



# RESEARCH NOTES

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## The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement

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Since the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) shot into the news after its takeover of Mosul, many have been confused over how to describe the group in relation to al-Qaeda,<sup>1</sup> the global jihadist organization best known for its audacious terror attacks against the West from the late 1990s through the mid-2000s. Relations between ISIS—and its prior incarnations, to be discussed—and al-Qaeda have been fraught with distrust, open competition, and outright hostility that have grown over time. The two groups are now in an open war for supremacy of the global jihadist movement. ISIS holds an advantage,<sup>2</sup> but the battle is not over yet.

### Background

Both Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who founded Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (JTJWJ) in 1999 (see Table 1

for the history of ISIS names), and al-Qaeda head Usama bin Laden came of age during the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, but their respective organizations have distinct genetic material, attributable in part to their different backgrounds, leadership styles, and aims. This is the case even though the two groups formed a marriage of convenience beginning in 2004.

One key difference involves the socioeconomic background of the groups' founders. Whereas bin Laden and his cadre grew up in at least the upper middle class and had a university education, Zarqawi and those closest to him came from poorer, less educated backgrounds. Zarqawi's criminal past and extreme views on *takfir* (accusing another Muslim of heresy and thereby justifying his killing) created major friction<sup>3</sup> and distrust with bin Laden when the two first met in Afghanistan in 1999.

**TABLE 1. A History of ISIS Names**

GROUP NAME	YEARS IN USE
Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (JTJWJ)	1999–2004
al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers (more popularly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI)	2004–2006
Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin (MSM)	2006
Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)	2006–2013
Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham	2013–present

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During this period in Afghanistan, bin Laden had the greatest leverage among the “Afghan Arabs” training in the Taliban-controlled country. His legitimacy derived from his money, his attacks abroad, and the failure of many local Arab jihadist insurgencies in the early- to mid-1990s.<sup>4</sup> Zarqawi wanted to pursue his own training camp in Herat with followers who had been released in a Jordanian prison amnesty earlier in the year. If not for the intervention of al-Qaeda’s military commander, the Egyptian Saif al-Adel—believed to be still under house arrest in Iran since escaping the U.S. invasion in late 2001<sup>5</sup>—Zarqawi would have had more difficulties setting up in Afghanistan. Instead, bin Laden provided him a small amount of seed money, which continued until 9/11. Nevertheless, Zarqawi was based on the other side of Afghanistan and had “a largely distinct, if occasionally overlapping, agenda” with al-Qaeda.<sup>6</sup> It is believed that bin Laden attempted to fully co-opt Zarqawi by requesting a *baya* (religious oath of allegiance), but this offer was repeatedly rebuffed by Zarqawi.<sup>7</sup>

During the Iraq war, Zarqawi’s brash personality and belief that authority is derived from those on battlefield front lines rather than behind the scenes would create even more tensions. This view also put him into conflict with his mentor, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi,<sup>8</sup> who is considered the most important jihadist ideologue alive and is independent of any one group.<sup>9</sup>

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, al-Qaeda’s main organizational goal was to lend financial support to roving foreign fighters in places such as Bosnia and Chechnya who were attempting to liberate what they perceived as occupied Muslim territory. The group also aimed to topple “apostate” Arab regimes. To achieve these goals, however, it first had to cut off the head of the snake—the United States and the West. JTJWJ, meanwhile, sought first to topple the Jordanian monarchy, with the rest of the Levant presumably to follow. The missions of both organizations, however, would change over time. The growth of the al-Qaeda brand spawned various local franchises<sup>10</sup> in the mid-2000s, and the group backed local plots and insurgencies in the Arab world to supplement its efforts against Western targets. For its part, al-Qaeda

in Iraq (see Table 1) shifted toward an attempt to build an Islamic state; this effort, though unsuccessful in the mid-2000s, has seen brighter fortunes of late in Syria and Iraq.<sup>11</sup>

### The Rise and Fall of AQI and the Creation of the Islamic State

In the years after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan but before the invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi had not yet achieved infamy. He bounced around between Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria, and the Sunni Triangle in Iraq, gaining new jihadist contacts. Within a half year after the invasion of Iraq, however, Zarqawi became a household name for his brutal personal beheadings and fast-paced suicide bombing campaign against Shiite religious targets and Sunni civilians, among others. As a result of these successes, many foreign fighters wanted to join, and the group needed more resources to continue and expand its operations. Further, not to be outdone by Zarqawi, bin Laden himself wanted to “own” the Iraq jihad as well as remain relevant while hiding from the United States. Given these dynamics, in the October 2004 issue of *Muaskar al-Batar* (The Sword Training Camp),<sup>12</sup> Zarqawi relented to bin Laden, pledging *baya* to him and renaming his group al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers after eight months of negotiations. This cemented the marriage of convenience but sowed the initial seeds of today’s conflict between the two groups. Among other immediate benefits for Zarqawi, meanwhile, was access to private donors and recruitment, logistics, and facilitation networks.

In Iraq, and now part of the al-Qaeda network, Zarqawi’s group controlled resources and the flow of foreign fighters, helping it gain loyalty from individual fighters. This is important because AQI thus controlled many of the informal networks and the future generation of the jihadist movement. One of the key factors now separating ISIS from al-Qaeda relates to this generational difference. Those who came of age and fought or trained with al-Qaeda in the 1980s and 1990s in Afghanistan and those who came of age and fought or trained with AQI and now ISIS in Iraq and Syria in the past decade shape this battle. There are, of course, individuals who don’t fit

this model, but overall it's relatively accurate.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the high mobilization for the Syrian jihad since 2011 and strong allegiance to ISIS can be attributed in part to the relationships made and contacts built in the Iraq fighting.<sup>14</sup>

The ideological divide between bin Laden and Zarqawi played out on the battlefield. As Brian Fishman has noted, part of this was because Zarqawi felt that the only way to save the *umma* (global Islamic community) from itself was through purging it, whereas bin Laden's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, believed that Muslims were not the problem, but that instead the "apostate" institutions needed to be changed.<sup>15</sup> Essentially, this amounted to a difference between a more strategic versus doctrinaire outlook as well as differing attitudes toward the role of institution building and governance.

Frustration over Zarqawi's continued excesses led to stern warnings in two 2005 letters from Zawahiri, then deputy head of al-Qaeda and now its leader,<sup>16</sup> and Sheikh Atiyat Allah Abd al-Rahman al-Libi, a senior al-Qaeda ideologue and operations leader who was killed in a 2011 drone strike.<sup>17</sup> Both advised Zarqawi to tone down the violence and over-the-top enforcement of sharia, which they correctly argued was alienating Sunnis and hurting the long-term goals of the global jihadist project. Zawahiri urged Zarqawi to remember "that we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."

While Zarqawi ignored the advice regarding how to conduct the war due to his belief in battlefield leadership, he did listen to Zawahiri's call for institution building. In early 2006, Zarqawi brought together a number of other Iraqi insurgent factions and established the Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin (MSM) with AQI at the top.<sup>18</sup> This process was further consolidated after Zarqawi's death on June 7, 2006. On October 15, a statement titled "Announcing the Establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq"<sup>19</sup> was released by Muharib al-Juburi, ISI's new information minister. And on November 10, AQI's replacement for Zarqawi,<sup>20</sup> Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, pledged *baya* to the newly appointed leader of ISI, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. While Muhajir had called bin Ladin emir

in his first audio release on June 13, 2006,<sup>21</sup> he never actually officially pledged *baya*.

These finer points of *baya* are important because only an individual can pledge allegiance to a leader. An organization does not pledge *baya* to another organization. Therefore, Zarqawi's death invalidated MSM's implied pledge to bin Ladin. This means that, in effect, the group and its subsequent incarnations have not technically been subordinate to al-Qaeda in eight years. In practice, of course, the situation was a bit more complicated since the groups continued to share resources and work together. And bitter grievances related to the issue of *baya* were not fully aired until after al-Qaeda disaffiliated itself with ISIS in early February 2014. In retrospect, Zawahiri's push for Zarqawi and AQI to move toward an institutional model hurt al-Qaeda in the long run. This allowed a better organized MSM/ISI/ISIS to establish an independent agenda and gain its own follower base.

The creation of ISI pushed the group to focus on taking territory and governing in Iraq's Anbar province. The attempt to govern, as it happened, was disastrous, in part because of ISI's overfocus on criminal punishment for individuals based on narrow interpretations of sharia. This led to a backlash by residents as well as other Sunni Iraqi insurgent forces. In the end, ISI lost major support<sup>22</sup> and became stigmatized within the insurgency and the Sunni community, which helped propel the *sabwa* (awakening) movement.

While al-Qaeda's leadership may have felt vindicated by such developments, its image was still tarnished as well since it backed the group publicly. The indiscriminate versus strategic use of violence and *takfir*, most importantly that targeting the group's Sunni base, became an important issue taken up by al-Qaeda in the following years. The main proponent of limiting *takfir* and knowing when to use it properly was Libi,<sup>23</sup> who emphasized the sanctity of Muslim blood.<sup>24</sup> It was even confirmed in the Abbotabad documents, which were private communications between al-Qaeda leaders and affiliated jihadists in other groups, that al-Qaeda was worried about the excessive use of violence by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> More recently, in September 2013, Zawa-

hiri released a pamphlet titled “General Guidelines for the Work of a Jihadi,”<sup>26</sup> which codifies rules of engagement for al-Qaeda’s branches and highlights the limits and concerns that he and Libi previously raised with Zarqawi.

In addition to al-Qaeda’s troubles with Zarqawi, his mentor, the independent jihadist scholar Maqdisi, exhorted him to stop engaging in the shortsighted fighting strategies and to focus more on consolidating gains. Maqdisi hoped to steer the jihadist community to a more “pure” jihad.<sup>27</sup> In the recent fighting between al-Qaeda, its official branch in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), and ISIS, Maqdisi has come down on the side of al-Qaeda.<sup>28</sup> He announced:

ISIS is a deviant organisation from the path of truth, [they are] aggressors against the mujahidin...I also call upon the members of ISIS to join the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra, giving *bay’a* to its leaders.

Similarly, many other independent jihadist ideologues, such as Abu Qatada al-Filistini, Iyad Qunaybi, and Hani al-Sibai, have disavowed ISIS.<sup>29</sup> While the most prestigious sheikhs have put in their lot with JN’s position, ISIS has also been able to corral support from less influential, but still relevant, sheikhs such as Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti and Turki al-Binali (Abu Humam al-Athari).<sup>30</sup>

Even though JN has support of top shaykhs, enthusiasm remains for ISIS as it did after Zarqawi’s death in June 2006 when fervent supporters<sup>31</sup> kept his message alive. These calls thus far do not seem to have quelled the excitement over ISIS by its online grassroots activists and those fighting with it in Syria and Iraq. That said, while Zarqawi may have had hardcore supporters, his successors in ISI still lost major local support in Iraq, and the group contracted and was squeezed as a result.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, excitement surged online over the prospect of an Islamic state following ISI’s announcement of its own establishment.<sup>33</sup> Since the announcement, all major online jihadist forums list the number of days since the Islamic state was formed (2,813 days, as of June 26, 2014).

In the years after ISI’s relative decline, though not outright defeat, violence in Iraq receded. Behind the scenes, ISI and al-Qaeda appeared to reach a detente

that would show in their public releases. For example, on April 17, 2008, Zawahiri released an audio message titled “On the Fifth Anniversary of the Invasion and Torture of Iraq,” stating that

providing assistance to the mujahedin in Iraq—at their head, the Islamic State of Iraq—is one of the most important duties required of the Islamic *ummah* today.<sup>34</sup>

Further, on August 7, 2011, a few months after bin Laden’s death, ISI spokesman Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani praised Zawahiri’s appointment as al-Qaeda’s new leader:

I also send sincere greetings to the honorable sheikh, the reputable instructor, the experienced leader, the wise of the *ummah*, Shaykh Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. We beseech God to bless him and his recent position of leadership. We ask God to help him with the charge entrusted to him, and to guide him to what pleases Him.<sup>35</sup>

Of note, though, unlike leaders of other al-Qaeda branches, ISI’s emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who assumed the position in 2010 after Abu Omar al-Baghdadi’s death, never publicly pledged *baya* to Zawahiri. Further, such gestures never changed the DNA of the organization as established by Zarqawi, ensuring the differences with al-Qaeda would continue into the present decade.

### The Current Struggle

In April 2013, overt enmity between ISIS and al-Qaeda broke out in full when ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that he was extending the Islamic State of Iraq into Syria and changing the group’s name to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham.<sup>36</sup> He also noted an open secret that ISIS and JN were one and the same. This did not sit well with JN leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, who rebuffed the move into Syria and reaffirmed his allegiance to Zawahiri.<sup>37</sup> In turn, Zawahiri later tried, but failed, to nullify Baghdadi’s power play by telling ISIS to return to the Iraq front and leave the Syrian front to JN.<sup>38</sup> Neither Jawlani nor Zawahiri was allegedly consulted in advance about the expansion of the Islamic state. In defiance, Baghdadi released an audio message stat-

ing ISIS would remain in Syria and would not adhere to a division based on the Sykes-Picot deal dating to World War I.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, as William McCants notes, Baghdadi also gave Zawahiri al-Qaeda's most "brazen" rebuke from an affiliate ever, stating in the same audio message that Baghdadi had "chosen the command of my Lord over the command in the letter that contradicts it."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, contrary to the original media narrative that JN had merged with ISIS, the two groups actually separated.

The context for the recent split can be found in late summer 2011, when ISI began the first stages of its comeback because of the Syrian uprising. Baghdadi dispatched operatives to Syria to set up a new jihadist organization, which Zawahiri was involved in planning, too.<sup>41</sup> Among the operatives was Jawlani, whose group, JN, publicly announced itself in late January 2012.<sup>42</sup> By November 2012, Jawlani had built JN into one of the opposition's best fighting forces and locals viewed its members as fair arbiters when addressing corruption and providing social services. Such success helped inspire Baghdadi to extend his group's writ into Syria. Syrians, he felt, got to know JN members on their own terms rather than being falsely guided by media "misrepresentations" and therefore felt it opportune to announce the expansion.

At first, it appeared the JN-ISIS feud would be settled behind the scenes. Publicly, both ISIS and JN tried to put a good face on the matter, suggesting that a battlefield competition against a common foe, the Assad regime, would benefit everyone. Al-Qaeda also enlisted emissaries as mediators, among them Abu Khalid al-Suri, a now deceased senior leader in Ahrar al-Sham—a more locally focused Salafi rebel group in Syria—and Sheikh Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, an Australian who serves as one of JN's top sharia officials. None of these negotiations yielded success.

Al-Qaeda's ultimate disaffiliation with ISIS occurred as a result of various factors, including the January 2014 uprising against ISIS by mainstream Syrian rebels over the group's excesses;<sup>43</sup> the group's general predatory way of taking territory and resources from other rebel groups; and a failed public reconciliation effort by the independent Saudi cleric Abd Allah bin Muhammad al-Muhaysini—along-

side the failed private attempts mentioned earlier.<sup>44</sup> On February 2, 2014, al-Qaeda's general command (AQGC) released a statement that said:

ISIS is not a branch of the Qaidat al-Jihad [al-Qaeda's official name] group, we have no organizational relationship with it, and the group is not responsible for its actions.<sup>45</sup>

Afterward, Adnani went after Zawahiri by responding,

If God decrees to you [Zawahiri] to set foot in the land of the Islamic state, he should pledge allegiance to it and be a soldier of its amir [Baghdadi].<sup>46</sup>

AQGC's statement began what both ISIS and al-Qaeda/JN describe as a *fitna* (state of discord), which has led to open warfare in Syria that continues to this day.

In addition to killing one another on the battlefield, including Abu Khalid al-Suri, both groups have used media to lure fence-sitters and possible defectors among the global jihadist community. It is likely that social media, especially Twitter, has amplified mutual hatred, with supporters of each camp refusing to back down rhetorically, likely signaling their steadfastness to their respective leaders. One wonders whether the situation would have become so hostile a decade ago, when al-Qaeda could control the message on its password-protected forums. Each group also released official testimonies from defectors from the other side. A JN video series from ISIS defectors is called "*Muhajirin* [emigrants or foreign fighters] under Siege."<sup>47</sup> A nine-part ISIS video series, "Series of the Life from the Words of the *Ulama* [religious scholars] on the Project of the Islamic State,"<sup>48</sup> highlights positive comments about the creation of its Islamic state from its own past leaders (Zarqawi, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi), al-Qaeda leaders (bin Laden and Abu Yahya al-Libi), and a leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP (Anwar al-Awlaqi).

The main argument between ISIS and al-Qaeda/JN is over authority and methodology (*manhaj*) as well as revisionist history. ISIS views Zawahiri's authority as illegitimate, even if prior sentiments noted earlier would suggest otherwise, and his organization as having deviated from the path of bin Laden. ISIS con-

siders itself the true heir of bin Laden's al-Qaeda,<sup>49</sup> but under the new banner of the Islamic state. For example, in early April 2014, Adnani claimed that

the leaders of al-Qaeda deviated from the right *manhaj*, we say this as sadness overwhelms us and bitterness fills our hearts...Verily al-Qaeda today has ceased to be the base of jihad, rather its leadership has become an axe supporting the destruction of the project of the Islamic State and the coming *khilafa* (caliphate)...al-Qaeda now runs after the bandwagon of the majority and calls them as 'the Umma,' and softens in their stance at the expense of the religion, and the *taghut* (tyrants) of the Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood).<sup>50</sup>

For their part, al-Qaeda and Zawahiri claim that Baghdadi did, in fact, pledge *baya* to Zawahiri, though privately.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, according to this reasoning, Baghdadi and ISIS broke a religious oath and have become a deviant group that disobeyed the emir's orders, specifically relating to its failure to carry out jihad in its designated location, Iraq. In mid-April 2014, one of al-Qaeda's chosen individuals to conduct the reconciliation between ISIS and JN, Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, explained the group's power structure, based on *iqlim* (region), and how all regional branches fit this structure.<sup>52</sup> In this setup, each leader pledges *baya* to Zawahiri, who heads the entire operation. Baghdadi, then, would be head of the Iraq *iqlim* and that is why he cannot encroach on the Shami (Levantine) *iqlim*, which is run by JN.

Beyond the more technical arguments between leaders in these organizations, ISIS and JN have also acted differently on the ground in Syria. For ISIS, which believes it truly is an Islamic state, all residents of territory it takes over fall under the group's sovereign will and must abide by its interpretations of God's law. In this model, no competition or power sharing can be acceptable. It is true that ISIS has added a "hearts and minds" component<sup>53</sup> to its governing strategy, but it has kept its narrower interpretations of sharia pertaining to social or criminal issues.

In contrast, JN views itself as one among many groups (primarily other Islamist allies) that must work together not only to fight against the Assad regime, but also to govern liberated spaces. JN takes

the long view that it cannot force its ideas on individuals and therefore must pursue a more gradualist approach, based on the lessons of past failed attempts at jihadist governance in Iraq last decade, as well as Somalia, Yemen, and Mali. The key is to socialize and normalize its ideas over time so that eventually the group can legitimately implement its more narrow interpretations of sharia. While this approach may have greater appeal for locals, ISIS's "forcing it down people's throats" style is more popular with its foreign fighter contingent, which makes up about 50 percent of its fighting force and provides support for its out-of-theater power projection.

### Future of the Movement

While the fight between ISIS and al-Qaeda/JN has mainly played out within the Syrian zone of conflict, it has affected jihadist organizations and factions in other locales. For instance, while both AQAP and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have kept a neutral position and called for reconciliation between the two groups, AQIM's central region came out in support of ISIS in late March 2014.<sup>54</sup> The central region's legitimacy, however, has been questioned considering that the signers of its statement were previously unknown.

Additionally, in late January 2014, some AQAP fighters in Syria have in their own capacity backed ISIS, including as expressed by the AQAP leader Hatim al-Mamun.<sup>55</sup> Closer to home, a breakaway faction of nine individuals in al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, including Maqdisi's brother and some other relevant leaders, pledged *baya* to Baghdadi in early April 2014.<sup>56</sup> This forced one of al-Qaeda's ideologues, Abu Amir al-Naji, to respond in late May 2014 that the nine-person letter made false claims against al-Qaeda.<sup>57</sup> Such a stiff response to the defection of just nine people illustrates al-Qaeda's worries about its ability to win the war of ideas with the future generation of global jihadists. In addition, other regional groups like Ansar al-Sharia in both Tunisia and Libya as well as jihadists in Gaza/Sinai and Indonesia have posted pro-ISIS propaganda.

All has not been lost for al-Qaeda, however. In late April 2014 Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the emir of

the group al-Murabitun—an al-Qaeda branch in the greater Sahara—backed Zawahiri and al-Qaeda:

It is incumbent upon us to confirm our confidence and commitment to the *manhaj* and guidance of our emir, Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri, out of our faith in the correctness of this *manhaj*, which is built upon perception and correct jurisprudence, and steady, successful, and blessed steps.<sup>58</sup>

Additionally, in mid-May 2014, the emir of Harakat Shabab al-Mujahedin in Somalia, Sheikh Mukhtar Abu al-Zubair, confirmed support for Zawahiri's efforts in dealing with ISIS.<sup>59</sup> Zubair also specifically endorsed Zawahiri's November 2012 release, "The Treatise of Supporting Islam," which highlights the importance of implementing sharia and liberating occupied Muslim lands.<sup>60</sup> Even more recently, Ali Abu Muhammad, the leader of the Caucasus Emirate (CE), a jihadist group that is not a branch of al-Qaeda, expressed sympathy for JN's side.<sup>61</sup> This is likely because the CE's branch in Syria, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, is close with JN.<sup>62</sup> These three overt endorsements are unlikely to tip the scales toward al-Qaeda, but it does provide reassurances in addition to the support from JN, AQAP, and AQIM. It also highlights that al-Qaeda is not defeated.

Al-Qaeda is having a difficult time, given ISIS battlefield gains in both Syria and Iraq. Continued success for ISIS, of course, is by no means guaranteed, especially given the group's tendency to overplay its hand with locals. But unlike in Iraq a decade ago, there is no force like the United States on the ground to consolidate insurgent gains against ISIS. As seen in Syria since January, many nationalists, mainstream Islamists, and even JN have been unable to strategically defeat ISIS. And now that ISIS has gained new resources in the recent Iraq battles, it is pouring them into new offenses and regaining lost territory. Further, the reality of a proto-state and ISIS's willingness to try to govern—this *khilafa* project, as many within the group call it—is quite appealing to jihadists. ISIS is not only talking the talk about establishing an Islamic state, it is walking the walk. This has attracted many foreign fighters to its side.

In becoming the beacon for foreign fighters over the past year, ISIS now controls many recruitment and facilitation/logistics networks. Further, those who have fought with ISIS have made connections with one another and will likely keep in touch when they return to their places of origin. The solidarity and brotherhood established through fighting on the front lines and enduring the same hardships cements these relationships, which will be important for the future of the jihadist movement. Additionally, individuals like winners and, unlike al-Qaeda, which has not had a clear victory in a decade, ISIS continues to build its prestige and legitimacy within the overall movement.

The composition of foreign fighter flows to Syria<sup>63</sup> (and now to Iraq again<sup>64</sup>) indicates that the movement's future is being decided by Saudis, Libyans, Tunisians, and Jordanians. In terms of the Saudis, one question to be answered is whether returnees to AQAP can flip or execute a coup against AQAP's leadership. AQAP remains loyal to Zawahiri given its emir Nasir al-Wihayshi's relations with bin Laden, which go back to Afghanistan. That said, if Wihayshi is killed in an American drone strike, anything could happen. AQAP, still viewed as al-Qaeda's strongest branch, is a bellwether and if it leans toward ISIS in the near to medium future, ISIS will have won the war against al-Qaeda. Similarly, with ISIS's victories next door in Iraq, members of JN may have more cause to defect back to ISIS, which could be a fatal blow to al-Qaeda as well. There are already small signs of such movement, especially in Deir al-Zour and Damascus.

Looking to North Africa, where a third safe haven exists outside the Syria/Iraq and Yemen arenas, many of the Tunisians and Libyans who fought in ISIS were originally members of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL), which could help make both groups kingpins in the Maghrebi landscape, especially since they continue to grow closer organizationally themselves.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, the Darnah-based jihadist group Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam publicly voiced support for ISIS earlier this week.<sup>66</sup> Unlike the Saudis, Libyans, and Tunisians, the Jordanians are still more sympathetic to JN than to ISIS, which could hurt the latter's abil-

ity to project further into the Levant. Lastly, in terms of Westerners, most of whom come from European Union countries (three thousand-plus), most are now with ISIS. Any plots or attacks in the West will thus more likely emanate from ISIS than from al-Qaeda.

Various possibilities could either help or hinder the prospects of ISIS or al-Qaeda. For ISIS, major local backlash or deaths in the leadership could do harm. For al-Qaeda, drone strikes against the leadership in Pakistan or AQAP's leaders in Yemen could potentially accelerate ISIS's claim over the global jihadist movement. There are even rumors that there could be a Ramadan reconciliation between the two in the coming weeks, which would likely benefit ISIS, since it has more of the leverage over al-Qaeda in light of the recent Iraq offensives.

It is impossible to of course predict the future since for example many in 2006 viewed Zarqawi and AQI as permanently eclipsing al-Qaeda, yet this did not end up happening. If al-Qaeda wants to reclaim some semblance of legitimacy, it will desperately pursue a major strike along the lines of the Madrid train bombings, the July 7, 2005, London attacks, or actualizing the failed AQAP plots in 2009 and 2010. At this point, though, momentum toward ISIS may be too great for both the short and the longer term. Will the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan help resuscitate an organization that has taken many leadership hits in the past few years? It is too early to know, but if current trends hold, ISIS has opened up a lead on al-Qaeda, which has a steep hill to climb just to stave off its own relative decline.

## Notes

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