

Two Enemies are Better than One

Differences between Al-Qaeda and ISIS will be key to their defeat

by Animesh Roul

A TWO-HEADED MONSTER now dominates the global terror trade. Al-Qaeda, the original militant Sunni Islamist network, spread and divided like a terrible virus. Despite the disarray caused by several strategic reversals over the years, the core of Al-Qaeda remains a potent force. The other powerful incarnation of terrorism arose in mid-2014 from Al-Qaeda's regional franchise in Iraq; it is now infamous as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.

Even though the origin and objectives of these once-conjoined jihadist twins remain similar, sparring between them has widened the gap over ideology, space, and operational tactics. The two now compete for global standing, new recruits, and funds to sustain them against their Western enemies. Understanding the difference between these two jihadist organizations will be essential to defeating them, as both the West and Saudi Arabia's newly-formed anti-terrorist coalition hope to do.

The Jihadist Hydra

Much of the jihadist worldview that Al-Qaeda and ISIS hold in common can be traced to the writings and teachings of Al-Qaeda's present leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Where they differ—ISIS's brutal sectarian violence and bold military expansion—stems from the operational influence of Abu Musab

al-Zarqawi during the Iraq War.

The theological and strategic differences between the two groups were known much earlier, but they did not divide until ISIS's extreme violent ideals, territorial ambition, and possible expansion into the strongholds of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Yemen forced Al-Qaeda to dissociate itself from ISIS in February 2014.

The June 2014 Mosul assault demonstrated ISIS's ability to control territory and desire to establish a functional state with all aspects of military, civil, and religious governance. By seizing and controlling huge swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria and establishing its so-called caliphate, ISIS has pushed Al-Qaeda from its once dominant position in the jihadist movement. This territorial aggrandizement remains the foundation of ISIS's overarching criticism of Al-Qaeda, underscoring the latter's failure to work toward the establishment of an Islamic state.

The long-brewing differences between Al-Qaeda and its Iraqi franchise came into the open in early 2014 when Al-Qaeda's central leadership disowned its affiliate in the Levant region. The primary cause was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Under al-Baghdadi, ISIS refused to obey Zawahiri's orders and operated independently of Jhabat Al-Nushra, another Al-Qaeda-mandated jihadist group active in Syria. In a scathing reaction to Al-Qaeda on April 17 of that year, a spokesman for ISIS released the audio of a speech denouncing the com-



Al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden (deceased) and Ayman al-Zawahiri, 2001

mand of Al-Qaeda for having deviated from the path of its slain chief Osama bin Laden.

The gulf widened further when Al-Qaeda's Arabian Peninsula and Maghreb affiliates, in Yemen and North Africa respectively, vehemently criticized al-Baghdadi's Islamic caliphate and termed it illegitimate in subsequent months. Many Islamic clerics close to Al-Qaeda denounced the declaration of ISIS's caliphate, calling it "void and meaningless".

Al-Qaeda has emphasized that ISIS does not have the authority to rule all Muslims, and that ISIS's declarations apply to no-one but themselves. One cleric, who once mentored ISIS's slain spiritual leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, criticized them for their violence against fellow Muslims and advised them to "Reform, repent, and to stop killing Muslims and distorting the religion." In September 2015, Al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri released an audio message that accused ISIS's al-Baghdadi of sedition and again contended that al-Baghdadi is not the leader of all Muslims.

Nonetheless, according to the Global Terrorism Index created by The International Institute of Eco-

nomics and Peace, ISIS is now the richest and most violent jihadist group in modern history, with support from more than 40 different international militant Islamist groups including the deadliest in West Africa, Boko Haram. Al-Qaeda has desperately attempted to consolidate its position with a call for grassroots radicalization programs in Muslim majority and minority countries, but it cannot compete with the sponsorship or recruits received by ISIS.

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There are many similarities between the two groups, ranging from their focus on building a caliphate to emphasis on the obligation of all Muslims to perform jihad. Both groups see Western democracies as an enemy of Muslims and disdain man-made laws as opposed to what they see as their divinely-mandated ones. Both groups encourage lone wolf attacks in the



Mugshots of ISIS's Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (deceased) and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

West and espouse sectarian ideals with extreme prejudice against non-believers and those they consider as un-Islamic, within Islam itself and other religions. Another aspect of convergence is the apocalyptic vision used by both groups to mobilize Islamists and justify religious violence.

It is their dissimilarities which are most significant, however, and there are a number of critical differences between the two jihadist groups. Understanding these differences is paramount to undermining their authority and devising an effective counter-strategy or, more aptly, a counter-narrative.

Islamic State Building

ISIS's establishment of its so-called caliphate, however contested, has provided them with a territorial base and safe haven for resource extraction, militant training, and the civil governance that Al-Qaeda failed to establish either in Afghanistan or the Middle Eastern region. ISIS has thus begun to emphasize state building, governance, and public services alongside territorial expansion and military consolidation. Close study of ISIS propaganda magazine *Dabiq* and other literature suggests that the group has a core principle of "remaining and expanding" (translated from "baqiya wa Tatamaddad").

The group entices and encourages Muslim professionals, e.g. doctors, engineers, and other skilled people,

to migrate to the caliphate rather than make pilgrimages to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, in order to assist in building an Islamic State government. It states that its aim is to expand into annexed Wilayats, or provinces, in Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, and parts of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Even though Al-Qaeda also aims to establish a caliphate in the distant future, its emphasis is on creating affiliates or franchises abroad, like Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), to mastermind sporadic militant attacks on Western targets. As clear from "Al-Qaeda's General Guidelines for Jihad", written by Ayman al-

Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda's focus is on educating and training fighters who can face and "confront the Crusaders and their proxies, until the caliphate is established."

Al-Qaeda's strategy remains focused on militant activities in enemy countries, on providing military and tactical guidance for perpetrating violence, mostly jihadist, and on "promoting and protecting" the Muslim community worldwide. It embeds itself within localized Islamic insurgencies and encourages religious and social revolution in volatile regions.

Al-Qaeda thrives within failed states or defunct administrative machinery with limited firepower. It depends mostly on arms dealers and arsenal heists.

Both groups encourage lone wolf attacks in the West and espouse sectarian ideals with extreme prejudice against non-believers.

In contrast, ISIS forcefully inherited massive arms caches, mostly modern military equipment and vehicles, when it occupied Syrian and Iraqi territory and overpowered their national armies. Thus the conventional military strength of ISIS is much more organized and centralized than that of Al-Qaeda, which depends on its affiliates and their local connections to procure arms and munitions.

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Though numbers are not fully known, it seems the manpower of ISIS is also much more than Al-Qaeda because of the foreign volunteers enticed by its propaganda. ISIS can be open in its recruitment methods, telling others to come to it in Iraq, whereas Al-Qaeda must be more secretive. Al-Qaeda's dwindling number of foot soldiers is due not only to mass defections in

has largely distinguished its brand of terrorism from others. The beheadings, burning of prisoners, and open executions that ISIS conducts have been criticized by senior Al-Qaeda commanders. Al-Qaeda leaderships called these violent displays "barbaric", while emphasizing to its followers that Al-Qaeda's jihadist strategy is more sustainable and a better way to defeat the Western democracies in a long religious battle.

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As noticed in the recent Mali attacks, when Al-Qaeda released any hostages who could recite the Shahada (the Islamic statement of faith), Al-Qaeda has become more sympathetic to fellow Muslims. The organization has apparently mellowed from its earlier blood-lust, when it occasionally targeted other Muslims along sectarian lines. ISIS, however, shows no remorse in killing Muslims, and doesn't tolerate dissent or desertions among its ranks. Though both groups consider Shia Muslims to be apostates, Al-Qaeda has criticized ISIS's targeting of Shia and other sects of Muslims as too extreme.

regions dominated by its affiliates, but also to its dependence on the slow recruiting methods of Mosques and Madrasa training. By recruiting openly on social media, however, ISIS has been able to romanticize jihad for many disillusioned youths. Fighters and service men are pouring into Syria and Iraq to join the group.

These subtle degrees of difference between two competing jihadist movements creates prospects for counter-terrorism initiatives. The continued infighting could amplify the existing rivalry and lead to self-

Violent Schism

There have been mass outcries against the gruesome methods displayed by ISIS on social media, which



A stockpile from an Al-Qaeda safe house in Iraq

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destruction of the violent organizations.

A recent suicide bombing in southern Syria pushed the two in that direction. The mid-November attack of Al-Qaeda's Al-Nusra Front against the ISIS-linked Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade (YMB) of the Golan Heights left six YMB commanders dead, including the brigade leader. In retaliation, YMB released a gruesome execution video involving two Al-Nusra captives being tied and blown up with bombs, possibly in Daraa, Syria.

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The in-fighting may also encourage the self-destruction of their violent ideology. That the two organizations offer competing narratives goes against their own maxim that the tenets of Islam are not open to interpretation. A 2013 Harvard study found that Muslims who were exposed to multiple interpretations of scripture were less likely to become extremists. ISIS is certainly able to recruit abroad among already suicidal youths, but these competing jihadists may inadvertently dissuade local Muslims away from extremism.

Despite the conflicts between the two organizations, there is also the threat of a future strategic convergence between ISIS and Al-Qaeda against a common foe. Significant progress by Western forces might unite the two. The main schism between Al-Qaeda and ISIS is rivalry over control of Syria; there is risk that they could resolve this amicably in order to face a larger and stronger common enemy.

Successes by the newly created anti-terrorism coalition of 34 Muslim nations led by Saudi Arabia, however, might not have the same effect. If it were to strategically target ISIS exclusively, it could encourage Al-Qaeda to distance itself further. ISIS has already declared war against Saudi Arabia following the formation of the latter's coalition. The next major indicator of the relationship between the two jihadist organizations will be whether Al-Qaeda, which has long been accused of being hand in glove with Saudi agencies in the Yemen civil war, will ultimately stand with or against ISIS in the ongoing ideological and military battle in the Muslim world. ■

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Al-Qaeda affiliate fighters in the Maghreb