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The War between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda: Strategic Dimensions of a Patricidal Conflict

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Introduction

For almost two decades, al-Qaeda was universally recognized as the world's dominant salafi jihadist militant group. Al-Qaeda's competition against its enemies until 2013-14 can be understood conceptually as a *two-player game*: Al-Qaeda represented salafi jihadism, and its opponent was all countries and actors who opposed, or failed to live up to, its hardline and puritanical vision of Islam. This two-player dynamic has changed as a result of the dramatic growth of another salafi jihadist group, the Islamic State (IS), which had previously been al-Qaeda's Iraq-based affiliate. There are significant differences between the two groups. For one, IS is more technology-savvy than al-Qaeda; it understands social media's ability to mobilize people to its cause on an unprecedented scale, a dynamic that has helped IS connect with a younger demographic. IS also expects to experience success in a shorter timeframe than al-Qaeda: While al-Qaeda developed a long-term strategy designed to flout operations against it by appealing to and becoming an organic part of local populations, IS thought the time was ripe to capture significant territory, crush its foes, and declare the caliphate's reestablishment.

With similar ideologies and a common objective of creating a caliphate that would be ruled by a strict version of *sharia* (Islamic law), al-Qaeda and IS now find themselves locked in a fierce competition. What had once been a two-player game now has been transformed into a three-player game.[1] Al-Qaeda's strategy, built for a two-player game, was disrupted when another salafi jihadist competitor emerged that exploited the vulnerabilities inherent to al-Qaeda's deliberate approach, and portrayed al-Qaeda's patience as indecisiveness. Al-Qaeda and IS are now competing fiercely for affiliates and recruits. Indeed, *The New York Times* reported in August 2015 that "top intelligence, counterterrorism and law enforcement officials" in the United States are now deeply divided over which of these two groups "poses the biggest threat to the American homeland."[2]

This study explores the strategic competition between IS and al-Qaeda. We place these groups and their competition within a broader theoretical and historical framework by examining them as revolutionary movements. In the classic volume *Makers of Modern Strategy*, John Shy and Thomas Collier define revolutionary war as "the seizure of political power by the use of armed force," with the additional characteristics "that the seizure of power is by a popular or broad-based political movement, that the seizure entails a fairly long period of armed conflict, and that power is seized in order to carry out a well-advertised political or social program."[3] A number of authors, including David Kilcullen and Michael Vlahos, have explicitly adopted the framework of understanding jihadist actors as

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[1] The difference between a two-player and three-player game is the *simplest* way to understand this competition. One could add Iran, Syria, and the GCC states as additional players in their own right, as none are removed or disinterested actors.

[2] Eric Schmitt, "ISIS or al-Qaeda? American Officials Split Over Top Terror Threat," *New York Times*, August 4, 2015.

[3] John Shy and Thomas Collier, "Revolutionary War," in Peter Paret ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 817.

revolutionaries in their analysis of al-Qaeda.[4] Stathis Kalyvas, a noted scholar of civil wars, has recently proposed that IS should be considered a revolutionary movement as well.[5]

The two groups differ in their approach to revolution. Al-Qaeda favors covert actions, unacknowledged affiliates, and a relatively quiet organizational strategy to build a larger base of support before it is ready to engage in a larger scale of conflict with its foes. IS, in contrast, believes that the time for a broader military confrontation has already arrived. The group combines shocking violence with an effective propaganda apparatus in an effort to gain further support from its bloody successes. A useful framework for understanding these groups' strategies can be found by contrasting the Maoist and Focoist schools of revolutionary thought. Al-Qaeda exhibits a revolutionary strategy that is both implicitly and explicitly based on the works of Mao Tse-tung,[6] whereas IS possesses a strategy that is more consonant with the Focoist writings of Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Régis Debray.

Mao's theory of revolution is rooted in the primacy of politics over warfare. His first two principles are "arousing and organizing the people," and "achieving internal unification politically."[7] In Mao's paradigm, these two steps, which constitute his first stage of revolutionary warfare, must occur before the initiation of military action, covert or otherwise. Mao's first stage—that of organization, consolidation, and preservation—is followed seamlessly by a stage of progressive expansion, followed by a third and final stage of decision, or the destruction of the enemy. Only upon a steadfast political foundation, in Mao's view, can guerrilla forces create bases for logistics and operations, and slowly build strength and momentum for the final conventional stage of warfare. Mao rarely undertook strategic military offensives outside of areas that were prepared politically.[8]

Under Mao's theory of revolutionary warfare, the early stages do not terminate with the initiation of a new stage. Thus, Maoist revolutionaries continue to emphasize the political stage of organization and consolidation even as they pursue progressive expansion. Consistent with Maoist theory, al-Qaeda and its affiliates have focused on maintaining and expanding the group's political support. Even in areas where al-Qaeda has openly undertaken warfare, it has been somewhat restrained in its approach to civilian populations, and it has adopted a relatively slow and phased implementation of its hardline version of *sharia* where it has control or significant influence. Al-Qaeda's adherence to a Maoist framework was largely shaped by its experience of being hunted by the United States and its allies for a decade and a half.

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[4] See David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Michael Vlahos, *Terror's Mask: Insurgency within Islam* (Laurel, MD: Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, 2002).

[5] Stathis Kalyvas, "Is ISIS a Revolutionary Group and if Yes, What Are the Implications?," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015).

[6] See Michael W.S. Ryan, *Decoding al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle against America* Kindle ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), loc. 1057 of 9027 (noting that al-Qaeda's strategy is "based on communist revolutionary strategy developed by Mao Tse-tung").

[7] Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare* Kindle ed., Samuel B. Griffith trans. (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2014), loc. 474 of 1451.

[8] Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 186.

Contrary to Mao is the Focoist approach to revolutionary war. First used successfully in Cuba in the 1950s, and attempted unsuccessfully many times since, Focoism holds that the political foundation necessary for revolution can be crafted through violence. Guevara essentially flipped Mao's theory by arguing that the use of violence against the state could inspire the peasants to rise up too—and this general uprising could usher in political purity. Focoism, unlike Mao's strategy, accepts great risks in order to inspire support. IS has in many ways followed the Focoist model. It believes in the power of violence to forge the political opinions of the Muslim masses. IS views al-Qaeda's slower and more deliberate Maoist approach, which awaits the proper political formation of the people, as too slow. IS is willing to take significant risks for propaganda purposes, and is happy to win today and lose tomorrow if today's win creates a large enough subject for propaganda.

This framework of Maoist versus Focoist models of revolutionary warfare should not be seen as a complete explanation for either al-Qaeda or IS's behavior. Neither group is perfectly Maoist or Focoist, but they can be understood as largely adhering to one of these two revolutionary paradigms on the whole. One virtue of this framework is that it places these groups within the broader revolutionary history in which they reside, and in that way both helps to illuminate certain aspects of their respective strategies and to flesh out potential outcomes of their competition.

Examining the implications of the two groups' approaches to revolutionary warfare, al-Qaeda's use of Maoist strategy is designed to be low-risk and to yield long-term results. This is consistent with al-Qaeda's conception of its conflict with the West as both existential and also generational in nature. The group has taken steps to ingratiate itself with local populations and reduce its exposure to counterrevolutionary forces. Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, has even convinced some U.S. allies—including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—that it should be viewed as a partner in the fight against both IS and also Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime. The hardline coalition of which it is a part, Jaysh al-Fatah, openly receives support from several states in the region.[9] Indeed, the idea that "moderate" elements within Nusra—or even al-Qaeda itself—could be a bulwark against IS's further growth has even made its way into discourse in the West, though it has not driven U.S. policy.[10]

IS's use of a Focoist strategy is more high risk, and the group's extreme violence and imposition of repressive governance is certain to alienate populations under its control. The Islamic State's method of dealing with this problem is to try to crush all opposition while it is still in its nascent stage, making an example of would-be opponents. The riskiness of this approach is the primary reason that no Focoist revolution has succeeded since Cuba: Focoism inherently exposes revolutionary forces to counterrevolutionaries, who are often better equipped. IS's challenge is further bolstered by the fact that it is

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[9] E.g., Kim Sengupta, "Turkey and Saudi Arabia Alarm the West by Backing Islamist Extremists the Americans Had Bombed in Syria," *The Independent* (U.K.), May 12, 2015.

[10] See, e.g., Jake Tapper, "Petraeus Explains How Jihadists Could Be Peeled Away to Fight ISIS—and Assad," CNN, September 1, 2015; Barak Mendelsohn, "Accepting al-Qaeda," *Foreign Affairs*, March 9, 2015; Ahmed Rashid, "Why We Need al-Qaeda," *New York Review of Books*, June 15, 2015.

locked in combat with at least three nation-states (Iran, Syria, and Iraq) and four parastates (the YPG, the Kurdish Regional Government, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Hizballah) with state equivalent power that only lack state status as a matter of international legitimacy. But despite the Focoist approach's history of failure, this use of violence to inspire an uprising is important to IS both ideologically and strategically.

This study begins by examining how the experiences of IS's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), have shaped both groups' strategic outlooks. It then analyzes both groups' strategy—globally and regionally, vis-à-vis one another—and demonstrates how both groups have defined themselves in relation to their opponent. The study is designed to provide insight into the vulnerabilities that this competition creates for both IS and al-Qaeda—but also some of the unexpected opportunities that it has produced for them, especially for al-Qaeda. It begins by exploring the strategic objectives of IS and al-Qaeda, including both groups' approach to violence and governance. Following this analysis of the two groups' approaches, we examine potential future outcomes of this competition.

The Iraq War as Formative Experience

The strategic doctrines of both al-Qaeda and IS have been heavily influenced by AQI's experiences in Iraq in the mid-2000s. AQI ascended rapidly to the fore of the global jihadist movement and then burnt out just as quickly, scorching al-Qaeda's image as well. AQI's early success during the U.S. occupation derived in part from its ability to spark sectarian strife through waves of attacks into Shia areas; AQI correctly believed that it could interject itself into a sectarian civil war by presenting itself as the Sunnis' protector. Yet even while it offered protection from the Shia reprisals that it had provoked, the group oppressed Sunnis by imposing an alien form of religious law through its reign of terror in Anbar province. This strategy was successful in the short term; an intelligence assessment written in August 2006 described AQI as the "dominant organization of influence" in Anbar.[11] It also wielded significant power in West Baghdad, Mosul, Diyala, and elsewhere.

AQI's proclivity for brutality and indiscriminate violence raised concerns within al-Qaeda's senior leadership (AQSL), which feared that AQI would alienate Iraqis. Members of AQSL sent at least two letters—from then-deputy emir Ayman al-Zawahiri and *masul aqalim* (head of regions) Atiyah Abd al-Rahman—to AQI's emir Abu Musab al-Zarqawi exhorting the hotheaded Jordanian to moderate his approach. Zawahiri reprimanded Zarqawi for his videotaped beheadings of victims, warning the former street thug not to "be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the shaykh of the slaughterers."[12] Both Zawahiri and Atiyah emphasized the need to win over the population, with Atiyah instructing Zarqawi to gain Iraqis' support in a gradualist manner by "lauding them for the good they do, and being quiet about their shortcomings."[13]

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[11] Col. Peter Devlin, "State of the Insurgency in al-Anbar," intelligence assessment, August 17, 2006, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/02/AR2007020201197.html.

[12] Ayman al-Zawahiri letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, July 2005, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf.

[13] Atiyah Abd al-Rahman letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, late 2005.

The objections offered by Zawahiri and Atiyah were driven by strategic, rather than moral, considerations. Indeed, Zawahiri noted that rather than beheading AQI's prisoners, "we can kill the captives by bullet." The preeminence of strategic over moral concerns can be discerned in al-Qaeda's activities following the Iraq war. As the group tried to alter its image, which had been damaged by AQI's excesses, it did not avoid atrocities. Rather, al-Qaeda appears more concerned with keeping them off-camera, and minimizing negative attention.

Zarqawi disregarded AQSL's instructions, and after a period of repression, the Sunni population in Anbar rebelled in a tribal uprising known as the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement. The Sahwa soon spread to other provinces through a program known as the "Sons of Iraq." At its height, more than a hundred thousand predominantly Sunni Iraqis took part in this program. Along with a "surge" in U.S. troops and America's shift to population-centric counterinsurgency, the Sahwa movement contributed to AQI's downfall. By the time General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker testified before the U.S. Congress in September 2007, the changes on the ground had already become apparent: The Awakening movement had helped to significantly improve Anbar, transforming it from the dark days in which AQI was the dominant actor. General Petraeus said that Anbar had become "a model of what happens when local leaders and citizens decide to oppose al Qaeda and reject its Taliban-like ideology." [14] The Sahwa's success amounted to a repudiation of AQI—and by extension, of al-Qaeda itself.

The damage done by AQI and its successor organizations was so severe that in January 2011 Adam Gadahn, an American-born al-Qaeda media strategist, wrote a letter to al-Qaeda emir Osama bin Laden arguing that al-Qaeda should cut ties with its Iraqi branch.[15] Gadahn contended that if al-Qaeda did not expel AQI, al-Qaeda's "reputation will be damaged more and more as a result of the acts and statements of" that group, "which is labeled under our organization."

There is no indication that Gadahn's suggestion was seriously entertained at the time. Nonetheless, AQI's excesses and ultimate defeat during this period heavily influenced the strategy that al-Qaeda would adopt when the Arab Spring protests struck the Middle East and North Africa. AQSL viewed AQI's defeat as a repudiation of the group's approach, while it saw the U.S.'s population-centric approach as a success. Consequently, in other regions where al-Qaeda had a recognizable presence, it began to adopt a more population-centric approach in the wake of the Iraq war. IS did not share this conclusion: It viewed Zarqawi as a founding father who was above reproach. IS's continued adherence to Zarqawi's approach would drive its tensions with its parent organization and contribute to its eventual expulsion from al-Qaeda's network. And IS's approach following its split from al-Qaeda, when it reached unprecedented levels of success, continued to be driven by Zarqawist principles.

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[14] General David H. Petraeus, "Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq," September 10–11, 2007, p. 5.
[15] Adam Gadahn, letter to unknown recipient, January 2011, SOCOM-2012-0000004-HT.

The Strategic Objectives of al-Qaeda and IS

Al-Qaeda's Strategic Objectives

The post-Arab Spring environment has proven to be a major inflection point in al-Qaeda's global strategy. The new environment ushered in by the successful revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and the unsuccessful revolution in Syria, has provided al-Qaeda with two major opportunities. The first opportunity is that the regional upheaval has created a growth environment for jihadism, and al-Qaeda has sought to exploit this by establishing a significant presence in places where it had previously been suppressed. The second opportunity is that al-Qaeda perceived an opening to repair its damaged image as it expanded into new areas, where the population often was seeing al-Qaeda (perhaps operating under the name of a front group) for the first time.

The organizational methodology that al-Qaeda formulated for this post-Arab Spring environment is designed to pursue two key objectives. First, al-Qaeda has implemented a population-centric approach—including use of gradualism and cooperation with local actors—in order to increase its base of popular support. Second, al-Qaeda made copious use of clandestine efforts and tailored popular front groups (like Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, which will be discussed further later in this report) in its expansion. This was intended to reduce the organization's exposure to counterinsurgent forces, including the United States and the Middle East's Sunni regimes, and to avoid frightening or alienating local populations.

Popular Support

Popular support has become essential to al-Qaeda's organizational survival and growth. While al-Qaeda once conceptualized itself as exclusively a vanguard movement, the group has come to view itself in recent years as a popular movement that needs the support, or least the acquiescence, of the populace. This transformation had begun prior to the Arab Spring, as the letters that Zawahiri and Atiyah wrote to Zarqawi in 2005 recognize the importance of the population to jihadist groups. However, the transformation of al-Qaeda into a more broad-based movement was supercharged by the Arab Spring, which demonstrated the power of the masses in affecting change and provided a critical opening for greater jihadist penetration.

It is worth noting how the concept of popular support figured in al-Qaeda's rhetoric and thought prior to the Arab Spring. Al-Qaeda's relationship to the populace stood at the center of AQSL's dispute with Zarqawi in the 2005-06 period. In his letter to Zarqawi, Zawahiri explained the importance of public support at some length:

> If we are in agreement that the victory of Islam and the establishment of a caliphate in the manner of the Prophet will not be achieved except through jihad against the apostate rulers and their removal, then this goal will not be accomplished by the mujahid movement while it is cut off from public support, even if the jihadist movement pursues the method of sudden overthrow. This is because such an overthrow would not take place without some minimum of popular support and some condition of public discontent which offers the mujahid movement what it needs in terms of capabilities in

the quickest fashion. Additionally, if the jihadist movement were obliged to pursue other methods, such as a popular war of jihad or a popular intifada, then popular support would be a decisive factor between victory and defeat. In the absence of this popular support, the Islamic mujahid movement would be crushed in the shadows, far from the masses who are distracted or fearful, and the struggle between the jihadist elite and the arrogant authorities would be confined to prison dungeons far from the public and the light of day.[16]

In a separate section of the letter, Zawahiri again underscored the importance of popular support, noting that "the strongest weapon which the mujahedeen enjoy—after the help and granting of success by God—is popular support from the Muslim masses in Iraq, and the surrounding Muslim countries. So, we must maintain this support as best we can, and we should strive to increase it."[17]

During the period that AQI's excesses were in fact spurring Iraqi Sunnis to revolt against it, al-Qaeda's ideologues were able to read the warning signs clearly. In a letter written in early 2007 that was later recovered from bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, an unidentified jihadist leader of Egyptian origin warned that if AQI operatives "continue using techniques such as this [i.e., indiscriminate attacks on civilians], they will spoil [things and] alienate the people, who could be won over by enemy after enemy."[18] And the soul-searching intensified following AQI's defeat, as reflected in the aforementioned letter Adam Gadahn wrote urging al-Qaeda's dissociation from AQI.

AQSL decided to make changes to ensure that other branches of the organization would not repeat AQI's errors, and to regain the trust and support of local populations. In a letter that Atiyah wrote to Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the emir of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), he noted that "the people's support to the mujahedin is as important as the water for fish," making reference to Mao Tse-tung's famous adage that "the guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea."[19] Pointing to AQI as a cautionary tale, Atiyah encouraged Wuhayshi to "study all the mujahedin's attempts and efforts to learn from their mistakes," and to avoid targeting tribal members when doing so would result in conflict with a local tribe. Wuhayshi in turn transmitted a similar message to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) leadership, illustrating al-Qaeda's coordinated efforts to forge a new approach.

The most significant example of these changes came in September 2013, when Zawahiri released a document entitled "General Guidelines for Jihad" that made public al-

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[16] Zawahiri letter to Zarqawi, July 2005.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Letter from Unknown to Hafiz Sultan, SOCOM-2012-0000011, March 28, 2007, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/05/03/Foreign/Graphics/osama-bin-laden-documents-combined.pdf.

[19] Letter from Atiyah Abd al-Rahman to Nasir al-Wuhayshi, SOCOM-2012-0000016, date unknown, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/05/03/Foreign/Graphics/osama-bin-laden-documents-combined.pdf.

Qaeda's new population-centric approach.[20] Zawahiri instructed affiliates to avoid conflict with Middle Eastern governments when possible, asserting that conflict with local regimes would distract from efforts to build bases of support. Zawahiri also instructed affiliates to minimize violent conflict with Shias and non-Muslims in order to prevent local uprisings, and to abstain from attacks that could result in Muslim civilian casualties. A purportedly leaked letter that Zawahiri wrote to the Islamic State's caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in September 2013 notes that the General Guidelines were distributed to all of al-Qaeda's affiliates for review prior to their publication to allow for comments and objections, thus suggesting the document represents the unified policies of al-Qaeda as a whole.[21]

Consonant with these changes to al-Qaeda's operations, the organization also prioritized a "rebranding" campaign designed to alter its public image. This rebranding campaign was an organizational focus even before the Arab Spring began. Documents recovered from bin Laden's Abbottabad compound reveal that an unnamed al-Qaeda official had discussed changing al-Qaeda's name to something that would resonate more with the *ummah* (worldwide body of Muslims). As the official noted, al-Qaeda's name (which literally means *the base* in Arabic) had become identified with "a military base with fighters without a reference to our broader mission to unify the nation."[22] Bin Laden similarly wanted to change the group's public image. In May 2010, he argued in a letter to Atiyah that al-Qaeda should enter a "new phase" that prioritized the battle for popular support.[23] The events of the Arab Spring further reinforced the importance of popular support for the jihadist movement, showing that popular mobilization could topple long-standing regimes.

Reducing Exposure to Counterinsurgent Forces

Al-Qaeda's covertness strategy—including its use of front groups—and its embrace of a relatively low-key public profile are also related to the group's efforts to evade counterinsurgent forces. Among other things, al-Qaeda's maintenance of clandestine relationships with its undeclared branches is a deliberate effort to minimize the attention that the al-Qaeda network receives from adversaries.

The U.S.'s ability to quickly topple the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq was instructive in shaping al-Qaeda's preference for covertness. The jihadist group realized that the United States—even when "exhausted," as Atiyah described America after its protracted war against the jihadist movement—retained the "strength to destroy an Islamic state in the region."[24] Bin Laden made this rationale for preferring

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[20] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for Jihad," September 2013, available at https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf.

[21] The "leaked" letter can be found at http://justpaste.it/asrarwkk.

[22] Letter from unknown al-Qaeda official, SOCOM-2012-0000009, date unknown, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/05/03/Foreign/Graphics/osama-bin-laden-documents-combined.pdf.

[23] Letter from Osama bin Laden to Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, SOCOM-2012-00000019, May 2010, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/05/03/Foreign/Graphics/osama-bin-laden-documents-combined.pdf.

[24] Letter from Atiyah to Wuhayshi, SOCOM-2012-0000016.

covertness explicit in one of the letters he wrote in Abbottabad. He noted that when a branch's affiliation with al-Qaeda "becomes declared and out in the open," that causes the group's enemies to escalate their attacks on it. He pointed to the civil wars in Iraq and Algeria as examples of this phenomenon. Even if al-Qaeda's enemies would inevitably discover the network's relationship with one of its branches, bin Laden stated that "an official declaration remains to be the master for all proof."[25]

Al-Qaeda's covert and deliberate approach allows the group to quietly build its network, waiting until its adversaries have been weakened before revealing its full strength.

Al-Qaeda's Approach in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia

Consonant with Maoist principles, al-Qaeda adopted a tempered approach to spreading its influence in the Middle East and North Africa in the wake of the Arab Spring revolutions. Al-Qaeda's strategists quickly recognized that the changes gripping the region provided a new set of opportunities. In addition to producing the kind of widespread instability that can help a militant movement that harbors rigid utopian principles to carve out a foothold, al-Qaeda's strategists foresaw unprecedented opportunities to undertake *dawa* (evangelism).[26] This is because, while pre-Arab Spring political regimes placed strict restrictions on religious expression, strategists foresaw that fewer restrictions would exist in the political environment that immediately followed the revolutions. This would create new opportunities for a wide range of Islamist groups, ranging from moderate political Islamists to hardline salafi jihadists, to disseminate their views to the general public.

Many al-Qaeda leaders spoke of the possibilities for *dawa* in the post-Arab Spring environment. Zawahiri publicly remarked upon the "opportunity for advocacy and statement" that existed in both post-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt.[27] Bin Laden also recognized this opportunity, advising jihadists in one of his few statements on the Arab Spring to "spread the correct understanding, as the current conditions have brought on unprecedented opportunities." [28] Atiyah described the Arab Spring as a "historical opportunity," and called on jihadists to "spring into action and initiate or increase their preaching, education, reformation and revitalization in light of the freedom and opportunities now available in this post revolution era."[29] Shaykh bin Mahmud, a regular contributor to jihadist forums, exhorted jihadists in Tunisia to "win the Tunisian people

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[25] Letter from Osama bin Laden to Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr, SOCOM-2012-0000005, August 7, 2010, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/05/03/Foreign/Graphics/osama-bin-laden-documents-combined.pdf.

[26] See, e.g., Hamzah bin Muhammad al-Bassam, "Heeding the Advantages and Lessons of the Two Uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia," *Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah*, February 11, 2011, trans. Open Source Center; Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, "The People's Revolt... The Fall of Corrupt Arab Regimes... The Demolition of the Idol of Stability... and the New Beginning," distributed by the Global Islamic Media Front, February 16, 2011.

[27] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "And be Neither Weakened nor Saddened," Al-Sahab Media, August 15, 2011, trans. Open Source Center.

[28] Letter from Osama bin Laden to Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, SOCOM-2012-0000010, April 26, 2010, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/05/03/Foreign/Graphics/osama-bin-laden-documents-combined.pdf.

[29] Atiyah, "The People's Revolt."

and quickly," noting that the Tunisians "are naturally loving of their religion, and the manifestations of immorality in Tunisia are the work of a minority."[30] While al-Qaeda possesses reasons for undertaking *dawa* that are independent of Maoist principles, this opening to spread the group's ideas fit neatly within Mao's paradigm for the first stage of revolutionary warfare.

Al-Qaeda theorists explicitly understood that *dawa* would help to build the organization's popular base of support and pave the way for military confrontation in the future. Jihadist writer Hamzah bin Muhammad al-Bassam, while urging a focus on *dawa* in the near term, articulated the ultimate need for the movement to engage in violence. Without violence, he reasoned, salafi jihadism would find itself as just one of a number of different "intellectual trends."[31] The Ansar al-Mujahedin Network advised "acquiring and storing arms in safe locations known only to one who is trustworthy and on the solid, right path" even during the stage of *dawa*.[32]

Al-Qaeda's efforts in Tunisia exemplified its early post-Arab Spring strategy. Jihadist expansion in Tunisia originally occurred through *dawa* efforts spearheaded by an al-Qaeda front organization called Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST).[33] AST was publicly established when several high-profile salafi jihadists who had been imprisoned by dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime were released from prison after he was overthrown.

AST initially focused most of its resources on *dawa*, emphasizing visibility as it undertook these efforts. AST made its presence felt in some rather traditional ways, including holding *dawa* events at markets or universities, holding public protests, and dominating physical spaces, such as cafés, near places of worship. Two of the group's innovations were its provision of social services to Tunisians (which can be seen as an extension of AST's *dawa* efforts) and the group's use of social media—even before IS's emergence—to advertise its activities.

AST's social services activity included the distribution of food, clothing, and basic supplies, as well as sponsorship of convoys that provided medical care and medicine. These efforts concentrated on areas that are typically neglected by the government, such as rural and impoverished areas. AST's provision of social services typically was accompanied by distribution of literature designed to propagate its ideology. These efforts would not reach the same areas consistently—which is where AST's use of social media became particularly relevant. Almost immediately after it undertook humanitarian efforts, AST would post information about its latest venture, including photographs, to its Facebook page and other websites. Social media served as a force multiplier, illustrating a rapid pace of

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[30] Husayn bin Mahmud, "Interview on Events in Tunisia," Ansar al-Mujahedin Network, January 20, 2011, trans. Open Source Center.

[31] Bassam, "Heeding the Advantages and Lessons of the Two Uprisings."

[32] "Statement by Jihadist Media Forums and Establishments to Our People in Libya," Ansar al-Mujahedin Network, March 28, 2011, trans. Open Source Center.

[33] For evidence that AST was a front organization for al-Qaeda, see discussion in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Bridget Moreng and Kathleen Soucy, *Raising the Stakes: Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia's Shift to Jihad* (The Hague: ICCT–The Hague, 2014), pp. 13-15.

humanitarian assistance and thus helping the group achieve its goal of visibility. AST's objectives in carrying out these activities were to build the organization's support base and to win the sympathies of the Tunisian population.

As AST's *dawa* activities gained traction, the group began to engage in violence. The first form of violence in which the group engaged is *hisba*, which relates to the Islamic concept of "commanding right and forbidding wrong."[34] As the scholar Michael Cook explains in a comprehensive study, the well-known Sunni scholar Ghazzali (d. 1111) "adopted the word *hisba* as a general term for 'forbidding wrong.'"[35] Salafi jihadist groups, including both al-Qaeda and IS, believe that *hisba* necessitates violence—though al-Qaeda counsels a more gradualist approach to the use of violence.

Indeed, though AST was clearly involved in a wave of *hisba* violence that became undeniable in Tunisia by late 2012, it wasn't the only actor carrying out *hisba* attacks. AST did not claim credit for any such attacks despite its involvement in them. By targeting perceived enemies of the faith, and not making the attacks all about AST, the group sought to create the perception that this violence was organic to the Tunisian people.

Indeed, Tunisia's earliest post-revolution *hisba* violence focused on a target that might be considered universally acceptable by those inclined toward religious fundamentalism: female prostitutes. Though *maisons closes* (brothels) have been legal in Tunisia since 1942, in February 2011 a crowd of "several hundred outraged citizens" gathered near a *maison close* in Tunis on a Friday, the Muslim day of prayer, to protest the presence of prostitutes.[36] The protesters came armed with "sticks and torches in hand," but were stopped by both the Tunisian military and "a militia of pimps, porters and day laborers."[37] These attacks quickly spread, with *maisons closes* being set aflame in Kairouan, Médenine, Sfax, and Sousse. During some of these attacks, the prostitutes were beaten.

Later targets of *hisba* violence included symbols of modernity and secularism, including establishments that served alcohol and television stations and cinemas that showed content that could be deemed impermissible or blasphemous. Salafists also targeted women for dressing immodestly. During these initial stages, AST ensured that its violence did not cross the line and provoke a government crackdown. AST was thus able to continue expanding its influence through *dawa* even while it began to employ violence within the country.

From there, AST graduated to jihad violence, which is warfare against the group's enemies, rather than internal cleansing of the Muslim community. Initially AST's efforts focused on carrying out jihad abroad, facilitating Tunisians' travel to foreign battlefields in

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[34] The obligation to command right and forbid wrong is discussed in the Qur'an. See Qur'an 3:104, 3:110, 9:71.

[35] Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[36] Alexander Smoltczyk, "Islamist Intimidation: The Battle for the Future of Tunisia," *Der Spiegel*, December 5, 2012.

[37] Ibid.

places like Syria, Libya and Mali. As with the group's gradual escalation in violence, this was designed to build up AST's military capabilities while allowing it to continue expanding its political base. However, by 2013 AST had turned its guns against the Tunisian homeland.

AST members were blamed for the assassination of two high-profile secularist politicians that year, Chokri Belaïd and Mohammed Brahmi. The latter man was killed on July 25, and less than a week later—on July 29—a jihadist ambush in Jebel el-Chaambi killed eight soldiers, five of whom had their throats slit. This was, at the time, the bloodiest day that Tunisian security forces had ever experienced. These two bloody incidents, occurring in such close proximity to one another, constituted a point of no turning back for the Tunisian government, and in August 2013 it designated AST a terrorist organization and initiated a crackdown on the group.[38]

It is not clear that AST's leadership wanted the group's violence to escalate so quickly. Indeed, it seems that the group had not progressed far enough in its political stage (what we might consider the Maoist stage of organization, consolidation, and preservation) by July 2013 to justify the initiation of open warfare against the state. By design, AST gave local branches considerable autonomy, which may have contributed to violence escalating faster than AST's core leadership wanted or anticipated.[39] But while the progression of AST's activities may have occurred in a manner that exceeded the leadership's intentions, al-Qaeda's blueprint for Tunisia nonetheless demonstrates how its plans for the post-Arab Spring environment followed Maoist insurgent principles.

IS's entry to the scene as a competitor to al-Qaeda disrupted the latter's careful, deliberate approach.

IS's Strategic Objectives

In its bid for supremacy over the global jihadist movement, IS has formulated a strategy against al-Qaeda that centers on two techniques: 1) portraying al-Qaeda's slower and more deliberate strategy as weakness and indecisiveness, and (2) appealing to al-Qaeda's affiliates by emphasizing its own momentum and expansion, with the aim of poaching groups, members, and potential recruits from al-Qaeda. In essence, IS's approach is the opposite of al-Qaeda's: while al-Qaeda has deliberately sought to minimize the amount of attention it receives in order to reduce its exposure to counterinsurgents, IS is boisterous, constantly seeks the media spotlight, and touts its victories (real or invented) at every opportunity. In doing so, IS is positioning itself as an alternative for jihadists who may be dissatisfied with the drawn-out nature of al-Qaeda's strategic doctrine, or with their position in the al-Qaeda organization. IS utilizes a highly advanced social media apparatus that helps the group broadcast its message, gain recruits, and undermine al-Qaeda's position.

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[38] "Tunisia Declares Ansar al-Sharia a Terrorist Group," BBC, August 27, 2013.

[39] For discussion of whether AST's leadership ordered the assassinations, see Gartenstein-Ross, Moreng and Soucy, *Raising the*, pp. 11-13.

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Because IS was born out of the al-Qaeda network, the organization has unique insights into al-Qaeda's strategy, enabling it to try to transform al-Qaeda's strategic methods into weaknesses. As previously explained, although al-Qaeda's methodical strategy appears to be effective against its state opponents in what we might call a *two-player game*, its approach is vulnerable to disruption by a rival jihadist group—especially one like IS that possesses superior media capabilities. IS's significant advantages in the jihadist social media sphere have helped the group to in turn dominate the news media, which often looks to social media for clues about the latest jihadist goings-on.

Currently IS's three major strategic objectives in its conflict with al-Qaeda are expansion and consolidation of the caliphate, gaining new affiliates abroad through the proliferation of "provinces" (*wilayats*), and attracting foreign fighters and emigrants to the Islamic State.

Expansion and Consolidation of the Caliphate

In the first issue of its English-language magazine *Dabiq*, entitled "The Return of Khilafah," IS presents a chart illustrating the five phases necessary to achieve a caliphate. The first step, the *hijrah* (migration) phase, involves the immigration of mujahedin to an area with weak central governance, where the organization can base its operations. This is intended to create a chaotic environment where the local government becomes unable to execute control over the territory, thus allowing the militants to thrive. The second phase, *Jama'ah* (group), involves an escalation in the frequency of the mujahedin's attacks, thus leading directly to IS's third phase, the complete collapse of state governance in large swaths of territory. IS claims that this will create a state of *tawahhush* (mayhem), at which point the mujahedin can fill the power vacuum by creating an "Islamic state." This roadmap is ultimately designed to produce the ultimate phase, *Khilafa*, in which the caliphate is established. According to IS, this "has always been the roadmap towards Khilafah for the mujahidin." [40] Importantly, this ultimate phase is one that al-Qaeda's methodology has never been able to reach—and, IS argues, is not capable of reaching. The establishment of the caliphate is thus a central achievement for IS, one that clearly sets the group apart from al-Qaeda.

The five phases of the caliphate's creation. (Source: *Dabiq* issue 1)

As IS tries to continue expanding the territory it controls through military means, the group also consolidates its gains through an administrative apparatus and heavy-

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[40] "From Hijrah to Khilafah," *Dabiq* issue 1, June/July 2014, p. 38.

handed implementation of *sharia*.[41] IS's approach to *sharia* implementation is markedly different from al-Qaeda's, and IS has harshly criticized al-Qaeda for focusing on fostering popular support and tailoring *sharia* to meet the needs of local populations. Indeed, IS claims that al-Qaeda has abandoned true Islamic principles by giving "preference to popularity and rationalization." In this way, IS argues, al-Qaeda "became embarrassed of acknowledging undeniable *sharia* fundamentals such as *takfir* [excommunication]."[42] IS has warned that al-Qaeda's emphasis on popular support would leave in place the system that both groups claim to be fighting against, as al-Qaeda's method "would neither eliminate a *taghut* nor remove injustice from the necks of the people."[43] IS claims that rather than implementing *sharia*, al-Qaeda instead "set up 'shar'i' and 'mutual' committees and courts that were 'planning'—for more than two years—to implement the *sharia* but would not execute the *hadud*."[44] (This argument is not accurate: Nusra and other al-Qaeda groups have implemented, and do implement, *hudud* punishments in Syria, though not as brazenly as IS.)

Gaining New Affiliates Abroad

IS has been actively trying to poach affiliates from al-Qaeda in order to expand its network and foster the perception that al-Qaeda is an organization in decline. Africa has been a central battleground where IS has gone after al-Qaeda affiliates, as IS has worked to foster the perception that it has a strong presence on the continent. IS has similarly trumpeted its expansion into Yemen—a move that appears to be driven less by its possession of a strong on-the-ground presence than by strategic considerations related to its competition with al-Qaeda. Yemen is the stronghold of al-Qaeda's most important branch, AQAP, and challenging AQAP's supremacy in Yemen would be of significant value to IS.

IS's affiliate strategy will be explored in more depth later in this report.

Attracting Foreign Fighters and Emigrants

Drawing foreign fighters to fight for, and civilians to populate, the caliphate is essential to the group's objectives. Given the large number of fronts on which IS is fighting simultaneously, attracting foreign fighters has grown quite important to the group's overall military efforts. Maintaining a constant influx of foreign fighters is crucial to IS's ability to replenish its ranks in the face of organizational attrition. Attracting foreigners also helps provide IS with religious legitimacy, given that a caliphate is meant to command the loyalty of the Muslim masses worldwide.

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[41] The best publicly available work on IS's administrative efforts has been the contributions of Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. See, e.g., Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015); Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Critical Analysis of the Islamic State's Health Department," *Jihadology*, August 27, 2015; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "26 Unseen Islamic State Administrative Documents: Overview, Translation & Analysis," *Jihadology*, August 24, 2015.
[42] "From Hijrah to Khilafah," *Dabiq*.
[43] Abu Jarir ash-Shamali, "Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan: A Testimony from Within," *Dabiq* issue 6, December/January 2014/2015, p. 54.
[44] "Irja: The Most Dangerous Bid'ah (and Its Dffect on the Jihad in Sham)," *Dabiq* issue 8, March/April 2015, p. 54.

Foreigners also present an opportunity for IS to expand its reach globally, if and when these foreigners return home. IS fighters who return to their states of origin may be tasked with establishing an IS presence, or a branch of the broader IS network. Such was the case in Libya, where the al-Battar brigade—which fought alongside IS in Syria—helped establish IS's Libya presence upon its return. IS may also try to use foreign fighter returnees to strike against a Western state from within its own borders.

Elements of Strategy for IS and al-Qaeda

Governance, *Sharia*, and the Utility of Violence

IS and al-Qaeda take different approaches to governance, *sharia*, and the utility of violence. IS places the use of violence and immediate, coercive implementation of *sharia* at the center of its governance policies, putting these policies in place anywhere it has enough fighters to impose the group's will. In contrast, al-Qaeda often will choose not to seek to govern in areas where it is militarily strong. Consonant with its strategy of appearing to be an organic part of the local landscape, in areas where branches of al-Qaeda do govern territory—such as Syria and Yemen—these branches often do so as a part of coalitions or front groups. Al-Qaeda favors a slow introduction of *sharia* and disavows unnecessary overt violence.

IS's Use of Violence in Governance

IS's ability to impose governance where it enjoys military power is essential to the group's mission, as the caliphate's legitimacy is predicated on IS's ability to implement laws and otherwise function as a state. Following its capture of territory in Iraq and Syria, the organization quickly announced the imposition of *sharia*. It further issued calls for the emigration of doctors, engineers, judges, and specialists in Islamic law, a symbol of its state-building project. [45] In doing so, the group seeks to portray itself as a state entity that provides basic services and a modicum of security to citizens living inside the caliphate.

Screen capture from IS's video "Health Services in The Islamic State—Wilayat al-Raqqa."

IS's media apparatus, including its strong social media machine, has been an essential component of the group's efforts to demonstrate that it provides basic services to citizens in the caliphate. Several of IS's propaganda videos feature scenes depicting day-to-day life, including children going to school, factory workers bagging wheat, and civilians shopping at outdoor markets. IS has released photos and videos of its doctors treating children, and has propagandized about the state's ability to provide medicine and psychiatric services. In one video, the group

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[45] See, e.g., "From Hijrah to Khilafah," *Dabiq* issue 1, June/July 2014, p. 11.

shows the "Islamic State Fire Brigade" rushing to the scene of a bombing, police patrolling the streets, and a *sharia* court.[46]

However, all independent accounts from IS's two key urban holdings of Mosul and Raqqa City tell a very different story than does IS's propaganda, including the collapse of infrastructure, a severe deterioration in quality of life, and fuel and food shortages. In much of the territory IS controls, social services are rudimentary or non-existent; the public supply of water and electricity is limited to only a few hours per day, food stocks are limited, and gas prices have skyrocketed.[47] Public infrastructure in the caliphate is deteriorating and quality of life for Iraqis and Syrians living in IS-controlled territory has declined considerably. The *Washington Post* has reported a dire situation in areas under IS's rule that contradicts the group's rosy propaganda:

> Services are collapsing, prices are soaring, and medicines are scarce in towns and cities across the "caliphate" proclaimed in Iraq and Syria by the Islamic State, residents say, belying the group's boasts that it is delivering a model form of governance for Muslims.... Slick Islamic State videos depicting functioning government offices and the distribution of aid do not match the reality of growing deprivation and disorganized, erratic leadership, the residents say. A trumpeted Islamic State currency has not materialized, nor have the passports the group promised. Schools barely function, doctors are few, and disease is on the rise.[48]

IS's inability to provide a reasonable quality of life exposes a vulnerability in its strategy. This deficiency presents a major challenge to IS being seen as running a legitimate state. Indeed, IS's opponents argue that the group's governance failures undermine its claims of religious legitimacy. The Baghdad-based Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS) noted in a July 2014 statement that the requirements of an Islamic state or caliphate include "laying the cornerstones for administrative institutions according to the new system, having a realistic structure for the state, and the state's ability to impose the system it adopts and to provide people with their basic needs, among other things."[49] AMS argued that IS failed to fully consider all the factors that are necessary for establishing the caliphate.

Rather than building public support prior to implementing its austere version of *sharia*, IS quickly implements *hudud* punishments. As such, coercive violence is a major component of IS's strategy for governance. The organization has thrown people suspected of being gay off of roofs, beheaded those it deems traitors or apostates, cut off the hands of thieves, and stoned to death women accused of adultery. Nor does this even begin to describe the more macabre tactics IS has employed, including burning men alive in Raqqa City, Baghdadi, and Mosul. The group's rapid and bloody implementation of its system of

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[46] Information gathered from Islamic State propaganda videos "From Inside Halab" and "From Inside Mosul."
[47] Patrick Cockburn, "Life Under Isis," *The Independent* (U.K.), March 15, 2015.
[48] Liz Sly, "The Islamic State is Failing at Being a State," *Washington Post,* December 25, 2014.
[49] Association of Muslim Scholars, "In Relation to the Islamic State's Announcement of a Caliphate in Iraq and Syria," July 1, 2014.

laws stands in contrast to al-Qaeda's gradualist approach, which emphasizes a process of preparing the population ideologically before implementing *sharia*.

Al-Qaeda's Gradualist Model of Governance

In territories al-Qaeda's affiliates govern, the group has adopted a slower and more methodical imposition of *sharia*. The group's guidelines for implementing *sharia* emphasize a population-centric, pragmatic approach. Al-Qaeda leaders have instructed affiliates to tailor the implementation of *sharia* to local conditions, taking into consideration local customs and religious practices. One facet of al-Qaeda's gradualism is first laying the foundations for *sharia* by spreading its understanding of the faith through *dawa*. Finally, al-Qaeda has encouraged its affiliates to implement *sharia* flexibly in its initial phases, and to ignore minor transgressions during that period (though to punish them later, when religious methodology and al-Qaeda's power are more firmly established).

Al-Qaeda's strategists stress that the establishment of governance structures is an opportunity for jihadists to win over the "hearts and minds" of local populations. This outlook is evident from communications between Atiyah and Zarqawi, who largely disregarded the particularities of the local population in areas under AQI's control. In a letter to Zarqawi, Atiyah noted that "embracing the people and bringing them together and winning them over and placating them and so forth … is a great way towards victory and triumph." As such, Atiyah emphasized that al-Qaeda should conduct itself in a manner that would convince the population to "love us … and sympathize with us, and [do things] which will fill it with affection, trust, and reassurance towards us."[50]

Al-Qaeda's "hearts and minds" governance strategy has several aspects. One central component, consistent with IS's own governance strategy, is the provision of services to local populations. In a letter to AQIM's emir Abdelmalek Droukdel, Wuhayshi outlined the strategic importance of service provision, noting: "Try to win them over through the conveniences of life and by taking care of their daily needs like food, electricity and water. Providing these necessities will have a great effect on people, and will make them sympathize with us and feel that their fate is tied to ours."[51]

The gradual implementation of *sharia* is also crucial to al-Qaeda's population-centric approach. Al-Qaeda encourages its affiliates to adjust *sharia* to local conditions, if only temporarily and for strategic reasons. Atiyah articulated the group's outlook on the application of *sharia* in his letter to Zarqawi, which noted that "our *sharia* allows [for a] wide scope, including keeping quiet and looking the other way until you have total power and control."[52]

Following this logic, al-Qaeda has instructed its affiliates to "educate" local populations on the laws of Islam before inflicting punishments for minor infractions. This approach is clearly outlined in Wuhayshi's letter to Droukdel, who was rebuked for the

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[50] Letter from Atiyah Abd al-Rahman to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, late 2005.
[51] Letter from Nasir al-Wuhayshi to Abdelmalek Droukdel, May 21, 2012, available at http://www.longwarjournal.org/images/al-qaida-papers-how-to-run-a-state.pdf.
[52] Letter from Atiyah to Zarqawi, late 2005.

method in which *sharia* was implemented in northern Mali. Wuhayashi provided what was essentially a blueprint for bringing *sharia* to new areas:

> You have to take a gradual approach with them when it comes to their religious practices. You can't beat people for drinking alcohol when they don't even know the basics of how to pray. We have to first stop the great sins, and then move gradually to the lesser and lesser ones. When you find someone committing a sin, we have to address the issue by making the right call, and by giving lenient advice first, then by harsh rebuke, and then by force. We have to first make them heed monotheism and fight paganism and sorcery, and then move on to enforcing punishments of great sins…. It's enough that the society is free of the great sins. As for the smaller sins and offenses, they have to be addressed gradually, with patience, leniency and wisdom.[53]

Al-Qaeda's senior leaders have been consistent in counseling this approach for over a decade. In Atiyah's letter to Zarqawi, he noted that in the early stages of governance affiliates should overlook many of the population's "mistakes and flaws, and while tolerating a great deal of harm from them for the sake of not having them turn away and turn into enemies on any level."[54]

In the previous two examples—Mali and Iraq under AQI—evidence of this gradualist approach emerged when AQSL assessed affiliates as departing from its guidelines, and rebuked them. But in Syria, though Nusra was accused of hastily implementing *sharia* early in the civil war, the group now appears to be adhering to al-Qaeda's governance blueprint. In areas it controls, Nusra has repealed bans on cigarette smoking and has adopted more lenient rules regarding dress codes for women.[55] Nusra has also begun to make public displays of punishing fighters who unjustly harm local residents, a sharp break from the group's earlier behavior, which included crucifixions, public beatings, and other acts of brutality against local populations.[56] This approach should not be mistaken for moderation on Nusra's part: There are compelling reports of the group's continuing extremism, especially in its treatment of religious minorities, but it has taken this approach where it will draw less attention and do less damage to Nusra's relationship with local populations.

AQAP has also adhered to a population-centric governance approach in the parts of Yemen the group has overtaken in recent months. In April 2015, AQAP overtook Yemen's fifth-largest city, al-Mukalla, in the Hadramawt coastal region. After the city fell, AQAP appointed an umbrella group called the Sons of Hadramawt to police the city, and selected

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[53] Letter from Wuhayshi to Droukdel, May 21, 2012.
[54] Letter from Atiyah to Zarqawi, late 2005.
[55] Raja Abdulrahim, "Al-Qaeda's Syrian Arm Shifts Tactics in War," *Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 2015.
[56] Bassem Mroue, "Nusra Front Quietly Rises in Syria as Islamic State Targeted," Associated Press, March 24, 2015.

a local council to govern.[57] These moves appear designed to reduce counterinsurgent pressure on AQAP, and also preserve existing tribal structures and customs in order to win over the population. AQAP has also been cautious in implementing *sharia* in Mukalla. AQAP denied rumors that it had banned music, claiming that tribes opposed to AQAP had spread these fictitious claims.[58]

Military Approaches

IS and al-Qaeda also have different military approaches. Both groups are capable of fighting conventional wars, and do so in various theaters. However, IS is intent on maximizing the publicity from its military gains, whereas al-Qaeda has sought to obscure its connections with militant groups fighting in various theaters. Further, in several theaters—including Syria, Yemen, and Libya—al-Qaeda has intermeshed its forces with militant groups regarded as more moderate, making al-Qaeda difficult to target with air power.

The Islamic State's Military Campaigns

In its military campaigns, IS employs an extremely aggressive approach to its territorial conquests. The group's willingness to employ force-on-force warfare has enabled it to take major territory quickly, and some offensives the group has undertaken required massive amounts of manpower reflective of the type of military strategy ordinary state forces might employ. The group's frequent use of force-on-force violence has borne fruit for the organization, but has also increased the opportunities for the group's enemies to target it from the air, and has driven up IS's rate of attrition. IS's defeat at the northern Syrian city of Kobani, which is majority Kurdish, is the most glaring example of the risks that IS faces in embracing a conventional military approach. The Islamic State's push on Kobani in late 2014 allowed it to capture more than 300 surrounding villages, and enter the city center by early October. But the group's repeated military pushes against Kobani with heavy armor allowed coalition airpower to inflict significant attrition on its ranks, and IS was ultimately pushed out of the city entirely. IS lost upwards of 1,200 fighters, as well as significant amounts of heavy weaponry and equipment, in its continuing efforts to capture the city.

Following IS's devastating loss in Kobani, the group seemingly undertook adaptations, moving toward greater use of irregular and special forces-type warfare. The group's capture of Ramadi illustrates its evolving tactics. Over IS's three-day surge against the Anbari city, the group was able to largely evade surveillance and airstrikes—aided in part by a severe sandstorm. IS conducted at least 27 suicide vehicle attacks during the offensive, and IS fighters used dozens of new weapons, including transforming captured U.S. armored vehicles into massive improvised explosive devices. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported, American analysts believed that these developments demonstrated how IS "appears to be learning from battlefield defeats like the one in Kobani, Syria, last summer in

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[57] Lee Keath and Maggie Michael, "In the Face of IS Successes, al-Qaida Adapts, Grows Stronger," Associated Press, May 4, 2015.
[58] Ibid.

pursuit of its goal to control the Sunni-majority areas of Syria and Iraq."[59]

The use of conventional warfare tactics does not separate IS from al-Qaeda. As this report discusses subsequently, al-Qaeda routinely utilizes front groups and other tactics designed to obscure the responsibility for its military advances. But in contrast, IS uses virtually all of its advances as propaganda pieces, designed to create the perception of perpetual momentum. The group's powerful social media apparatus helps it to build this image, but also functions as a double-edged sword, as these electronic communications can be monitored by intelligence services. At least one U.S. air strike on an IS command post was attributed to a "moron" in IS who divulged the post's location by bragging about IS's capabilities over social media.[60] With tens of thousands of IS social media accounts, there is no way the group's *mukhabarat* can review all of them for operational security concerns. As a result, all kinds of valuable information routinely leak onto social media.

Inspiring Lone Wolf Attacks

There is no question that we have seen a recent spike in "lone wolf" (single actor) terrorist attacks that can be attributed primarily to the Islamic State. A recent study on lone wolf terrorism by Australian scholar Ramón Spaaij examines the phenomenon across 15 Western states.[61] Spaaij demonstrates that lone wolf terrorism had gradually increased throughout the length of his sample (from 1968-2010), but that it still represented a rare exception when it came to terrorism rather than the rule. On average, there were 4.7 lone wolf terrorist attacks per year across all 15 countries, and across all the various ideological varieties of terrorism. By the decade of the 2000s, that average had risen to 7.3 lone wolf attacks per year.

The fact that IS has driven a spike in lone wolf terrorism can be seen by the fact that IS-inspired attacks in 2014, *by themselves*, were greater in number than the annual average for all kinds of terrorism. The likely reason that IS has driven this spike is its mastery of social media. Terrorism has tended to be a group activity: To get someone to carry out an act as extreme as terrorism, where he may lose his life and is likely to lose his freedom, generally requires group dynamics. The group can help reinforce the radicalizing individual's extreme ideas, spur him on to action, and refuse to let him back out. While we have grown accustomed to members of such groups being in physical proximity to each other, one's social media contacts can play the role of the radicalizing and mobilizing group. Online relationships are (generally) no less real than those that occur in the physical world, and it appears that the current spike in lone wolf terrorism has been driven by the way that extremists in IS have taken advantage of new online communication platforms.

IS often employs young foot soldiers to call for attacks in their country of origin, speaking in that state's native tongue. The purpose of using such a spokesman to call for

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[59] Margaret Coker, "How the Islamic State's Win in Ramadi Reveals New Weapons, Tactical Sophistication Prowess," *Wall Street Journal,* May 25, 2015.

[60] Justin Moyer, "Islamic State 'Moron' Bragging Online Brings an Airstrike on Himself," *Washington Post*, June 5, 2015.

[61] Ramón Spaaij, Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention (Springer, 2012).

attacks is ensuring that the audience can identify with him. For example, in December 2014, Canada native John Maguire appeared in an IS video urging his fellow Canadians to either travel to the Islamic State or carry out attacks at home. He said, "You either pack your bags, or you prepare your explosive devices. You either purchase your airline ticket, or you sharpen your knife."[62] Maguire encouraged Canadians to "follow the example" of Martin Rouleau, a Canadian who struck two military personnel in Montreal with his car in October 2014. Before the video ends, Maguire points out that he was once "a typical Canadian." He says, "I was one of you.... I grew up on the hockey rink and spent my teenage years on stage playing guitar. I had no criminal record. I was a bright student, and maintained a strong GPA in university." (In addition to hockey, Tim Horton's is another theme that features heavily in the propaganda from Canadian IS members.)

IS has explained the importance of lone wolf attacks to its audience, encouraging Muslims who cannot travel to the caliphate to carry out violence in their home countries in several issues of *Dabiq*. Even the group's top spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, made an appeal in this regard in September 2014. He urged his audience to "kill a disbelieving American or European—especially the spiteful and filthy French—or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war." He said, "Do not ask for anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers."[63]

One reason to prefer lone wolf attacks, *Dabiq* emphasized, is to reduce the chance of a plot being disrupted. "The smaller the numbers of those involved and the less the discussion beforehand, the more likely it will be carried out without problems," IS's official English-language publication advised. "One should not complicate the attacks by involving other parties, purchasing complex materials, or communicating with weak-hearted individuals."[64]

In IS's view, the lone wolf attacks it inspires need not necessarily be spectacular. Rather, the group is more focused on inspiring *frequent* attacks in order to maintain the perception of momentum. IS has also stressed the importance of ensuring that an attack be attributed to the organization, warning in *Dabiq* that attacks that are not explicitly carried out in IS's name may be framed as "random killings" by the media.[65] Ultimately, an article published in *Dabiq* in late 2014 shows how IS ties various lone wolf attacks together to advance the group's narrative:

> In Australia, Numan Haider stabbed two counterterrorism police officers. In Canada, a soldier was shot and killed in front of the war memorial in Ottawa.... All these attacks were the direct result of the Shaykh's [Baghdadi] call to action.... Sections of the media were quick to single out the attackers as

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[62] IS's video of John Maguire urging Canadians to take part in attacks can be found at http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=79b_1417981736&comments=1.

[63] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "Indeed your Lord is Ever Watchful," speech released September 21, 2014, available at https://ia801400.us.archive.org/34/items/mir225/English_Translation.pdf.

[64] "Rush to Support Your State O Muslim," *Dabiq* issue 4, September/October 2014, p. 44.

[65] Ibid.

"disturbed loners," individuals just looking for an excuse to commit violent crime in their hometowns. But the truth runs far deeper than this…. The significance of these attacks and others is enormous and cannot be underestimated. By calling on Muslims around the world to rise up in arms, the Shaykh launched attacks in Canada, America, and Australia (three of the countries mentioned in his speech) with nothing more than words and a shared belief in the act of worship that is jihad. A general in a conventional army couldn't possibly hope to have such power over men he'd never met on the other side of the world, ordering them to attack and possibly be killed, even if he offered them money![66]

Overall, IS has exceeded al-Qaeda's ability to inspire lone-wolf attackers, and this has furthered its goal of being seen as surpassing its parent organization. Lone wolf attacks fulfill several of IS's core objectives. The ability to inspire lone wolves helps IS to appear ascendant, demonstrates its transnational reach, and keeps the group in the media spotlight.

Al-Qaeda's Deception and Disguise

While one purpose behind IS's military actions is to showcase the group's strength to the rest of the world, al-Qaeda has systematically sought to conceal the size of its network and downplay its capabilities across the Middle East and North Africa. The group has pursued this objective by masking its involvement in emerging theatres of conflict and establishing covert relationships with unacknowledged affiliate organizations like AST. Consequently, analysts have consistently underestimated al-Qaeda's strength while—consistent with one of al-Qaeda's key goals—counterinsurgent forces have allowed al-Qaeda front groups to thrive and build their support base. Moreover, concealing affiliates' relationships with al-Qaeda allows these groups to gain public support and attract resources from individuals and entities that might otherwise be wary of assisting an overt al-Qaeda entity.

Even as al-Qaeda took on overt regional affiliates in the years after 9/11—including AQI, AQIM, and AQAP—the group's senior leaders were weighing the merits of adopting a more covert strategy. One clear example of this comes from a letter bin Laden wrote in 2010 to the Somali militant group al-Shabaab's emir Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr.[67] Even though Shabaab was already part of al-Qaeda's orbit at the time, this letter rejected Zubayr's request to publicly announce Shabaab's allegiance to al-Qaeda.

Bin Laden explained that establishing a formal public relationship would attract the attention of counterinsurgent forces against Shabaab. Further, bin Laden asserted that keeping Shabaab's connections to al-Qaeda concealed would allow wealthy businessmen from Saudi Arabia and Yemen to send money to Somalia without facing sanction from the international community. Channeling of aid to the Somali population through Shabaab, bin Laden explained, would help Shabaab gain popular support and "keep people with the

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[66] *Dabiq* issue 5, October/November 2014, pp. 37-38.
[67] Letter from bin Laden to Zubayr, SOCOM-2012-0000005, August 7, 2010.

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mujahedin." Thus, bin Laden counseled Zubayr to state publicly that al-Qaeda and Shabaab's relationship was limited to a "brotherly Islamic connection and nothing more," even while he advised Zubayr to pass on "secret messaging" to the Somali people that the two groups had formally united.[68] Other al-Qaeda leaders disagreed with bin Laden's decision to conceal Shabaab's connections to al-Qaeda, and Shabaab became a publicly-acknowledged al-Qaeda branch shortly after bin Laden's death.[69] Nonetheless, this internal disagreement does not show that there was dissension about the covertness strategy so much as it suggests there was a difference of opinion regarding which al-Qaeda branches should remain concealed and which should not.

Al-Qaeda adhered closely to its covertness strategy as the Arab Spring protests spread chaos in the Middle East in North Africa, and created new opportunities for jihadist groups. Al-Qaeda believed that if it quickly established an overt presence in places like Tunisia and Libya, it would attract pressure from counterinsurgent forces and risk alienating the population. Instead, al-Qaeda elected to use front organizations to expand its presence in revolutionary and post-revolutionary environments, concealing its footprint in order to allow its network to grow. Writers and strategists affiliated with al-Qaeda acknowledged this covertness strategy in their public writings. For example, Hamzah bin Muhammad al-Bassam wrote in February 2011:

> Generally, it is possible in our currently existing case—in the shadow of the people's revolution against ruling tyrannies—to benefit from the strategy of the constructive disarrangement and the sound assembling toward realizing the best results. The constructive disarrangement could be through various activities which are distributed in multiple directions capable of distracting the rival from the real size of the work we are doing. Then, and at the moment of decision, the sound assembling takes place, in accordance with the unity of the methodology.[70]

Bassam's mention of "constructive disarrangement" refers to the establishment of a decentralized, clandestine network that might go unannounced, and is less vulnerable to interdiction from counterinsurgent forces.[71] The strategic rationale for adhering to the covertness approach in the post-Arab Spring environment was further articulated by Abu Ubaydah al-Maqdisi, al-Qaeda's late intelligence chief. In a seminal article on strategy, entitled "Strategic Overstretch in Guerilla Warfare," Maqdisi noted that "the guerilla must be like the calm that precedes a storm; his footprints seen, but only at an appropriate time and place, and according to an appropriate plan."[72] Such language indicates that al-Qaeda,

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[68] Ibid.

[69] For evidence of this disagreement, see letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Osama bin Laden, SOCOM-2012-0000006, December 2010, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/05/03/Foreign/Graphics/osama-bin-laden-documents-combined.pdf.

[70] Bassam, "Heeding the Advantages and Lessons of the Two Uprisings."

[71] Bassam's description of this decentralized network is strikingly similar to Derek Jones's analysis of clandestine cellular militant networks. See Derek Jones, *Understanding the Form, Function, and Logic of Clandestine Insurgent and Terrorist Networks: The First Step in Effective Counternetwork Operations* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2012).

[72] Abu Ubaydah al Maqdisi, "Strategic Overstretch in Guerilla Warfare," *Resurgence* issue 1, Fall 2014.

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unlike IS, places a premium on concealment. Indeed, the publication of Maqdisi's essay in al-Qaeda's English-language magazine *Resurgence* was an obvious shot at IS and its approach to revolutionary warfare.

Other jihadist authors affiliated with al-Qaeda have echoed these calls for covertness in the post-Arab Spring environment, or noted that it was being pursued. A March 2011 statement from Atiyah placed al-Qaeda's official imprimatur on the group's covert involvement in the uprising against Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime in Libya.[73] Atiyah noted that "it is not possible for the jihadist vanguards among the sons of the Islamic *ummah* to be at the helm of affairs in any new situation in Libya because of certain considerations such as the need for gradual change, or the need to protect a certain interest and avert a certain case of weakness." The same month, a contributor to the al-Shumukh online forum noted that al-Qaeda militants were participating in the uprising against Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime in Libya, but "all this is being done without announcing the direct involvement of al-Qaeda."[74] Recently declassified documents that were captured from bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad support the idea that al-Qaeda was covertly involved in the uprising against Qaddafi.

Al-Qaeda strategists have begun to conceive of the political system as another space to which they can expand their clandestine network. Though salafi jihadists consider participation in democratic institutions to be *shirk* (idolatry) and thus forbidden, some al-Qaeda theorists have suggested that the group should engage in politics both tactically and covertly as a means of expanding the organization's base of support and allowing it to further entrench itself in the local landscape. The famous strategist Abu Musab al-Suri explained the opportunities that existed in the political realm in his 2004 treatise *Da'awa al-muqāwama al-islāmīyya al-'alāmīyya* (Call for Global Islamic Resistance), where he wrote that jihadists can "secretly use this comfortable and relaxed atmosphere [i.e., the political realm] to spread out, reorganize their ranks, and acquire broader public bases."[75]

The approach described by Suri has increasingly become part of al-Qaeda's strategy. In a revealing article written in March 2015, Abdallah bin Muhammad—a jihadist commentator who is linked to AQAP—endorsed covert jihadist engagement in politics, terming the strategy "political guerilla warfare." Bin Muhammad reasoned that jihadists should remain in the shadows when engaging in politics, allowing them to both avoid counterinsurgent detection and embed themselves within state security agencies. He pointed to some former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) factions' integration into the Dawn coalition in Libya as an example of the practical application of this strategy.[76]

Al-Qaeda adopted this covertness strategy in other theatres as well. Similar to the way al-Qaeda employed AST as a front group in Tunisia, it did so as well with Ansar al-

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[73] Atiyah Abu Abd al-Rahman, "Taḥeya le-āhlna fī Lībyā," Al-Sahab Media, March 18, 2011.

[74] Muhib Ru'yat al-Rahman, "Al-Qaeda Explodes and Kills Civilians and Does not Fight Enemies of Religion; a Repeated Accusation Circulating among Some Muslims," Shumukh al-Islam Network, March 22, 2011, trans. Open Source Center.

[75] Mustafa Setmariam Nasar (Abu Musab al-Suri), *Da'awa al-muqāwama al-islāmīyya al-'alāmīyya* (2004).

[76] Abdallah bin Muhammad, "Ḥurub al-'aṣābāt a-sīyasīya," March 2015.

Sharia in Libya (ASL).[77] Nusra operated as an unacknowledged al-Qaeda affiliate for some time before it officially pledged *bayat* (an oath of allegiance) to Ayman al-Zawahiri in April 2013. In fact, in a May 2013 letter believed to have been written by Zawahiri, the al-Qaeda emir scolded Nusra's emir Abu Muhammad al-Julani for "publicly showing his links to al-Qaeda without having our permission or advice."[78] This letter demonstrates that the decision to mask Nusra's ties to al-Qaeda came directly from AQSL. Similarly, the Caucasus Emirate is believed to have been covertly affiliated with al-Qaeda for years before it publicly acknowledged its relationship in 2014.

These examples demonstrate al-Qaeda's preference for covert expansion, particularly in the post-Arab Spring environment. This strategy creates some vulnerabilities in the competition with IS, which seeks to portray al-Qaeda as small and declining. In these efforts, the group is aided by the fact that al-Qaeda is *also* trying to disguise some of its strength. However, al-Qaeda has also derived benefits from this approach, as it managed to develop an expansive clandestine network in the post-Arab Spring environment without attracting the attention of counterinsurgents.

Al-Qaeda's Cautious Military Strategy

Al-Qaeda has adopted a methodical military strategy that prioritizes sustainable growth and discourages the capture of territory that cannot be held over the long term. Though al-Qaeda has not discouraged its affiliates from holding and governing territory in the post-Arab Spring period—affiliates currently hold significant swaths of territory in Syria, Yemen, and Somalia, and governed territory in Mali from 2011 to 2013—the group has shied away from making ostentatious land grabs that it may not be able to hold.

Al-Qaeda's military approach is shaped by its patient worldview. Tactical victories that expose the network to attack and undermine al-Qaeda's long-term prospects are of little value to the organization from a strategic perspective. As such, al-Qaeda has exhorted its affiliates to take a measured approach in taking new territory, and to avoid establishing overt emirates in areas where it is vulnerable to counterinsurgent forces. Essentially, AQSL wants the network to slowly develop its capabilities and resources in preparation for a longer campaign. At the same time, al-Qaeda instructs its affiliates to begin destabilizing state regimes. This two-pronged strategy—of gradually enhancing its capabilities and destabilizing enemy regimes—positions al-Qaeda to capitalize on state collapse and weakness in the long term.

Al-Qaeda's overarching military strategy is best articulated in former intelligence

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[77] The likelihood of al-Qaeda's use of ASL as a front group was flagged early on by Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, *Al-Qaeda in Libya: A Profile* (Washington, DC: 2012). The United Nations finally added ASL to the al-Qaeda sanctions list in November 2014. United Nations Security Council, press release, "Security Council al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Two Entities to Its Sanctions List," November 19, 2014, available at http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11659.doc.htm. Eulogies released after the death of ASL leader Muhammad al-Zahawi in January 2015 further clarified the relationship between ASL and al-Qaeda. See Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar al-Sharia Libya Leader Met with Osama bin Laden, Followed his 'Methodology,'" *Long War Journal*, February 11, 2015.

[78] Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Muhammad al-Julani and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, May 24, 2013, available at http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/710588/translation-of-ayman-al-zawahiris-letter.pdf.

chief Abu Ubaydah al-Maqdisi's article "Strategic Overstretch in Guerilla Warfare," which was referenced previously in this report. Maqdisi emphasizes the risks of overaggressive military operations, noting that if "expansion is not accompanied by organizing the necessary force required to absorb the consequent losses in a static conventional war (as opposed to a fluid guerilla war), the results may be fatal for the Jihadi group."[79] He further identifies the challenges that militant groups encounter when confronting better-resourced state actors, remarking that "mere presence of the necessary force to merely defend a territory is not a sufficient condition for establishing complete control over the same area…. If the enemy feels that the threat posed by the expansion is existential, it will not spare any effort in destroying this threat." Maqdisi cites the Pakistani Taliban's expansion into Swat district as an example of such overstretch: The militant organization's advance into Swat Valley, a longtime tourist destination just sixty miles from the capital of Islamabad, provoked a massive counteroffensive from the Pakistani army that reversed many of the Pakistani Taliban's gains.

Keeping this cautionary tale in mind, Maqdisi presents a model for cautious and deliberate military strategy that minimizes overstretch. Maqdisi writes:

> A guerilla force may possess the capacity of inflicting huge blows on the enemy, but it may be better for it to restrain from doing so in situations when the reaction of the enemy may be overwhelming. The environment for conducting spectacular special operations is never conducive until the guerilla force has attained sufficient strength and has become invulnerable to the power of the enemy. It is only after reaching this level of strength that it is possible to direct decisive blows against the enemy. The basic principle, therefore, is to take into account the reaction of the enemy before every step in the escalation of the conflict so that decisions appropriate only for the final stages of the war may not be made prematurely.[80]

Maqdisi's prescriptions of patience and methodical growth are echoed elsewhere in al-Qaeda's public and internal communications. The theme of patience is prevalent, for example, in Atiyah's correspondence with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who often defied AQSL's preferred military paradigms. In one letter to Zarqawi, Atiyah warned: "Do not rush victory over the enemy, for the war and our journey are truly long."[81]

AQAP's recent military operations in Yemen, in the midst of an intense sectarian conflict, demonstrate how al-Qaeda seeks to carry out its military strategy. AQAP has not tried to hold territory that it captured when the group did not consider those gains sustainable, and when it does control territory, it employs the kind of population-centric approach that can be seen in Mukalla. An example of AQAP choosing not to impose institutions of governance even after conquering territory can be seen in March 2015, when AQAP militants overran al-Houta, the capital of Lahj Province. AQAP killed over twenty soldiers and seized a number of government buildings in the process. Hours after

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[79] Maqdisi, "Strategic Overstretch in Guerilla Warfare."
[80] Ibid.
[81] Letter from Atiyah to Zarqawi, late 2005.

the militants stormed Houta, they withdrew. Though press accounts claimed that AQAP had been "driven out" of Houta,[82] the absence of reports of militant casualties suggests that AQAP in fact undertook a tactical withdrawal. AQAP employed similar hit-and-run tactics in the town of Bayhan in Shabwa Province in February 2015, seizing an army base before withdrawing.[83] Such attacks have a destabilizing effect, and also send the signal to local stakeholders that al-Qaeda can return anytime. These locals will have a huge disincentive to cooperate with al-Qaeda's opponents, who cannot offer sufficient protection from the jihadists. At the same time, withdrawing after overrunning this territory limits AQAP's exposure to retaliation from counterinsurgent forces.

Al-Qaeda's deliberate and methodical approach extends to the group's view of the establishment of the caliphate. In contrast to IS, al-Qaeda believes that the strategic situation does not yet make the declaration of a caliphate wise. For al-Qaeda, the loss of popular support following a failed caliphate experiment would be disastrous for the jihadist movement. Wuhayshi noted to Droukdel that if al-Qaeda tried to establish a functioning caliphate and failed, "people may start to despair and believe that jihad is fruitless."[84] Another al-Qaeda official (either bin Laden or Atiyah) articulated a similar point, noting that "the impact of losing a state can be devastating, especially if that state is at its infancy. The devastation would be even harder on those who had been directly involved in the building of that state."[85]

Affiliates and Alliances

Affiliate groups and alliances are integral to both organizations' strategies. Affiliate groups, much like the franchise model in business, are a part of the overall organization and are expected to follow the senior leadership's strategy, but possess some degree of autonomy to conduct operations as they see fit. Affiliates' operations are expected to be carried out within the constraints provided by the central organization (although, particularly when the central organization's coercive power over the affiliate is limited, this is not always the case). Allies, on the other hand, are not part of the organization, but are organizations or states that share interests, objectives, or values.

Al-Qaeda and IS have different approaches to affiliates and allies. Because al-Qaeda was IS's parent organization, it had established a robust network of affiliates, some of them covert, long before IS became a distinct organization. As such, since the competition between these jihadist groups escalated, IS has focused on trying to poach al-Qaeda affiliates, and send the signal to others in al-Qaeda's orbit that their organization was in decline, while all the momentum is on IS's side. The jihadist groups that do defect to IS are renamed as wilayats of the caliphate. And they differ with respect to allies in that al-Qaeda is willing to work with militant groups of varying ideological fervor. IS has been less ecumenical in its decisions about forming alliances. In fact, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani said that "the legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes

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[82] See "Al-Qaeda Driven Out of Yemen City After Killing 20 Soldiers," Reuters, March 21, 2015.
[83] "Yemen Army Base Seized by al-Qaeda Linked Fighters," BBC, February 12, 2015.
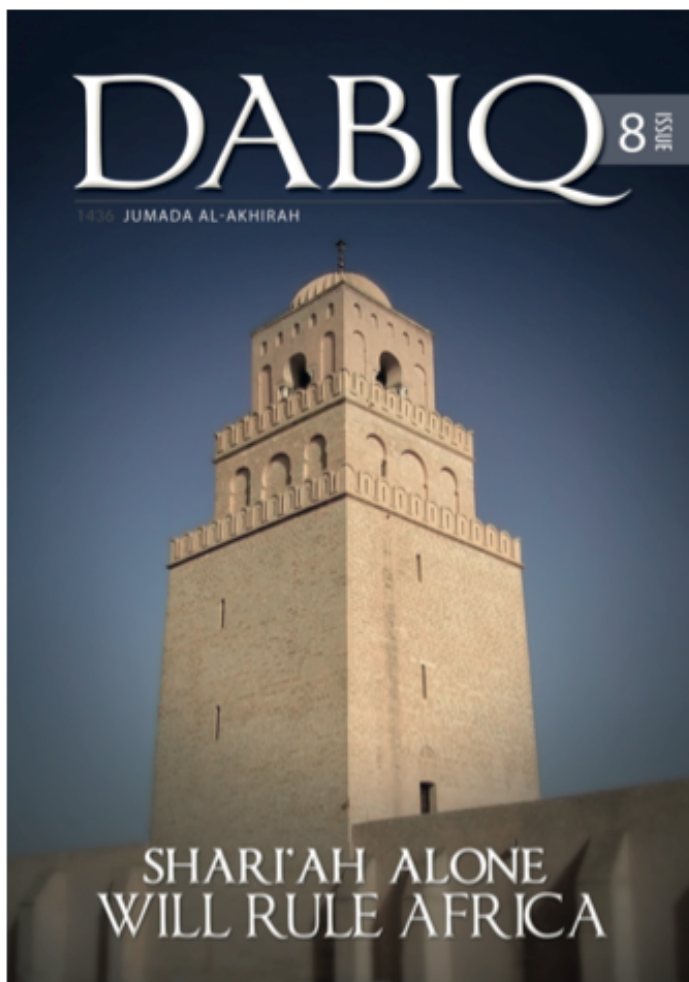[84] Letter from Wuhayshi to Droukdel, May 21, 2012.
[85] Letter from Unknown to Unknown, SOCOM-2012-0000017, date unknown.

null by the expansion of the khilāfah's authority."[86] Declaring other militant groups illegitimate obviously complicates the process of partnering with them; and IS's drive for "ideological purity" means the partners with which IS works are more limited than al-Qaeda's.[87]

IS's Challenge to al-Qaeda in Africa

IS has used two major overarching tactics in Africa to steal militant groups away from al-Qaeda. Its primary method is a "momentum strategy," which works to advertise the group's presence in the area and prove that IS has an upward trajectory. IS's second method is to inspire and publicize high-level defections from Africa-based organizations in al-Qaeda's orbit, in the hope that that other jihadist groups will follow suit. When IS has been unable to inspire these defections, it has sometimes fabricated them.

Africa is an important part of IS's designs on expansion abroad for several reasons. First, the chaotic post-Arab spring environment has allowed space for jihadist groups to operate. Both IS and al-Qaeda realize that access to ungoverned spaces in countries like Libya and Mali would allow them to train fighters, launch attacks or military campaigns from safe havens, and eventually govern these areas. Second, Africa's geographic proximity to IS's territorial holdings in Iraq and Syria, coupled with the proximity of the various militant groups in North Africa to each other, makes it a desirable location. IS addressed this in *Dabiq*, noting that "Algeria, Libya, and Sinai are lands strategically near each other, making it possible to expand further despite the whims of the tawaghit."[88] Third, the fact that a large number of established jihadist groups are in Africa creates multiple opportunities for IS to attract new wilayats abroad. Showcasing IS's

The cover of the eighth issue of *Dabiq* is a powerful symbol of the Islamic State's intentions for Africa.

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[86] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "This is the Promise of Allah," June 29, 2014.
[87] This phrase is taken from Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015.
[88] "Algeria," *Dabiq* issue 5, October/November 2014, p. 32.

Africa intentions, the cover of the eighth issue of its magazine *Dabiq* features a photograph of the Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia, with text proclaiming: "Shari'ah Alone Will Rule Africa."

IS's most significant activities in Africa have been in Egypt, where Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) abandoned its allegiance to al-Qaeda and became IS's Wilayat Sinai; in Libya, where the group currently controls the city of Sirte; in Tunisia, where IS has significant support on the ground among jihadists; and in Nigeria, where the militant group Boko Haram pledged *bayat* to IS in March 2015.

IS poached the Sinai-based group ABM from al-Qaeda's orbit in November 2014. ABM's pledge of *bayat* to IS marked the culmination of a year-plus campaign to lure ABM into the Islamic State's orbit. The campaign dated back to August 2013, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—despite the fact that IS was still part of al-Qaeda's network—set out to obtain oaths of *bayat* from Sinai-based jihadists, successfully luring in one militant group, al-Muhajirun wal-Ansar, with an offer of $10,000 in exchange for a pledge of allegiance.[89] Though ABM did not pledge *bayat* to IS at the time, signs soon emerged that some support for IS existed within ABM. In January 2014, Abu Usamah al-Masri issued a statement just before IS's expulsion from al-Qaeda that concluded with specific encouragement of IS, saying the organization should "show firmness" and "be patient." In late March 2014, nine figures associated with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, including Abu al-Huda al-Sudani, publicly declared their allegiance to IS in an Arabic-language statement. The document concluded by noting other jihadist organizations to whom copies of the statement were sent, and listed ABM among those factions.

Ties between the two organizations continued to grow. The first indication of operational coordination between ABM and IS emerged in the summer of 2014, when Egyptian security forces began arresting IS members traveling to Egypt through underground tunnels between Rafah and the Gaza Strip, with the likely intention of supporting ABM.[90] In September 2014, the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Shahid* reported that IS had dispatched a jihadist known as Musa'id Abu Qatmah to the Sinai Peninsula through Gaza—and that, once in Sinai, he set about trying to win oaths of loyalty from local militant groups.[91] Abu Qatmah was not the only IS figure attempting to win over Sinai groups during that period. When Egyptian authorities arrested eleven alleged militants in early September, they found that the men carried three letters from a Libya-based IS figure known as Abu Ahmad Al-Libi; he encouraged Sinai-based jihadist groups to unite under a single banner of IS supervision in exchange for IS providing all the funding and arms that they required.

The relationship between the two groups was cemented in October 2014, when two envoys from ABM traveled to Syria, where they met with IS leaders and discussed pledging *bayat* to IS in exchange for weapons and funding.[92] At around the same time that the

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[89] "Will ISIS Find Fertile Ground in Egypt's Sinai," *Al-Monitor*, June 23, 2014.
[90] Randa El-Banna, "Alleged ISIL Members Arrested in Sinai Friday," *Cairo Post,* June 29, 2014.
[91] "Ikhwān al-Kūwait Ātaqou al-jihādī Ābu Āyoub li'da'm Dāesh," *Al-Shahid* (Kuwait), September 4, 2014.
[92] David Kirkpatrick, "Militant Group in Egypt Vows Loyalty to ISIS," *New York Times*, November 10, 2014.

envoys traveled to Syria, ABM carried out an attack against the Karm al-Qawadis checkpoint on October 24, and, according to Egyptian authorities, the arrested suspects said that IS ordered ABM to execute the attacks with funding, weapons and explosives that the group had received from Palestinian jihadist groups. Just weeks after the attack, ABM officially pledged allegiance to IS.

It wasn't just IS's entreaties that cemented ABM's pledge. Even as IS plied ABM with money and weapons, ABM lost a number high-level leaders during the course of 2014—losses that were particularly significant because ABM's total size in the Sinai is estimated at no more than around 200 full-time members. Two key ABM leaders—founder Tawfiq Mohammad Faraj and Muhammad al-Sayyid Mansur al-Tukhi—died on the same day in March 2014. After their deaths, Shadi al-Menei assumed leadership of ABM until he was shot dead in Sinai on May 23.[93] After the successive losses of Faraj, al-Tukhi and al-Menei, other key ABM leaders lost to the Egyptian security services included Khaled al-Menei, former commando Hesham al-Ashamwy, and Faysal Husayn Salim Sulayman. These deaths were a major catalyst behind IS sending its representative Musa'id Abu Qatmah to the Sinai, to exploit this rapid attrition. The group's new leader Shehta al-Ma'atqa was then killed by Egyptian authorities in early October 2014, with around twenty other ABM members also killed in a one-week (October 3–9) Egyptian offensive. Shortly thereafter, Egyptian security forces captured ABM's military emir Walid Atallah, further eroding the bench of personnel who would have maintained loyalty to al-Qaeda. Thus, IS skillfully wooed Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, but its efforts were also helped by attrition within the group's ranks.

In Libya, IS has established a solid foothold, and the group has heavily broadcast its expansion efforts into the country. In the eighth edition of *Dabiq*, IS advertised Libya as a place to go "for those who find difficulty making their ways to Sham, particularly those of our brothers and sisters in Africa."[94]

While IS has an impressive network in Libya, the group has also used smoke and mirrors to create the perception of strength during its advance. In October 2014, IS released videos and pictures via social media of IS militants parading through the streets of the eastern Libyan city of Derna, waving IS's black flags. This propaganda campaign convinced onlookers—including such major media outlets as BBC and CNN—that IS had seized control of Derna.[95] In reality, IS only controlled a portion of Derna. The fragility of IS's foothold in Derna became apparent in June 2015, when the Derna Mujahedin Shura Council, which was comprised of several militias, drove IS out of the city entirely. Since being forced out of Derna, IS's center of gravity in Libya has shifted to the city of Sirte, Muammar Qaddafi's hometown. IS has had a presence in Sirte dating back to June 2013, when Turki al-Binali, one of IS's top religious clerics, traveled to the city to give a series of

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[93] "Egypt: Sinai Islamist Leader Shadi al-Menei Shot Dead," BBC, May 23, 2014.

[94] "The Libyan Arena," *Dabiq* issue 8, March/April 2015, p. 26.

[95] For examples of these reports, see Paul Cruickshank et al., "ISIS Comes to Libya," CNN, November 18, 2014; Maggie Michael, "How a Libyan City Joined the Islamic State Group," Associated Press, November 9, 2014.

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lectures and to recruit residents.[96] IS was able to tap into these networks when it focused its efforts on Sirte—and as of this writing, it is in control of the city.

IS's expansion in Libya—both real and fabricated—has had ripple effects that extend to Nigeria. At the time of IS's expansion into Sirte, Boko Haram was on the verge of pledging *bayat* following IS's months-long courtship. IS's widely-reported capture of Libyan cities—at the time, media claimed that the group controlled both Derna and Sirte—demonstrated the Islamic State's capabilities in Africa, and no doubt helped to remedy Boko Haram's unease about leaving al-Qaeda's orbit for IS. On March 7, Boko Haram publicly pledged *bayat* to IS in an audio recording.

Tunisia, which has had more foreign fighters travel to Syria than any other country, also appears to be a battleground in the struggle between IS and al-Qaeda in Africa. While the jihadist groups that emerged in the immediate wake of the Arab Spring—AST and Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi (KUIN)—have leadership loyal to al-Qaeda, the majority of Tunisians who went to Syria as foreign fighters were aligned with IS in that theater.

IS's momentum-based strategy has been at play in Tunisia. Following the March 18, 2015 attack on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis—which killed twenty-one people—IS quickly claimed credit for the attack. However, Tunisia's later investigation instead attributed the terrorist incident to KUIN, and identified the group's emir Luqman Abu Saqr as the mastermind. If IS did indeed exaggerate its role in the Bardo attack, as it appears, its strategy in doing so is clear. After all, the Bardo attack occurred amidst a series of IS advances in various countries, including a Libyan IS affiliate's offensive into Sirte in February and Boko Haram's pledge of *bayat* to IS on March 7. The Islamic State's claim of the Bardo attack furthered the perception that the group had significant momentum internationally.

The Bardo attack, because it was carried out by a rival, threatened IS's narrative of momentum. But IS knew from past experience that al-Qaeda generally doesn't claim credit for attacks while the operatives who carried them out are still at large. IS thus may have realized that it could issue a claim of responsibility before al-Qaeda was prepared to do so. Given the way media cycles work—and IS is *very* attuned to the media cycle—a false or exaggerated claim of responsibility would dominate the news before anybody could disprove it, at a time when Bardo remained a top headline. Al-Qaeda's greater role wouldn't become known until the attack was no longer a hot news item. And IS appears to have been correct in its calculations about media coverage of the Bardo attack.

The Islamic State in Yemen

IS has trumpeted its expansion into Yemen. As previously noted, the group's claims to be a powerful force in Yemen appear to be driven less by its actual possession of a strong on-the-ground presence than by its competition with al-Qaeda. AQAP is al-Qaeda's most important branch, as illustrated by the fact that the group's late emir Nasir al-Wuhayshi (d. June 12, 2015) had also been named the overall al-Qaeda organization's general manager.

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[96] Kevin Casey and Stacey Pollard, "The Islamic State's Strategy in Libya," *Sada*, March 25, 2015, at http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=59488&solr_hilite.

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Additionally, IS, as a former al-Qaeda affiliate, is well aware that AQAP is responsible for guiding al-Qaeda's Africa network. If IS were able to mount a significant challenge to AQAP, or at least chip away at the group's dominance in Yemen, it would be a major blow to al-Qaeda. Indeed, even if IS proves unable to build a competitive network to challenge AQAP, if its propaganda fosters the *perception* that it has done so, IS could further paint al-Qaeda as a sinking ship whose affiliates should run for a life raft as soon as possible.

IS's attempts to move into Yemen come against a backdrop of civil conflict and growing chaos in the country. In 2014, tensions intensified between the regime of Yemeni president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthis, a movement based in northern Yemen that follows the Zaidi school of Shia Islam. In September 2014, Houthi militants moved into the capital of Sana'a, heightening concerns about a broader national conflagration. Those concerns were realized in February 2015, when the Houthis—who are backed by forces loyal to deposed president Ali Abdullah Saleh—dissolved the parliament and raided the presidential palace, placing Hadi under house arrest. (Hadi escaped Sana'a, and fled to Saudi Arabia in March 2015.) As the Houthis, backed by Iran, pushed toward the last major pro-Hadi bastion in the coastal city of Aden, Saudi Arabia and a coalition of Sunni states launched a military offensive aimed at driving back the Houthis and restoring Hadi's government.

The Saudi-led coalition's intervention added a regional dimension to the conflict in Yemen. The Saudis and their Sunni partners on the ground view the Houthi advance as part of a broader trend of Iranian encroachment. The Saudi-led coalition has initiated a campaign of air strikes against the Houthis, and has deployed ground forces in recent weeks to retake Houthi-controlled territory in southern Yemen. The Saudi intervention has intensified the sectarian elements of this civil conflict.

IS has tried to exploit the sectarian conflict to gain popularity among Yemeni Sunnis and undercut AQAP's position. IS presents itself as the protector of Sunnis and has launched a campaign of suicide attacks against Houthi mosques. At the same time, IS criticizes al-Qaeda for its failure to similarly target the Houthis' houses of worship and, more generally, for taking a softer stance towards Houthi civilians. IS has also attacked AQAP for avoiding attacks against the "apostate government, army, police, and intelligence forces."[97] (In return for this concession, AQAP has been able to participate in the capture of Aden and amass considerable resources from an increasingly desperate GCC.)

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[97] "Yemen," *Dabiq* issue 5, October/November 2014, p. 27.

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Screen capture from the Islamic State's video "Soldiers of the Caliphate Land in Yemen."

IS announced its arrival in Yemen in typically spectacular fashion in March 2015, when suicide bombers carried out attacks on two mosques frequented by Houthis in Sana'a, killing 137. The attack was controversial among Sunnis because Sunni Muslims also frequented both mosques: IS had killed Sunnis in addition to Houthis. The group followed this attack with a barrage of propaganda aimed at highlighting its expansion into Yemen. On April 24, 2015, IS released a nine-minute propaganda video entitled "Soldiers of the Caliphate Land in Yemen." The video opens with a lone IS member planting the group's flag into desert sand near Sana'a. He is joined by some twenty additional IS fighters wearing matching camouflage uniforms. The militants are shown in training exercises, after which they threaten attacks on Houthis. The video was clearly designed to trumpet IS's presence and to present disillusioned AQAP members with an alternative group to join.

Exactly one week after IS released this video announcing its presence in Yemen, the group released another video, "Eliminating the Apostates," which showed the execution of fifteen Yemeni soldiers. In May 2015, IS released another video in which IS fighters based in Syria advised Yemeni Sunnis to have "patience," while urging those who have not yet joined IS to "join the convoy," which they portrayed as "still moving forth." A day after the video was released, IS claimed credit for an attack on a Houthi military barracks in Shabwa province.[98]

Despite IS's propaganda campaign, its limited success should be made clear. Outside of Sana'a, its attacks have been overwhelmed in terms of number, target, and impact by AQAP and Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen. Further, IS has experienced extremely limited success in inspiring high-level defections from AQAP. IS was able to poach Mamun al-Hatim from AQAP, though he was killed in a drone strike in al-Mukalla in May 2015. Other than Hatim, IS has failed to attract AQAP's senior leaders, several of whom have strongly denounced IS.[99]

Still, IS will likely continue to target AQAP—both its leadership cadre and lower echelons—in an effort to chip away at the al-Qaeda affiliate's strength. IS may also highlight low-level defections as evidence of AQAP's internal disunity, casting AQAP as a crumbling

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[98] "IS Division in Yemen Claims Attack on Houthi Barracks in Shabwa," SITE Intelligence, May 4, 2015.

[99] For one example of AQAP leaders' criticism of IS, see Thomas Joscelyn, "AQAP Rejects Islamic State's 'Caliphate,' Blasts Group for Sowing Dissent among Jihadists," *Long War Journal*, November 21, 2014.

organization. Nonetheless, IS faces a tall order in trying to challenge AQAP, one of al-Qaeda's strongest affiliates, which has been on an upward trajectory since the outbreak of civil war.

Al-Qaeda's Cooperation with Other Militant Organizations

In the post-Arab Spring environment, al-Qaeda has employed a collaborative approach toward other armed groups, including those who do not share its salafi jihadist outlook. There are several strategic benefits that al-Qaeda derives from its collaboration. For one, this approach bolsters al-Qaeda affiliates' military capabilities and allows al-Qaeda to embed itself within local groups, making it difficult for counterinsurgent forces to target al-Qaeda separate from its partners. Additionally, collaboration with other armed groups provides al-Qaeda the opportunity to expand its support base by appealing to Islamist rebels.

Al-Qaeda strategists have long exhorted affiliates to engage with non-salafi jihadist organizations and to avoid confrontations with other Islamist groups that would detract from al-Qaeda's objectives. As early as 2003, bin Laden called for jihadists to collaborate with Baathist insurgents against the U.S. coalition in Iraq—despite al-Qaeda's "belief in the infidelity of the socialists"—likening the Baathist-jihadist relationship to the collaborative relationship between Persians and Arabs in the seventh and eighth Century.[100] In another statement pertaining to Iraq, Zawahiri gave pointed instructions to jihadists not to be "restrained by the shackles of organizations and foundations from entering the fields of battle," and to "free ourselves from [these] shackles" if they interfered with the pursuit of jihadist goals.[101] Atiyah issued a directive to Zarqawi in 2005 instructing AQI's emir to cooperate with all Sunni insurgent organizations, even those that were "disobedient or insolent."[102]

Al-Qaeda's collaborative approach has yielded benefits in the conflict-prone post-Arab Spring environment. Jabhat al-Nusra's participation in the Jaysh al-Fatah rebel coalition is a prime example of how al-Qaeda's strategy has been carried out. In March 2015, several of Syria's most powerful rebel groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, Faylaq al-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa, joined with Nusra to form Jaysh al-Fatah, which was established to allow the rebels to coordinate their offensive on the city of Idlib. Within a matter of weeks, the rebel coalition had made significant gains, taking the cities of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughour. The coalition is now in control of the majority of Idlib province—including Ariha, Harem, and Marrat al-Nu'man—and is well positioned to continue advancing.

Nusra's involvement in Jaysh al-Fatah confers several advantages. The fact that the group is so embedded within the rebel landscape—when the United States is still committed to ensuring that Assad's regime falls—makes it nearly impossible for the United States to target Nusra without sparking the ire of other rebel groups, and angering Syrians who view Nusra as an integral part of the anti-Assad coalition. But even before the establishment of Jaysh al-Fatah, Nusra's strategy of establishing lasting relationships with

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[100] "Nuṣ resālat Usāma bin Lāden al-ṣawtīyah 'an al-āzma al-'irāqīya," Al Jazeera television, February 11, 2003.
[101] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Statement on President Bush's Surge," January 22, 2007.
[102] Letter from Atiyah to Zarqawi, late 2005.

other militant groups complicated U.S. efforts to combat Nusra's network. In November 2014, when the United States targeted the external operations wing of the Khorasan Group, which was embedded with Nusra, other rebel factions, including some moderate groups, decried the airstrikes.[103] Nusra's role in Jaysh al-Fateh makes targeting the group even more difficult.

Another advantage is that Nusra is now in a strong position to benefit from the material support that Sunni Arab states provide to the Syrian opposition. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar have all supported Jaysh al-Fatah.[104] These regimes' support for Jaysh al-Fatah makes Nusra a beneficiary of overt state sponsorship. Moreover, Nusra's involvement in Jaysh al-Fatah allows it to spread its methodology and ideology among the Syrian rebels and population.

Nusra emir Abu Muhammad al-Julani's statement after the capture of Idlib city reveals Nusra's careful strategy to expand its influence in territory that Jaysh al-Fatah overruns. Julani called for the establishment of *sharia*, enforced by *sharia* courts, as well as for the provision of services to the public. Yet Julani also noted that Nusra was "not looking to rule the city … alone without others," thereby assuaging the concerns of other rebel groups that Nusra would dominate the governance of Idlib.[105] Recently a spokesman for Ahrar al-Sham said of Nusra's role in Idlib: "Nusra is like any of the other factions.… It hasn't differentiated itself. Every faction has a role and has a vote, but the general decision is taken by consensus."[106]

Al-Qaeda's pragmatism has also shaped the group's approach toward the Islamist political parties that initially dominated the political space in post-revolutionary countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. Al-Qaeda's policy toward Islamists was outlined in Zawahiri's General Guidelines for Jihad, which instructed affiliates to avoid becoming consumed by ideological disagreements with Islamists, and advised affiliates to respond to Islamist-initiated hostilities with only a "minimal response that would be sufficient to stop its aggression, so as to close the door of strife amongst Muslims."[107] Though al-Qaeda disagrees with political Islamists' methodology, its strategists reasoned that confronting political Islamists would distract from al-Qaeda's primary targets, "enemies of Islam and those who hold animosity towards Islam" according to Zawahiri's guidelines. Al-Qaeda also calculated that adopting a less confrontational approach toward political Islamist parties could provide the jihadist movement opportunities for growth. Al-Qaeda's strategists accurately assessed that Islamist political parties would be hesitant, at least initially, to crack down on salafi jihadists' *dawa* efforts—and perhaps on their use of *hisba* violence as well.

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[103] Ruth Sherlock, "U.S. Air Strike on Rebel Ally is Helping Assad, Say Syrians," *Telegraph* (U.K.), November 6, 2014.

[104] E.g., Hassan Hassan, "Syria's Revitalized Rebels Make Big Gains in Assad's Heartland," *Foreign Policy*, April 28, 2015.

[105] Thomas Joscelyn, "Al-Nusra Front Leader Preaches Jihadist Unity in Idlib," *Long War Journal*, April 1, 2015.

[106] Raja Abdulrahim, "Al-Qaeda's Syrian Arm Shifts Tactics in War," *Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 2015.

[107] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for Jihad," Al-Sahab Media, September 14, 2013, available at https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf.

Thus, Al Qaeda assessed that it could capitalize upon this permissive environment by expanding its *dawa* efforts while avoiding confrontation with Islamist regimes. Atiyah clearly articulated this strategy in a statement issued in the early months of the Arab Spring, in which he instructed jihadists to "embark upon a constructive preparatory work" in Tunisia and Egypt, rather than becoming "engaged in conflicts with … various groups in the Islamic movements."[108] As noted earlier in this report, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia closely adhered to this strategy in the early stages of the post-Arab Spring period.

Potential Outcomes

The competition between al-Qaeda and IS will play a significant role in shaping the jihadist movement in the coming decade. There are several possible near-term futures that could arise as a result of this competition. Below we examine the two most likely trajectories: al-Qaeda and IS maintain their current strategies, and al-Qaeda shifts its strategy to replicate IS's.

Future 1: IS Remains Brutal While al-Qaeda's Network Goes Darker

The most likely future is that IS remains a largely overt and brutal organization while al-Qaeda continues to rebrand itself and shore up its political base of support, exploiting its adversaries' perception of al-Qaeda as a spent force. Al-Qaeda sees IS's ostentatious approach as an opportunity to rebrand itself as a more palatable organization with wider appeal. As IS continues to draw international media attention for its savagery, al-Qaeda is likely to continue making use of front organizations and establishing itself as a potential partner to Sunni states and a wide range of armed groups. In this scenario, al-Qaeda is content to allow IS to continue to draw international media and military attention while al-Qaeda quietly remodels itself. Al-Qaeda is likely to support some groups that are fighting IS on the ground—including the Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade and Jaysh Usud al-Sharqiya in Syria, and Ansar al-Islam in Iraq—while not explicitly going to war with IS.

Meanwhile, in this scenario IS's insistence on proto-statehood and its continued use of excessive violence exposes the group to continued coordinated counterattacks that are likely to degrade the organization significantly, albeit gradually. At some point, IS's struggles to take and hold new territory may dissuade prospective foreign fighters and fence-sitting jihadist organizations from joining IS.

The unknown in this scenario is whether IS's loud approach, coupled with possible attrition in al-Qaeda's leadership ranks, results in a major al-Qaeda affiliate defecting to IS. If that were to occur, it could tilt this competition definably in IS's favor. But if IS is unable to achieve such a breakthrough, the end state could instead be a quietly ascendant al-Qaeda as IS fractures.

Future 2: Increased Overt Competition Between al-Qaeda and IS

Al-Qaeda may feel pressure to become more overt, both organizationally and militarily. The result of al-Qaeda becoming more overt in its competition with IS would be a

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[108] Atiyah, "The People's Revolt."

strategic outbidding between the two groups.

Several factors could drive a more overt competition between the two jihadist organizations. One would be al-Qaeda losing affiliates to IS, which could force al-Qaeda to more reliance on overt actions to signal its continued potency to the rest of its network. A second factor that could drive this approach would be degradation within al-Qaeda's leadership ranks, and old leaders' replacement by young blood that desires short-term results and views al-Qaeda's deliberate approach as a strategic liability.

In this scenario, both al-Qaeda and IS may be incentivized to escalate the pace of attacks against regional governments and the West in order to showcase their abilities. The competition between the two organizations may also force al-Qaeda to publicize its covert relationships with front organizations and other groups that have not yet adopted the al-Qaeda moniker. In this scenario, it is also possible that al-Qaeda would abandon its slower approach to implementation of *sharia*, and hastily implement an austere version of *sharia* in territories under its control. This trajectory of violent outbidding could wreak a great deal of havoc, but also expose both IS and al-Qaeda to military operations from local and global powers. This scenario is less likely than the first, due to al-Qaeda's longtime strategic preference for maintaining a low profile, minimizing attention from counterinsurgent forces, and generating public support. The end result of this conflict would be sustained and intense conflict in the MENA region, and a likely decline in public support for salafi jihadism in the Muslim world.

Conclusion

The most probable result of the competition between al-Qaeda and IS is for the groups to continue with the strategies they are currently pursuing. Both groups' commitment to their current approaches, and their investment of significant resources to advance these strategies, makes it unlikely that either group will dramatically modify and reverse its current approach, barring a major leadership change or a dramatic shift in the external environment. Al-Qaeda will likely maintain its Maoist approach to establish the political conditions for an Islamic caliphate in the longer term, while IS will continue to pursue its Focoist strategy of taking military risks to create the perception of momentum necessary to win new affiliates and defections to its network.

The key question is which group's strategy is more likely to succeed. The competition between the two groups will likely be fierce, and will involve unexpected developments. Al-Qaeda's strategy is better positioned for the long term, though IS's emergence has placed significant pressures on al-Qaeda's network, and has transformed some of its strengths into weaknesses—for example, by leveraging al-Qaeda's use of front groups to make its network seem less attractive to affiliates IS is trying to woo. If the right circumstances align for IS, it could severely weaken al-Qaeda's network.

It is essential that the United States understand the two groups' strategies, and pay close attention as their approaches continue to evolve. In the current operating environment, the United States has tremendous opportunities to exploit the cleavages

between IS and al-Qaeda. However, if we fail to understand the two organizations' strengths, weaknesses, and strategic and tactical postures, the jihadist movement may emerge from this period of competition stronger than before.