The Internal Conflict in the Global Jihad Camp

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The founding of the organization known as the Islamic State in the spring of 2013, and its June 2014 announcement of the establishment of the Islamic State under the leadership of the caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, caused a split among all organizations belonging to and identifying with the global jihad camp – a camp that until then had been led by al-Qaeda. The dispute began in April 2013 with al-Baghdadi's unilateral declaration of a union between the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an organization under his leadership that was a branch of al-Qaeda, and the Jabhat al-Nusra organization in Syria, led by Abu Mohammad al-Julani. The decision, which al-Baghdadi made without consulting al-Julani, set the two at odds; al-Julani quickly rejected the unification, while declaring his loyalty to al-Zawahiri, the emir of al-Qaeda and his supreme commander. For his part, al-Zawahiri tried unsuccessfully to mediate between the hostile parties and preserve unity. Thus in May 2013 he ruled that al-Baghdadi would remain responsible for Iraq, while al-Julani would be responsible for Syria. He also announced that Jabhat al-Nusra would become the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda and an official member of its cluster of alliances.[1] After a year of additional but futile attempts at mediation and compromise, accompanied by grave mutual accusations by spokesmen of ISIS and al-Qaeda supporters, the feud reached a peak with al-Zawahiri's declaration of February 2014, in which he disclaimed all responsibility for ISIS activity in Iraq and Syria, and the consequent expulsion of the organization from the al-Qaeda cluster of alliances.[2]

These events were followed by the announcement in late June 2014 by Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani of the founding of the Islamic State and the self-appointment of al-Baghdadi as caliph. This amounted

to a coup d'état within the global jihad camp, and catapulted al-Baghdadi to the top of the leadership – over al-Zawahiri – by granting him the status of a mortal successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Caustic disputes and power struggles ensued between supporters of both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, who were required to choose between adherence to the old leadership or loyalty to the new caliph. The unique step of appointing a caliph outraged senior Muslim religious figures, who denied the legality and legitimacy of this appointment in particular, as well as Islamic State policies in areas under its control.[3] They responded in a letter in September 2014, addressed directly to al-Baghdadi and signed by 126 leading religious figures. They listed their main criticism of the Islamic State's injustices and its distorted interpretation of the commandments of Islam. The authors emphasized that the use of religious concepts outside the context of the Qur'an and the Hadith was forbidden.[4] They also noted that 24 prohibitions in the Qur'an and Hadith were regularly violated by the Islamic State, including the ban on religious legal rulings (*fatwas*) without a proper knowledge of the Islamic texts, and the ban on declaring individuals to be non-Muslim unless they openly declare disbelief. Other violations include slavery, harm to Christians or any people of the Scripture (*ahal al-dhimmi*), forced conversions to Islam, and elimination of the rights of women and children. The Islamic State ignored this general condemnation, declaring that it was of little importance to al-Baghdadi's caliphate.[5]

The most important result of the steps taken by al-Baghdadi was a tremendous upheaval in the ranks of global Islam. Until the establishment of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda had managed to retain the loyalty of its main partners – al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Shabaab in Somalia, Jabhat al-Nusra (which replaced al-Qaeda in Iraq after al-Zawahiri expelled al-Baghdadi), and al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent (AQIS)[6] – despite a series of setbacks caused by the loss of many of its principal commanders, including its leader, Bin Laden.[7] Once the Islamic State was established, however, splits began within organizations, and loyalties began shifting from al-Zawahiri to Caliph al-Baghdadi, mainly among organizations that had regarded al-Qaeda and above all its supreme commander as a supreme guide, a model for imitation, and a source with whom to identify.

For example, since its establishment, the Islamic State has succeeded in recruiting organizations and factions that had formerly identified with al-Qaeda, and some were joined in thirty-four provinces (*wilayats*) operating in Iraq,

Syria, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Khorasan (Afghanistan-Pakistan-Central Asian republics), the northern Caucasus, and Nigeria. Various organizations in these countries swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi after a long process, during which they were carefully evaluated by the Islamic State and found suitable to be accepted as subordinate partners. The criteria considered included their potential contribution to promotion of Islamic State interests, their operational capability, their control of sizable territories, their ability to unite other organizations under their leadership, and their utter loyalty to the idea of the Islamic caliphate. These organizations had previously identified chiefly with al-Qaeda; some had even expressed loyalty to that organization, which they now redirected to the Islamic State. Among the most prominent of these is Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, an Egyptian Salafi organization operating mainly in the Sinai Peninsula but also in Egypt itself. Having expressed loyalty to Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, his successor, when it was founded in late 2011, it swore allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014. Noteworthy too is that certain factions active in Egypt have not changed their affiliation, as in the case of al-Murabitun, led by Hisham Ashmawi, who shifted its affiliation with Ansar Bait al-Maqdis to operate independently with leanings to al-Qaeda.[8]

Another organization in a different geographical region that once sided with al-Qaeda without officially belonging to its cluster of alliances but has since joined the Islamic State is Boko Haram in Nigeria. Its close connections to al-Qaeda and its partners, mainly in the Maghreb and Somalia, were reflected in the training of its operatives and its financing by al-Qaeda partner organizations. Boko Haram gradually came to cooperate with the Islamic State, with which it was officially united in March 2015, when its leader, Abubakar Shekau, swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi. A similar process took place with groups such as Okba ibn Nafaa in Tunisia and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, combatants who had left the Caucasian Emirate in Chechnya and Dagestan, and factions that had left the Taliban and its partners in Afghanistan and have now been recognized as "Wilayat Khorasan." Other groups, including al-Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiya and Battalions of Omar al-Hadid in the Gaza Strip, and organizations in Southeast Asia such as Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines and Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) in Indonesia have likewise made this move. Particularly noteworthy was the shift in allegiance by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which for many years had been one of al-Qaeda's most prominent allies and closest collaborators in

Afghanistan and Pakistan. Following the announcement of the death of Mullah Omar, the original leader of the Taliban and the emir of al-Qaeda and its partners, IMU swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi on July 31, 2015.[9]

The prevailing sentiment in the public and institutional discourse – within the intelligence community, academia, and media – on the conflict between the two camps assigns a clear victory to the Islamic State. The most unequivocal and pessimistic assessment of al-Qaeda's chance of surviving its conflict with the Islamic State has come from no other than al-Qaeda authoritative supporters, whose names were conspicuous among the signatures in the letter against the appointment of al-Baghdadi. In a rare interview with the *New York Times* in June 2015, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada – two of al-Qaeda's most important religious guides and advocates – asserted that the organization had reached the end of the road and had lost its struggle against the Islamic State.[10] Their assessment was based on an image of the Islamic State as an invincible successful terrorist entity with military achievements and the ability to conquer and control large swaths of land, mainly in Iraq and Syria, and enjoy unprecedented worldwide media coverage – in contrast to al-Qaeda, which is having difficulty mobilizing material support and finding new recruits among young Muslims.

At the end of 2015, a year and a half after the establishment of the Islamic State and the declaration of the caliphate, the names ISIS and Islamic State appear on Google more than 240 million times, as compared to some 50 million references to al-Qaeda. The Islamic State's sophisticated strategy is based on operations in cyberspace, which it conducts through its media division on social media channels: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and others. In addition to this activity, admirers and supporters of the organization engage in independent media activity and promote the organization's interests on social media; together they are creating an effective system of non-military "soft" power.[11] Al-Qaeda and its partners, on the other hand, who were once perceived as masters in the use of the "old media" to promote their agenda of global jihad and who are in fact active in "modern" social media, are at this point either too busy or incapable of competing with the Islamic State, due to constraints in means and manpower. Instead, they are focusing their efforts mainly on fortifying their position in various theaters of conflict, where they are again competing with Islamic State operatives for dominance among the supporters of global jihad.

The military struggle between the two camps is conducted on various fronts, with its clearest expression in Syria, currently a key jihad arena. Jabhat al-Nusra, in cooperation with organizations that are members of local coalitions, such as Jaish al-Fatah and Ansar al-Sharia, are fighting the Islamic State (and the regime's forces) in the provinces of Idlib, Daraa, and Aleppo.[12] In Libya, the organizations supporting al-Qaeda, including Majlis Shura Derna, which has joined the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, are fighting the partners of the Islamic State. In the Caucasus, enmity exists between the Caucasus Emirate, which swore allegiance to al-Qaeda in the summer of 2014,[13] and other members of the Emirate that swore allegiance and were accepted into the Islamic State in June 2015. In Afghanistan, the new Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor, reaffirmed his support for al-Qaeda after receiving an oath of allegiance from al-Zawahiri in August 2015.[14] As for Yemen and Saudi Arabia, it appears that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has not yet spoken its final word in the campaign against the Islamic State. Despite a number of showcase terrorist attacks by organizations identifying with the Islamic State in these two countries, it appears that jihad adherents are more inclined to support al-Qaeda and its partners in this region. In Africa, too, neither party has an advantage at this stage; in Nigeria, Boko Haram supports the Islamic State, while in Somalia, al-Shabaab is a supporter and representative of al-Qaeda.

Despite the momentum and victorious image enjoyed by the Islamic State as an independent entity with the grandiose ambitions of conquering territory and establishing a caliphate, it is only at the beginning of its road, especially as it is facing a coalition of over sixty Arab and Western countries. On the other hand, al-Qaeda – which until recently was perceived by many as the most dangerous terrorist threat of all – is benefiting from the distraction of the international coalition, and behind the smokescreen created by the Islamic State, is taking advantage of the opportunity to rebuild and consolidate its infrastructure in various locations throughout the world. It thus appears that despite the decisiveness with which the Islamic State has been crowned as the new undisputed leader of the global jihad camp, it is still premature to discount the influence of al-Qaeda and its cluster of alliances on the global terrorism map.

The rivalry between al-Qaeda and its partners and the Islamic State and its supporters is caused by a dispute not about vision, but rather about the strategy and the most effective pace and method to achieve it. The bitter feud

between them is to a great extent the result of personal and organizational competition over prestige and power. It is entirely possible that at some point, after the leaders of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are no longer active, and especially given the possibility that the two camps will suffer severe setbacks at the hands of the international coalition operating against them, the two organizations will revert to cooperative action in order to defend themselves and promote their dream of reclaiming Islam's glory and supremacy. Most likely the current bitter struggle for the allegiance and support of admirers will continue in the short term. In the future, however, they are liable to act as a team, thereby aggravating the international jihad terrorist threat, both individually and in tandem. The leaders of the international coalition against terrorism should therefore continue to attack both camps, which despite their antagonism, embrace the same ideology and espouse similar goals, even if their current paths are different and subject to internal dispute. As both sides are of the same nature, the campaign against al-Qaeda and its allies must continue in full force, side by side with present efforts to halt the spread of the Islamic State. The rivalry between them is fertile ground for divide-and-conquer tactics. Herein lies an opportunity for operational intelligence warfare to pitch the two camps against each other by recruiting their operatives and conducting operational psychological warfare in order to exacerbate the conflict. The extreme cruelty of the Islamic State, which overshadows that of al-Qaeda and its partners, must not be allowed to create the illusion that any understanding can be reached with either organization. The leaders of the campaign against them must be responsible for achieving victory over both.

Notes

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