

# Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis

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**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

## Editorial Note

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# The State of Al Qaeda

**W**e are happy to release Volume 6, Issue 4 (May 2014) of the Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis (CTTA) at [www.cttajournal.org](http://www.cttajournal.org) and [www.pvtr.org](http://www.pvtr.org). This issue presents three articles which assess the contemporary character of Al Qaeda, the brand synonymous with transnational terrorism.

The US-led 'War on Terror', launched after 11 September 2001, has concentrated on neutralizing leaders of and cutting off financial support from Al Qaeda core or Al Qaeda Central (AQC) based in Afghanistan, and now in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. AQC led by Ayman al-Zawahiri has transformed primarily into an ideological force, while its affiliates and allied groups carry out most attacks on behalf or independent of AQC.

Cornelis de Waart and Abu Dawud al-Amriki compare the nature of jihadist authority among the AQC and other key decentralized and often autonomous actors within the Salafist-jihadist movement, such as 'Islamic states' in various theatres. Nur Aziemah Binte Azman shows how the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has gained support online despite being disavowed by AQC in February 2014, and notwithstanding its dreadful reputation on the ground in Syria. Andrew Mitzcavitch sketches ways in which AQC and its regional affiliates have seemingly adopted Mao Zedong's "Three Stages of Revolutionary Warfare" in its strategy for advancement, while taking a closer look at Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (also known as Ansar al-Sharia) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) (also known as Al Nusra Front).

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# Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis

**L**aunched in 2009, Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis (CTTA) is the monthly journal of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR). Each issue of the journal carries articles with in-depth analysis of topical issues on terrorism and counterterrorism, broadly structured around a common theme. CTTA brings perspectives from CT researchers and practitioners with a view to produce policy relevant analysis.

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# Jihadist Authority: Understanding the Structure and Narrative

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Cornelis de Waart and Abu Dawud al-Amriki

*Assessing extremism requires an understanding of jihadist authority and how it relates to the vanguard role of Al Qaeda. Contrary to conventional thinking, Al Qaeda is not the supreme authority in the hierarchy of Salafi-jihadist doctrine; neither are all significant elements of the jihadist threat, many of which are decentralized, directly associated with Al Qaeda, as is the case with the Islamic State of the Levant (ISIL).*

To assess the current status of Al Qaeda-associated extremism, it is essential to understand the structure of jihadist authority. The myopic focus on Al Qaeda senior leadership as the main component of the extremist threat has led to a significant miscalculation concerning the current danger of jihadist extremism. The impact of extremism transcends Al Qaeda-linked attacks in Western homelands as it is fuelling sectarian conflicts and spreading chronic instability in other theatres. Al Qaeda - as the self-proclaimed vanguard - is not the supreme authority in the hierarchy of Salafi-jihadist doctrine, nor are all significant elements of the jihadist threat, many of which are decentralized, directly associated with Al Qaeda. Consequently, a more effective approach to assess jihadist extremism requires analyzing the movement from a holistic perspective, to include the structures and capabilities that jihadists have established and continue to develop.

## **Jihadist Authority**

There are two principal authorities in the Salafi-jihadist hierarchy: emirs of Islamic States and emirs of *mujahedin* groups. Between these two, the higher authorities are the emirs of Islamic States. This relationship was evidenced in 1998, when Osama bin Laden pledged allegiance to the proclaimed 'Leader of the Faithful' Mullah Omar of the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'. This title, 'Leader of the Faithful', has been used by Caliphs and Muslim rulers to assert their legitimacy to be the supreme leader among the community of believers. By claiming the title, 'Leader of the Faithful', Mullah Omar - who donned the Prophet's cloak in 1996 - had arguably assumed the highest position within jihadist authority. Bin Laden's role

was to lead the vanguard in order to create conditions to open and expand new jihadist fronts.

This position has been reaffirmed by Ayman al-Zawahiri's 2009 observation: "The State [Islamic State of Iraq]...is superior o mujahidin groups. These organizations [in Iraq] must give allegiance to the state, not vice versa." The Vanguard (Al Qaeda), has consistently asserted that it is under the authority of Mullah Omar, and therefore does not have the authority granted to the emir of an Islamic state. While Islamic states may value support or guidance from Al Qaeda, its leaders are not bound by Al Qaeda's decisions.

**Extremist Islamic States**

Jihadists have established - or at least acknowledged - four Islamic States: Afghanistan (1996), Iraq (2006), the Caucasus (2007), and Azawad (primarily Northern Mali) (2012). The conditions for establishing a legitimate Islamic State are ambiguous; however, common elements that are frequently mentioned include: being survivable, having a functioning Shura (leadership/advisory council) with an elected leader, being capable of supporting the population and, most important, administering Sharia law. Once states are established, the Vanguard asserts only a limited role in their management; consequently, the extremist landscape is subjected to changes and shifting priorities. This has sometimes been misinterpreted, by those unfamiliar with extremist ideology and doctrine, as either Al Qaeda being weak, or that the states have a different agenda than Al Qaeda.

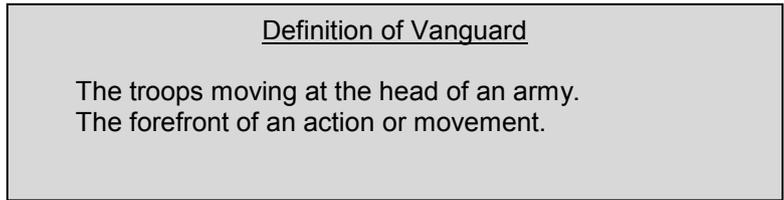


Figure 1 – Definition of 'vanguard'  
Source: [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)

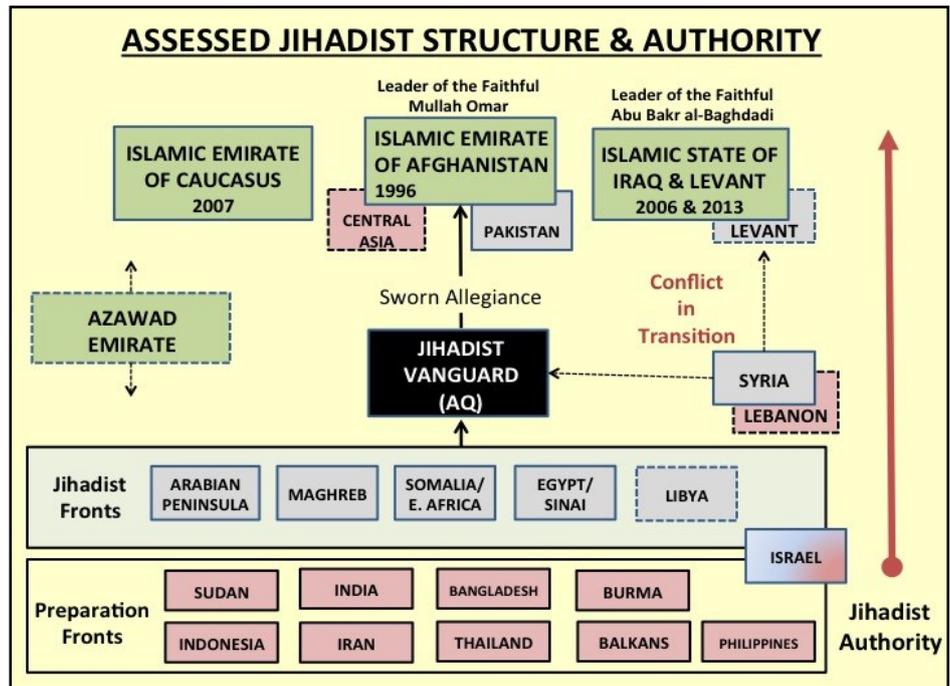


Figure 2 – Assessed Jihadist Structure and Authority: the chart reflects the hierarchy of jihadist authority from Emirs of States to preparation fronts, and the position of the vanguard role that is performed by Al Qaeda.  
Source: Authors

**The Vanguard**

Al Qaeda has consistently identified the role of the organization as that of a vanguard. To accomplish its vanguard mission, Al Qaeda established a strategy to awaken Muslim identity, facilitate the spread of their ideology, train leaders and create conditions to re-establish Islamic States. Al Qaeda's attack against the United States in 2001 was part of their strategy to shift jihadists' operational focus from governments in Muslim nations to what Al Qaeda calls the 'far enemy' - the United States and its allies. This strategy was designed to exhaust the US and weaken Western influence in Muslim countries in order to remove regimes in territories that were formerly a part of

the Caliphate, and establish Islamic States that follow extremist ideology.

Since 2011, extremists have seized opportunities created by the Arab Spring and have aggressively promoted their ideology and expanded their influence in Muslim countries. In internal communications, Osama bin Laden commented on the Arab Spring, saying, “Things are strongly heading towards the exit of Muslims from being under the control of America.” Consequently, bin Laden gave guidance regarding Al Qaeda’s priorities, saying, “Double the efforts to direct and educate the Muslim people...this great duty should take the main share of our efforts.” Although striking the far enemy is desirable, the vanguard shifted its priority. This adaptive response to the Arab Spring reflects a focused vanguard, an organization adjusting its strategy in pursuit of strategic objectives.

#### Transition from Vanguard to State

Ideally, transitions from vanguard operations to the process of forming a state are discussed and coordinated with Al Qaeda central leadership in order to synchronize efforts of the overall extremist movement. For example, according to an April 2010 correspondence from bin Laden, Yemen was assessed to be the country most suited for the establishment of a state. However, in 2011, when Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) approached Al Qaeda senior leaders about the possibility of establishing a state in Yemen, Al Qaeda counselled them against the idea. Al Qaeda sought to keep extremists in Yemen focused on transnational issues, but avoid Western attention that would have been attracted by creating a formal state. In this way Yemen, which bin Laden called the “centre of gravity”, would remain as the vanguard’s strategic reserve. In this role, jihadists in Yemen would focus not on establishing a state, but providing a safe haven for training, planning and supporting other fronts.

“This adaptive response to the Arab Spring reflects a focused vanguard, an organization adjusting its strategy in pursuit of strategic objectives.”

The transition between vanguard operations and the establishment of a state can be a messy affair, as was demonstrated by the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006. Jihadist authorities in Iraq initiated this transition without consulting Al Qaeda, which was facilitating support to militant jihad in the region. The Islamic State - once announced - had an emir over which Al Qaeda abruptly had no authority. The leader of this new state, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, also claimed the title ‘Leader of the Faithful’. More significantly, as explained in Nibras Kazimi’s *The Caliph Attempted* (2006), ISI presented the case that their control and governance of territory, and the Qurayshite and Husaynite heritage of the new leader, gave him the legitimate right to the claim this title, which is synonymous with Caliph. The successor of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, who was killed in 2010, is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who has continued to operate independently. According to documents captured in Osama bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Al Qaeda senior leaders have exerted little influence over ISI, whose formation was controversial not only within Al Qaeda, but within broader jihadist circles.

In April 2013, ISI unilaterally announced the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), aspiring to extend its authority from Iraq into Syria. This decision created significant conflict between ISIL and Al Qaeda, and has fuelled contentious debate among extremist ideologues. With its decision to extend state control into Syria, ISIL was demanding the shifting of pledges of allegiance (*bayat*) to its emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This has led to open conflict between jihadist factions. Technically, fighters should yield to the authority of the Islamic State. However, there is a debate over whether the expanded state was prematurely created and is therefore illegitimate. There appears to be no mechanism in jihadist doctrine to resolve this

intractable dispute. When al-Zawahiri said that ISIL is not a part of Al Qaeda, it is a statement of fact. It is also probably indicative of al-Zawahiri distancing himself from ISIL and siding with those who contest the legitimacy of ISI's expansion. While some analysts assess this episode as demonstrating Al Qaeda's weakness, al-Zawahiri had no authority to force his will on the authority of the Islamic State as discussed earlier.

### Islamic State Boundaries and Jihadist Geography

Salafi-jihadists have their own geography as is demonstrated in Document 17 recovered in Abbottabad. According to this document by an unidentified author, "The maps which had been drawn by the Sykes-Picot Agreement [secret arrangement between France and Great Britain in 1916 to define their spheres of influence in the former Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I] and other more recent maps have been acknowledged by all world leaders. However, if a new Islamic State is to emerge, these maps will become something of the past." Jihadists pursue objectives in accordance with their geographic perspective. Consequently, fighters will almost certainly expand from Afghanistan to spread jihad into Central Asia in order to re-establish the control of the geographic space known as Khorasan.

Jihadists' perspective of geography played a role in ISI's expansion into Syria in 2011. ISI reportedly dispatched Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani to Syria to pursue the objective of extending its control to the Levant or Al-Sham. The territory of Al-Sham extends from Egypt to the Euphrates River in Iraq. The significance of geography to jihadists is demonstrated by their criticism of al-Zawahiri's effort to reverse the formation of ISIL. By doing this al-Zawahiri was accused of constraining jihadist activity among the boundaries of the hated Sykes-Picot Agreement.

### ISIL – Emerging Leader

Over the last three years ISI has increased its operations in Iraq, challenging the Iraqi government with increasingly sophisticated and

lethal operations. With ISI's expansion into Syria, it is emerging as the leader amongst aspiring jihadists across the world. This could supersede Al



Figure 3 – Rally in Indonesia in support of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ ISIL)

Source: *Islamtimes.org*

Qaeda's role as the vanguard within the Levant. As described in detail in Nibras Kazmi's *Syria Through Jihadist Eyes: A Perfect Enemy* (2010), this newly expanded state has many elements to attract Salafi-jihadists: (1) it confronted and survived US forces in Iraq, (2) the Levant is historically significant, (3) the enemy, the 'Nusayri-Alawites', have a long history of contentious struggle with Sunni Islam and (4) the conflict is very emotive and resonates with the population. Operating in ungoverned spaces outside the influence of a capable counterterrorism force, ISIL is emerging as a threat to the region.

The jihadist conflict over the establishment of ISIL was borne from two growing organizations. Al Nusrah Front is directly associated with Al Qaeda and its main effort is within Syria. The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), meanwhile has been strengthening its position in Iraq and views itself as the regional jihadist authority. Jihadists can function - if not thrive - with these competing authorities. While there is a conflict between ISIL and Al Nusrah Front, they continue to follow what extremists call the same 'current', that is, they are going in the same direction. While pundits in the West like to focus on internal conflict between ISIL and Al Nusrah Front because of the weakness it

suggests, both groups remain motivated to pursue their objectives.

### Jihadist Fronts and Preparation Fronts

Within the jihadist structure there are also jihadist fronts, where resistance is organized and violent jihad is being conducted. There are Al Qaeda-associated fronts in the Maghreb (AQIM), Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Somalia (Al Shabaab), the Sinai and in Syria. The vanguard is also promoting activities to prepare for future jihad in Asia, Central Asia, Iran and into central Africa. In accordance with Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's 2004 manifesto, *The Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*, these activities can be organized outside of the control of Al Qaeda. The establishment of jihadist groups and their movements into phases of operational activity ideally follows extremist insurgency doctrine. The phases of insurgency according to this doctrine is examined in Al Qaeda's Doctrine for Insurgency: Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin's "A Practical Course for Guerrilla War" by Norman Cigar. Many new groups have emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring. Depending on which phase of insurgency the group is operating, it may or may not openly participate in violent activity. Jihadist fronts and preparation fronts are often managed by the vanguard. However, in some cases their activities can be organized and/or led by neighbouring Islamic States.

### Conclusion

Measuring the presence of jihadist extremism requires assessing the entire range of jihadist authorities to include the states that have been established, Al Qaeda's capabilities as the vanguard, existing jihadist fronts and regions being prepared for future conflict. As more extremist organizations are established, the range of impending threats increases. Above Al Qaeda lies a greater jihadist authority and, significantly, the

most potent exists in the Islamic State of Afghanistan and in the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Jihadist success in either of these fronts could lead not only to the creation of a secure sanctuary, but also to a surge in momentum if Al Qaeda's vision to re-establish the Caliphate is seen as a realistic possibility.

While the West has largely been fixated on Al Qaeda and the leadership of the vanguard, the extremist movement has grown in its formal and informal structures with the establishment of Islamic States, jihadist fronts and preparation fronts. Paradoxically, as new Islamic States are being established, the Vanguard may lose capacity as authority is transferred to emirs of these states. However, this transfer frees Al Qaeda to look forward and to focus on other vanguard missions such as opening new areas of operation.

Finally, despite the current split of jihadists over the establishment of ISIL and the harsh policies it implements, the new state has attracted some degree of acceptance from extremists. Although it does not carry the Al Qaeda brand, ISIL's claim to authority as a state entity, the fact that it is fighting the Assad regime,

the proximity of the conflict to Israel and the lack of Western ability to effectively influence events, suggest that significant danger could be emerging from the Levant.

**“Above Al Qaeda lies a greater jihadist authority and, significantly, the most potent exists in the Islamic State of Afghanistan and in the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).”**

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# Strategic Communication: ISIL's Race to Dominate the Web

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Nur Aziemah Binte Azman

*With ties to Al Qaeda severed, a number of jihadist figures and many Syrians are alienating and rejecting the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). However, the group (ISIL) attempts to maintain the upper hand in the jihadist forums and win over the online extremist community.*

The Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) was once Al Qaeda Central (AQC)'s Iraqi branch led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. However, on April 2013, al-Baghdadi announced that ISI was to extend its activities into Syria and changed the group's name to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This sparked a conflict between ISIL, AQC and Al Qaeda's Al Nusra Front in Syria, resulting in violent clashes in early January 2014. On 3 February 2014 Ayman Al-Zawahiri announced that AQC "is in no way connected to ISIL."

ISIL's harsh and aggressive methods, hard-line interpretation of the Shariah and its reliance on foreign fighters have made it unpopular among the jihadist community, and among Syrians in particular. Its indiscriminate attacks against Shiites as well as moderate Sunnis, minority Kurds, Christians and Alawites, and the imprisonment of aid workers, journalists, moderate clerics and activists, have also earned the group much disapproval from al-Zawahiri. ISIL's enforcement of strict religious laws in Raqqa, a city in north-central Syria, has left the locals and other Syrians embittered and fearful in general. ISIL therefore finds itself increasingly isolated among the Muslim population. Yet, ISIL maintains a robust online presence which appears to be growing.

## **ISIL's Online Presence**

Jihadist groups have always relied on the Internet, especially the discussion forums, for disseminating their propaganda. In addition, the forums are utilized for information gathering and sharing among participants. Most significantly, the forums also provide a platform for active members of jihadist groups to attract supporters and sympathisers. When the jihadist forums first appeared in late 2001, they were sympathetic to the cause of Al Qaeda. Over time they mutated into becoming official forums of Al Qaeda Central (AQC), and its primary online presence. However, as the number of Al Qaeda branches and affiliates grew as well as other groups that subscribe to AQC and jihadist ideology proliferated since approximately

2005, the jihadist forums began to cater to all Salafi-jihadist groups and factions in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The present friction between the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and AQC, and the latter's dominance over the forums thus far, would predict a limited presence online by ISIL. However, ISIL's statements and other media productions can be found in abundance and side-by-side with those from AQC in the major jihadist forums. The earlier difference was though that AQC ensured the authenticity and credibility of its materials, while materials ostensibly from ISIL were not disseminated through its officially appointed representatives, known jihadist media production entities, or by official administrators of the respective forums. ISIL has since been successful in asserting its authority in the jihadist forums and has adopted a more disciplined online presence. On 19 August 2013, ISIL issued a disclaimer through a correspondent of the *Hanein Network* forum, declaring that only materials circulated via the Al-I'tisam Foundation, the media wing of ISIL, and posted in the *Shumukh Al-Islam Network* forum or Al-I'tisam's Twitter account can be considered as official and authentic materials of the ISIL. ISIL added that the content of any other material could be fabricated or exaggerated, or misrepresent the orientation of the group. The statement was signed by ISIL's Ministry of Media to confirm its authenticity. The Ministry of Media is the entity which endorses ISIL's statements and media products, while the Al-I'tisam Foundation functions as the producer of ISIL's media products such videos and publications. From then on, every statement posted was signed off by ISIL's Ministry of Media or by the Al-I'tisam Foundation, and most videos posted were produced by the latter. Jihadist forum participants have also become more cautious of ISIL-related posts which do not bear the official branding of ISIL.

Jihadist forums have always claimed to be unbiased and impartial towards the different terrorist and extremist groups that use them. Of the four forums mentioned in this article, the *Hanein Network* appears to be able to maintain some neutrality, as its administrators are not overtly inclined towards a particular group - although forum members who support the ISIL are steadily increasing. *Al-Minbar Al-I'lami Al-Jihadi*, on the other hand, is fully exploited by ISIL, and has risen to fame and popularity as a result. *Shumukh Al-Islam Network*, as indicated above, has also succumbed to ISIL's influence, although it still also distributes materials from AQC and its affiliates. The *Al-Fidaa' Islamic Network* is the only forum which is at present loyal to AQC. On 7 April 2014, Al Qaeda's Al Nusra Front in Syria released a statement announcing that it would cease the distribution of its official materials on *Shumukh*, and will be using *Al-Fidaa'* instead. In the statement, Al Nusra Front claimed that it has suffered much disregard and neglect from the *Shumukh Al-Islam Network* since the conflict arose between the group and ISIL.

#### Extremist Sentiment on AQC's Denouncement of ISIL

Topics or events related to ISIL or Al Nusra Front in Syria usually garner a lot of activity in the forums. Prior to AQC parting ways with ISIL, the forums were abuzz with discussions and



Figure 1 – Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)'s fighters in Ninawa Province in northern Iraq.

Translation of caption at the bottom: 'Ninawa Province: Pictures from the camps of the Islamic State in Baaj district.'

Image source: *Shumukh Al-Islam jihadist online forum*

speculations on the discord between the two. Many in the *Al-Fidaa*, *Shumukh* and *Hanein* forums even urged and prayed for the two groups to reconcile and make peace. For instance, Abu Qudamah Al-Muhajir, a forum member in *Al-Fidaa*, posted an audio statement by Abdullah Al-Muhaisani, a Saudi Arabian jihadi preacher, in which he described the clashes between jihadist factions in Syria as *fitna* or internal strife between Muslims. He urged each *mujahid* to adopt a stand to keep away from *fitna* and lay down his arms in the face of any other Muslim, despite differing inclinations or orientations. Responses to the posting reveal that some of the members are cautious about Al-Muhaisani's statements as they believe him to be a member of a newly formed Syrian rebel alliance called the Army of the Mujahideen. ISIL has accused the Army of the Mujahideen of functioning like the Sahwa movement or 'awakening councils' of Iraq, funded by the US to fight the insurgency in Iraq in 2005. Others adopt a neutral stand, praising Al-Muhaisani but not revealing support for a particular group. Administrators of the Salafi-jihadist website "Minbar Tawhed wal Jihad" (owned by Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, a prominent figure in the Salafi-jihadist movement) posted a statement on the *Al-Fidaa* forum that it is their wish that jihadists

from all factions stand together in Syria, and that they should avoid distributing any book or article that may incite division among them. Many *Al-Fidaa* forum participants seem to be in agreement with Minbar Tawhed's position.

However, some forum participants resent and oppose ISIL for disobeying AQC. In response to their sentiments, the pro-ISIL *Al-Minbar Al-I'lami Al-Jihadi* forum, issued a statement saying that they were 'conspiracies' against ISIL. Administrators of *Al-Minbar Al-I'lami Al-Jihadi* stated that they stand with ISIL and that they will not disseminate any statement or material from any other group waging jihad in the Levant. They have also prohibited members from sharing posts or media productions promoting any other jihadist group. Most of the *Al-Minbar* forum members supported the administrators' move to limit the distribution of statements and materials from groups other than the ISIL. These declarations of support were made by (self-proclaimed) Salafi-jihadists in Libya, Lebanon, Indonesia and France, and jihadist media entities such as *Al-Ghurabaa* Media and *Al-Battar*. ISIL propaganda such as the posting about the first reconnaissance aircraft purportedly invented by ISIL, the implementation of whipping as punishment for those who drink alcohol and

smoke hashish and the mass production of bread by ISIL managed ovens in Raqqa, were also shared on *Al-Minbar*. It should be noted that such propaganda indicates that ISIL is not only concerned with fighting but also with governance and legitimacy. Based on forum posts, it also seems that ISIL has good control of its strongholds in the northern and eastern provinces in Syria and in some of the provinces in Iraq.

*Al-Minbar*'s open support of ISIL contradicts its stated policy of independence and non-affiliation with any party or organization. Prior to AQC's announcement of separation in Syrian operations, *Al-Minbar* posted materials from Al



Figure 2 – Screenshot of the homepage of *Al-Minbar Al-I'lami Al-Jihadi* forum with banners of the latest media releases from ISIL and media entities that support ISIL  
Image source: *Al-Minbar Al-I'lami Al-Jihadi* jihadist online forum

Qaeda affiliates such as Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and even the Al Nusra Front on its pages. With *Al-Minbar's* increasing support for ISIL since January 2014, *Al-Minbar* is enjoying increasing popularity online. While the activity in the pro-Al Qaeda *Al-Fidaa'* forum has not declined, the site was down several times this year. With the *Shumukh Al-Islam Network* forum in favour of ISIL, and even the most 'neutral' *Hanein Network* gaining more pro-ISIL members, it can be concluded that the majority of the online jihadist community supports ISIL over Al Qaeda's Al Nusra Front in Syria.

However, the ground opposition to the ISIL can sometimes be clearly observed on the jihadist forums. For example, on 11 December 2013, the *Hanein Network* sent an appeal to ISIL to release two Spanish journalists who were held hostage by the group. The journalists were kidnapped on 16 September 2013 at a checkpoint in Raqqa by ISIL militants when on their way out of the country after a two-week reporting trip. According to the administrators of the *Hanein Network*, the two journalists, Javier Espinosa and Ricardo Vilanova, support the causes in Iraq and Syria and have journalistic integrity. The *Hanein Network* administrators claimed that some of them knew the journalists personally and have worked with them. In its appeal for clemency from ISIL, the online forum even posted a banner on its homepage (Figure 3), showing the two journalists and a masked person supposed to be a member of the ISIL holding two cats – presumably appealing to the 'softer side' of ISIL.

In response to the *Hanein Network's* appeal, many of its forum participants questioned the authenticity of the administrators' sources regarding the kidnappings, and whether it was indeed ISIL that had kidnapped the journalists. Others urged the *Hanein Network* to retract the appeal since ISIL had not claimed responsibility for the abductions. To this, the *Hanein Network's* administrators stated that their sources were reliable, and that they were certain that ISIL was responsible for the kidnappings, which constituted a human rights



Figure 3 – A banner posted by jihadist *Hanein Network* in an appeal to ISIL for the release of two Spanish journalists who were captured by the group. Image source: *Hanein Network jihadi online forum*

crisis that needed to be resolved. There were many who supported the *Hanein Network's* appeal to ISIL and urged ISIL to release the two journalists. Javier Espinosa and Ricardo Vilanova were eventually released on 30 March 2014, but how they were released remains unclear. According *El Mundo* (30 March 2014), the Spanish newspaper that the journalists worked for, the captors were indeed ISIL.

### Conclusion

Certainly, ISIL's indiscriminate killings, kidnappings involving both Muslims and non-Muslims, and extreme interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence have proven to be unpopular among the public, hence resulting in the group's rejection, isolation and untimely disassociation from Al Qaeda Central. However, it seems that over the course of a year since al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of ISIL, the group has managed to attract a significant number of sympathisers and supporters online, which in turn have influenced the dynamics of the jihadist forums in favour of ISIL. The ISIL's content, i.e. propaganda materials, discussions and debates, posted in the forums has enabled it to expand its influence over jihadist forums.

A palpable threat emerges in the online domain with the possibility of ISIL exploiting forums full of eager supporters and malleable administrators to

gain new recruits into the group. Propaganda disseminated through these forums is likely also to be one of the ways in which ISIL creates support on the ground. It is thus imperative to understand the nature of the population of forum participants in terms of their backgrounds and intentions as well as the number of forum participants (size of the online jihadist community), which are at present not clear. It is equally useful to gain an understanding of who the administrators (and funders) are of the major jihadist forums. The struggle for influence online is a reflection of the struggle for power on the ground between ISIL and Al Qaeda's Al Nusra Front, the two most prominent jihadist terror groups in Syria. While jihadist groups on the ground continue on their extremist path, the violence these groups perpetrate only deepen the people's rejection of them as they continue to destroy Syria, a country with one of the richest spiritual histories in the world.

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**Nur Aziemah Binte Azman** is a Senior Analyst with ICPVTR.

**“A palpable threat emerges in the online domain with the possibility of ISIL exploiting forums full of eager supporters and malleable administrators to gain new recruits into the group.”**

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# Al Qaeda and Mao Zedong: Analogies of Protracted Warfare

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Andrew Mitcavitch

*There is a correlation between the strategy of progression pursued by AQC and its regional affiliates with Mao Zedong's "Three Stages of Revolutionary Warfare": 1. Establish a local stronghold and disseminate propaganda; 2. Expand influence and increase attacks; 3. Capture small cities and directly engage government forces. AQC and affiliates have fluctuated between Mao's three stages in pursuing protracted warfare, although in most cases they lack the capacity and popular support to sustain the third stage to achieve a genuine revolution*

## **Rise and Decline of AQC**

Al Qaeda Central (AQC) has evolved over the years and currently acts as an ideological model and advisor for its regional affiliates. According to most assessments, the primary terrorist threat now is not from AQC, but from its regional affiliates and fronts that conduct operations on behalf, or, independent of AQC. Attacks carried out by these groups target local governments and Western interests albeit with differing priorities. The transformation that AQC has undergone together with the guerrilla strategy followed by its affiliates and allies could be compared with Mao Zedong's favoured three-stage strategy of protracted warfare: the "Three Stages of Revolutionary Warfare." The first stage is in establishing a local stronghold in a difficult and isolated terrain. This stage also consists of earning popular support through mass propaganda, buttressed by attacks on organs of the concerned government. The second stage is to influence 'pocket areas' in the surrounding countryside and expand its influence by any means including attacks on isolated enemy units. The third stage is to encircle and capture small cities, then larger ones, until a military force can engage government forces on a battlefield. Mao's strategy also focuses on intangibles such as time, space and will, which is strikingly different to that of traditional state structures that emphasize on military tangibles such as arms, logistics and manpower. However, the sustaining force behind Mao's revolutionary struggle was the popular support, which AQC and affiliates lack - the reason why the movement has not been able to establish a state, or at the least, gain sustained control over a particular territory which may lead to the eventual establishment of a state.

AQC went through several organizational changes during its formative years. Osama bin Laden, the late leader of AQC, was a religious dissident who leaned towards radical ideas. During the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990, bin Laden offered to form an Arab-Afghan fighting force to defend Saudi Arabia from Iraq's army, but Saudi Arabia refused his request and instead opted for US troop protection. Bin Laden took the rejection as a personal insult and an affront to his heritage as an Arab, which further pushed him towards creating an alternative to governments that pursue the Western ideology but focus instead on recreating a political structure that is based on the glorification of Islam.

Between 1996 and 2001, the strategy of AQC was almost like Mao's first stage of protracted warfare. This was evident when AQC operated as a fully organized and established entity with several training bases in remote areas of Afghanistan with the help of the Taliban government. Another similarity was when bin Laden, although not qualified, tried to sway the *Ummah* (Muslim population) through propaganda by issuing two *fatwas* (religious decrees) in 1996 and 1998, in the hope of garnering its support. His first *fatwa* was meant to persuade the *Ummah* that the United States of America is the primary enemy and it is the duty of the *Ummah* to constrain it by militant jihad. His second *fatwa* listed three grievances: (1) US occupation of the Arabian Peninsula, (2) US aggression against the Iraqi people and (3) US support of Israel. AQC's infamous 11 September 2001 (9/11) attack can be compared to Mao's second stage of warfare, as it included four coordinated attacks on US organs of government: financial (Twin Towers), military

(Pentagon) and governance (the failed attack that targeted government bodies in Washington, D.C.).

The 9/11 attacks provoked a very focused and coordinated response especially by the US which destabilized AQC as an organization with most of its senior leadership either captured and killed or on the run. During this period, however, AQC went through a period of change, transforming itself into a brand, while other groups supporting AQC's ideology established branches in many parts of the Middle East and North Africa, in the form of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al Nusra Front in Syria and Al Shabaab in Somalia. The affiliates embraced AQC's organizational objectives and ethos and swore allegiance to Al Qaeda Central led by Osama bin Laden (now by Ayman al-Zawahiri). However, overall control also shifted from AQC to these entities, partly due to AQC leaders either being dead, captured or in hiding.



Figure 1 – Osama bin Laden with Ayman al-Zawahiri in a video broadcasted on Al-Jazeera, after bin Laden issued his second *fatwa* in 1998. Image source: Alternate History Wiki, [http://althistory.wikia.com/wiki/Ayman\\_al-Zawahiri\\_\(President\\_McCain\)](http://althistory.wikia.com/wiki/Ayman_al-Zawahiri_(President_McCain))

### AQC Affiliates take Centre Stage

All Al Qaeda affiliated groups share a similar ideology and share the objective of establishing an Islamic Caliphate (Islamic state) under the banner of the Islamic Black Flag (Figure 2). There are two common trends among all regional affiliates of AQC that can be compared with Mao's first two stages of protracted warfare. First is securing a base of operation to create instability within a state and then expanding attacks on government forces to undermine the political structure. Second is gaining control of what Mao called 'small pocket areas', then taking on the role of the state by providing certain public services and implementing *Shariah* (Islamic Law). It is hoped that these pocket areas captured throughout the country would eventually come together to form an area

which will equal a state. However, each regional AQ affiliate is at a different stage of advancement. Examples of how AQ affiliates have grown in Yemen and Syria in accordance with Mao's three stages of revolutionary warfare would suggest that putting Mao's theory into practice has been better said than done for the jihadist movement.

The historical roots of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) can be traced back to Yemen's turbulent past in the 1990s and in the first half of the 2000s, involving the civil war which began in 1994 and the Shia Houthi rebellion which began in 2004. In January 2009, Saudi Arabian and Yemeni 'branches' of Al Qaeda officially merged under the banner of AQAP, and achieved Mao's first stage of protracted warfare by establishing preliminary bases of operation in Yemen. In 2011, AQAP was re-branded as Ansar al-Sharia ("Supporters of Islamic Law"), and jumped to Mao's third stage of protracted warfare by seizing various cities in the Southern provinces of Abyan and Shabwa, exploiting the chaos during the 2011 Yemeni revolution. However, Ansar al-Sharia was evicted from these cities by the government forces in 2012. During Ansar al-Sharia's short period of rule, it enforced *Shariah* and managed to increase its legitimacy by providing public services such as electricity, water and education to the local population. It can be noted here that Ansar al-Sharia's brand of *Shariah* is accepted by some segments of the population in Yemen. Ansar al-Sharia has since relocated to the remote eastern province of Hadramaut, Yemen's largest province. As of now, Ansar al-Sharia is currently in Mao's second stage of protracted warfare, as it awaits an opportune time to expand beyond its pocket areas of control. Ansar al-Sharia continues to carry out attacks on government security forces, most notably in 2013, killing more

than 400 security and army officials as reported by the *National Yemen* newspaper on 2 January 2014. At present, the government of Yemen is beleaguered not only by the presence of Ansar al-Sharia, but the Succession Movement in the South (a movement in the former South Yemen that demands secession from the Republic of Yemen) as well as sporadic fighting between the (Shia) Houthis and Sunni tribesmen in the North. The Yemeni government lacks the strength and resources to uproot the terrorist and extremist elements from its soil. Therefore, Ansar al-Sharia may be able to return to Mao's third stage if the opportunity arises.



Figure 2 – The Islamic Black Flag is used by many Al Qaeda affiliates as well as non-terrorist groups; photo taken in Jakarta, Indonesia (date unknown)

Photo source: AFP, *Ynetnews*, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4281556,00.html>

The civil war in Syria gave Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) or Al Nusra Front the opportunity to establish itself and exploit the unstable conditions in the country, in line with Mao's first stage of protracted warfare. JN was formed in January 2012 as an offshoot of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) (which worked with AQC in Iraq). Initially its membership consisted

mostly of Syrians who were fighting in Iraq and then were sent back to Syria along with foreign specialists in guerrilla warfare as the conflict in Syria erupted. In Mao's second stage of warfare, JN has coordinated with the secular Free Syrian Army (FSA) to attack government forces and take control over pocket areas, as both the groups share the objective of bringing down President Bashar al-Assad's regime. With a growing membership and military capability, there is a possibility of JN entering Mao's third stage by launching full-scale guerrilla attacks on government forces and installations to ultimately seize some territory in Syria. However, JN's hard-line ideology is likely to prevent it from retaining influence over the majority of the Syrian population.

The path of AQC and affiliates also corresponds to Mao's theory on how insurgents fight an unconventional war against a conventional army by using time, space and will. Mao traded space for time by avoiding head-on battles and giving territory to enemy forces during the first two stages of warfare. This exchange allowed the survival of the insurgents and time to drag on, which eventually led to the battle of wills that would produce a victory for the insurgent. For example, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), used Mao's 'space-for-time' tactic to wait out the US.

ISI was able to emerge and attain Mao's first stage of protracted warfare by establishing a foothold in Iraq due to the unstable conditions which followed the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US. In the initial years after the invasion, ISI was able to expand its influence in Iraq and increase attacks until 2007, when the US troop surge led to a series of offensives against the group. This displaced ISI and thwarted its advancement. ISI's indiscriminate attacks against Iraqi civilians also severely damaged its image among the population, and many Sunni militants switched allegiances to work with the American forces. The US and Iraqi offensives and the suspension of military activity by the Shiite Mahdi Army saw a reduction in violence in Iraq between 2007 and 2011. In December 2011, 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' ended and US military forces withdrew from Iraq. By mid-2012 ISI and other terror groups were resurgent, having given space for time. Since then Iraq has become riddled with terrorist attacks as well as sectarian violence between majority Shiite Muslims, who are in power, and minority Sunni Muslims. On 21 July 2012, ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made a statement claiming that ISI is returning to its strongholds which its members were dispersed from.

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In 2011 ISI expanded into Syria and in early 2012 changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). However, in November 2013, Ayman al-Zawahiri ordered the abolishment of ISIL and said that it should continue as ISI and confine itself to Iraq. On 3 February 2014, al-Zawahiri disavowed ISIL from Al Qaeda and stated that Al Qaeda is not responsible for the actions of ISIL. In May 2014, al-Zawahiri advised ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his followers to focus on the fight in Iraq (Al Qaeda thus seems only to reject ISI's expansion into Syria and the name change to ISIL, not its operations in Iraq).

ISIL has repeatedly tried to influence the political structure in Iraq with suicide bombings, assassinations and attacking government security forces, achieving Mao's second stage of protracted warfare. According to Iraq Body Count, nearly 9,500 civilians died in 2013 alone as a result of violence across the country. In early January 2014, ISIL was able to take control over parts of Ramadi and Fallujah in western Anbar Province of Iraq, which can be considered the onset of Mao's third stage

of warfare, i.e. capturing areas with large populations. Nevertheless, Anbar Governorate is the only territory that ISIL has been able to hold due to it being sparsely populated and a minority Sunni stronghold. In other areas, and among the general Iraqi population, ISIL's extreme tactics and version of *Shariah* are unlikely to yield sufficient popular support as the people are divided along sectarian lines. Thus, while ISIL is not directly threatening the authority of the Iraqi government, it is causing further instability in the country.

### **Conclusion**

AQC, its affiliates and allies thrive in states that have unstable conditions. This is their breeding ground and where they establish bases for operations to advance through Mao's three stages

of protracted warfare. However, it is improbable that any of the Al Qaeda affiliates will be able to complete Mao's third stage by holding power and influence over their respective nations for an extensive period of time. Firstly, the Islamist ideology of AQC and affiliates will not result in a popular revolt against existing governments as most of the *Ummah* do not adhere to their hard-line ideology, and especially not to their extreme battle tactics or methods, i.e. terrorism. Mao Zedong led a successful revolution only as it was supported by the people.

Secondly, control and power-sharing issues will be a source of tension whenever one affiliate and another come into contact with each other. This was seen in Syria in 2013 when the ISIL tried to subsume JN under its wing without consulting AQC leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Although ISIL and JN have cooperated in attacks

against the Syrian regime, there is in-fighting between the two groups (as well as other jihadist groups in Syria). This is what led al-Zawahiri to reject ISIL with regard to its operations in Syria. Thirdly, governments are likely to seek military assistance from outside when extremist forces become too strong. An example of this was seen in Mali where the government requested for foreign military help to regain control of the northern part of the country. French security forces intervened and helped push Ansar Dine ("Defenders of the Faith") out of power in most areas in the north. To keep these forces in check, it is necessary for affected governments to take steps to prevent terrorism and extremism from taking root in their respective countries. The international community should also assist these countries in establishing sustained peace and stability.

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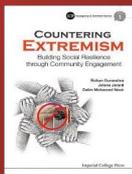


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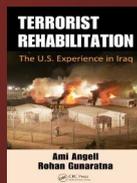
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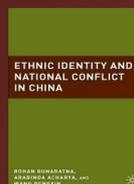
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