Jihadi Rivalry:
The Islamic State Challenges al-Qaida

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Executive Summary

The world of international jihad has undergone a wholesale internal revolution in recent years. The dramatic recovery of the Islamic State group (IS), its expansion into Syria, and its proclamation of a Caliphate crossing established international boundaries set the stage for the intensive intra-jihadi competition seen today. The world no longer faces one Sunni jihadi threat, but two, as al-Qaida and IS compete to outperform each other on the global stage.

The relationship between al-Qaida and IS's predecessor movements had never been an entirely stable one. During IS's early years in Iraq, the group was an avowed affiliate of al-Qaida and thus technically expected to submit to the authority of al-Qaida's central leadership. However, it repeatedly ignored orders to cease public displays of gruesome violence and mass casualty attacks, and by the time it had begun calling itself the Islamic State in Iraq in mid-2006, its relationship to al-Qaida was unclear at best. Since mid-2014, the two organizations have been fighting each other in Syria and have engaged in full-scale verbal hostilities internationally.

In recent years, IS has evolved from being an Iraq-based terrorist organization to a transnational insurgent movement. Moreover, it has definitively challenged al-Qaida's status as the world's preeminent Sunni jihadi organization. By preying on and exploiting increasing state instability in the Muslim world, both transnational jihadi organizations have established concrete territorial footholds in which and from which they seek to realize their global objectives. However, al-Qaida and IS have set about reaching this state of affairs through divergent strategies.

Al-Qaida has evolved considerably since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Beginning in Iraq in 2003 and 2004, Osama bin Laden set about expanding his organization into a global movement through the acquisition of affiliates. Upon joining the al-Qaida cause, affiliates were expected to adopt the broader organization's vision, meaning a continuation of a fight against the "near enemy," while simultaneously turning one eye towards targeting the "far enemy"—the West. This brought with it advantages and disadvantages. Most groups joining al-Qaida did so from a position of weakness; joining an international movement bolstered their strategic potential. However, plotting attacks against the West risked inviting external threats and losing local support.

In recent years, having faced a decade of concerted international counterterrorism

measures and the new and intensely competitive threat of IS, al-Qaida has adapted and refocused its strategy around localist objectives. Al-Qaida affiliates—particularly Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen—are now playing a long game, focused on building alliances and growing durable and deep roots within unstable and repressed societies. By restraining its imposition of harsh forms of Sharia law, al-Qaida seeks to avoid appearing as repressive and instead as a favored alternative to the pre-existing status quo.

IS meanwhile has consistently maintained a localist focus. Since Iraq in the mid-2000s, its inherent objective has been to destabilize local dynamics to facilitate the rapid establishment of unilateral territorial control and imposition of Sharia law. IS avoids compromising its severe religious mores by intensively collecting local intelligence, strictly controlling local populations, and brutally suppressing dissent.

Having proclaimed the establishment of a Caliphate in mid-2014, IS presented itself to the international jihadi community as having achieved something al-Qaida had failed to do for twenty years. However, the rapidity with which IS imposed its rule in parts of Iraq and Syria and the scale and speed of its subsequent international expansion through its system of provinces makes it vulnerable. Throughout much of its controlled territories, IS has decidedly shallow roots compared to al-Qaida, which may negatively impact its capacity to retain its momentum and to define itself as a state, let alone a Caliphate.

The competition between IS and al-Qaida for jihadi supremacy will continue, and will likely include more terrorist attacks on the West. The United States and its allies need a better set of policies to counter the threat these organizations pose. Such policies should include continuing to target al-Qaida leaders, containing IS within Iraq and Syria, and exploiting the liabilities of new IS franchises. The international community must also do more to disrupt jihadi financial activities and ramp up domestic intelligence and counter-radicalization efforts. Ultimately, however, state instability across the Muslim world must be ameliorated or jihadis will continue to establish themselves within vulnerable societies.

A Revolution From Within

The world of international jihad has undergone a wholesale internal revolution in recent years. After at least a decade of dominance by al-Qaida and its network of affiliates, the dramatic recovery and expansion of the Islamic State group (IS) since 2012 fundamentally transformed the dynamics and nature of jihadi militancy. IS's downing of a civilian airliner over Egypt's Sinai Peninsula on October 31, 2015 and its dramatic attacks in Paris two weeks later underlined the emergence of IS as a truly formidable jihadi actor. FBI Director James Comey's July 2015 assertion that IS posed a more significant and immediate terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland than al-Qaida appeared apt.[1]

Comey's assessment had been especially interesting considering al-Qaida's long-established tradition of focusing on plotting attacks against Western targets. Conversely, IS consistently operated as an organization focused on fighting local governments and cleansing the Islamic world of "unbelievers." So why has this shift taken place? The answer lies as much within al-Qaida's strategic evolution as it does in IS's growth, not to mention the dynamics resulting from the interplay of these two factors.

Ultimately, IS evolved from being an Iraq-based terrorist organization in 2011 to a transnational insurgent movement with established fronts in 11 countries by mid-2015. Meanwhile, the influence of al-Qaida's central leadership (AQC) in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Af-Pak) steadily declined and comprehensively failed to defend itself against the unruly actions of an insubordinate former affiliate: IS. As a result, al-Qaida resembles something akin to a collective of like-minded terrorist factions loosely held together by a sense of Islamic loyalty to the tradition of AQC in Af-Pak. IS, meanwhile, resembles the more centralized jihadi organization that al-Qaida represented in the early-to-mid-2000s, when it began establishing its network of affiliates, or franchises, across the world.

The roots of today's intense intra-jihadi competition lie principally in Syria and Iraq and date back over a decade. By early 2004, Jordanian jihadi Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had risen to become perhaps the most notorious insurgent leader fighting against U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq. While his presence in pre-9/11 Afghanistan attracted minimal attention from Osama bin Laden, Zarqawi's exploits in Iraq with his group Jama'at al-Tawhid wal Jihad (JTWJ) presented al-Qaida with an opportunity. After eight months of negotiations initiated by AQC in Af-Pak, Zarqawi pledged "bay'a," or allegiance, to

bin Laden and renamed his group al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers, or al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI).[2]

Zarqawi's perspective on jihad and how it should be fought always differed from the vision espoused by bin Laden. Once in Iraq and as AQI's leader, Zarqawi focused resources not only on attacking coalition and other foreign targets in Iraq, but upon cleansing the country of non-Sunnis. AQC viewed this intense sectarianism, along with the brutal mass casualty attacks that came from it, as contrary and damaging to al-Qaida's broader struggle. In a letter sent to Zarqawi in July 2005, then al-Qaida deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri made this patently clear:

> Many of your Muslim admirers amongst the common folk are wondering about your attacks on the Shia. The sharpness of this questioning increases when the attacks are on one of their mosques … My opinion is this matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace, however much you try to explain it, and aversion to this will continue.[3]

Zarqawi's notorious use of public and video-taped beheadings received similar criticism from Zawahiri:

> Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace … will never find palatable are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages. You shouldn't be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the Sheikh of the slaughterers, etc. They do not express the general view of the admirer and the supporter of the resistance in Iraq…. We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. … we are in … a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma.[4]

Despite this "advice," Zarqawi continued his otherwise "unpalatable" practices, but he did comply with another al-Qaida instruction by preparing the ground for the establishment of an Islamic state in Iraq. As it happened, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) was announced in October 2006, four months after Zarqawi's death in June.[5] However, hidden within the complex mechanics of ISI's formation was the reality that the Iraqi movement was technically no longer under al-Qaida's umbrella. Specifically, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, Zarqawi's replacement as AQI's leader, pledged bay'a to ISI leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi in November 2006, and in doing so, nullified any pre-existing bay'a sworn by Zarqawi to bin Laden.[6] Similarly, upon assuming ISI leadership in May 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi never publicly pledged bay'a to al-Qaida, leaving the relationship between the groups unclear.[7]

When Baghdadi expanded ISI into Syria in April 2013, thereby forming the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), he attempted to bring his erstwhile Syrian wing,

Jabhat al-Nusra, back under his command.[8] However, its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Golani, rebuffed this and instead re-pledged his bay'a to al-Qaida and Zawahiri.[9] In the months that followed, ISIS asserted itself as an aggressively self-interested actor in Syria, while consistently ignoring Zawahiri's orders to desist and return to Iraq. After a series of ISIS attacks against other Syrian opposition forces, including the assassination of Zawahiri's personally appointed Syrian mediator, Abu Khaled al-Suri, a concerted rebel offensive was launched against ISIS across northern and eastern Syria.[10]

> **"Al-Qaida and IS are operating based on starkly different jihadi models.**

Weeks later, al-Qaida's shura council disavowed all organizational links to Baghdadi and ISIS, thus initiating an extraordinary series of rhetorical hostilities that pitted al-Qaida and its global network of veteran ideologues against ISIS and its younger generation of loyalists.[11] When ISIS forces swept across swathes of Iraq in June 2014 and declared a Caliphate led by Baghdadi—who was renamed "khalifah" (Caliph) Ibrahim—al-Qaida's jihadi credibility was fundamentally challenged.[12]

Thirteen years after 9/11, al-Qaida had demonstrated minimal capacity to establish overt Islamic territorial rule and failed altogether to create anything akin to a self-declared and sustainable Emirate or Caliphate. While IS's designation as a viable Islamic "state" was undoubtedly questionable, its control over a 670 kilometer near-contiguous stretch of territory between Syria's Aleppo governorate and Iraq's Salahuddin province in July 2014 was an impressive feat by contemporary jihadi standards.[13] Its subsequent international expansion, incorporating noteworthy groups in Egypt's Sinai and Nigeria and its splintering of al-Qaida affiliates in Yemen, Algeria, Af-Pak, and the Russian North Caucasus, sent shockwaves throughout the jihadi community worldwide.

Within today's dynamics, al-Qaida appears to be on its heels. The June 2015 death of Nasir al-Wuhayshi, Zawahiri's deputy and chief of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the announced death of Taliban emir Mullah Mohammad Omar—to whom Zawahiri was ultimately loyal—in late July 2015 posed potentially existential threats to the very concept of al-Qaida as a single distinct movement. Meanwhile, despite facing sustained military, political, and financial attack and pressure in its Syrian and Iraqi heartlands, IS's existence and momentum—internationally or in Syria and Iraq—still show little sign of abating.

However, al-Qaida and IS are operating based on starkly different jihadi models. Is IS's rapid organizational expansion sustainable? Could it open the movement up to future internal challenges? Does al-Qaida's increased focus on revolutionary integration and localism give it a more durable foundation for future operations? These issues and more will form the core focus of this paper, which assesses al-Qaida and IS's competing models of jihad and how they may determine the trajectory of jihadi militancy in the years to come.

By first exploring al-Qaida and IS's respective evolutions and jihadi models separately, the paper aims to subsequently establish the most likely future scenarios for jihadi movements and their implications for international security. Both organizations experienced a variety of serious internal strategic and structural issues while undergoing growth, generational transition, and pressure-induced evolution. The paper expounds on these issues and concludes by outlining how policymakers should best deal with managing and countering what will inevitably be an environment of heightened terrorist threats.

Al-Qaida: Localism with an Eye Toward the West

A l-Qaida has evolved considerably over the past fourteen years. Facing intense scrutiny and attack following 9/11, it expanded internationally through acquiring likeminded affiliates but has recently been challenged by IS. Al-Qaida's process of organizational learning, structural adaptation, and strategic maturation is a complex and multifaceted one, worthy of detailed explanation. Today's inter-jihadi competition between IS and al-Qaida is part of a more extensive context than generally appreciated. By understanding how the organization has changed over time, whether as a result of internal or external pressures, and by broadening the horizons of contemporary analysis of jihadi threats, the international community would be in a better position to determine more effective counter-measures, especially as they relate to individual territorial zones of jihadi activity.

Evolution & Lessons Learned

In the years following the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaida faced intense pressure, with its leadership forced to flee and disperse across Af-Pak and Iran and the movement's strategic direction unclear. Although bin Laden had developed an expansive network of contacts with Islamist and jihadi cells and organizations around the world, al-Qaida itself largely remained a centrally administered movement in the early 2000s.

The rapid emergence of a capable Iraqi insurgency following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 presented bin Laden with an opportunity to gain a foothold in the country. Despite their strategic differences, Zarqawi's AQI became bin Laden's first formal affiliate in October 2004, thereby initiating the global expansion of the al-Qaida franchise.

Throughout the mid-2000s, al-Qaida began methodically strengthening pre-existing relationships with experienced jihadi networks around the world. By 2009, al-Qaida had integrated two more affiliates in addition to AQI—al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in North Africa in January 2007 and AQAP in Yemen and Saudi Arabia in January 2009. While bin Laden arguably needed AQI more than AQI needed al-Qaida, the cases of AQIM and AQAP were different; both were operationally struggling in their previous forms—the Algeria-based Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat and two separate al-Qaida-linked Yemeni and Saudi factions.

As an organization al-Qaida was building a formal structure, whereby each affiliate was responsible for their respective "iqlim," or region, into which no other official faction was permitted authority.[14] Each iqlim was led by the affiliate's "emir" (literally, prince), who was ultimately loyal to bin Laden. Bin Laden himself maintained bay'a to Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar—the self-styled "emir al-mu'mineen," meaning Leader of the Faithful—a title normally reserved for a Caliph.

Outside of this formal structure, al-Qaida sought to build or expand unofficial but invaluable ties with likeminded jihadis in places like Russia's North Caucasus (Caucasus Emirate), Indonesia (Jemaah Islamiyah), the Gulf and Lebanon (Abdullah Azzam Brigades), and Central and South Asia (Lashkar-e-Taiba, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Islamic Jihad Union, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement), among other areas.

> **"New al-Qaida affiliates assumed a responsibility to adopt the broader organization's strategic vision.**

In swearing bay'a to bin Laden, new al-Qaida affiliates assumed a responsibility to adopt the broader organization's strategic vision. On paper, this meant not only continuing to fight the "near enemy," understood as Western-supported "apostate regimes" in the Islamic world, but to also devote resources to attacking the "greater" "far enemy," meaning the West, principally the United States. Operationalizing such a shift brought with it considerable opportunity costs, particularly in risking one's local legitimacy.[15] All insurgent organizations—as al-Qaida affiliates were at the time—are reliant on sustaining durable, if limited, local roots, which themselves are based on the group's contribution towards local, tribal, or communal struggles. Not only did reducing attention to these investments risk local legitimacy, but becoming an avowed enemy of the Western world also invited additional instability and external threats.

In practice, only AQAP demonstrated the will and capability to pose a direct threat to Western interests inside the Western world after its formation in 2009. Encouraged at the time by the charismatic Yemeni-American preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, and under the command of bin Laden's former personal secretary al-Wuhayshi, AQAP was responsible for, or linked to, three attacks and plots against the United States in 2009-2010 alone:

> - A drive-by shooting at a U.S. military recruitment center in Arkansas (June 1, 2009);
>
> - The attempted bombing of Northwestern Airlines Flight 253 (December 25, 2009); and
>
> - A bomb plot targeting cargo planes flying between Yemen and the United States (October 2010).

Meanwhile, AQI's brutality and obsession with sparking sectarian war in Iraq and AQIM's well-known reliance on criminality and the drug trade conflicted with bin Laden's intended vision of Islamic purity. Expanding through international affiliates may have provided al-Qaida with a genuine transnational network, but it only added to its administrative and organizational concerns. Precisely for this reason, bin Laden resisted acquiring Somalia-based al-Shabab as an official affiliate.

Despite these affiliate-related internal strains, the benefits of franchising still outweighed the costs. As a jihadi movement with transnational objectives, al-Qaida arguably survived because of its affiliate model. Nonetheless, bin Laden's death at the hands of U.S. Navy SEALS in Pakistan in May 2011 was a major blow. His replacement, Zawahiri—the comparatively uncharismatic former leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ)—was entirely expected. In an apparent attempt to demonstrate continued momentum, one of Zawahiri's first and most significant moves was to admit al-Shabab into al-Qaida, despite the group's ongoing internal issues relating to clan hostilities and emerging tensions over strategic direction.

Like AQIM and AQAP in 2007 and 2009, at a time of relative weakness, al-Shabab joined al-Qaida in February 2012—supporting the theory that affiliation occurred "as a result of failure." Al-Qaida helped debilitated jihadi factions acquire "financial support… a potential haven… access to new training, recruiting, publicity, and military expertise… branding… and opened up networks from past foreign fighter mobilizations."[16]

Despite this, al-Shabab's internal divisions erupted publicly in March 2012 when prominent American commander Omar Hammami (Abu Mansur al-Amriki) released a video titled "An Urgent Message" in which he claimed, "My life may be in danger from Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahedeen due to some differences that occurred between us over matters of Sharia and matters of strategy."[17] Hammami's specific complaints related to perceived military failures, complaints over the treatment of Somali Muslims, and Ahmed Abdi Godane's apparent isolation of al-Shabab's foreign fighters.

A bitter "fitna," or rift, then emerged within al-Shabab's ranks through 2012 and 2013. In April 2013, founding member Ibrahim al-Afghani penned an open letter to AQC pleading for intervention.[18] He also co-signed a fatwa with other leading al-Shabab officials Mukhtar Robow and Hassan Dahir Aweys condemning Godane's attacks on Hammami.[19] Zawahiri did nothing and within five months Hammami, Afghani, and several others were killed by Godane loyalists.

Matured Strategy – Playing slow for "Safe Bases"

Al-Shabab's period of fitna came during a pivotal moment of organizational learning within al-Qaida. For a decade, al-Qaida expanded through carefully acquiring affiliates but demonstrated little capacity to coordinate the implementation of its anti-Western

vision. Moreover, intensive Western counterterrorism measures against AQC—culminating in the death of bin Laden in May 2011—encouraged what had been a centrally-led organization with clearly delineated command and control structures to evolve into a movement of semi-autonomous franchises that determined their own operational direction but remained devoutly loyal to AQC's paternalistic leadership.

By 2011, AQC's resources and operational capabilities became extremely limited, but nonetheless a more "mature" al-Qaida grand strategy began to emerge. Individual affiliates were transforming into more socially-rooted insurgent movements capable of fighting conventional battles and establishing more durable control over people and territory.

The first example of this came in Yemen when AQAP rebranded, changing its name to Ansar al-Sharia in spring 2011. Prominent AQAP Sharia official Adel bin Abdullah Bin Thabet al-Abab (Sheikh Abu Zubair) claimed the new name was "what we use to introduce ourselves in areas where we work to tell people about our work and goals."[20] Indeed, the specific choice of name was intended to emphasize the localism of AQAP's activities—in jihadi parlance, a distinction is made between "ansar," or supporters, used to refer to local recruits and members, and "muhajireen," meaning immigrants. By summer 2011, Ansar al-Sharia established dominance across substantial parts of southern Yemen, particularly in Abyan and Shabwa governorates, where it was declared an Islamic emirate.

To establish durable control over those territories, Ansar al-Sharia looked for ways to effectively fight the existing "apostate" central government authorities while providing a credible alternative governance structure for their disillusioned and vulnerable populations. In doing so, it provided services to populations within its "emirate." Ansar al-Sharia established a tailor-made media wing, *Madad News Agency,* to exhibit its provision of food, security, water, electricity, education and justice within otherwise deprived and destitute desert communities.[21] By reinforcing broader conflict dynamics and demonstrating a consistent ability to provide stability and core—if limited—services, the group produced tacit levels of approval from local communities across swathes of territory in which al-Qaida's broader strategic objectives could be planned and eventually implemented. Nevertheless, Ansar al-Sharia's Yemeni "emirate" was eventually defeated by a military offensive throughout mid-to-late 2012.

> **"By 2011... a more 'mature' al-Qaida grand strategy began to emerge.**

Separately, events in Mali in early-2012 presented AQIM with an opportunity to exploit. In January 2012, an armed uprising launched by Malian Tuaregs—bolstered by weapons and recruits with military experience arriving from post-Gadhafi Libya—began rapidly capturing territory in the country's northeast. Led by the Tuareg nationalist National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA), the uprising

was gradually infiltrated by Islamists, including the indigenously established Harakat Ansar al-Din, headed by Tuareg leader Iyad Ag Ghali.

By mid-2012, working in concert with Ansar al-Din, AQIM had set up base in Timbuktu while the AQIM splinter faction Mouvement pour l'Unicite et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO) assumed dominance in the town of Gao. Ultimately, many prominent AQIM figures arrived in northeastern Mali, including Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Abou Zeid, Nabil Makhloufi, Yahya Abu al-Hammam, and Sanda Ould Bouamama.[22] However, rather than pragmatically embedding themselves within populations, AQIM and MUJAO quickly declared an "Islamic State of Azawad" and placed an emphasis on enforcing law and order through harsh Sharia legal codes.[23] "Islamic police" forces were deployed in the streets of Gao and Timbuktu and crimes as minimal as theft were punished through public amputation. Ancient shrines in Timbuktu were destroyed and invaluable historical libraries and museums looted. This was a far cry from the ordinarily liberal lifestyles of most Malians.

> **" Droukdel insisted the Malian people and AQIM's project in Mali be treated like an infant.**

With international attention focusing increasingly on this jihadi contingent in northeastern Mali in mid-2012, AQIM leader Abu Musab Abdul Wadud (Abdelmalik Droukdel) sent a secret letter addressed to his sub-commanders in Mali and to Ansar al-Din leader Ag Ghali. In it, Droukdel castigated his men for their premature Islamic declarations, the "extreme speed" of their application of "Sharia … in an environment ignorant of religion," and their aggressive behavior towards the MNLA.[24] Instead, Droukdel insisted that the Malian people and AQIM's project in Mali be treated like an infant:

> The current baby is in its first days, crawling on its knees, and has not yet stood on its two legs. If we really want it to stand on its own two feet in this world full of enemies waiting to pounce, we must ease its burden, take it by the hand, help it and support it until it stands. … One of the wrong policies that we think you carried out is the extreme speed with which you applied Shariah … Our previous experience proved that applying Shariah this way … will lead to people rejecting the religion and engender hatred towards the mujahedeen.[25]

Droukdel's broader argument was that while an international intervention was already likely in Mali, AQIM's strategy on the ground should have been to ensure that "even if the project fails later it will be just enough that we will have planted the first, good seeds, in a fertile soil and put pesticides and fertilizer on it, so that the tree will grow more quickly."[26] Six months later, the French army intervened in Mali and forced AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar al-Din out of populated areas and the "Islamic State of Azawad" was defeated.

Although it came too late, and may not have influenced behavior on the ground anyway, Droukdel's advice seemed all the more powerful after the fact. Like in Yemen, it demonstrated that a more mature strategic thinking was emerging at al-Qaida's top decision-making levels. Intriguingly, by the time French forces fired their first bullets in Mali, Belmokhtar had finalized plans for a large-scale attack on the In Amenas gas plant in Algeria, which killed 37 foreign hostages over four days. Despite withdrawing from AQIM in December 2012 after creating an independent battalion, Belmokhtar seemed intent on sustaining al-Qaida's broader international focus. He later claimed responsibility for a double suicide truck bomb attack on a French uranium mine in Niger in May 2013 and more recently for an attack on a hotel in Bamako, Mali's capital, on November 20, 2015.[27]

> **"Jabhat al-Nusra began a process of integration into broader revolutionary dynamics by...2012.**

Meanwhile in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra began manifesting the most refined version of this new localist thinking. Although on paper still a subsidiary of ISI and thus technically outside of the formal al-Qaida bay'a structure, Golani was already rebuffing orders from Baghdadi in Iraq by late 2012, and by April 2013 had come firmly back under Zawahiri's leadership.[28] In contrast to ISI's notorious violence, sectarian hostility, and liberal use of "takfir," or excommunication, Golani began displaying similar strategic thinking as his compatriots in Yemen and North Africa. Writing in December 2012, for example, Golani reminded his fighters:

> Day after day, you're getting closer to the people after you have conquered their hearts and become trusted by them. … Beware of being hard on them, begin with the priorities and fundamentals of Islam and be flexible on the minor parts of religion.[29]

Thus, within an intensely brutal and complex conflict in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra began a process of integration into broader revolutionary dynamics by the winter of 2012. Simultaneously, it exploited the winter cold in cities like Aleppo to take control of bakeries and other local entities in an attempt to provide services more efficiently than more moderate factions.[30] Militarily, Jabhat al-Nusra coordinated operations with groups of all ideological foundations, prioritizing the populist revolutionary ideal of fighting the Assad regime over more long-term concerns with establishing Islamic rule. That was not to say the latter was not a priority. In fact, establishing Islamic emirates in Syria was Jabhat al-Nusra's foremost priority, but the group realized that the survival of those emirates could only be achieved through a long-term project.

This strategy was largely effective and was likely a primary reason behind Baghdadi's assertive "emergence" into Syria and attempt to subsume Golani back under his command in April 2013. Tellingly, when the United States formally designated Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist organization in December 2012, Syrians across the opposition spectrum took

to the streets proclaiming, "We are all Jabhat al-Nusra!"[31] Although the arrival of ISIS in Syria, its co-optation of Jabhat al-Nusra's foreign fighters, and its takeover of the group's oil and gas resources initially hit it hard, Jabhat al-Nusra's integration into the broader revolutionary umbrella ensured it had the necessary durability to ride out the storm.

With Jabhat al-Nusra demonstrating the strategic value of a longer-term strategy, Zawahiri issued his "General Guidelines for Jihad" in September 2013. Seemingly displaying lessons he learned from leading

> **" Zawahiri stressed the strategic importance of self-discipline and restraint.**

EIJ in Egypt, Zawahiri stressed the strategic importance of self-discipline and restraint. Instead of aggressively asserting control over vulnerable populations, Zawahiri ordered his affiliates to "focus on spreading awareness amongst the general public" and more broadly to invest in securing "maslaha," or interests, and averting "mafsada," meaning harm. Fighters were ordered to refrain from fighting those "who have not raised arms against" them and to cease attacking targets that endanger Muslim civilians. Perhaps most surprisingly, and in a clear point of distinction from IS, al-Qaida units were to "avoid fighting the deviant sects" (Shia, Alawites, Ismailis, Ahmadis, and Sufis) and to "avoid meddling with Christian, Sikh and Hindu communities living in Muslim lands. … [as] we are keen to live with them in a peaceful manner."[32]

Crucially, Zawahiri revealed that al-Qaida's strategy appreciated that their "struggle is a long one, and Jihad is in need of safe bases."[33] These "safe bases" were exactly what had been envisioned initially by AQAP in Yemen, Droukdel in Mali, and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. But what were the safe zones intended for? Zawahiri stated this plainly in his guidelines document:

> All mujahid brothers must consider targeting the interests of the western Zionist-Crusader alliance in any part of the world as their foremost duty.[34]

Thus, al-Qaida's ultimate objective and strategic priority remained targeting the West, and the adoption of a more refined, localist, long-term strategy would ensure the movement's threat as more sustainable. AQC's deployment of at least a dozen senior commanders from Af-Pak, Yemen, and Iran into Syria from late 2012 and their involvement in planning foreign attacks on behalf of what the United States labeled the "Khorasan Group" from within Jabhat al-Nusra's ranks is a clear indication of this long-term planning.[35]

In terms of traditional theories of insurgency, al-Qaida clearly operates a strategy akin to that espoused by Mao Zedong, whereby "only upon a steadfast political foundation … can guerrilla forces create bases for logistics and operations, and slowly build strength and momentum for the final conventional stage of warfare."[36] In fact, al-Qaida leaders have frequently used Mao-like language when discussing strategy.

More broadly, al-Qaida "has morphed from a discrete terrorist group into a wide-ranging fighting movement that conducts insurgencies, recruits foreign fighters into conflicts, raises funds, and conducts terrorism on the side … Al-Qaeda is clearly still in the terrorism business, but terrorism is no longer its flagship product."[37]

Islamic State: Ink Spot Expansionism

Like al-Qaida, IS also underwent a consequential process of evolution in recent years, especially since it proclaimed the Caliphate in June 2014. Since then, it sought to exploit its well-established network of jihadi relationships around the world to co-opt armed factions, and most importantly, cells from within existing al-Qaida affiliates. In 18 months, IS successfully demonstrated its capacity to compete with al-Qaida as a major international jihadi movement. However, the momentum of expansion will likely decline as IS's international connections are expended, leaving its strategic focus on localism and exploiting proliferating state instability as its main insurance policy from 2016 onwards. This is perhaps IS's greatest strength and biggest potential vulnerability.

Controlled Wilaya Expansion

In declaring itself a "dawla," or state, and by proclaiming the "khilafah," or caliphate, in June 2014, IS attached an immediate expectation for significant expansionary objectives to its jihadi project. Although its territorial control and influence in Syria and Iraq was impressive by jihadi standards, IS needed to transform into a more international movement to justify its self-presentation. In his speech announcing the Caliphate, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani laid the ground for this expected expansion of authority by way of global pledges of allegiance:

> We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of the khilafah, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the khalifah Ibrahim and to support him … The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations becomes null by the expansion of the khilafah's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas. … Listen to your khalifah and obey him. Support your state, which grows every day...[38]

In the months that followed, IS demonstrated a twin-track strategy of growth, focused first on expanding into territory directly bordering existing areas of control in Syria and Iraq; secondly on receiving and accepting pledges of bay'a from other jihadi movements further afield. The former strategy depended directly on IS's capacity to achieve military successes on the battlefield, spurred by its dramatic victories in Iraq, the Caliphate declaration, and its deep knowledge of communal and tribal dynamics. In eastern Syria

and western Iraq, for example, co-opting the allegiance of powerful tribes—through physical threat, fear-induced respect, or financial persuasion—proved a particularly effective method of territorial expansion.

The latter strategy utilized IS's high profile to encourage existing jihadi groups and disenfranchised sub-factions around the world to join its growing Caliphate. During the occupation of Iraq, IS had established a large and intricate foreign fighter network. This network was crucial in securing pledges of allegiance from its first batch of foreign "wilayat," or provinces–all given on November 10, 2014 by groups in Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia and accepted by Baghdadi three days later. Crucially, not only did all of these countries contain pre-existing pro-IS foreign fighter and support networks, but they were also areas prone to, or already suffering from, social, religious, or political instability.

"It was IS that actively sought out ABM's allegiance.

In Egypt, for example, IS acquired a bay'a from Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM), a group that emerged from the disenfranchised tribal and Bedouin communities of the Sinai Peninsula and the Salafi-jihadi cells in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, upon its formation in 2011, several of ABM's most senior leaders were veterans of AQI's jihad in Iraq, including Palestinian Hesham al-Saedni and Egyptian Tawfiq Mohammed Faraj. ABM's militant roots in the Sinai also trace back to notorious al-Sawarka tribal leader Khaled al-Musaid, who was strongly influenced by Zarqawi's activities in the early 2000s.[39]

While its formative years were spent attacking Israeli targets along the Sinai border, ABM switched its target to the Egyptian state following the July 2013 overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi, resulting in the killing of hundreds of soldiers and police.[40] This encouraged a brutal crackdown by Egyptian security forces through the summer of 2014, which resulted in the deaths of multiple senior leaders, including Faraj, Shadi al-Menai, Khaled al-Menai, and Mohammed al-Sayed Mansour al-Tokhi.[41]

Although ABM's public rhetoric had begun to indicate their appreciation of IS by January 2014; it was IS that actively sought out ABM's allegiance when it dispatched a senior emissary, Musaid Abu Qatmah, to the Sinai in September 2014.[42] Traveling through Gaza, Qatmah represented IS's second attempt to send a message of encouragement to ABM; a group of IS-linked militants had earlier been arrested carrying a letter from Libya-based IS commander Abu Ahmed al-Libi urging ABM to pledge bay'a to Baghdadi in exchange for weapons and money.[43] ABM had already exploited Libyan connections for the purpose of dispatching fighters for training and for purchasing vast amounts of weapons leftover from the Gadhafi era.

Prior to ABM's public bay'a to IS, the group sent two senior representatives to Syria to discuss establishing organizational bonds.[44] Meanwhile, official IS statements began celebrating ABM's attacks and declaring the Sinai a promised land for jihad.[45]

Clearly, both sides laid the foundation for ABM's bay'a well in advance. This resembled the case in Libya, where state collapse fostered an environment in which armed groups of all ideological backgrounds thrived. Some of the most extreme militant elements first established a safe haven in the eastern port city of Derna. By mid-to-late 2014, it had developed into a melting pot of factions with loyalties to both al-Qaida and IS.

One such organization, the Shura Council of Islamic Youth (SCIY), was the first Libya-based organization to pledge bay'a to IS, along with several smaller cells in the city on October 5, 2014. The collective pledge was preceded—like in Egypt—by a centrally coordinated IS "diplomatic mission" led by the Iraqi senior IS commander Abu Ali al-Anbari, the Saudi Abu Habib al-Jazrawi, and the Yemeni Abu Bara al-Azdi.[46] After a second bay'a by Libyan jihadis on November 10—in apparent coordination with others in Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia—IS continued its "diplomatic" outreach, encouraging the subsequent expansion and establishment of its Tripoli "wilaya," or province, in the west (incorporating Tripoli, Sirte, Misrata, and several other municipalities) and its Fezzan wilaya in the south in November and December 2014.

By November 2015, IS claimed to manage 19 wilayat in Syria and Iraq—including two (al-Furat and al-Jazeera) that crossed the internationally recognized state boundaries—and 18 internationally, in Libya, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, Af-Pak, Nigeria, and the Russian North Caucasus.

Consequently, IS's international expansion through its wilaya model focused primarily on areas of existing jihadi militancy and where active or easily initiated support networks existed. While much of this outreach and co-optation targeted unaligned jihadi factions, some also induced elements within al-Qaida affiliates to splinter and join IS's Caliphate. Known AQAP figures in Yemen indicated their potential allegiance to IS as early as January 2014. AQIM's Central Region branch first pledged allegiance to IS in March 2014, three-and-a-half months before the Caliphate declaration.

Most significant in terms of IS's competition with AQC has been its expansion into Af-Pak by co-opting elements within al-Qaida, the Taliban, and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This process of infiltrating AQC's heartland began in March 2014, when nine AQC figures announced their defection to IS. Remarkably, this included the brother of al-Qaida's most reputed ideologue, Jordanian cleric Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi.[47]

> **"By November 2015, IS claimed to manage 19 wilayat in Syria and Iraq.**

Though this initial splintering received little attention, the October 2014 defection of five prominent TTP leaders to IS suggested significant change was afoot. Among those five was Shahidullah Shahid, the TTP's chief spokesman, and Hafiz Saeed Khan, who had been named a potential successor to killed TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud in late

2013. Together, the five effectively represented the TTP's authority across their regional stronghold of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).[48]

By January 2015, several further statements of support and bay'a had come out of Af-Pak, including by jihadis active in Pakistan's Hyderabad, Karachi, Quetta, the rural Sindh state, and another key TTP stronghold, the Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa region.[49] It was therefore altogether predictable that IS spokesman Adnani would announce on January 26, 2015 the establishment of IS's Khorasan wilaya with Saeed as its emir and former Guantanamo Bay detainee Abdul Rauf Aliza (or Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim) as his deputy.[50]

> **"The acquisition of Boko Haram in March 2015 was arguably IS's most significant achievement.**

Although its military presence on the ground in Af-Pak remained small in comparison to Pakistan's TTP and Afghanistan's Taliban, the emergence of IS there served to underline the scale of IS's ideational attraction. IS in Af-Pak has since steadily increased its operations and the announced death of Taliban leader Mullah Omar in late July was a further boon to its potential.

By emerging as a viable and potentially superior rival to al-Qaida, IS introduced an intense competitive dynamic within the global jihadi movement. Thus far, IS has successfully splintered several al-Qaida affiliates and other otherwise closely linked groups. The acquisition of Boko Haram in March 2015 was arguably IS's most significant achievement, and this feat may soon be surpassed should rumors of an al-Shabab defection prove true in the coming months.

Despite momentum appearing to be on its side, IS also fears the possibility of defections from within its own ranks, as Adnani made clear in the Caliphate declaration speech:

> Be very wary of breaking the ranks. For you to be snatched by birds would be better for you than to break the ranks or take part in doing so. And if anyone wants to break the ranks, split his head with bullets and empty its insides, whoever he may be.[51]

IS's expansion since June 2014 can therefore be described as representing something akin to an "ink spot strategy," whereby easier targets for acquisition have been prioritized initially to serve as incubators of IS activities and pro-IS messaging. A majority of new IS franchises increased their operational tempos after pledging bay'a, which served not only to demonstrate their determination to prove themselves, but also immediately destabilized local, regional, or national dynamics.

The use of violent escalation to dramatically destabilize has remained a core IS tactic since the early days of the JTWJ in Iraq. IS has repeatedly created social and communal conditions more amenable for terrorist and insurgency activity. Moreover, these tactics

allow IS to present instability as the consequence of central or local government mismanagement, and thus to present IS governance as the solution.

Steadily, through the power of IS's media apparatus, its dramatic attacks on new areas of operation, and its early introduction of local service provision and "dawa," or religious outreach, IS presents an image of an organization with genuinely self-sustaining momentum. Each wilaya acts as an ink spot, gradually expanding outwards through violence and social activity, while IS's international message and operations encourage other undecided jihadi factions to join.

Wilaya Model & Localism

Contrary to initial expectations, IS's Caliphate declaration clearly induced a series of consequential bay'a pledges and an international expansion of IS-linked activities. However, IS has not (yet) accepted and made official a considerable number of bay'as made by groups globally, including in Malaysia, Indonesia, Gaza, Tunisia, the Philippines, and India. Rather than indicating general selectivity, this has demonstrated that IS's ink spot expansion via its wilaya model is part of a methodical and controlled process, with certain conditions being necessary before the establishment of organizational relations.

A week after accepting the bay'a pledges and establishing wilayat in Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia on November 13, 2014, IS explained this process in the fifth edition of its English-language magazine Dabiq. In an article titled "Remaining and Expanding"—referencing IS's central slogan—Dabiq's authors explained:

> Prior to the [November 13] announcement of the new wilayat, a number of groups … had pledged their allegiance to the Khalifah and continue to do so daily. The Islamic State … delayed the announcement of their respective wilayat … This delay should end with the appointment or recognition of leadership by the Khalifah for those lands where multiple groups have given bay'at and merged, or the establishment of a direct line of communication between the Khilafah and the mujahid leadership of lands who have yet to contact the Islamic State and thus receive information and directives from the Khalifah.[52]

IS insists that potential new franchises must contain capable leaders with the capacity to maintain direct contact with leaders in Iraq and Syria *prior* to accepting pledges of allegiance. This stand conveys an appreciation of the dangers inherent in creating an international jihadi movement. Therefore, IS's dispatching of emissaries from Syria and Iraq represents a more cautious method of testing new franchises and their capabilities in an attempt to effectively exploit long-established networks dating back to IS's history in Iraq since 2003.

In addition to leadership and command-and-control issues, IS presumably also requires

a demonstration of military potential, ideological affinity, and a will and capacity to introduce IS-style governance and rule of law. At times, however, these requirements appear to be ignored or misjudged, as exhibited by the Algerian Soldiers of the Caliphate (ASC) and its leader Abdelmalek Gouri.

As the former leader of AQIM's Central Region, Gouri—also known as Khaled Abu Suleiman—formally pledged bay'a to IS on September 14, 2014, and quickly demonstrated his loyalty to Baghdadi by kidnapping French citizen Herve Gourdel on September 21, in stated retaliation for French airstrikes on IS in Iraq. While Gourdel's kidnapping and subsequent beheading on video three days later closely resembled IS's modus operandi and secured ASC's acceptance into the Caliphate on November 13, Gouri's death on December 22 dealt a near-mortal blow to IS's presence in Algeria.

Al-Qaida & IS: Comparing Models

Clearly, accepting smaller factions so quickly has brought potentially serious disadvantages. In that sense, IS's strategy of expansion since June 2014 closely resembles that adopted by al-Qaida since the mid-2000s, but has been undertaken at a more accelerated pace. While this may succeed in presenting IS as a continuously expanding movement, it presents many of the same dangers al-Qaida has faced, and on a larger scale.

Although IS's image and jihadi "style" is both well-known and broadly replicated by its new franchises, the likelihood of individual wilaya leaders diverging from its model should not be discounted, especially where franchises face concerted counterterrorism pressures.

Still, in its competition with al-Qaida, IS enjoys one major advantage: its core objective is almost entirely local, not foreign. Although al-Qaida clearly moved closer to this localism in recent years as part of a survival strategy, localist objectives are inherent within IS's strategic thinking. The IS project focuses on building a state and expanding the Caliphate—through internationally dispersed ink spots that will theoretically continue to expand until IS rules the world.

IS, therefore, avoids the issue of "preference divergence," whereby franchise or affiliate leaders face the dilemma of whether to invest in local interests that help secure local legitimacy or divert resources and adapt their strategic vision towards international objectives, which risk damaging local repute.[53] Al-Qaida affiliate leaders suffered from this "preference divergence," with some largely refusing to adopt al-Qaida's internationalist vision and others doing so, but suffering the consequences locally. Conversely, IS leaders are expected to focus solely on establishing and consolidating territorial control and replicating IS's "state" model in order to compete with government authority. A related benefit to this localism is that IS franchises no longer dispatch local citizens to IS's center of gravity in Syria and Iraq, but instead retain their manpower "at home."[54]

IS's local focus complements the geopolitical instability now prevalent across much of the Middle East and North Africa, and the popular perception of intensified sectarianism. IS's recovery in Iraq and growth into Syria was not only catalyzed by these dynamics, but IS itself sought to exacerbate them further. Moreover, its enthusiastic adoption of horrific brutality and barbaric tactics appear closely aligned with the "Management of

Savagery" strategy espoused by jihadi writer Abu Bakr Naji.[55] In his 113-page book, Naji espoused the idea that jihadis should sustain a campaign of merciless violence aimed, on the one hand, at draining local governmental capacity to restore stability, and on the other, at creating a state of total chaos and socio-political vacuum for the jihadi Islamic State project to fill.

Consequently, IS's effective use of social media to rapidly disseminate propaganda materials reinforces a perception of power and momentum on the ground. Locally, this aims to instill fear in its adversaries, which would presumably garner the respect of its potential "constituency." Regionally and internationally, the visibility of IS's military power, its fearsome reputation, and its focus on "building an Islamic state" encouraged an unprecedented flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq since 2012. This continued ability to recruit has allowed IS to replace the estimated 15,000 IS militants killed by coalition airstrikes since August 2014.[56] While the majority of IS's influencing power radiates from social media, the al-Qaida versus IS competitive dynamic also appears on traditional jihadi internet forums, with administrators of Al-Fidaa favoring IS and Al-Shumukh remaining loyal to al-Qaida.[57]

> **"The al-Qaida versus IS competitive dynamic also appears on traditional jihadi internet forums.**

While IS remains centrally focused on attaining localist objectives, the initiation of U.S.-led coalition air operations against its forces in Iraq in August 2014 and in Syria in September 2014 prompted an urge for foreign retaliation. Under pressure at home, and unable to spare resources from franchises internationally, IS's solution was to call for "lone wolf" attacks against Western targets. In a vicious diatribe released in late September 2014, IS's Adnani exclaimed:

> So O [Muslims], do not let this battle pass you by wherever you may be. You must strike the soldiers, patrons, and troops of the tawaghit [(or tyrants)]. Strike their police, security, and intelligence members, as well as their treacherous agents. Destroy their beds. Embitter their lives for them and busy them with themselves. If you can 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, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. 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. …

> … If you are not able to find an IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman, or any of their allies. Smash his head

with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him. Do not lack. Do not be contemptible. … If you are unable to do so, then burn his home, car, or business. Or destroy his crops. … If you are unable to do so, then spit in his face. …[58]

This decentralized strategy achieved considerable success. Out of 30 terrorism plots or attacks in the West between July 2014 and July 2015, 24 (80 percent) were linked to IS.[59] In June 2015, the sheer volume of IS-linked terrorism investigations in the United States was so significant the FBI drafted "criminal squads" to monitor terrorism suspects.[60] In the U.K. alone, "thousands" of suspects were under reconnaissance in July 2015, while the terrorist threat in France was described in April 2015 as "unprecedented." [61]

By late 2015, IS had downed Russian Metrojet Flight 9268 over Egypt's Sinai Peninsula by detonating an explosives-filled soft drink can, and killed 130 people in Paris in gun and bomb attacks. Though the perpetrators of the latter attacks included at least one IS militant who had previously been based in Syria, the group's core strategic objective of inspiring rather than centrally coordinating attacks against the "far enemy" appeared to remain in place. Localism was still front and center in IS's modus operandi.

Outlook and Policy Recommendations

At its heart, today's competition between al-Qaida and IS is being fought between two conflicting generations of transnationally minded jihadis. On the one hand, al-Qaida represents international jihad's old guard, whose strategic thinking harks back to the Afghan-based struggle in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. IS characterizes the younger 21st century generation of jihadi militants who view the path laid by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq in the early 2000s as the most effective and legitimate model. Al-Qaida seeks to durably root itself within Muslim societies and build a sustainable jihad capable of simultaneously targeting the "near" and "far" enemies. Despite IS's high profile and momentum, this traditionalist trend continues to attract a steady stream of recruits around the world.

In addition to its historical consequence, al-Qaida's more recent fusion of localism with an eye still turned towards fighting the West has sustained the support of its existing affiliates. By re-emphasizing the value of investing locally and within broader sub-state conflict dynamics in order to develop durable "safe bases" for international jihad, al-Qaida provided its increasingly autonomous affiliates with a mechanism for counterbalancing IS's inherent localism and jihadi "state building." Crucially, al-Qaida has not dropped—and likely will never drop—its core focus of attacking the West, but has adopted a long-term strategy that enables it to build more viable launching pads for such attacks.

More immediately, al-Qaida's most serious weakness is the declining continuity in its top leadership. The loss of Mullah Omar—Ayman al-Zawahiri's emir al-mu'mineen and the utmost source allegiance—was an extremely significant blow, while the death of AQAP's al-Wuhayshi left Zawahiri without arguably his most loyal and strategically likeminded follower. With IS still fighting strong internationally, such losses could engender serious consequences.

With a central leadership that goes quiet for months amid such losses and an existentially important struggle with IS, interest in sustaining allegiance to AQC may steadily decline. Such waning interest encourages internal affiliate divisions. The expulsion of one of Jabhat al-Nusra's seven founding members, Sheikh Saleh al-Hamawi, in July 2015 for publicly criticizing overly aggressive activities indicated such divisions. Rumors that another founding member, Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, may be next suggest hardliners

were gaining favor within an organization whose success had thus far depended on maintaining a certain level of pragmatism.[62]

Despite this poor outlook, al-Qaida continues to plot against the West. With veteran and specialized figures plotting attacks from within Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria,[63] AQAP claiming responsibility for attacks in Paris in January 2015,[64] and AQIM and Belmokhtar's Al-Mourabitoun claiming an attack against a luxury hotel in Mali in November 2015, the threat clearly remains. Moreover, in the aftermath of its leader's death in mid-June 2015, AQAP is refocusing its ire on the West, with bomb-maker Ibrahim al-Asiri urging attacks on "America in its own home and beyond" and senior leader Khaled Batarfi praising attacks in Texas and Tennessee in May and July 2015, while calling for more "lone jihad."[65]

> **" IS will continue challenging al-Qaida's credibility as the traditional leader of international jihad.**

Meanwhile, IS remains focused on a state-building project, whereby "true believers" rise up against unbelief, cleanse society of impurities, and establish ideationally and organizationally linked "Islamic States" within a single Caliphate led by a chosen Caliph.

Perhaps surprising to some, IS perceives itself as the rightful and legitimate inheritor of bin Laden's mantle of global jihadi leadership. After AQC's disavowal of all links to IS in February 2015, IS's Adnani issued a stinging rebuke of Zawahiri's leadership of al-Qaida. After praising the days of bin Laden and Zarqawi, Adnani exclaimed:

> The leaders of Al-Qāʿidah have deviated from the right [methodology]. … verily Al-Qāʿidah today is no longer the Qāʿidah of Jihad, and so it is not the base of Jihad. … rather its leadership has become an axe supporting the destruction of the project of the Islamic State and the coming Khilāfah. … The difference between the [Islamic] State and Al-Qāʿidah… is a matter of crooked Religion and deviated [methodology] … a [methodology] which believes in pacifism and runs after majorities.[66]

Looking forward, given the pace of its expansion, IS must maintain military momentum and sustainable governance to avoid self-destruction. With AQC seemingly struggling, 2016 will likely test IS's ink spot expansionist model. IS will face tough military, political, and economic challenges in its Iraqi and Syrian heartlands, but its international franchises may offer invaluable insurance—both as distractions from counterterrorism efforts, and as incubators of alternative large-scale territorial control and governance efforts. IS's growing dominance in Libya's Sirte, Egypt's northern Sinai, and areas in Afghanistan and Nigeria look potentially promising, as does its growing capacity to inspire spectacular attacks around the world.

As part of this strategy, and in the wake of AQC losses—especially the death of Mullah Omar—IS will continue challenging al-Qaida's credibility as the traditional leader of

international jihad. With reports of Baghdadi's incapacitation likely being false, he may make more public appearances—in person or on video—to demonstrate IS's capacity to present a more visible face more frequently and effectively than AQC.[67] Spokesman Adnani will continue his aggressive attacks on Zawahiri and al-Qaida's credibility. Perhaps most importantly, IS will attempt to acquire more al-Qaida affiliates or dismantle them by encouraging sizeable defections. Al-Shabab appears the most vulnerable, and AQAP's resilience despite al-Wuhayshi's death may be tested further by intensifying sectarian dynamics in Yemen.

Ultimately, an intense intra-jihadi competition will continue to exist, with each group seeking to assert itself as the global leader of 21st century Salafi-jihad. As a result, al-Qaida and IS now have even more incentive to demonstrate their jihadi credibility. This means more violence, more death, and almost certainly, more terrorist attacks against the West. Consequently, policies adopted by the United States and its allies to counterterrorism and jihadi insurgency will prove crucial in determining not only the future trajectory of international jihad, but also the outcome of this competition.

The international community is faced with a more intense, complex, and rapidly developing threat from international jihad than ever before. The emergence of IS as a competitor to al-Qaida transformed what was a singularly focused counterterrorism issue into a phenomenon that consistently changes shape, nature, and trajectory.

In rushing to adapt to this evolved threat, the United States and its allies have been one or more steps behind their adversaries. Some of their actions may prove detrimental to the broader fight against international terrorism and state instability in the Islamic world.

“IS will attempt to acquire more al-Qaida affiliates or dismantle them.

A more refined, better-informed, and more precisely targeted set of policies aimed at directly countering jihadi militancy and its key pillars, neutralizing its ideational foundations, and resolving sources of instability that fuel rebellion and armed resistance represents the best chance of methodically reducing the immediate and long-term potential of organizations like al-Qaida and IS.

Al-Qaida

Target al-Qaida leadership: In its struggle for international momentum, al-Qaida depends heavily on maintaining internal organizational loyalty to AQC's cause. While its increasingly overt adoption of localism has helped it develop roots within conflict-ridden and disenfranchised communities, the loss of senior individuals with more extensive investment in al-Qaida and AQC could catalyze a process of internal disintegration. Policy should therefore focus on weakening the organization's leadership by continuing to attempt to eliminate such individuals.

Adopting this aggressive counterterrorism policy (as well as developing methods of cooperating with local allies) requires recognizing that the apparent pragmatism of al-Qaida affiliates is merely a tool for concealing AQC's dangerous long-term objectives. The affiliates' limitation of ideologically influenced behavior and delay in enforcing Sharia law norms are part of al-Qaida's strategy and laid out from the top-down. If deprived of leaders that are loyal to AQC, affiliates will undoubtedly face heightened pressure from lower ranks to compete with IS by mirroring its more brutal, but less popular and likely less sustainable, practices. Setting such processes of strategic transformation in motion will have the added benefit of stimulating divisive internal debates and potentially even the splintering of affiliates into smaller factions that would represent more vulnerable targets.

ISLAMIC STATE

Contain IS in its Syrian-Iraqi heartlands: Despite its continued expansion, IS's most valuable assets, territorial control, and central leadership remain centered in Syria and Iraq. Therefore, the fate of IS in the Levant could significantly affect the sense of broader IS momentum worldwide. Although IS franchises in Libya and Egypt demonstrate enhanced sophistication in military, social, and other activities, they remain dependent on central directives from IS's core leadership and influenced by its sense of momentum amid international action in Syria and Iraq.

> **"Counterterrorist forces should exploit weaknesses demonstrated in the early stages of franchise acquisition.**

In seeking to contain IS there, an intensified focus should be placed upon accelerating the formation, training, and equipping of credible and capable local forces that oppose IS. In addition, existing efforts to establish dialogue with socially rooted sources of local authority within IS-controlled areas should be accelerated, especially with tribes and factions now "exiled" to other places in Syria. Such relationships can provide invaluable information for developing a more dynamic and socio-culturally mindful military strategy.

As IS loses momentum due to its containment by local and international actors, the attraction of its ideology and model as a viable long-term project should sharply decline. Ultimately, then, the organization's brutality and authoritarian behavior would sow the seeds of its own eventual destruction.

Target emerging and new IS franchises: In addition to containing IS in its heartlands, counterterrorist forces should exploit weaknesses demonstrated in the early stages of franchise acquisition. There are three particularly pertinent vulnerabilities.

First, counterterrorist forces could "decapitate" small and untested jihadi factions by killing off their leaders. IS already suffered this fate in Algeria, where its wilaya has failed

since its leader's death six weeks after pledging bay'a. Consequently, the United States, its allies, and local authorities must intensively collect intelligence on jihadi factions who appear close to IS so as to stand a better chance of neutralizing the threat shortly after bonds are established. Such losses would significantly damage the reputation of IS's international project.

Secondly, IS's acquisition of large and already well-known jihadi factions makes it vulnerable to intensive counterterrorism efforts built on pre-existing intelligence. Through close cooperation, the United States and allied governments can exploit such well-developed intelligence leads to decisively weaken young IS franchises. For example, TTP, Taliban, and al-Qaida militants (like Hafiz Khan Saeed, Shahidullah Shahid, Khalid Mansoor, and Abdul Rauf Aliza) that joined IS in January 2015 were already well-known to Afghan, Pakistani, and American forces. In February 2015, shortly after the establishment of the Khorasan wilaya, a U.S. drone killed Aliza, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee who had been appointed deputy leader.[68] Five months later, Shahid and Aliza's successor, Gul Zaman, were killed in another U.S. drone strike.[69] In July, Afghan intelligence claimed another U.S. drone had killed Saeed, although this was denied by senior commander Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, who had also been held in Guantanamo Bay.[70]

Finally, IS risks detracting from its strategic vision and broader self-presentation as a movement when acquiring jihadi groups with histories of unpredictability, a lack of cohesion or central control, or even questionable "purity" of Islamic practice. After all, al-Qaida's reputation and integrity continues to suffer from its affiliates' tendency toward "preference divergence" and their occasional disregard of AQC instruction. By accepting a pledge of bay'a from Boko Haram in March 2015, for example, IS risks hosting a franchise known for lacking internal structure and centralized command-and-control, and whose leader, Abubakar Shekau, frequently appears highly mentally unstable. While little can be done to influence certain franchises' lack of reliability or maturity, such vulnerabilities can form part of a broader counter-messaging effort aimed at disparaging IS.

AL-QAIDA AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

Expand efforts to counter terrorism financing: AQC, AQAP, and Jabhat al-Nusra rely heavily on sources of external finance to sustain their operations. The majority of this funding comes from private sources that collect donations and facilitate their transfer to operatives on the ground. The U.S. Treasury Department has intensified pressure on Gulf states, including Qatar and Kuwait, to crack down on individuals and networks known for and suspected of involvement in al-Qaida-related financial activities. While international sanctions and pressure undeniably impact the scale of funds flowing to al-Qaida, more can always be done. Specifically, the international community should target covert facilitation networks operating on the fringes of conflict

zones and track the business and black market activities of al-Qaida & IS affiliates. This requires increasing intelligence footprints in such peripheral areas and improving local government capabilities to detect and target such networks.

Since its early days in Iraq, IS has focused on achieving financial self-sufficiency by raising funds within its areas of military operation or influence. By mid-2015, whether through extortion, "taxation," legitimate "cover" businesses, illicit financial transactions, or other activities, IS in Syria and Iraq was earning roughly $1 billion per year.[71] Therefore, to most effectively and sustainably cut IS funds, local and international counterterrorism forces must intensify efforts aimed at forcing IS out of its existing territories and preventing further territorial expansion, particularly in profitable, resource-rich regions. With IS turning into an increasingly international movement, however, its new franchises are likely to maintain more diverse sources of finance that are often not strictly local, particularly those formerly linked to Al-Qaida, such as in Egypt, Af-Pak, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, a growing capacity to inspire and possibly direct attacks in the Western world may open IS up to growing sources of external finance, necessitating a strong focus on traditional international counterterrorism finance measures.

DOMESTIC MEASURES

Enhance domestic intelligence and counter-radicalization: After Turkish military intervention commenced in northern Syria in July 2015, media reports and even admissions from IS militants near the border have suggested that foreign fighters are experiencing difficulty crossing into Syria.[72] While this will eventually reduce the flow of foreign fighters from Western countries, it may also turn those frustrated and hostile young men—and women—toward domestic terrorism. Extremism in the West may also be encouraged by AQC's increasing calls to jihad as it competes with IS and retaliates against counterterrorism activities. This new competitive dynamic between al-Qaida and IS risks sparking a dramatic increase in terrorist plotting in the West.

While domestic intelligence agencies are already stretched thin, additional resources will be needed to deal with the consequences of tightening Syria's borders. Further investment is also required in supporting locally rooted and civil-run counter-radicalization programs. As with the issue of returning foreign fighters, the solution lies in local Muslim-led and government-supported initiatives, especially those that encourage community resilience against extremism and foster traditional societal and familial relationships.

INTERNATIONAL MEASURES

Intensify diplomatic efforts for stabilization: Lastly, the international community must acknowledge that violent extremism and jihadi insurgency only exists as a result of governance failures and socio-religious divisions. The defeat of terrorism cannot occur through military means alone, and the overuse of such tactics amid continued political

shortcomings, socioeconomic inequalities, sectarian divisions, and other such issues will likely elicit further militancy.

Localism is at the core of IS's state-building model and has become increasingly key to al-Qaida's strategy of building "safe bases." State instability across the Muslim world must be ameliorated. Perceptions of regional sectarianism and rivalries between "great powers" within the Islamic world serve only to legitimize the jihadi worldview. Regional powers—such as Saudi Arabia and Iran—should break their age-old political boundaries and pursue further multilateralism. Otherwise, jihadis will continue to exploit domestic anger, frustration, and disenfranchisement by offering to punish authorities perceived as oppressive and seeking to replace their systems of control.

The United States and its European allies must act as *the* guarantors of fair and representative government and as the universal defenders of human rights. Therefore, they should make their political, financial, and military support to unstable countries conditional upon upholding such values, especially in the face of adversity. Despite the nuclear deal, Iran must not be allowed to freely continue to buttress dictators and operate sectarian armed militias to enforce its interests across the Middle East and counter Sunni influence. Similarly, President Bashar al-Assad cannot be left to wreak havoc and encourage the eventual division of Syria, all while being labeled an illegitimate leader. By failing to urgently solve such serious issues, the United States and its allies will provide jihadis with the space and time to establish themselves more durably within vulnerable and innocent societies.

Country	Wilaya	Logo (if available)
Iraq	Baghdad	
Iraq	Shamal (North) Baghdad	
Iraq (south of Baghdad)	Al-Janub (South)	
Iraq	Al-Anbar	
Iraq	Al-Fallujah	
Iraq	Salahuddin	
Iraq	Diyala	

Country	Wilaya	Logo (if available)
Iraq (northern)	Dijla (Tigris)	دجلة / إعلام ولاية دجلة
Iraq	Ninevah	ولاية نينوى / إعلام ولاية نينوى
Iraq	Kirkuk	كركوك / إعلام ولاية كركوك
Syria	Damascus	دمشق / اعلام ولاية دمشق
Syria	Homs	حمص / اعلام ولاية حمص
Syria (Hassakeh)	Al-Baraka	البركة / اعلام ولاية البركة
Syria (Deir el-Zour)	Al-Khayr	الخير / اعلام ولاية الخير

Country	Wilaya	Logo (if available)
Syria	Hama	
Syria	Aleppo	
Syria	Al-Raqqa	
Iraq & Syria (northern)	Al-Jazeera	
Iraq & Syria	Al-Furat (Euphrates)	
Yemen	Sanaa	
Yemen	Shabwa	
Yemen	Hadramawt	
Yemen	Al-Bayda	

Country	Wilaya	Logo (if available)
Yemen	Lahj	
Yemen (Ibb)	Liwa al-Akhdar	
Libya (Cyrenaica/eastern Libya)	Barqa	
Libya	Tripoli (or Tripolitania)	
Libya	Fezzan	
Algeria	Algeria	
Egypt	Sinai	
Saudi Arabia	Najd	

Country	Wilaya	Logo (if available)
Afghanistan-Pakistan	Khorasan	
Nigeria	Gharb (West) Africa	
Russia	Al-Qawqaz (Caucasus)	

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