



Al Qaida versus ISIL: the battle for ownership of the global jihad

KEY POINTS

- **Al Qaida is in competition with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.** After disowning ISIL, AQ has suffered the embarrassment of seeing the ISIL brand growing in strength whilst, at the same time, its own standing in the global *jihad* has taken a nosedive.
- **The dispute has led to other groups choosing sides**, and although ISIL is popular, AQ has yet to lose any of its long-standing allies to ISIL. If this occurs, ISIL will have brought about a strategic shift in the global *jihad*.
- **Groups in the Middle East, North Africa and South East Asia are keen to align with ISIL.** ISIL has not yet seen significant support in South Asia or East Africa: other brands (such as AQ or the Taleban) remain more popular here.
- **The most likely scenario is continued stalemate**, but the two groups could come to an agreement to end fighting in Syria and attempt to unify the *jihad*.
- **AQ has lost its monopoly over the global *jihad* and is highly unlikely to regain it.**

DETAIL

Since the beginning of 2014, Al Qaida has been engaged in a very public battle with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. After disowning ISIL and declaring them to no longer be an AQ affiliate, AQ has suffered the embarrassment of seeing the ISIL brand growing in strength whilst, at the same time, its own standing in the global *jihad* has taken a nosedive. And because the disagreement between the groups was played out in the media with seemingly no chance for rapprochement, other extremist groups are being forced to choose between the two. This paper examines the state of the relationship between the two groups and suggests three future options for ISIL and AQ.

AQ and ISIL: two very different groups

Although part of the same organisation until earlier this year, there are several well-documented differences between the two groups:

	AQ	ISIL
Aims	To target the Far Enemy (the West) first, believing that this will lead to a defeat of the Near Enemy (apostate states closer to home). Seeks to establish an Islamic Caliphate across approximately half of the	To create sectarian civil war in Syria and Iraq (and overthrow both governments); to attack Western targets in the region; to maintain its 'Caliphate' and seek expansion across the wider region; to inspire others to

	world. Act as 'the base' – encouraging other groups and individuals to join the AQ cause.	conduct lone actor attacks.
Attack plots	Has not directed an attack in the West since 2005. Hallmarks: sophisticated, coordinated but rare attacks. Specific focus on attacks against aviation and using new attack methodology. Activity in some regions is severely constrained by CT actions. Careful to avoid attacks that attract negative propaganda, e.g. against other Muslims.	Favours a 'little and often' approach. Seeks to inspire others to conduct lone actor attacks, bringing success for the group in Europe during 2014 and 2015. Attacks so far have been unsophisticated but numerous. Also has a high-profile penchant for kidnaps and extreme violence (including against other Muslims, Sunni or Shia). Beheadings now seen as the ISIL hallmark.
Brand, Appeal and Audience	Built of the successes of previous high-profile attacks e.g. 9/11 and 7/7. Owners of the global <i>jihad</i> narrative since the mid-1990s, using propaganda messages to spread its ideology. Branding has struggled since Usama Bin Laden's death. Now viewed by some as dull and out of date in comparison to ISIL.	Branding is based on its success (military victories and the establishment of its so-called 'Caliphate'). Their brand is global, empowering, uncompromising and commodifies extreme violence. Attracts thousands of mainly young Muslims, both male and female.

ISIL's increasing popularity: a sign of the times?

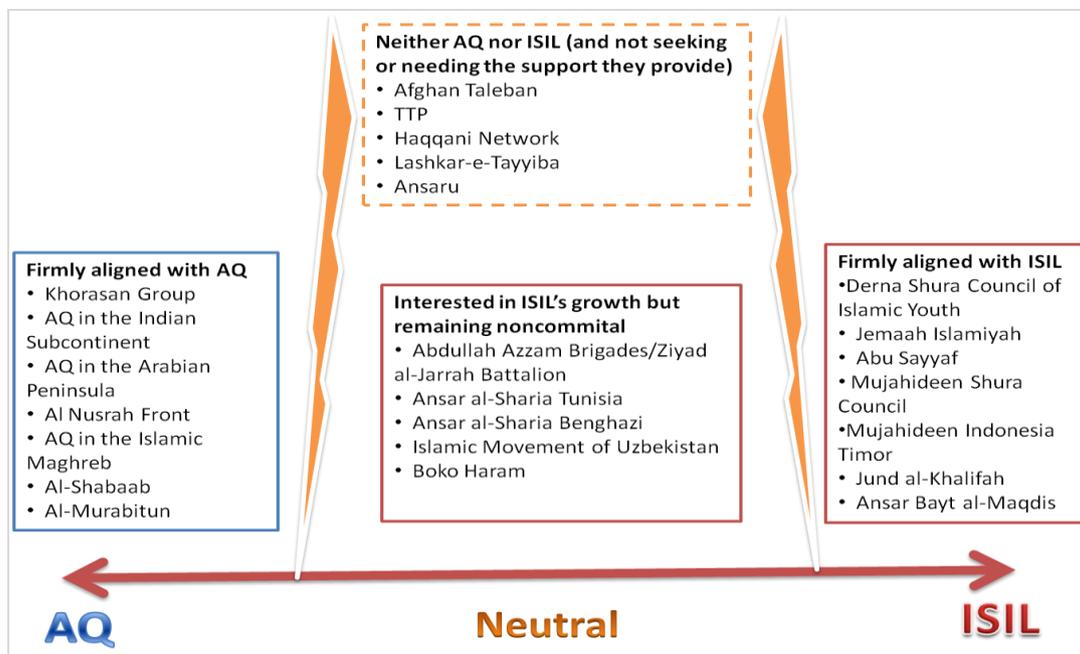
AQ has struggled to remain relevant to the global *jihad* since the start of the Arab Spring. This was compounded by the death of Usama Bin Laden. Documents recovered from UBL's compound (and released to the public through the US Combating Terrorism Centre) showed that he had been baffled by the events, and was still attempting to develop a strategy to respond up until his death. His successor's media releases have often appeared embarrassingly out-of-date and out-of-touch. **AQ is an organisation based on a long-term strategy: it has been undone by the pace of real world events.**

ISIL has filled the gap left by AQ. It is a group that has far less time for long-term strategic thinking, but is instead enormously reactive and able to seize opportunities. Its propaganda is slick, relevant and targeted at its young audience. Its use of social media makes it more engaging and accessible than AQ. And its message is simple: now is the time for action. By positioning itself as a group that is able to deliver successes on the ground, it offers up a clear criticism of AQ as a group that has failed to deliver anything other than strategic guidance since 2005. The biggest blow to AQ is ISIL's establishment of a so-called 'Caliphate': this has been front and centre

of AQ's objectives for decades and whilst AQ groups have held territory, they have invariably then lost it in the face of military action.

AQ versus ISIL: the current divide

Whilst some extremist groups have used public statements to encourage rapprochement between AQ and ISIL, others have taken the opportunity to (publicly) nail their colours to the mast. ISIL's appeal to other extremist groups is likely to be based on its narrative of success, as well as its perceived wealth and abundance of personnel. **Other, less affluent, less successful and less populous groups will view affiliation with ISIL as an opportunity not to be missed. But the reality may be disappointing – ISIL may not share its wealth or expertise with these groups.** ISIL's interest is, for the moment at least, limited to self-publicity and the opportunity to acquire more territory. An overview of the current AQ/ISIL divide (based on public messaging from these groups) is provided below:



Analysis of the groups supporting AQ or ISIL shows a clear geographical divide. ISIL's brand is popular in South East Asia: 3 of the 7 groups listed in ISIL's box (above) are based in the region. AQ, by contrast, does not have an ally there. But AQ has a presence in South Asia and East Africa where ISIL, for the moment, has less resonance. The main battlegrounds for the groups are in the MENA region: AQ currently has 5 allies to ISIL's 4.

AQ's reaction

Some of AQ affiliates have commented publicly on the fallout with ISIL: these messages should not be interpreted as indications of possible defections. **The oath of allegiance to AQ is a strong bond which will not be easily undone.** Although there is increasing pressure on AQ to make amends with ISIL in order to unite the warring *jihadi* factions in Syria/Iraq, Zawahiri will be reluctant to change his mind. He

will be biding his time, awaiting the 'inevitable' destruction of ISIL. And ISIL's leadership will not be interested in re-joining AQ as just another affiliate. There are at least three options for the future of the AQ/ISIL battle:

- **AQ and ISIL could unite** to create a stronger fighting force. But both sides will be reluctant to do this through fear of appearing weak. **An agreement to cease fighting one another in Syria seems far more likely than the two organisations merging, but would be difficult to achieve.**
- **The AQ brand could continue to suffer, resulting in one or more of AQ's affiliates aligning with ISIL.** This seems unlikely for the foreseeable future.
- **Continuation of the present stalemate** seems the most likely option, at least for the short term. Neither side seems likely to give in.

Although they have not yet brought about a strategic shift in the global *jihad*, ISIL's impact over the past 9 months has been enormous. As a result of ISIL's gains, **AQ has lost its monopoly over the global *jihad* and is highly unlikely to regain it.** AQ must share its leadership of the global *jihad* with ISIL for the foreseeable future.

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