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The American University in Cairo
School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

**An Analysis of the Strategic, Operational, and Organizational
Differences between The Islamic State and al-Qā'ida**

A Master's Project Submitted to
The School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For
The Degree of Master of Global Affairs

By

Jacob Greene

Under the Supervision of **Dr. Allison Hodgkins**

January 2015

The American University in Cairo
School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

AN ANALYSIS OF THE STRATEGIC, OPERATIONAL, AND ORGANIZATIONAL
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC STATE AND AL-QA'IDA

A Project Submitted by

Jacob Garrett Greene

to the Department of Public Policy and Administration

FALL14

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Global Affairs

has been approved by

Project Supervisor:

Name: _____

Title: _____

Department: _____

Institution: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

First reader:

Name: _____

Title: _____

Department: _____

Institution: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Second reader:

Name: _____

Title: _____

Department: _____

Institution: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Department Chair:

Name: _____

Title: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

The American University in Cairo
School of Global Affairs and Public Policy
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AN ANALYSIS OF THE STRATEGIC, OPERATIONAL, AND ORGANIZATIONAL
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC STATE AND AL-QA'IDA

Jacob Greene

Supervised by [Dr. Allison Hodgkins](#)

ABSTRACT

This project provides a comprehensive examination of the strategic, operational and organizational character of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham (ISIS). The purpose of the project is two fold: first, to challenge the perception that ISIS and al-Qā'ida are fundamentally “one and the same;” and, second, to offer policy makers a systematic and detailed description of ISIS on its own merits. Drawing on variables pertaining to three dimensions—strategy, operations, and organizational characteristics—and informed by both primary sources and secondary analyses, I investigate the qualitative differences between the two organizations. I find that, despite some similarities, ISIS and al-Qā'ida vary considerably in all facets. Accordingly, I offer targeted policy recommendations aimed at making current counter-strategy more effective and efficient.

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Abbreviations

AQ	al-Qā'ida
AQC	al-Qā'ida Core
AQI	al-Qā'ida in Iraq
AUMF	authorization for the use of military force
BSA	bilateral security agreement
CE	commodity exports
COIN	counterinsurgency
CT	counterterrorism
DOD	(United States) Department of Defense
FATA	Federally-Administered Tribal Areas
FSA	Free Syrian Army
IA	Iraqi Army
IF	Islamic Front
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
IS	The Islamic State
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISF	Internal Security Forces
ISI	Islamic State in Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham

PSYOP

psychological operations

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Despite the enormity of scholarship on al-Qā'ida post-2001, and the now growing—yet still relatively limited—amount of scholarship on the Islamic State, there have been no empirically-based studies comparatively analyzing these two organizations. This is surprising given the extent to which these two groups are equated in the popular and policy discourse and the perception that ISIS is becoming a significant threat to the homeland. For example, ISIS is still referred to as an al-Qā'ida off-shoot and their rise to prominence during the Syria civil war described as marking al-Qā'ida's resurgence in Syria.¹

This tendency to treat ISIS as an extension of AQ is due, in part, is due to a lingering infatuation with al-Qā'ida (AQ) and a general tendency to interpret similar phenomena through the same analytical lens. In this respect, the Islamic State (ISIS) is seen as a mere manifestation of AQ. Resourcefulness, although probably just a softer characterization of the same problem, likely also plays a part here, especially in explaining the relative imbalance in scholarship covering the Islamic State. Instead of constructing a new and organization-specific base of knowledge, academicians and practitioners are relying to a large extent on existing scholarship. But for an organization that hardly represents any known precedent, wholly equating it to another group is altogether problematic. And this has had a marked effect on our understanding of the organization. Other than their most obvious, and, incidentally, most recent, divergence (i.e., their

¹ Azeem Ibrahim, "The Resurgence of al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq," *Strategic Studies Institute* of the US Army War College (2014).

now overt non-affiliation), little is known about how and why ISIS and AQ differ. This is quite surprising, considering that the entirety of current US policy toward the Islamic State is based on its “one and the same[-ness]” as al-Qā’ida.² This grouping-together of these groups stems from the Pentagon’s current legal justification for the ongoing offensive against ISIS: The 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force against AQ.³

The synonymization of these organizations has obvious implications for American strategic planners. Not only does it project on US analysts and strategists a number of *a priori* analytical suppositions—in effect, biasing them toward, and committing them to, the official position of the government, regardless of its veracity—but it also binds them to a set of policy options which may not be altogether fit for combatting ISIS. If its categorization of the threat is factually wrong, it could lead not only to general inefficiency in resource allocation, but also to combat prolongation, out-right failure, or even exacerbation of the problem. It could also have detrimental consequences on regional security. Prolonged and misinformed military activity undermines both political and social stability, and severely impacts upon local populations—causing, among other problems, internal displacement, civilian casualties, shortages of food and other basic necessities, and sustained psychological trauma.

Despite this synonymization, even a curious glance reveals a number of red flags. The organization exercises *de facto* control over thousands of square miles of Iraqi and Syrian territory; it attracts thousands of new fighters to its rank-and-file every month; it grosses millions

² Spencer Ackerman, “Obama maintains Al-Qaida and ISIS are ‘one and the same’ despite evidence of schism,” *The Guardian* (October 2, 2014).

³ Massimo Calabresi, “Obama’s Anti-ISIS War in Syria May Be Illegal,” *Time* (September 11, 2014).

of dollars in revenue every day; and it maintains an enormous army, large enough to sustain its large-scale operations. All of these overwhelmingly outweigh any threat that al-Qā'ida ever constituted, and bear little resemblance to that organization. For a body of scholarship wholly deficient of any rigorous, comparative analysis, this should be somewhat alarming.

The current project attempts to address this deficiency. Looking at the organizations side-by-side, it offers an objective, comparative view of two entities that are so regularly equated as one in US media and policy circles. By systematically comparing these two organizations, strategically, operationally and organizationally, this project aims to determine what similarities objectively exist and whether there are key differences between the Islamic State and al-Qā'ida in order to inform which aspects of the existing US counterterrorism strategy can be reasonably adapted to combatting ISIS and where specific, Islamic State policies should apply.

While the Islamic State and al-Qā'ida certainly have similarities—importantly, a shared vision of an Islamic Caliphate and desired disruption of the current (global) socio-political order—there are a number of key differences between the two. Rooted in variable operating environments and structural organization, these differences culminate in starkly contrasting grand strategies. On the one hand, al-Qā'ida, which lacked any tangible, independently-controlled base of operation and which relied almost entirely on its vulnerable, externally-generated income, maintained a very asymmetric strategy—one which assumed that short-term political and social change was a necessary precursor to long-term reunification and sustenance. Indeed, theirs was a strategy that emphasized strength of the enemy and conducts asymmetric operations where the enemy is strong. On the other hand, the Islamic State, working from its resource-abundant stronghold in Syria and Iraq, maintains an operational and organizational

structure that enables it to pursue a relatively more conventional insurgent, or “state-like,” strategy. This strategy, which has parallels with many large-scale insurgencies that have invoked global revolution, is one that supposes political and social change through an initial consolidation of power and support. This strategy is one that emphasizes their own strength and, therefore, focuses their operations where they are strongest. These strategic differences and the operational nuances underlying them have been blurred by years of misinformed policy and call into question the efficacy of current attempts at rolling-back the Islamic State. To better formulate US COIN/CT policy toward the region, the outdated framework upon which current counter-strategy is based should be adapted to these differences.

1.1 Background

How and why the organizations’ qualitative differences came about—and evolved—involves historical and sociopolitical context. Subtle differences between the organizations, which go all the way back to their creation, combined with challenging operational environments, initially pulled these organizations together. But a rapid, large-scale shift the geopolitical character of the region exaggerated these differences tremendously, pushing them apart—and ultimately resulting in the schism that occurred in 2014.

Defining the security landscape and social environments in which these organizations matured, are two very telling stories. These stories are best understood temporally and geographically. Prior to the democratic zeal and pluralistic thinking of the “Arab Spring” movements, authoritarianism and submission to the state reigned supreme in the Middle East. Before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, this even held true for Saddam’s Baathist government. Security

institutions, like the intelligence services of Iraq and Syria, acted brutally and with near-impunity. They commanded large resources, ran a number of well-developed human informant networks, and operated with little oversight at the behest of the region's authoritarian leaders. When organizations like al-Qā'ida and ISIS first materialized in the 1990s, these rather unfriendly circumstances limited the groups' capacity to organize themselves and to market their beliefs and goals. Constant surveillance and repeated attempts at penetrating the organizations drove them underground, adapting them to constantly changing and ever-challenging operational environments. Those like ISIS, which had an intimate connection to geography and little space for operation, gained experience operating in denied areas, but suffered immensely. They had no place to train and no means for gaining publicity for their causes. Those like AQ, whose *raison d'être* superseded spatial tangibility, found other places to operate, on the periphery of authoritarian states—in places like the Sudan and Afghanistan. Initially, this proved advantageous for al-Qā'ida, as it showed an attractive alternative—i.e., a group with which to train in a place which allowed for training—for other jihadists and jihadist-oriented organizations; recruiting new followers, was, of course, key to AQ's then-faltering success. And so al-Qā'ida grew, incorporating into its ranks groups like ISIS.

How this franchising approach impacted on its new members differs from organization to organization. But, generally, it brought them together and pulled them apart, simultaneously. They acted as a single unit under the AQ banner, but, by and large, they maintained their own individual dispositions. Subordination under the structurally decentralized AQ, based then in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), provided a highly marketable facade for ISIS, known then as *Tanzīm Qā'idat al-Jihād fī Bilād al-Rāfidīn* (*al-Qā'ida in Iraq*, or AQI). At

the expense of its then only partially-developed identity, AQI adopted the Bin Laden “brand” of global jihad in lieu of its locally-oriented struggle, submitting itself to the guidance of al-Qā’ida core leadership. But this was more symbolic than anything. AQI founder and ideologue, Abū Muṣ’ab al-Zarqawi, much like his counterparts, showed little desire to fully temper his organization’s strategy and operations to match that of AQ.⁴ Indeed, his and Bin Laden’s relationship was defined purely by mutual self-interest—not servitude.

Ideologically, AQI was mired in its grudge against Shī’a Muslims and ethnic minorities—one which AQ shared but refused to act upon. This grudge varied considerably from its early years to its decoupling with AQ. Following the dismantlement of Iraq’s Baathist regime and the subsequent empowerment of the *Ḥizb al-Da’wa al-Islāmīyah*, Shī’a marginalization of Sunnis redefined their image in the eyes of AQI, from a people merely representing takfīrī, heretical beliefs to one symbolizing a tangible, existential threat to fundamentalist Sunni tradition. Even during the early years of Iraq’s sectarian civil war, al-Qā’ida leadership was at odds with AQI for its incessant focus on fighting the Shī’a.⁵ Following the mass mobilization of Arab populations against authoritarianism in 2011, the devolution of Syria into civil war some months later took on a tone of sectarian strife. The rigidity of opinion that this polarization caused, combined with the absence of the old, oppressive instruments of authority, proved a fertile environment for religious groups with regional ambitions to vie for power and influence. Like in Iraq during the

⁴ Andrew Phillips, “How al Qaeda lost Iraq,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 63.1 (2009), 69-70.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 70. See also Brian Fishman, “After Zarqawi: The Dilemmas and Future of Al Qaeda in Iraq,” *The Washington Quarterly* 29.4 (2006), 19-32.

civil war, the pronounced ideological social bifurcations in Syria not only stoked its anti-Shī'a fervor, but created opportunities for AQI to absorb and influence new supporters.

It is tempting to see this short-lived era of affiliation as a defining stage of the Islamic State's development. But, really, this period is only marginally important. From 2004 to 2013, AQI/ISIS essentially ran on autopilot, hibernating through the challenging environment of the region, letting Bin Laden shoulder the responsibility. This was especially so during the US occupation of Iraq, when al-Qā'ida served as the focus of the American-led "War on Terror." Although weakened during this period, and almost entirely defeated in its Ramadi stronghold, AQI held out until it saw prospects for ISAF withdrawal a few years later.

This, combined with failure of Iraqi/Syrian security institutions and general weakness of the state, made obsolete the very reason ISIS had initially joined AQ. By then, whether their relationship lasted was unimportant for Baghdadi and his deputies; whatever visage of the Qā'ida connection remained was purely superficial. If anything, this symbolic subordination to Zawahiri hindered Baghdadi. Disarray in Syria and the weak Iraqi state were fertile grounds for recruiting new followers and disseminating propaganda, and Baghdadi was keenly aware of this. His declaration of jurisdiction over both Syria and Iraq in 2013, and the onslaught of AQC reprehension that then ensued, made clear that a AQ-ISIS breakup was nigh.

These contextual differences explain much of what followed. In the security vacuum that emerged, the Islamic State, with its back-burner desires to be an influential takfīrī movement in its own backyard, grew immensely. Exploiting favorable social, political, and security conditions, ISIS rampaged through Syria and Iraq, fighting antagonistic rebel movements and taking with it land, weapons, resources and fighters. While it and al-Qā'ida may have been

independently definable organizations from the beginning—albeit, ones with ideological commonalities and some transient, organizational and operational overlap, the civil war in Syria created the conditions that enabled their very rapid and decisive divergence. Since February 2014, they are not only distinct organizations, but differ organizationally, operationally, and strategically. While similarities remain in terms of the ultimate vision of a future in which the Caliphate is restored and western influence diminished, they are fundamentally different in ways that require a distinct counter policy response. However, the continued targeting of ISIS as an AQ affiliate or even as AQ’s possible usurper overlooks these differences and, in doing so, amplifies the failure of US counter policy toward this dangerous but distinct group.

1.2 Client Description

The US Department of Defense (DOD) provides “the military forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of [the United States].”⁶ In addition to carrying out offensive and defense military operations, DOD strategy-makers are tasked with developing efficient policies which guide the pursuit of these aims. Given the ongoing offensive against the Islamic State, a fundamental examination of US policy toward ISIS—that is, the foundation upon which this policy is premised—directly implicates the interests of DOD. By identifying and correcting the shortcomings of this policy, the present study seeks to increase the efficiency of the Department of Defense’s counter strategy toward ISIS.

1.3 Analytical Framework

⁶ Department of Defense, “Mission,” available at <http://www.defense.gov/about/>.

The durability of the ISIS as AQ's "junior varsity"⁷ is understandable given the historical linkages detailed above, perceived competition for affiliates and the fact that they both rail against the west, have killed westerners and that western targets have been struck in their name. However, from a counter strategy perspective what matters is their organizational structure, how they behave operationally, and their actual strategy. The analytical clarity necessary to define or adjust the US policy response can be provided through an examination of their military operations, decision-making processes, and organizational structure, and they afford both analytical clarity and help fine-tune policy and targetable adjustments. Given the overlapping and interconnected nature of these traits — e.g., between military operations and military strategy — parsing them into these individual units can be somewhat of a demanding task, and any effort at doing so will have at least some shortcomings. Nevertheless, this approach will enable more targeted policy adjustments than assumptions based on surface similarities. Thus, this project offers a three-part analytical model: strategy, operations, and organizational character. Since Clausewitz, these analytic components—which encompass goals, capacity, and leadership—have been essential in evaluating the use of force as an instrument of policy.⁸

The first division, strategy, helps us understand *why* organizations do what they do and want what they want. *Strategy* includes the logic behind both the organizations' existence and expressions of their existence — i.e., the particular reason they do certain things and the means

⁷ In a January 7 interview with a reporter from the New Yorker magazine, President Obama referred to ISIS as the al-Qā'ida JV squad; see <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-2?currentPage=all> (accessed January 24, 2015)

⁸ Barry Posen, "The Sources of Military Doctrine," in Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009).

by which they hope to achieve certain goals. The second division, operations, helps us understand *what* organizations do. This includes manifestations or expressions of a group's strategy and decision-making — things like territorial acquisition, governance, and military activity. The final division, organizational characteristics, helps us understand *how* organizations achieve these things; these are the particular characteristics and instruments (i.e., descriptive and non-descriptive) by which an organization's strategy and operations are carried out. Soldiers, military materiel, energy, and organizational structure represent but a few examples of organizational character.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

In conducting this comparison, the project draws on two principle sources of information: (i) open-source, primary information available on websites, social networking fora, newspapers, scholarly journals, and other publications, in addition to videos available on sites like YouTube; and (ii) conceptual and theoretical secondary analyses.⁹

Selection of these cases—and ISIS, in particular—raises two valid concerns. Foremost, the Islamic State represents a rapidly changing organization in a rapidly changing region. Not only is it subject to the ongoing transformation of the regional security environment—due, in part, to an ongoing, western-backed intervention—but it is also affected by other, powerful geopolitical currents like the Syrian Civil War. I acknowledge this concern and the constraints it places on the validity and relevance of this study’s results. To help correct the issue, I have placed temporal boundaries on the scope of my research: anything prior to November 2014 constitutes my pool of data and analysis. Although a more defined, better documented case selection may better serve the needs of scholarly research, the policy-driven nature of the present study is inherently defined by, or at least subject to, issues which are in constant flux.

The second issue concerns the availability of open-source information. While there has of late been a marked increase in attention devoted to the Islamic State, there remains a disproportionately limited amount of credible analysis and raw data, especially compared to that

⁹ No human sources were consulted in the course of this study.

on AQ. This could have obvious adverse effects on the study's reliability. I attempt to control for this by focusing heavily on other objectively-identifiable, factual information. This will be extracted from both primary sources and secondary analyses. When available, factual gaps are filled with raw data obtained from primary sources (e.g., official statements and tweets from the organization's official media arm); when information is not available, these gaps are acknowledged.

CHAPTER THREE

Literature Review

Research on Islamic extremism and terrorism was relatively limited prior to—and even immediately following—the events of September 11, 2001. But scholarship eventually burgeoned and groups like al-Qā’ida became a popular topic for researchers.

Mosul’s recent fall to the Islamic State provoked a similar effect. With a growing readership hungry for all-things-ISIS, the international media has made it one of the most salient issues. Countless analyses, ranging from the purely theoretical to the practical, have emerged from freelance writers and thinkers, Washington’s premier think tanks, and the top security scholars. A number of books detailing ISIS’s mysterious inner workings are, likewise, now slated for publication. Despite the headway, and much like the scholarship of the immediate post-9/11 period, relatively few comprehensive studies on the Islamic State exist—and much of what we do have is ill-adapted to policy.

In spite of these challenges, current scholarship, although largely piecemeal in nature, give us tremendous insight into the machinery behind these organizations. Pulling it together under a single study allows for a comprehensive picture and nuanced appreciation of these two groups. Generally, this literature follows three broad themes, strategy, operations, and organizational characteristics, which I replicate here and use as a basis for my comprehensive analysis in Chapter 4. However, as I will show, contemporary discussions of terrorist strategy have emphasized rationality and de-emphasized variables like territory that were emphasized in discussions of terrorist tactics in conjunction with insurgencies.

2.1 Strategy

Since September 11, 2001, many studies have treated terrorism as a rational strategy of asymmetric warfare. In discussing the utility of terror, the majority of these studies emphasize the response of the target or an intended target audience in explaining strategy and de-emphasize organizational and environmental factors that dominated studies of asymmetric warfare in the pre-September 11 era. For example, Kydd and Walter's typology of five terrorist strategies—attrition, intimidation, outbidding, provocation, and spoiling—focuses on two targets of persuasion (the enemy and a domestic population) and three uncertainties (power, resolve, and trustworthiness).¹⁰ Given the circumstances under which a terror campaign is waged, the strategy utilized may differ considerably. The Neumann and Smith model similarly looks at the target's response. According to their three-step framework for terrorism,¹¹ a group: (i) disorients its enemy through an attack; (ii) induces target reaction by the enemy (which is ideally an illegal or disproportionately heavy-handed response that polarize opinion and mobilizes supporters); and (iii) exploits this opportunity to gain legitimacy and insert its own alternative message. Models like that that allow an organization a predictable response, or even a second-tier predictable response, offer a unique and reasonable perspective on strategic thinking. But the premise that terror groups have perfect information and act with perfect rationality—and are somehow able to

¹⁰ Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31.1 (2006): 49-79.

¹¹ Peter R. Neumann and M. L. R. Smith, "Strategic Terrorism: The Framework and Its Fallacies," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28.4 (2005): 571-595.

predict every move of their enemy—is both contested and not easily reconciled with actual results.

Environmental determinants, removed from the analytical scrutiny of strategic planners mired in operational secrecy, have immense influence on these responses. And these external variables cannot easily and systematically be built into a model like this.

Another example is Martha Crenshaw's four-part model that describes the utility of terrorism in terms of incentives and opportunities.¹² Terror acts, she argues, can be used to *mobilize* support and *polarize* ideological differences. This drives committed followers into a group's sphere of influence and rallies them against the enemy. They can also be used to *provoke* overreaction or *compel* enemy submission. Crenshaw offers September 11, 2001, and the subsequent US military response in Iraq and Afghanistan, as a case in point, describing the politically detrimental American reaction as an *intended* consequence of the attacks.

Crenshaw's framework is a useful tool for conceptualizing of and interpreting terrorism. However, like much of the scholarship on terrorist strategy, it is focused on generalizable frameworks that help scholars better understand the nature of terrorism as a whole, but offers little in the way of understanding the operational environment and organizational dynamics which actually shape that strategy. This oversight is apparent when applying her framework to specific examples where the results are difficult to reconcile with conceptual logic. For example, the provocation element of her argument unravels quickly in relation to AQ and September 11. If AQ attacked the US to provoke response that would diminish American credibility, did al-Qā'ida

¹² Martha Crenshaw, "Terrorism and Global Security," in *Leashing the Dogs of War*, eds. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2007, 67-82.

leadership *also* anticipate the near-destruction of their organization (i.e., as a consequence of the War on Terror)? And, if AQ's objectives really were to challenge US influence in the region,¹³ is it plausible that bolstering an American and western regional presence—and one which lasted for over a decade—was part of this strategy? Both of these are unlikely.

As Nacos lucidly explains, “they [al-Qā’ida] lost their safe haven, headquarters, training facilities, and weapon arsenals in Afghanistan. In this respect, Bin Laden and his colleagues underestimated perhaps the resolve of the US government and public and the willingness of many other governments to cooperate with Washington.”¹⁴ And, indeed, *had they* pondered the possibility of a US ground invasion, AQ leaders had little means by which to anticipate the level of resolve generated by the attacks, both within the US and among its allies.

More inclusive models, which incorporate variables like internal politics, leadership, organizational dynamics, and psychology, also fail to draw upon these environmental determinants. McCormick, for example, draws on these points in his piece on terrorist decision making.¹⁵

Although AQ has been the primary focal point for studies on strategy, a few ISIS-specific discussions have also emerged. Brookings scholars Daniel Byman, Shadi Hamid, Charles Lister, William McCants and Jeremy Shapiro, for example, offer their various perspectives in a

¹³ For English summaries of the 1996 and 1998 fatawa, see: “Al Qaeda Declarations and Acts of War,” *The Heritage Foundation*, available at: <http://www.heritage.org/research/projects/enemy-detention/al-qaeda-declarations>. For the original 1998 declaration of jihad, see “naṣ bīān aljbat alislāmīa ala’limīa ljihād alyehud walslībūn,” *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (February 23, 1998), available at: <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/fatw2.htm>.

¹⁴ Brigitte L. Nacos, “The Terrorist Calculus behind 9-11: A Model for Future Terrorism?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26.1 (2003), 13.

¹⁵ Gordon H. McCormick, “Terrorist Decision Making,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 6 (2003): 473-507.

roundtable discussion on Islamic State strategy.¹⁶ Brian Fishman offers a more-detailed perspective on the strategy of its AQI predecessor, notably including discussion on the strategic differences between it and AQC concerning sectarian differences.¹⁷ Most of these have been piecemeal in nature, with little holistic discussion on the grand strategy of ISIS.

The impact of AQ on the study of terrorism is also evident in the fact that it is now seen as a phenomenon that is somehow distinct or unique to insurgency, revolution or guerrilla war as opposed to a tactic employed in those forms of asymmetric warfare. There are a few notable exceptions in the current literature. Merari, for example, in explaining the different strategies of violent struggle, highlights the differences and similarities between conventional war, guerrilla war, and terrorism. The author uses as case studies the Algerian FLN, the Vietminh and the Vietcong, and the “Shock Committees” of Palestine, in addition to others. He notes that “the mode of struggle adopted by insurgents is dictated by circumstances rather than by choice, and that whenever possible, insurgents use concurrently a variety of strategies of struggle.”¹⁸ An interesting side note made by Merari concerns a key difference between guerrilla warfare and terrorism: the former, the author argues, seeks to tangibly control territory, whereas the former does not. But he goes on to explain that, “In reality, it is sometimes hard to distinguish between terrorism and guerrilla war even with the help of the criteria offered [in this study].”¹⁹

¹⁶ Daniel L. Byman, Shadi Hamid, Charles Lister, William McCants and Jeremy Shaprio, “Around the Halls: What is ISIS’s Strategy,” *The Brookings Institution* (September 24, 2014).

¹⁷ Brian, Fishman, “After Zarqawi: The Dilemmas and Future of Al Qaeda in Iraq,” *The Washington Quarterly* 29.4 (2006), 20-23.

¹⁸ Ariel Merari, “Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5:3 (1993), 213.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 213-251.

In a 1970s study, Jenkins identifies five stages of urban guerrilla warfare strategy: the violent propaganda stage; the organizational growth stage; the guerrilla offensive; the mobilization of the masses; and, finally, the urban uprising. These processes are defined by two key constraints: the difficulty of moving guerrilla movements—which largely begin in rural areas—into cities; and constraints that limit urban activity.²⁰ Given the rural-urban divide, Marks points out that insurgencies often “field approaches and doctrine[s]” to exploit the different environs which define rural and urban areas; these can lead to organizational fractures and splinter groups.²¹

2.2 Operations and Organization

Literature on operations and organization follows a number of sub-themes. Public perception, a consequence of governance and propaganda, is one of these. Looking at public opinion of ISIS, two separate studies measured the internal and external perceptions of the group, respectively. The former, a study done by *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, measured general Arab opinion of the Islamic State, looking in particular at the susceptibility of other regional populations to ISIS propaganda and its future endeavors.²² They found low support, between 0% and 5%, in all populations studied, which included random samples of Egyptians, Lebanese, and Saudis. The latter study, which measured internal opinion of ISIS in the Syrian city of Manbij,

²⁰ Brian Michael Jenkins, “The Five Stages of Urban Guerrilla Warfare: Challenge of the 1970s,” Rand Corporation (1971).

²¹ Thomas A. Marks, “Urban Insurgency,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 14:3 (2003), 100-157.

²² David Pollock, “Poll: ISIS has almost no popular support among Arab publics,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (October 14, 2014).

generally revealed similar low opinion levels, but showed some degree of consensual support.²³ Given the difficulty of accessing populations under ISIS control, information on internal perception is relatively limited. Although similar studies have been conducted on support for AQ, given that that organization currently neither controls nor tangibly threatens to control any population, these are not included in the present study.

Another sub-theme is organizational structure. A number of commentators have analyzed the structure of AQ, which has evolved from a relatively hierarchically-structured organization to a highly decentralized one. One of the common points of inquiry is the utility of cellular structure to AQ. Neumann et al examine, for example, the ‘middle men’ of al-Qā’ida, and their constitution of the ‘connective tissue’ which ties together grassroots operatives and the core.²⁴ Moghadam also parses the various layers of AQ, finding that senior- and middle-management operatives serve the most important role in innovation.²⁵ In Helfstein and Wright’s study on structure and operational success, the three tiers of AQ—the core, second-tier leadership, and individuals/cells—are analyzed in terms of their ability to carry out successful attacks.²⁶

No known systematic studies on ISIS organizational structure have yet been completed. However, as new information arises, speculative analyses approximate with growing precision the structural character of the organization. For example, Soufan Group, a private security and

²³ Goha Nail, “Guest Post: Manbij and The Islamic State’s Public Administration,” jihadology.com (August 27, 2014), 1.

²⁴ Peter Neumann, Ryan Evans and Raffaello Pantucci, “Locating Al Qaeda’s Center of Gravity: The Role of Middle Managers,” *Current* (2012): 13-22.

²⁵ Assaf Moghadam, “How Al Qaeda Innovates,” *Security Studies* 22 (2013), 466-497.

²⁶ Scott Helfstein and Dominick Wright “Success, Lethality, and Cell Structure Across the Dimensions of Al Qaeda,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34.5 (2011): 367-382.

intelligence firm based in New York, recently released a monograph detailing ISIS structure and leadership (among other dimensions), based on open-source intelligence and primary sources.²⁷ While much of the available secondary analyses—and primarily those in news articles and think tank publications—regurgitate the (unverifiable) facts produced in other works, some information is corroborated by official media/social media organs of the Islamic State.

Organizational strength is another sub-theme. In a study on the strength of AQ in Afghanistan,²⁸ Sageman finds that western counterterrorism policies have been largely effective at disrupting jihadist plots, pointing to the marked reduction in AQ-sponsored attacks, and particularly those originating in Afghanistan, since September 11, 2001; the author does, however, support the position that homegrown terrorism is on the rise.²⁹ In another account, Hoffman disagrees with Sageman, pointing to a still operationally effective AQ and AQC.³⁰ Various declassified intelligence estimates regarding organizational strength and size exist for both groups. CIA, for example, puts ISIS rank-and-file at 21,000-31,500 fighters,³¹ while the Pentagon estimates AQ at 3,000-4,000.³² Various analyses from official state organs and think

²⁷ Richard Barrett, “The Islamic State,” *The Soufan Group* (November 2014), 29.

²⁸ Marc Sageman, “Confronting al-Qaeda: Understanding the Threat in Afghanistan,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3.4 (2009): 4-25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4. See also Marc Sageman and Bruce Hoffman, “The Reality of Grass-Roots Terrorism [with Reply],” *Foreign Affairs* 87.4 (2008), 163-166.

³⁰ Marc Sageman and Bruce Hoffman, “The Reality of Grass-Roots Terrorism [with Reply],” *Foreign Affairs* 87.4 (2008), 163-166. See also Bruce Hoffman, “Al Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism and Future Potentialities: An Assessment,” RAND Corporation (2003), 1-17.

³¹ Bill Roggio, “On the CIA estimate of number of fighters in the Islamic State,” *The Long War Journal* (September 13, 2014).

³² “Shadowy Figure: Al Qaeda’s Size is Hard to Measure,” *The Wall Street Journal* (September 10, 2011).

tanks like the *Institute for the Study of War* (IFSW) also estimate force strength and size, weapons platforms, and territorial acquisitions. For example, IFSW's Iraq and Syria *situational reports* use open-source intelligence technology to track the daily movements of the Islamic State, offering continuous updates on positions and combat incidences.³³

Rebellion financing and economic factors are a relatively well-documented sub-theme. Using a data set of wars between the 1960s and the 1990s, Collier and Hoeffler make the case that economic variables—i.e., the availability of finance and the cost of rebellion—are key drivers of civil war.³⁴ Fearon and Laitin, examining conditions which favor insurgency, also found economic variables like poverty to be important factors.³⁵ A number of other studies shed light on the actual economic workings of these groups.³⁶ Bahney et al. provide perhaps the most thorough study, offering insight into the financial activity of AQ and (early) AQI, detailing, for example, the vast criminal enterprise sustained by that organization early-on.³⁷ In another study, Dickinson looks at the broader, Gulf-based financial network of Syrian rebel movements.³⁸ A

³³ See, for example, "Iraq Updates," *Institute for the Study of War*, available at <http://www.understandingwar.org/iraq-blog>.

³⁴ Paul Collier and Anke Heffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (2004), 574.

³⁵ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97:1 (February 2003), 75-90.

³⁶ Many of these are based on captured financial ledgers and other primary documentation. For the largest cache of declassified financial documents, see Conflict Records Research Center, "al-Qaeda and Associated Movements Collection," *Department of Defense*, available at <http://crrc.dodlive.mil/collections/aqam/>.

³⁷ Benjamin Bahney, Howard J. Shatz, Carroll Ganier, Renny McPherson, and Barbara Sude, "An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq," *Rand Corporation* (2010), 36.

³⁸ Elizabeth Dickinson, "Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home," *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with The Islamic World* No. 16 (December 2013).

few attempts at explaining external sources of income, like the illicit oil smuggling network fueled and operated by ISIS, are also insightful. Giglio offers one of the most elaborate takes, profiling the complex transit of fuel from the Islamic State to the hands of Turkish businessmen.³⁹

A final sub-theme, and one which is gaining an increasingly large amount of attention, is utilization of social and traditional media. Both AQ and ISIS have been the subject of a number of these studies. Hashem, for example, offers an in-depth analysis of the Islamic State's utilization of media, looking in particular at its use of websites and social media platforms as strategic instruments.⁴⁰ Ingram offers another perspective, arguing that, while ISIS' information operations campaign is not unique per se, its adaptation of this strategy to the twenty-first century and to its own strategic and operational requirements is unique. He describes the cumulative impact of three driving elements—reach, relevance, and resonance; synchronization of information operations with politico-military action; and centrality of the Islamic State brand to its campaign—as setting ISIS apart from contemporary organizations.⁴¹

³⁹ Mike Giglio, "This is how ISIS smuggles oil," BuzzFeed News (November 3, 2014), available at <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/this-is-how-isis-smuggles-oil>.

⁴⁰ Ali Hashem, "The Islamic State's social media strategy," *Al-Monitor* (August 18, 2014), available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/is-clinton-atrocities-social-media-baghdadi-mccain.html#>. One of the best sources of primary information is *jihadology.com*, a clearinghouse for ISIS propaganda and announcements. On this site, researchers can obtain original and translated material released by official ISIS media organs and affiliated websites/forums. Personal Twitter accounts serves as another primary source, on which many primary analyses are based.

⁴¹ Haroro J. Ingram, "Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare," *The RUSI Journal* 159:6 (December 2014), 4-11.

CHAPTER FOUR

Analysis

Where do al-Qā'ida and the Islamic State differ strategically, organizationally, and operationally? And how might DOD strategists take advantage of these differences? The following chapter investigates these questions, looking in particular at the feasibility of implementing a common defense policy for both entities.

Many analysts and policymakers readily, and correctly, observe a number of similarities between al-Qā'ida and the Islamic State. Ideologically, their beliefs and end goals are the same—to establish a Caliphate, rule by Sharia Law, and resist external cultural influences—and are generally rooted in the work of the same pool of Islamic scholars. They have a shared history, similar marketing schemes, and their close connectivity makes them, at times, indistinguishable. As a consequence, it is often assumed, perhaps as a result of political convenience or out of sincere resourcefulness, that these organizations can be dealt with by similar or identical security policy.

Despite the congruities, the Islamic State and al-Qā'ida, as I will show, are very different entities with different strategies and different behaviors. Dissimilar operational environments and structural adaptations, combined with competing perceptions of strength, drives a wedge between their grand strategies, operations, and organizational characteristics.

This chapter lays out a foundation for policy adjustments that are put forward in Chapter Five. In the following section, I offer a background on al-Qā'ida strategy, operations, and organizational characteristics, and compare and contrast the Islamic State with that organization.

In *section 4.2*, I examine the strategic, operational, and organizational differences between the two organizations. In the final section, I summarize these findings and argue that our current approach for dealing with ISIS is out-of-date.

4.1 Al-Qā'ida Strategy, Operations and Organization

For over a decade, al-Qā'ida's strategic and operational character was the focus of considerable scholarship. While there remains disagreement on some issues—notably, the true aims of the September 11 attacks—there is a great deal of agreement on others.

Al-Qā'ida's prominence is largely due to its sensational attacks against US interests thirteen years ago. After toppling two skyscrapers and heavily damaging DOD's Pentagon headquarters, AQ drew the American military into a decade-long offensive in the Middle East and South Asia. Their ingenuity, and their perceived ability to project their strategy far into the future, earned AQ and its leadership the infatuation of western analysts—and the fear of many Americans and Europeans. These and other attacks, like those in Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Aden, landed AQ on the radar of US intelligence. Bin Laden had, after all, been under close surveillance since his time in the Sudan in the 1990s.⁴²

What became even more endearing to these analysts, however, was the intangibility of al-Qā'ida. The organization embodied an ideology that was immune to conventional warfare: bullets and bombs could kill its enablers, but their ideas and principles, the very substance of

⁴² Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 250-251.

their organization, were ever-immune.⁴³ As a consequence, defining the “where” of AQ—the location of its troop formations, command and control centers, communications infrastructure, and barracks, all hallmarks of the *conventional* military threat—was quite problematic. Much like any other globalized commodity, their brand of Islam knew no boundaries, ironically having no other real “base” than in the minds of its followers. American interests in the region gave the AQ threat an element of geography and proximity, but, as was made clear, no place was off-limits. “The American homeland is *the planet*,” [emphasis added] *The 9/11 Commission Report* opined,⁴⁴ affirming the near-obsolescence of geography in contemporary security.

Part and parcel of the organization’s ideology, apart from Wahhabi tradition and the teachings of Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah, Hasan al-Banna, and Sayed al-Qutb,⁴⁵ was an immense antipathy toward the West.⁴⁶ Years of support for authoritarian regimes and its overt regional military presence, dissolved much of the credibility and appeal of the United States and its European partners. Thirst for oil, and its dependence on regional export markets for its military industry, not only further entrenched Washington in Middle Eastern affairs, but riled the already-acrimonious perceptions of the region’s people. From Bin Laden’s first trip to

⁴³ For opposing views on the utility of counterterrorism operations against an ideologically-driven AQ, see Raymond Ibrahim, “Terrorists die but ideology lives,” *Middle East Strategy at Harvard* (Feb. 1, 2008), and Walter Laqueur, “One Response to ‘Terrorists die but ideology lives’,” *Middle East Strategy at Harvard* (Feb. 14, 2008).

⁴⁴ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, Thomas H. Kean, and Lee Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (Washington D.C.: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004), 362.

⁴⁵ For a synopsis of scholarly influence on AQ ideology, see Walter Laqueur, ed., *Voices of Terror: Manifestos, Writings, and Manuals of Al-Qaeda, Hamas and Other Terrorists from around the World and Throughout the Ages* (New York: Reed Press, 2004), 388-447.

⁴⁶ For further contextualization of AQ ideology, see Michael W. S. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda’s Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America* (New York: Columbia UP, 2013), 17-51.

Afghanistan during the Soviet resistance, his position on the matter was clear: the Saudi regime, the Israelis, and the West, all had to go.

This was the *raison d'être* of his organization. A transnational movement at its very core, al-Qā'ida fixated on dismantling the prevailing world order, on destroying western governments and their proxies. For Bin Laden, history told all: The House of Saud had desecrated *The Land of the Two Holy Mosques*, corrupt families had plundered Muslim riches, and Israel had for too long occupied the *Farthest Mosque*. And he saw the West as nothing less than an enabler of these atrocities. Fighting it—waging global “jihad” against Europe, the United States, and the apostate regimes of the region—was the only way he could bring about justice and lay the foundation for a revived Caliphate. Anything less would be a futile endeavor.

He had an open-eared audience. While radical, his ideas greatly appealed to the angry sentiments of the wronged and the disenfranchised. The Arab world's near-unanimous support for Palestinians, for example, was but one of the common grounds of opinion to which he could appeal. Calling for the “liberation” of *al-Aqsa Mosque* and the destruction of Israel not only portrayed him and his organization as defenders of the Muslim world, but as freedom fighters for the Arab people. AQ's particular interpretation of Islam may have been rejected by most, but it did attract a great deal of support from the fringes of society. Even from more moderate elements, the organization's political message was able to draw many into its ideological sphere of influence.

A vast network of sympathizers, developed and nurtured since the 1980s, facilitated this process. Following Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent repatriation of Mujahideen, the fervor of militant Islam began to spread. From the coast of West Africa to the

islands of Indonesia and the Philippines, well-connected and battle-hardened veterans launched a number of locally-oriented movements—ones which often typified the Cold War flavor of jihad. The ways in which these movements marketed themselves to their constituent audiences varied, however. Some groups were empowered by the marginalizing effects of authoritarianism and State regulation; others thrived from society’s aversion to westernization and globalized culture. While most of them embodied very real social grievances, they also found *ideological* common ground with AQ, under the banner of Islam. Whether out of doctrinal alignment or close connectivity, many of them forged close relationships with AQ leadership. Bin Laden intentionally kept these affiliations loosely-defined and unofficial, allowing himself not only a trim and manageable franchise, but one which he could exploit for influence and leverage. Later, under al-Zawahiri, these relationships became more overt and more institutionalized. Regional affiliates like al-Qā’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Shabab, and al-Nusrah Front were made official AQ branches. Cells across Europe and the United States gave AQ further access to untapped recruitment pools in the West and allowed it a mouthpiece for its propaganda. New York-based radical imams like Anwar al-Awlaki, for example, influenced many American and non-American Muslims, including those responsible for the September 11 airplane hijackings.⁴⁷

Ideological sentiment and the Afghan link were not the only forces pulling groups closer to al-Qā’ida. Again, peripheral movements had their *own* agenda, their *own* constituencies, and their *own* governments to keep at bay. To sustain themselves, they needed revenue, sources of weapons and recruits, and ways to publicize their causes and gain support. Whether or not these organizations fully adopted the doctrines or behavioral idiosyncrasies of AQ is beside the point.

⁴⁷ T. Blumenfeld, “Are Jihadists Crazy?” *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2012), 3.

What is important is that they used AQ, whether out of last-hope necessity or careful strategic calculation, to piggyback themselves to a more prosperous position. Scoring a spot on the State Department’s list of foreign terror organizations (FTOs)—through their affiliation with AQ—was a fast-track to fame, even if they did not necessarily aspire to that designation. AQC surely understood the support of these organizations as merely a necessity of their survival, and short-lived at best. Yet they weighed these costs against their own self-interests.

An important component of maintaining these support networks was the internet. Social-networking fora like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook not only augmented the AQ recruitment effort and marketing scheme, but allowed the organization an easier means by which to communicate with its sympathizers. Leaders periodically took to social media platforms, disseminating announcements and videos—“long and turgid” ones that often eclipsed an hour in length⁴⁸—to encourage followers and affirm their resolve against the West. Special, non-Arabic publications like *Inspire*, an English language magazine formerly edited by American Samir Khan, were used to draw support and readership outside the Arabic-speaking world.⁴⁹ AQ affiliates also passed on operational reports, martyrdom announcements, and other updates, using a number of sites frequented by their supporters. The transmission of operational data and training information via these “jihadi websites” allowed, at least initially, for rapid and efficient exchanges between AQC and its former and prospective field operatives. Manuals explaining

⁴⁸ Spencer Ackerman, “Foreign jihadists flocking to Iraq and Syria on ‘unprecedented scale’ — UN,” *The Guardian* (October 30, 2014).

⁴⁹ Lloyd Grove, “A New Magazine for Terrorists,” *The Daily Beast* (June 30, 2010).

secure communications, proper rifle maintenance, and the construction of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and other tactical instruments, are widely available on these sites.⁵⁰

Utilization of the internet was, incidentally, one of AQ's most important operational developments, post-September 11. Not only did it revolutionize propaganda and communication—in effect, enabling AQ leaders to “bypass completely traditional, established media outlets” and to “shape and disseminate their own message in their own way”⁵¹—but it also drastically redefined their operational agenda. Even though AQC continued planning elaborate attacks on hard targets like embassies and military installations, western counterterrorism initiatives—and particularly those aimed at disrupting AQ financial networks—made executing these plans increasingly costly. Rather than relying solely on high-risk/high-cost operations, AQC came to depend, instead, on its internet-reared, “homegrown” followers in the West.⁵² As seen with the attacks and foiled plots in Fort Hood, Detroit and New York, “lone wolves” *completely* reinvented al-Qā'ida's *modus operandi*.⁵³ Attacking soft targets like malls, stadiums, and public thoroughfare, places that once elicited little security concern, then became the primary inertia driving the organization. Not only was this shift a huge force multiplier, but it also reduced the necessity of constant operational secrecy. If there really was no tangible connection between its

⁵⁰ See, for example: Abu Salih, “Training with the AK[2]” *Inspire* 5 (2011), 24; The AQ Chef, “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom,” *Inspire* 1 (2010), 33; and “How to use Asrar al-Mujahideen: Sending & Receiving Encrypted Messages,” *Inspire* 1 (2010), 41.

⁵¹ Bruce Hoffman, “The Use of the Internet By Islamic Extremists,” Testimony presented to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (May 4, 2006), published by *RAND Corp.* (May 2006), 2.

⁵² For discussion on homegrown terrorism and lone wolves, see Marc Sageman, “Confronting al-Qaeda: Understanding the Threat in Afghanistan,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3.4 (Dec. 2009), 4-25; and T. Blumenfeld, “Are Jihadists Crazy?” *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2012), 3-4.

lone wolf operatives and its core, a reality which runs many terror organizations into problems with communications, logistics, political message dissemination and general functioning,⁵⁴ al-Qā'ida could maintain the degree of insularity it already had without incurring increased risk. While the immediate benefit of attacking soft targets was lower than that of attacking harder ones (i.e., in terms of media sensation and grandeur), cost efficiency drove up their longer-term benefit tremendously. Through this decentralized, “leaderless jihad” franchising approach, AQ was able to take advantage of “inspired groups and individuals to act in accordance with its ideology, sometimes without any direct connection to the organization.”⁵⁵ However, these lone wolf attacks were more a response to successes in counterterrorism strategy than a premeditated change in grand strategy.

Yet its traditional support network remained vital. And this was especially so for the cash-generating elements of the Qā'ida web. Unlike financially independent groups like Afghanistan's Taliban,⁵⁶ AQC never developed a means of self-reliance: it had no criminal enterprise, no tax system, no drug trade monopoly, and no energy control. Prior to September 11, the majority of its estimated USD 30 million in annual operating expenses were satisfied by contributions from either non-governmental organizations, such as Wafa Charitable Foundation, or financial

⁵⁴ See, for example Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013), 31.

⁵⁵ Barak Mendelsohn, “Al-Qaeda's Franchising Strategy,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 53.3 (2011), 29.

⁵⁶ For discussions on Taliban sources of income, see for example Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), and Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009).

facilitators based in the Gulf.⁵⁷ Contrary to popular claim, Bin Laden contributed relatively little to his organization's operating revenue, having had very limited access—about USD 1 million per year—to the Bin Laden family fortune.⁵⁸ Thus, the organization was almost entirely dependent on donations from *external* sources. Funds from AQ financiers covered members' salaries and family stipends, travel expenses, official bribes, and the many other basic necessities of a terror group as large and diverse as al-Qā'ida. These funds also financed its numerous operations, including the 9/11 attacks, which cost the group approximately USD 500,000.⁵⁹ Without access to its backers, al-Qā'ida's operational funding would have dried up almost entirely. And, indeed, counterterrorism specialists—including those at the United States Department of the Treasury and the European financial institutions—targeted these networks early on.⁶⁰ In the post-September 11 years, AQ's expenses decreased substantially, to only a few million dollars per year.⁶¹ Part of this was undoubtedly due to (further) decentralization and the organization's increased utilization of lone wolf attacks, but the severance of connections between AQC and its financial backers was probably also a major factor.

⁵⁷ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "Al Qaeda's Means and Methods to Raise, Move, and Use Money," in *Terrorist Financing Staff Monograph* (Washington D.C.: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States), 22.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

⁶⁰ These efforts are ongoing. See "Treasury Designates Twelve Foreign Terrorist Fighter Facilitators," US Department of the Treasury Press Center (September 24, 2014), available here: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2651.aspx>.

⁶¹ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *Al Qaeda's Means and Methods*, 28.

These financial connections, and the ideologies they espoused, approximated the aims of al-Qā'ida. Some donors were unwitting, unaware of the destination of their contributions, but the many Imams, middlemen financiers, and small groups that knowingly fundraised on behalf of AQ were doing so out of a deep commitment to shared beliefs. These were premised not only on Bin Laden's vision of a unified Umma but also on the manner by which he hoped to achieve it. For them, a fundamental change in the international order was a necessary prerequisite to unification: the connection between Middle Eastern regimes and their western benefactors had to be cut. Local grievances certainly motivated this vision—both Bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, abhorred the political situations in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, their respective countries of origin—yet it simultaneously transcended political boundaries. From their perspective, the root of the problem was Western greed and the West's impiousness toward Islam and the region's people. Bringing down local governments without first—or at least concurrently—taking on the much more powerful West would merely be a short-term fix. And the issue also went beyond intra-faith disagreements. Sectarian differences had their place, but, for AQ leaders, these were a matter to be dealt with later.⁶² In the short-term, fighting the West took precedence over fighting other Muslims. This in itself was a step toward unification, but it was aimed, primarily, at concentrating the efforts of AQ and its sympathizers on a single objective. Given their limited numbers, having numerous targets and disunited strategies would only inhibit these efforts.

⁶² Brian, Fishman, "After Zarqawi: The Dilemmas and Future of Al Qaeda in Iraq," *The Washington Quarterly* 29.4 (2006), 20-23.

Many detailed accounts of AQ goals and strategies emerged following the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Some scholars portray Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and other AQ planners, as architects of these responses, claiming that the New York and Washington attacks were merely a part of a larger strategy to draw the West into protracted war—one which they were bound to lose. Other scholars reject this farsightedness, writing it off as nothing more than an error in judgement.⁶³ But while the rational calculus of AQ and the extent to which its leaders were able project their strategy are the subject of much debate, the overarching strategy and objectives of the organization are clear: change first and unification second. This greatly limited the organization's options. Not only did Bin Laden lack a base of operations, but he had no army, no tanks or anti-aircraft equipment, nothing capable of taking on the most powerful force in the world. Absent a unified constituency, and without strength in numbers, Bin Laden was left with few options and the organization's momentum slowed. While AQ attempted to adapt to this changed environment, there is no evidence that the decline in well-planned, high profile attacks like September 11 and the bombings in London or Madrid, and the rise in lone wolf attacks was actually part of a prior strategy designed to expand their mission.

4.2 Re-imagining ISIS: Key Differences

The recent spate of attacks carried out by ISIS-inspired lone-wolves, such as the recent attack on a cafe in Sydney, Australia has contributed to the entrenchment of the organizations as being seen as two sides of the same coin. As mentioned before, there are other immediately observable similarities: both organizations seek to liberate Muslims and fight the West; both possess

⁶³ See, among others, Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy*, 56.

asymmetric strategies; both command relatively large international followings, use social media, generate substantial funding, and draw-in numerous fighters; and both of their leaderships share a common background. However, a closer examination reveals some important differences that are of critical importance to counter strategy.

4.2.1 Strategy

Guiding its operations and organizational character, the Islamic State's strategic doctrine is principled on a few key pillars. Ultimately determined by ISIS's primary objective, the (re-)establishment and sustenance of the Caliphate, and also informed by political, military and economic environmental factors, each of these three pillars is a fairly distinct departure from AQ strategy.

(a) Strategy and Prioritization

The first pillar concerns prioritization. The Islamic State, like al-Qā'ida, envisions a world in which Muslims are united under a Caliphate, free from the influence of western imperialism and the pressures of the prevailing international order. How to go about achieving this remains a marked point of contention between the two, however. Separating militant jihadism into different camps are two different prioritization schemes. These reflect not only the ideological differences between the founders of these groups, but also the regional climate—i.e., varying operational environments—in which they developed.

The first, to which al-Qā'ida subscribes, emphasizes strength of the opponent. For AQC, weakening the west and emancipating the people of the Middle East from western imperialism is a necessary prerequisite to bringing down “apostate” local regimes, bringing together Muslims, and building a strong Caliphate. Doing so differently would have resulted in either strong

resistance by a heavy-handed state (remember, we are talking AQ, prior to 2001) or immediate intervention and assistance by the American military and its political establishment. Given the circumstances at that time, this would have been an almost impossible approach. Thus, AQ prioritized change—political, economic, and military change—over unification of Muslims. For AQC, it was *change first* and *Caliphate second*.

The second strategy is the one ISIS came to embody. This strategy emphasizes strength of the group—not of the enemy. For Baghdadi, and even for Zarqawi, bringing down local regimes and establishing a base of power in the Middle East was a necessary prerequisite to defeating the west. Informing this strategy were a number of political and social changes that occurred following the American invasion, circumstances to which AQC never adapted its own strategy. Toppling regimes that had already been toppled—i.e., Saddam Hussein’s and later, to some extent, Bashar al-Assad’s—was easy and effortless; and AQI/ISIS knew that the US had neither the political will nor the military might to sustain a *permanent* presence in the Middle East. Thus, they prioritized unification and the building of a local power base—a la the Islamic State’s Caliphate—over change in the international order, at least on the short term. For ISIS, it was *Caliphate first, change second*. Whether one of these is more appropriate or more correct than the other is not really important, but given the adaptation of ISIS strategy to current geopolitical and social realities, ISIS policy certainly seems to have a better footing than that of AQ.

(b) Strategy and Sectarianism

The second pillar concerns sectarianism. Much like the other elements of AQ/ISIS strategy, it was largely determined by environmental factors. ISIS and AQC both have similar aspirations in this regard: an Umma premised on the very idiosyncratic and fundamentalist

interpretations of their leaders, ones that categorically reject Shi'ism as un-Islamic. How they handle Shi'a differ substantially, however, and generally correspond with two positions. That of AQC is that all Muslims should be united first, under the broad banner of Islam, and their efforts directed at fighting the very powerful west. More people, for them, means more force and more of a chance for bringing about change. Only in the long term would these un-Islamic beliefs need to be formally addressed. The position of AQI/ISIS favored the opposite strategy. Influenced to a large extent by sectarian infighting and animosity—and, under post-Saddam Iraq, the more profound problem of sunni marginalization—leaders in the Islamic State saw the Shi'a as the world's biggest problem. Part of the organization's reason of existence, fighting Iraqi Shi'a was a fixation even during its early affiliation with AQ; and this was one of the major obstacles in the relationship between Zarqawi and al-Zawahiri.⁶⁴

(c) Strategy and Military

The third and final pillar concerns the military dimensions of their strategy. Part and parcel of AQC's and ISIS's take on unification/change was how to go about achieving these ends, militarily. Again, there are two major, environment-influenced positions here. Absent both a solid base of support and the necessary materiel, AQC was left with only the most asymmetric of means to achieve their ends. They *did* have a place of refuge—first in the Sudan, and later in Afghanistan—but they had none of the state-like resources and amenities that ISIS now has. They had no army, no resources, relatively few members, and few places to train. Carrying out sensational attacks—and later, smaller attacks, which were easier to pull off and generally more

⁶⁴ Brian Fishman, "After Zarqawi: The Dilemmas and Future of Al Qaeda in Iraq," *The Washington Quarterly* 29.4 (2006), 20-23.

effective—were the only way to combat the “imperialist” powers, playing on the sentiments of their populations and their subjection to domestic political will. In contrast, the Islamic State’s strategy complemented its efforts at establishing a strong base of support in the Middle East. With its swaths of land, relatively large population, and immense military and financial resources, it took a hybrid approach for achieving its objectives: a mix of insurgent terrorism and the strategies of conventional war. O’Neill offers the following on this type of insurgent terrorism: “Terrorism is a form of warfare in which violence is directed primarily against non-combatants . . . [and] *insurgent* terrorism is purposeful, rather than mindless, violence because terrorists seek to achieve specific long-term, intermediate, and short-term goals.”⁶⁵ [emphasis added] Not only does ISIS utilize the same type of terrorist-style attacks used by AQC, but it simultaneously commands an army; offers its population social services like education, food, and healthcare; uses psychological operations (PSYOP) and propaganda to counter its enemies; and it even has its own intelligence service. This strategy is not one defined by intermittent terrorist attacks or sustained insurgency; rather, it is a very complex mixture of all of these approaches.

4.2.2 Operations

Combined with the rapidly-changing sociopolitical environment of the Middle East, these strategic distinctions further distort the operational-level differences between AQ and ISIS.

(a) Territorial Acquisition and Control

This distinction is most apparent in terms of territorial acquisition and control. Essentially the root difference between the groups—and this goes back to the globally- versus locally-

⁶⁵ Quoted in Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2010), 103.

oriented strategies discussed in the previous section—acquisition of territory culminates in a snowball effect of organizational growth. This has obvious implications on the group’s organizational characteristics, such as fighters and fighter retention, quantity and quality of military equipment, and (internal) sources of income. It also has strategic and operational implications. As Metelits points out, “if we unpack the appraisal of territory by groups and the state, we see that land may be valuable not only for population dominance but also for other reasons of strategic significance, such as access to rivers for transportation or to attack more valuable assets such as the provincial or national capital as an important step forward in conventional warfare.”⁶⁶

As of August 2014, ISIS had in its reigns an immense amount of territory, so much that it eclipsed the size of many traditionally-defined states, spanning over 12,000 square miles.⁶⁷ A great deal of this territory was empty space, but it also included strategically-located towns and cities—ones adjacent to border crossings, major supply routes, and critical infrastructure.⁶⁸ That it is a tangible, religious-based rejection of the modern state is in itself significant, but more interesting is the level of governance and authority that it exercises: ISIS maintains near-absolute physical control and exertion of governing responsibility over the majority of its claims. More than anything, this gives the Islamic State an air of legitimacy, unseen by any other related movement. But it also gave them safe-haven—a place to consolidate power and grow. Byman

⁶⁶ Claire Metelits, *Inside Insurgency: Violence, Civilians, and Revolutionary Group Behavior* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 21.

⁶⁷ Maria Abi-Habib, “Assad Policies Aided Rise of Islamic State Militant Group,” *The Wall Street Journal* (August 22, 2014), available at <http://online.wsj.com/articles/assad-policies-aided-rise-of-islamic-state-militant-group-1408739733>.

⁶⁸ “How ISIS Works,” *The New York Times* (September 16, 2014).

notes that, “even as [insurgents] strive to create a cause and wrest it away from their competitors, they also need a respite from police, intelligence, and military services.”⁶⁹ Neither al-Qā’ida nor its AQI affiliate ever realized this type of continued territorial acquisition/control. The most they ever achieved was exercise of ideological influence and religious persuasion over limited, and non-contiguous, areas. Their antagonization of local security forces, by way of a few ragtag



militias, hardly met the same qualities of “territorial control” which characterize ISIS.

These acquisitions hyper-inflated the value of ISIS, and they did so almost immediately. Following its unfettered march through Syria and its subsequent (re-)expansion into Iraq, all eyes were on ISIS—including those of the international media. Their unprecedented assault not only

⁶⁹ Daniel L. Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies: Rand Counterinsurgency Study, Paper 3,” Rand Corporation (September 2007), 16.

on Sykes-Picot but on the political integrity of the entire region,⁷⁰ catapulted their name into dinner conversations across the world. For moderates cognizant of extremism and Middle East fragility, this instilled anxiety and fear; for prospective militants seeking thrill, and active ones seeking victory, this was something of which they aspired to be a part; and for those weary of war and marginalization, it was a welcome relief, even if short-lived. It was their assault on the very foundation of the international system—that of the Westphalian State and the behavioral norms and institutions that define it—which gave it the fame it now has. Images circulating the Web,⁷¹ depicting the intricately defined geographical boundaries of the Caliphate, struck into the minds of all the gravity of ISIS. Despite the rejection of such aspirations by former CIA Director John Brennan as a “feckless delusion,”⁷² the antiquated opinions of the Old Guard—the body of scholars and practitioners built around the now-outdated and somewhat cliché Qā’ida phenomenon—do little but sugarcoat an ominous reality. *Baqiya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding), a slogan at the very heart of ISIS doctrine,⁷³ has of late scored the organization countless wins in the face of this incredulity.

(b) Governance, Social Services, and Public Perception

⁷⁰ Michael Williams, “Sykes-Picot drew lines in the Middle East’s sand that blood is washing away,” *Reuters* (October 24, 2014).

⁷¹ For the embedded image, see Kyle Becker, “The World According to ISIS: The Terrorist Army’s Dreams for Islamic Caliphate Revealed in One Map,” *Independent Journal Review* (unknown date), available at <http://www.ijreview.com/2014/09/173496-world-according-isis-terrorist-armys-dreams-islamic-caliphate-revealed-one-map/>.

⁷² Kyle Becker, “The World According to ISIS: The Terrorist Army’s Dreams for Islamic Caliphate Revealed in One Map,” *Independent Journal Review* (unknown date), available at <http://www.ijreview.com/2014/09/173496-world-according-isis-terrorist-armys-dreams-islamic-caliphate-revealed-one-map/>.

⁷³ Aaron Y. Zelin, “Colonial Caliphate: The Ambitions of the ‘Islamic State’,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (July 8, 2014), originally published on jihadology.net.

Taking charge of the Islamic State's spoils of war required more than brute force. As they did in Mosul, ISIS soldiers took to captured police vehicles in January to secure the streets of Fallujah,⁷⁴ in effect filling one of the many voids in municipal services. Quelling opportunities for dissent certainly motivated this, but bombarding its new constituents with credible and reliable public services—"winning the hearts and minds" of the people—was a key part of their land grab. In the case of majority-Sunni regions like al-'Anbār, in addition to the rural areas of eastern Syria, the central governments in Baghdad and Damascus had done little to fulfill their social obligations. Food was short, crime was high, entire families had been displaced. This did not go unrecognized by the Islamic State. Just as al-Shabab had done with their implementation of neighborhood courts in Somalia,⁷⁵ ISIS used this anarchy and instability as a free ticket to connect with its new constituents—to ensure the marginalized that, while their Shi'a dominated governments had failed them, the Islamic State had stepped-in and solved all of their problems.

These services had other applications. According to Byman, "Being able to create or tap into a social services network offers tremendous advantages to proto-insurgencies. On a practical level, it allows them access to legitimate institutions from which they can divert money or find employment for followers. In addition, the social services network can assist group logistics—the network that transfers supplies for a hospital or provides documentation for workers can do the same for members of the insurgent movement."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Michael Knights, "The ISIL's Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor," *CTC Sentinel* 7.5 (May 2014), 11.

⁷⁵ Rob Wise, "Al-Shabaab," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Case Study Number 2 of the *AQAM Futures Project Case Study Series* of the Homeland Security & Counterterrorism Program and Transnational Threats Project (July 2011), 2-3.

⁷⁶ Daniel L. Byman, "Understanding Proto-Insurgencies: Rand Counterinsurgency Study, Paper 3," Rand Corporation (September 2007), 15.

Baghdadi and his deputies formed a number of public administrative bodies, including courts and various policing mechanisms; they handed-out food provisions to the poor; and they implemented a tax-collection system, by which money could be redistributed to the needy and the internally-displaced.⁷⁷ They shipped-in fuel, fixed water lines, and repaired electrical towers, all in a timely manner; and their educational system, at least in Manbij, saw noticeable differences, with teachers finally being afforded substantive salaries.⁷⁸ Journalism even had its place in the new Caliphate, despite the scores of harsh rules which all but limited the field to die-hard proponents of the regime.⁷⁹ These efforts at institution-building are certainly not new. The social services and institution building processes of various movements, such as Hezbollah and the PLO, are well documented.⁸⁰ But the rapidity and successfulness with which they have institutionalized these services is quite astounding. All of this coordination assumed the character of a complex bureaucracy, centered primarily in the Syrian city of Raqqa (notably, the former capital of the Abbasid Caliphate). Sitting at the helm of this structure, Baghdadi appeared to be controlling an entity that was looking more state-like by the day.

⁷⁷ Goha Nail, "Guest Post: Manbij and The Islamic State's Public Administration," jihadology.com (August 27, 2014), 1.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Yasser Allawi, "ISIS Issues 11 Rules for Journalists in Deir Ezzor," *Syria Deeply* (October 7, 2014).

⁸⁰ See for example: Judith Harik, "The Public and Social Services of the Lebanese Militias," *Papers on Lebanon Series*, no. 14 (Oxford: The Center for Lebanese Studies, 1994), 13; Lewis W. Snider, "The Lebanese Forces: Their Origins and Role in Lebanon's Politics," *Middle East Journal* 38.1 (1984): 1-33; Ronald McLaurin, "From Professional to Political: The Redefinition of the Lebanese Army," *Armed Forces and Society* 17.4 (1991): 547; Elizabeth Picard, *Lebanon: A Shattered Country*, Translated by Frank Philip (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1996), 82; Melanie Cammett, "Bricks and Mortar Clientelism: Sectarianism and the Logics of Welfare Allocation in Lebanon," *World Politics* 62.3 (2010): 382; and Augustus Norton, "Hizballah: From Radicalism to Pragmatism?," *Middle East Policy* 5.4 (1998): 147-158.

Despite this, ISIS' plan for social provisions proved somewhat less full-proof than they had perhaps imagined. "Debates rage[d] among family members and friends in the privacy of their homes about whether [ISIS] is a positive or negative force. No one complain[ed] about the stability the group ha[d] brought, but the prospect of living under a totalitarian theocracy d[id] not excite many, especially women."⁸¹ Sentiments of its constituency—now numbering in the millions—were mixed at best, but generally revealed a negative perception of ISIS and its new leaders. Even though people abhorred their previous living conditions and welcomed stability and relief, ISIS's fundamentalism and overzealous enforcement of draconian punishment did little to curb their appetite for change. Under their rule, "Religious police make sure that shops close during Muslim prayers and that women cover their hair and faces in public. Public spaces are walled off with heavy metal fences topped with the black flags of ISIS. People accused of disobeying the law are punished by public executions or amputations."⁸² Indeed, the people's place in the new Caliphate has essentially been one of servitude, not of citizen. Locals, accustomed to the relative secularism under which they once lived—and seen as less-committed to the Caliphate than its reverent foreign fighters—played almost no role in the Islamic State's bureaucracy or governance, from the beginning.⁸³ This negative perception of its domestic audience transcended the Islamic State's borders. General Arab opinion of ISIS follows a similar,

⁸¹ Goha Nail, *Manbij and The Islamic State*, 1.

⁸² "How ISIS Works," *The New York Times* (September 16, 2014).

⁸³ Goha Nail, *Manbij and The Islamic State*, 1.

albeit quantifiable, trend: According to one poll done by the *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, only 5% of Saudis, 3% of Egyptians, and 0% of Lebanese support the group.⁸⁴

Regardless, the Islamic State commands the authority and resources with which to quell dissenting opinion; and it remains ever-popular among its tens-of-thousands of committed fighters. Suppression of opposition, and gradual indoctrination of these audiences over the long-term, will likely characterize ISIS's way forward; the brutality and heinousness with which they deal with infractions of Shari'a law will be the force behind this.

According to Byman, “[violence] can foster an identity, create a cause, outpace rivals, attract outside support, and—most important—lead a state to overreact.”⁸⁵ Their particular violent character, at least with respect to AQ, also helps distinguish it from other jihadist movements and attract new fighters. Byman explains that, “at times, dozens of cells are competing for recruits and money, and a group that can successfully pull off attacks in the face of state opposition demonstrates its prowess to would-be recruits.”⁸⁶

Frequent executions and the display of corpses in public spaces serve as a stark reminder the implications of questioning ISIS' rule. Given the populations they have under their control, and the pliability of their perception (especially for younger people), the ISIS constituency is fertile ground for cultivating the future of its organization. Images of children holding the decapitated heads of enemy corpses, and rifle-wielding Kazakh teens calling for the “slaughter of

⁸⁴ David Pollock, “Poll: ISIS has almost no popular support among Arab publics,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (October 14, 2014).

⁸⁵ Daniel L. Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies: Rand Counterinsurgency Study, Paper 3,” Rand Corporation (September 2007), 7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

infidels,”⁸⁷ speak volumes to the mentalities with which society will be forced to deal in the future.

This is a strong departure from al-Qā’ida, of which this kind of tangible constituency is entirely irrelevant. Apart from the audiences they were able to reach via the internet and other media, they had relatively little (palpable) influence over non-followers. This is especially so in the wake of their disrupted financial network and their decreased capacity to project fear through sensational attacks. AQ was really nothing more than a vassal of the Afghan Taliban: it paid rent for its land and training bases and exercised little governing authority. This likely delegitimized AQ in the eyes of its followers to some extent, making it appear dependent on its host government(s). And dependent it was. At one point, the Taliban even considered ejecting the group from Afghanistan,⁸⁸ as the Sudani government had done some years prior.⁸⁹ Branding implications aside, this reality made efforts to combat the group somewhat unique. By and large, Washington adopted a CT policy toward AQ, whereby its operatives were individually targeted and eliminated. This, of course, manifested in the form of a full-scale invasion of Afghanistan in 2002 and close cooperation with regional governments (e.g., Yemen, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, et al.), and later as targeted, precision attacks, using contingents of special forces and armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

(c) Instrumentalization of the Media

⁸⁷ Joanna Lillis, “Kazakhstan: Children Star in Islamic State Propaganda Video,” [eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71071) (November 24, 2014), available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71071>.

⁸⁸ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2008), 139-140.

⁸⁹ “The Life and Death of Osama bin Laden,” *The Washington Post* (May 2, 2011).

The Islamic State's instrumentalization of social and traditional media platforms is another operational difference. A modern adaptation of Mao Tse-tung's union of Army and people through perception-shaping,⁹⁰ the Islamic State has "built on [Mao's] legacy and developed an [information operations] campaign that is multidimensional, spread across different platforms and that simultaneously targets its 'friends and foes'."⁹¹ Through its enormous online presence, built on social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, ISIS leadership can reach very large audiences with ease. Its followers get live tweets, video streams, and uncensored pictures from the battlefield, unfazed by the lax regulation of social media. While members operate a number of unofficial accounts, ones which occasionally contradict official position, there is a distinct element of organization about ISIS's internet presence:

*Its online and print media organization is efficient. Each online network such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have designated moderators, and each "wilayah" (state) has its own dedicated social media accounts, with Ninevah state, for instance, only posting news from that area.*⁹²

These accounts generally function as a single unit: unofficial ones, which may command thousands of followers, pass-on and re-tweet announcements released from official accounts. In effect, ISIS leaders have direct access to a media web with millions of redundant connections. Even if regulations were tighter, breaking apart this network would be a tedious, and probably near-impossible, undertaking.

⁹⁰ Mao Tse-tung, "On Guerrilla Warfare," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: Vol. IX* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1937), available at: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/1937/guerrilla-warfare/>.

⁹¹ Haroro J. Ingram, "Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare," *The RUSI Journal* 159:6 (December 2014), 4-11.

⁹² Ali Hashem, "The Islamic State's social media strategy," *Al-Monitor* (August 18, 2014), available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/is-clinton-atrocities-social-media-baghdadi-mccain.html#>.

Officially part of the broader *Al-Furqan Media* umbrella, these outlets are an important component of the Islamic State's recruitment strategy. Technology-savvy internet administrators appeal to prospective recruits using pop-culture, trending themes, gory eye-catchers, and other consumer-oriented approaches. They even have their own equivalent of AQ's *Inspire* magazine and the Taliban's *Azan*, a periodical which they dub *Dabiq*.⁹³ Photos of fluffy, "mew-jahid" kittens, straddling the butts of Kalashnikov rifles, epitomize the imagination and creativity of their media moderators. Symbolic images like these, which tie everyday normality with militant Islam and jihadism, spread quickly, often to unwitting audiences outside of their active support base. Professionally-edited videos depicting battlefield euphoria and the unfettered dominance of ISIS fighters are disseminated regularly via these same outlets.⁹⁴ Also popular are battlefield "selfies," taken by uninterested fighters seeking to share their heroism and adventure with friends and family, a phenomenon which Brian Jenkins dubs "jihad tourism."⁹⁵

All of these mediums appeal to different crowds in different ways, netting the largest audience possible. As Ingram argues, through their targeting of "local, regional and global audiences with multilingual offerings using a broad range of platforms,"⁹⁶ they are able to maximize this reach. But the nature of ISIS recruitment propaganda appears to be simultaneously driving an ideological wedge between hardliners and the relatively (more) moderate Islamists.

⁹³ Ingram, *The Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare*, 4-5.

⁹⁴ For a sample of these productions, see, for example, *Category Archives: al-Furqan Media* on jihadology.net, available at <http://jihadology.net/category/al-furqan-media/page/2/>.

⁹⁵ Brian Michael Jenkins, "The Role of Terrorism and Terror in Syria's Civil War," *RAND Corporation* (November 2013), 4.

⁹⁶ Ingram, *The Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare*, 4.

While this decreases its base of support to some extent, this could be in its interest, as it brings together the meanest-of-the-mean, creating a force multiplier effect and making the organization even more of a force to be reckoned with. While the average effect of recruitment propaganda on its viewers is probably minimal—Who thinks it’s cute to let a kitten near a rifle, anyway?—if taken as a whole, we see a different story. Even if only one person in half a million is influenced by a catchy slogan, gruesome image, or battlefield story, these outliers add up quickly. As Byman concludes, “[violence] is a form of propaganda. Such ‘propaganda by the deed’ is intended to both educate the uncommitted on the cause in general and inspire them to act. Violence attracts media attention, and thus the group serves as a magnet for like-minded fighters.”⁹⁷

It also enables ISIS to spread fear—not necessarily to motivate political change, but mostly to deter western interventionism into its affairs. It has something—land, resources, and a relatively viable Islamic state—that it does not want to lose. “The necks of your citizens will be cut, so long as you participate in the Crusade against Islam and the Muslims. #UK #US #AlanHennig,” writes Mujahid Miski on Twitter.⁹⁸ Through its internet interface with Western audiences, Baghdadi and his deputies can exert strategic, indirect pressure on the governments which they hope to influence. If they can instill real and tangible fear in the minds of their enemies, they can distance these enemies from intervening in their affairs.

That is not to say their internet propaganda does not involve calculation for social or political change—after all, “change” is very much a part of ISIS’s long-term vision, even if it is

⁹⁷ Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies*, 7.

⁹⁸ Hayes Brown, “Turns Out It’s Pretty Hard To Shut Down Jihadi Twitter,” *BuzzFeed News* (November 6, 2014).

relatively less-important than unification. One Twitter offers the following, for example: “I say to the United States that your time will come and we’ll bleed you to death and incha Allah we will raise the flag on the White House.”⁹⁹ A picture of an Islamic State flag displayed on a cell phone in front of the White House, Tweeted from Twitter handle @sunna_rev in August, made the threat that much more terrifying, and spoke to the strength and ubiquity of ISIS support.¹⁰⁰

Whether these provocations were a detrimental miscalculation—and I believe they were—is unimportant. The point is that ISIS has been immensely successful in its utilization of the internet and social media, especially when compared to AQ. While it may very well have taken a page from the AQ playbook, the level of ingenuity, imagination, and creativity which underlie ISIS media production is unparalleled. No longer are the boring Bin Laden YouTube videos which last hours on end and “[favor] the old style of Arabic speech-making.”¹⁰¹ Today’s jihadists use romanticization, simple language, and pop-culture to convey otherwise uninteresting or unappealing themes to tech-savvy and younger audiences. And they are doing remarkably well.

Traditional media outlets have done a good job at this, too. The explosion of coverage on the Islamic State, following its June takeover of Mosul, brought international attention to an organization which was, until then, relatively unknown. American domestic media outlets, spanning the political spectrum from Fox News to MSNBC, propagated sensationalist exposes of the Islamic State and its territorial advances. Fueled by ratings, the ISIS media fire grew and continued to grow. Even academic communities, like Washington DC’s premier think tanks,

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ali Hashem, “The Islamic State’s social media strategy,” *Al-Monitor* (August 18, 2014).

¹⁰¹ As’ad AbuKhalil, “ISIS and al-Qaeda: Similarities and Differences,” *alakhbar* (September 2, 2014).

exploited the growing appetite for all-things-ISIS. Horror stories, like that of murdered journalist James Foley, and the graphic videos which followed them, were aired time-and-again, constantly “analyzed” by political pundits. The now-famous beheading video, in addition to the numerous others that followed it, are only a part of ISIS’s broader media strategy: to feed unthinkable acts of barbarism to an international media machine that is hungry for violence. An unfortunate and unavoidable reality of democracy, this uncensored, round-the-clock coverage of ISIS did wonders for its recruitment campaign.

4.2.3 Organizational Characteristics

A number of organizational characteristics further define the growing gap between these organizations. The most obvious, ISIS’ various instruments of hard power, are the ones which the organization uses to acquire and control territory. As their territorial hold expands—and as more weapons, fighters, and sources of income are absorbed—these divisions become even more pronounced.

(a) Soldiers, Weapons Platforms, and Army

With the failing and weak security institutions of the Iraqi state, and the urban-centric strategy, preoccupation and near-indifference of Assad’s military,¹⁰² hard power overwhelmingly favored ISIS’s hand. Even for other organized rebel militias and ethnic groups—essentially the last line of defense against the Islamic State—their resistances were rendered wholly ineffective by logistical problems and strategic incoherence. Problems coordinating attacks, supply shortages (including, ammunitions and weapons), general military inexperience, and, in the case

¹⁰² Brian Michael Jenkins, “The Dynamics of Syria’s Civil War,” *RAND Corporation* (2014), 12.

of war-weary Syrian rebels, low esprit d'corps, produced only muddled attempts at rolling back the Islamic State. Even major population centers, like Mosul, fared little hope:

*The first line of Mosul's defense was the sixth brigade of the Third Iraqi army division. On paper, the brigade had 2,500 men. The reality was closer to 500. The brigade was also short of weapons and ammunition, according to one non-commissioned officer. Infantry, armor and tanks had been shifted to Anbar, where more than 6,000 soldiers had been killed and another 12,000 had deserted. It left Mosul with virtually no tanks and a shortage of artillery.*¹⁰³

Indeed, the Islamic State was everything that the others were not: large, well-coordinated, well-equipped, and driven by the fervor of winning their own state. Without question, Baghdadi was commanding one of the strongest unrecognized (i.e., non-state) military-like structures in existence, on par with that of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah. As of October 2014, they operated the largest number of jihadist training facilities in the region, with twelve in Syria and nine in Iraq.¹⁰⁴ Conservative estimates from CIA put ISIS rank-and-file in the tens-of-thousands; others, like that of Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, put them even higher, in the hundreds-of-thousands.¹⁰⁵ With this kind of manpower, Baghdadi's fighters were able to consume poorly-defended governorates like al-'Anbār, Nīnawā and the eastern provinces of Syria. Motorcades of Nissan trucks and APCs, mounted by masked men surveying their spoils of war, swarmed towns by the droves. The equipment they carried bore the defaced markings of their origin: Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, the United States, Europe, and other western countries. The group seized

¹⁰³ Jeremy Bender, "One Paragraph Explains How ISIS Managed to Seize Iraq's Second-Largest City," *Business Insider* (October 14, 2014).

¹⁰⁴ Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Jihadist training camps proliferate in Iraq and Syria," *The Long War Journal* (October 24, 2014).

¹⁰⁵ Patrick Cockburn, "War with ISIS: Islamic militants have army of 200,000, claims senior Kurdish leader," *The Independent* (November 16, 2014).

numerous rockets and small arms, in transit from external third parties to Syrian rebel groups.¹⁰⁶ State-of-the-art weapons platforms, like M1A1 Abrams tanks, M-46 130mm field guns, anti-aircraft systems, and armor-piercing technologies,¹⁰⁷ were but some of the other goods they brought to secure their new claims. Captured on the field or marauded from state-controlled arms depots, much of them originating as American military aid to Iraq, these weapons bloated the arsenals of ISIS's growing garrison of troops—and they would also even later challenge the likes of the all-powerful US military. Short of western intervention, fighting them was a lost cause—a David and Goliath battle without the slingshot. According to one Iraqi colonel, “In my entire battalion we have one machine gun. In *each pickup* they had one.” [emphasis added]¹⁰⁸

The grandeur of its army, its weapons cache, and the many images of its sensational takeover is another difference. Especially for poorly equipped and meagerly compensated radical militants fighting in Syria, this was an attractive option. Defections from other groups to the Caliphate ran high early-on. For them, ISIS had it all: the braun, the morale, the glory, and the guns, and they had the rewards to prove it. Complementing this new found zeal was a concurrent *devaluation* of al-Qā'ida's currency. One of the starkest differences, apart from territorial claim, was their deficiency in this type of hard power. Committed to its western-oriented agenda, AQ simply could not achieve the military momentum that ISIS had sustained so easily; the snowball effect of high fighter-retention, weapons accumulation, and growth in public support, simply

¹⁰⁶ “How ISIS Works,” *The New York Times* (September 16, 2014).

¹⁰⁷ Robert Farley, “Five ISIS Weapons of War America Should Fear,” *The National Interest* (September 25, 2014).

¹⁰⁸ Jeremy Bender, “One Paragraph Explains How ISIS Managed to Seize Iraq's Second-Largest City,” *Business Insider* (October 14, 2014).

never materialized. Aware of these shortcomings, ISIS was quick to exploit AQ weakness and reveal Zawahiri's impotence. Overtly challenging his leadership—through Baghdadi's declaration of universal jurisdiction in the Levant,¹⁰⁹ an unthinkable act of insubordination—and assassinating his emissary in Syria, Khaled al-Suri, were but two ways he undermined the authority and legitimacy of Zawahiri's AQC. This was all strategic, meant to gain defectors, increase his stature, and take advantage of the unprecedented security vacuum in Syria and Iraq. In Aaron Zelin's words:

*Another way the Islamic State could gain “ungoverned” spaces or build up its capacities and networks is through creating breakaway groups of members that defect from al-Qaeda branches to Islamic State “territories” in places like Syria, Yemen, Somalia, or North Africa. The recent successes on the battlefield in Iraq (and now again in Syria due to a shifting of new resources gained in the Iraqi offensive) and the announcement of the Caliphate, the Islamic State perceives that this could push more factions, individuals, or groups to join up with its cause and reject the “out of touch” leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahiri.*¹¹⁰

(b) Finances

Financial sustenance is another key difference, one intimately connected to territorial acquisition. Unlike al-Qā'ida, which largely funded itself and its operations through the *external* financial connections outlined in *Section 4.1*, ISIS transformed itself into a financially independent organization early-on. By the time it brokered its formal relationship with al-Qā'ida, the organization had already established a lucrative and self-sufficient funding scheme. According to declassified AQI financial ledgers from 2005 and 2006, its administrative branch in al-ʿAnbar province, alone, grossed an estimated USD 373,000 per month.¹¹¹ More than 50% of

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Nusrah Front emerge as rebranded single entity,” *The Long War Journal* (April 9, 2013).

¹¹⁰ Aaron Y. Zelin, “Colonial Caliphate: The Ambitions of the ‘Islamic State’,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (July 8, 2014), originally published on jihadology.net.

¹¹¹ Benjamin Bahney, Howard J. Shatz, Carroll Ganier, Renny McPherson, and Barbara Sude, “An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of Al-Qa’ida in Iraq,” *Rand Corporation* (2010), 36.

this revenue was from selling stolen goods, “most of which were highly valuable capital items, such as construction equipment, generators, and electrical cables.”¹¹² While external donations constituted a portion of its overall revenue—albeit a small portion, amounting to less than USD 250,000, over the course of a year—other sources, like car sales and extortion, were nearly twice as much.¹¹³ By and large, these sources remain unchanged. According to congressional testimony by Patrick Johnston,

*The key difference between the financial activities of [ISIS’s] predecessors and the financial activities of [ISIS] now is not in kind but rather in scale. Most recent estimates suggest that [ISIS] makes between \$1-3 million per day. In contrast, ISI’s master financial ledgers in Mosul show that the group made an average of slightly less than \$1 million per month between August 2008 and January 2009. Although it is unclear how much of present-day [ISIS’s] revenues are made in and around Mosul, the key fact is that it used to take the group a month to make what it now makes each day. These resources have been critical enablers of [ISIS’s] success in seizing broad swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq and in waging a two-front war against multiple governments and other non-state armed groups.*¹¹⁴

New opportunities, and the absence of authority, help explain this difference in scale. Absent strong state institutions or an occupying foreign power like the US, virtually nothing was able to deter ISIS from kleptocratic tendencies—not even the ardent religious principles for which its members claim to stand. Unjust seizure of property, extortion of “religious tax” from blasphemers, and petty theft, are merely reflections of its members’ shared criminal history, brought to the surface by lawlessness.

Despite these continuities, one facet of its income has evolved markedly: oil production. Although analysts are of mixed opinion about AQI’s past reliance on oil production,¹¹⁵ they

¹¹² Ibid., 36.

¹¹³ Ibid., 37.

¹¹⁴ Patrick B. Johnston, “Countering ISIL’s Financing,” Testimony presented before the House Financial Services Committee on November 13, 2014, published by *Rand Corporation* (November 2014), 2-3.

¹¹⁵ Bahney et al, *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa’ida*, 60.

generally agree that oil revenue, today, makes up a sizable portion of its income—about USD 1 million per day.¹¹⁶ The point where this oil enters external/global markets is an obvious, exploitable vulnerability, yet relatively little is actually known about these dealings. Declassified AQI/ISIS accounting records afford almost no attention to hydrocarbons sales. Some media reports suggest that oil from Syrian production sites is sold to political connections within the Damascus government and/or to Turkish officials,¹¹⁷ but the veracity of these claims is questionable. Other reports paint an intricate picture of a complicated underground smuggling network, through which Syrian middlemen traffick barrels of cheap crude oil across the porous borders of Turkey. Its buyers, Turkish businessmen, “[sell] it secretly to gas stations or set up illegal filling stops.”¹¹⁸ The group maintains control over 60% of oil production in eastern Syria, in addition to a number of smaller production sites in Iraq. Even with its export of 30,000 barrels per day (at about USD 35 per barrel), ISIS still has enough surplus to meet local refineries’ demands.¹¹⁹ In fact, satisfaction of these internal petroleum needs is the destination of an increasingly large portion of its oil.¹²⁰ Not only does this reduce reliance on external markets and potential points of leverage for western economic sanctions, it also helps develop domestic dependency on ISIS’s heavily subsidized fuel.

¹¹⁶ Charles Lister, “Cutting off ISIS’ Cash Flow,” *Brookings Institution* (October 24, 2014).

¹¹⁷ Martin Chulov, “ISIS surges towards the borders of Turkey as west mulls options,” *The Guardian* (August 23, 2014), available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/23/isis-islamic-state-surges-to-turkish-border>.

¹¹⁸ Mike Giglio, “This is how ISIS smuggles oil,” *BuzzFeed News* (November 3, 2014), available at <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/this-is-how-isis-smuggles-oil>.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Charles Lister, “Cutting off ISIS’ Cash Flow,” *Brookings Institution* (October 24, 2014).

This strategy of resource exploitation is not unique. A number of parallels can be drawn between ISIS' oil production and the exploitation of commodity exports (CE) in other rebellions. Examples include UNITA's smuggling of oil and diamonds during the Angolan civil war; Charles Taylor's exportation of timber during the Liberian civil war; and the Khmer Rouge's sale of rubies and tropical timber in communist Cambodia. FARC drug exports and the Afghan Taliban's poppy production serve as yet another example. In both cases, drug commodities were a staple commodity fueled by external consumption—ones which, if eradicated entirely, would have had a significant impact on local populations—and remained relatively “invulnerable.”¹²¹ According to Collier and Hoeffler, the presence of these CE types increases risk for conflict significantly, from about 0.5% risk (for countries without CE) to 23% (for countries with CE).¹²² That ISIS success would have been hindered in a non-resource rich area—one whose economy is not highly dependent on the exportation of hydrocarbon commodities—is not an unreasonable assumption.

Other areas of their criminal enterprise generate significant cash-flows. Although its incidence is decreasing, kidnapping-for-ransom once brought in substantial operating revenue. One Scandinavian corporation, for example, paid USD 70,000 for one of its kidnapped employees.¹²³ Similarly, prior to his videoed beheading, ISIS demanded USD 132.5 million for

¹²¹ Marks, *Urban Insurgency*, 140.

¹²² See Paul Collier, “Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and Their Implications for Policy,” in *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*, eds. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Hall (Washington DC: USIP Press, 2007), 201; and Paul Collier and Anke Heffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (2004), 574. See also James Fearon and David Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 75-90.

¹²³ “Multiple kidnappings for ransom’ funding ISIS, source says,” *CBS News* (August 21, 2014).

the return of journalist James Foley,¹²⁴ a payment which the US was unwilling to make. Tax-generated income has also increased. This is a tactic which has been employed by many other insurgencies—notably Colombia’s FARC, which earned nearly USD 700 million per year from kidnapping (and drug exports),¹²⁵ and Nigeria’s *Boko Haram*. ISIS earned USD 12 million per month through illicit taxation systems in Mosul even *prior* to taking over the city; this is now being undertaken in a more-systematic, more-organized manner.¹²⁶ Road tolls on highways connecting Jordan, Syria and Iraq, for example, are but one means for collecting these levies. Even control of resources like wheat and water, and the priceless ancient artifacts dotting the swaths of land they occupy, help bankroll their operations.¹²⁷

What makes all of these sources of income so interesting is that, with only a few exceptions, they are all internally generated and relatively immune to targeted fiscal policies or economic sanctions. Unlike AQC, whose financial base was almost entirely external and thus vulnerable to targeting, combatting ISIS’s domestic enterprise is extremely difficult. Moreover, the magnitude of their funding gives them a level of influence and leverage that AQ never saw. As Collier points out, the difference between a successful resistance and an unsuccessful one is their varying “opportunities to raise revenue.”¹²⁸ And, indeed, “if ... such criminal incentives

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Paul Collier, “Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and Their Implications for Policy,” in *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*, eds. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Hall (Washington DC: USIP Press, 2007).

¹²⁶ Charles Lister, “Cutting off ISIS’ Cash Flow,” *Brookings Institution* (October 24, 2014).

¹²⁷ Matthew Levitt, “Show me the money: Targeting the Islamic State’s bottom line,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (October 1, 2014).

¹²⁸ Collier, *Economic Cause of Civil Conflict*, 197.

exist, one would expect them to have an overriding influence on insurgents' behavior, since these actors are at the whim of the global economy, and illicit activities offer fast ways to raise revenue."¹²⁹ Unlike AQ, ISIS can sustain and feed a population, maintain their supply lines and weapons, strengthen their infrastructure, and, most importantly, attract to their ranks thousands of new fighters looking for competitive salaries and stipends. Yet another example of the snowball effect.

(c) Leadership and Structural Organization

The organizational structure and leadership of the Islamic State is another point of inquiry. Mirroring the various social services they provide their citizens, as outlined in *Section 4.2.1*, the Caliphate is organized into a number of individual bodies, both functional and jurisdictional. At the top of its hierarchically-organized executive structure is the Caliph, currently occupied by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Perhaps a bit megalomaniacal, the self-appointed Emir claims control, not only over the Islamic State, "but also [over] every other salafist/takfiri group in the world."¹³⁰ His appointment was said to have been a "surprise" by some, and "to have been engineered by an ex-Colonel from the Iraqi Revolutionary Guard, Samir Abed Hamad al-Obeidi al-Dulaimi."¹³¹ Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and Abu Ali al-Anbari, former Turkmen Baathists and close confidantes of the Caliph, act as his deputies in Iraq and Syria. Maintaining their connection with Baghdadi are intermediaries like Abu Yahya al-Iraqi.¹³²

¹²⁹ Claire Metelits, *Inside Insurgency: Violence, Civilians, and Revolutionary Group Behavior* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 18-19.

¹³⁰ Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State," *The Soufan Group* (November 2014), 28.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 29.

While these top-tier executives “set the overall strategic objectives of the group,”¹³³ a number of lower, semi-autonomous councils look after the organization’s basic administrative and military functions. These councils “oversee strategic planning, military operations and civilian administration,”¹³⁴ advising Baghdadi on matters pertaining to media, intelligence, security, finance, and other issues.¹³⁵ Complementing the functional councils are two other important bodies. First is the Shura Council, headed by Abu Arkan al-Ameri and composed of about a dozen former Iraqi Baathists.¹³⁶ The Islamic State’s highest advisory body, the Shura Council is “responsible for conveying directives from Abu Bakr [al-Baghdadi] down the chain of command and for ensuring that they are carried out. It decides on laws [of the Islamic State] and their implementation [...]”¹³⁷ Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and Abu Ali al-Anbari are both believed to be members of the Shura, in addition to the Military Council’s Abu Ayman al-Iraqi, the Media Council’s Amr al-Absi, and ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami.¹³⁸ The second body is the Shari’a Council. Composed of six members and overseen by Baghdadi, “its duties include selecting a Caliph and ensuring the compliance of all other parts of the administration

¹³³ Ibid., 29.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹³⁵ Nick Thompson and Atika Shubert, “The anatomy of ISIS: How the ‘Islamic State’ is run, from oil to beheadings,” *CNN* (October 7, 2014).

¹³⁶ Richard Barrett, “The Islamic State,” *The Soufan Group* (November 2014), 29.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 29-30.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 30.

with Shari'a law, according to its own interpretation."¹³⁹ The Soufan Group describes it in the following manner:¹⁴⁰

With help from the Sharia Commissions, headed by Abu Mohammed al Aani, [the Shari'a Council] is responsible for ensuring party discipline, providing rules and deciding penalties for their infringement, supervising the sharia police and courts and overseeing ideological outreach (dawa), both in areas under the State's control and beyond.

Finally, in the lowest executive rung are between a dozen and two dozen local administrators. These provincial governors, nearly all of whom were former Iraqi officials, report on matters concerning local administration and military operations to Baghdadi's deputies.

Given this rough picture of ISIS's internal organization, three things are worth noting. The first concerns the group's hierarchical structure and chain-of-command. Perhaps resembling al-Qā'ida centralization in the 1990s—albeit, much more collectively led—ISIS's current organization allows it to efficiently and rapidly transmit directives from the top-down. Although to some extent inherited by Baghdadi when he assumed control of AQI (following ISAF withdrawal),¹⁴¹ this structure has in recent years become much more defined: new positions have materialized, procedure has become more systematic, and the top brass have become more powerful and more symbolic. Importantly, its structure and centralization have enabled Baghdadi and his top planners to consolidate competing strategies into a single narrative and to transmit it through their chain-of-command, all the way down to local- and battlefield-commanders. Because of this, ISIS now has the level of offensive and defensive coordination necessary to

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹⁴¹ Siobhan Gorman, Nour Malas and Matt Bradley, "Brutal Efficiency: The Secret to Islamic State's Success," *The Wall Street Journal* (September 3, 2014).

capture and retain large cities and territories, despite the (limited) internal defenses they face in doing so. As insurgency practitioner Regis Debray put it, “The lack of a single command puts the revolutionary forces in a situation of an artillery gunner who has not been told which direction to fire... The absence of a centralized executive (political and military) leadership leads to such waste, such useless slaughter.”¹⁴² Indeed, research shows that, compared to decentralized, “networked” groups, hierarchically-organized insurgencies fare much better on the battlefield.¹⁴³ As noted in the background section, al-Qā’ida core became highly decentralized after 2001 in order to increase its operational security and sustain the integrity of its organization. This compromised AQC’s ability to achieve the level of efficiency and coordination that Baghdadi’s Islamic State now has.

Second, there is a clear division of administrative and military duty in the Islamic State. This division of responsibility has reduced the level of micromanagement necessary to keep the organization viable. With the help of his deputies, provincial governors, and various technocrats, Baghdadi is able to manage the daily operations of his vast organization with relative ease, and it allows him to keep getting bigger and stronger. Although partially irrelevant to AQC, as neither Bin Laden nor al-Zawahiri controlled tangible constituencies or large memberships, lack of this division may explain part of AQC’s relative weakness. Because of the operational constraints on AQC—due to the immense amount of CT activity against it and its operatives—it was unable to maintain the same type of centralized, role-oriented structure. In effect, it was unable to expand

¹⁴² Connable, Ben, and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2010), 81.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 80.

its size and sustain its momentum. Although somewhat of a circular, chicken-and-egg argument, it represents the snowball effect this paper has stressed so much already. ISIS managed itself well, AQ did not.

Third, Islamic State leadership share a very similar background. By and large, Baghdadi's appointed executives were career military professionals who served under Saddam Hussein in Baathist-controlled Iraq. Baghdadi appointed them partly because they were old and trusted colleagues, with a common mindset and shared background. But he also chose them for strategic reasons, as they brought to ISIS an immense amount of military knowledge, regional understanding, and governing ability—all traits which Baghdadi believed would allow him to sweep through Iraqi cities and quickly institute mechanisms of control. Most of AQC, although certainly educated on political theory and governance, did not have this same level of practical experience.

(d) Membership Composition

A final point of inquiry is the composition of its membership. Despite their apparent ideological commonality—i.e., recognition of Baghdadi's Caliphate—ISIS members reflect an extremely diverse organization: they come from many different cultures, bring with them many different mentalities, and seek many different goals. It is no minor detail that nearly 15,000 foreign fighters, hailing from scores of countries, now call the Islamic State home.¹⁴⁴ What it means to wage “jihad” for an American (fighter) probably means something far different for a Chechen or an Indonesian, which almost certainly differs from that of the average Syrian or Iraqi. Foreigners are likely driven more by religious fervor or adventurism, whereas locals are

¹⁴⁴ Richard Barrett, “The Islamic State,” *The Soufan Group* (November 2014), 16.

driven, if not by religion or adventurism, by fear, anger, resentment, or necessity. These are differences which should inform—not hinder—CT/COIN strategy. Blanketing ISIS with policies solely countering ideological extremism, for example, would do little to address the basic grievances (e.g., lack of security, social marginalization, political disenfranchisement, etc.) which have driven so many into the organization.

Pre-existing, competing ideologies are also important. Remember that many of the ISIS rank-and-file once subscribed to the AQC vision of the Caliphate, either as members of AQI or as defectors from the broader AQ franchise. This is important because, even if we write-off ISIS as aspiring primarily to Umma unification—and not to attacking the West, at least on the short term—there still remains vestiges of the AQ Old Guard’s sentiments. While Islamic State leaders mostly maintained their own idiosyncratic approaches to the Caliphate—even during their affiliation with ISIS—and institutionalized these approaches in their current doctrine, policymakers should still be wary of ideological aberrations. Just as ISIS is not equivalent to AQC, ISIS is also not completely internally uniform.

4.3 Conclusion: An Outdated Framework

To completely dissociate al-Qā'ida from the Islamic State is not the objective of this analysis. That similarities exist is readily and abundantly clear, and need not further qualification. ISIS's and AQ's histories are intimately connected, as are their beliefs, principles, and basic behaviors. And there are many lessons to be learned from our dealings with these organizations, lessons that can be applied to other DOD counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations. Indeed, al-Qā'ida policy *should* inform Islamic State policy, and Islamic State policy, likewise, *should* inform al-Qā'ida policy.

What the point of this analysis *is*, however, is to show empirical evidence that al-Qā'ida and the Islamic State, despite their many similarities and common origins, are two very different organizations. Their basic nature may, in fact, be the same, but their behaviors and strategies are quintessentially incomparable. The point is also to critique current policy, offering analytical nuance to DOD's understanding of the Islamic State, perhaps provoking a partial review of current policy or a complete revision of US position.

From this, we can also extract key organizational weaknesses which can inform our COIN/CT policies, ones which parallel the activities of other, well-documented movements. For example, the Islamic State's hierarchical structure, as much as it gives ISIS coherence, organization, and efficiency, is an exploitable vulnerability. As one scholar notes, "in line with contemporary thinking, hierarchies are somewhat vulnerable to decapitation strikes."¹⁴⁵ Eliminating top leadership, as was done with the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front), the

¹⁴⁵ Connable, *How Insurgencies End*, 82.

Angolan UNITA, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), the LTTE (Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers), and Sendero Luminoso (i.e., Shining Path), led to major organizational disruptions—and sometimes defeat—when their leadership cadres were eliminated.¹⁴⁶ Another weakness is its urban presence. While a number of advantages arise from urban insurgency, it can also bring about vulnerabilities: “the longer [insurgencies last], the easier it be[comes] for the government to zero in on insurgent leadership and cadres. Tight quarters and rapid communication provide security-service informers ample opportunity to observe and track insurgent activities.”¹⁴⁷ Even their violent MO, an above-discussed strength, also serves as a weakness. According to Connable, insurgencies which practice the ISIS type of “indiscriminate terror” tend to end more quickly than those that do not.¹⁴⁸ The ongoing dispute between AQ and ISIS,¹⁴⁹ likewise, reveals a number of opportunities for counter-insurgents. According to Byman, “because there is competition for both identity and the cause itself, the primary foe of [a] proto-insurgency in the early stages is perhaps not the government, but the welter of rival organizations vying for recruits and money. Many of these organizations seek to exploit the same cause but use a different identity or platform to do so.”¹⁵⁰ Strength, itself, is one of ISIS' biggest weaknesses. Overconfidence, which plays in the favor of counterinsurgency, is often an overlooked vulnerability of resistance movements. The LTTE, for example, “was so confident in its military

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 104.

¹⁴⁹ Aaron Zelin, “The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy Research Notes* 20 (2014), 1-11.

¹⁵⁰ Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies*, 16.

capabilities that it pulled out of peace talks in 2003, even after achieving de facto semiautonomous self-rule. Six years later, Sri Lankan military forces had rebounded and crushed the LTTE insurgents.”¹⁵¹

Premised on the supposition that ISIS and AQ are entirely synonymous, military leaders are reluctant to adopt ISIS-specific counterinsurgency/counterterrorism policy. According to Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby, the Department of Defense’s position is that, “[ISIS], though they claim to be broken off from al-Qaida, they were born of al-Qaida, and al-Nusra is an offshoot of al-Qaida. So in our minds, from our military perspective, they are very much one and the same.”¹⁵² [emphasis added] And even Deputy national security adviser Antony Blinken draws this conclusion, failing even to acknowledge their breakup: “Zarqawi, the founder of al-Qaida in Iraq was a colleague of Osama Bin Laden before [9/11], very close to him. After 9/11, he formed al-Qaida in Iraq. They associated themselves with al-Qaida.”¹⁵³

Although certainly a product of the Obama administration’s political maneuvering around congressional oversight—he was using the same congressional authorization for the use of military force (AUMF) as that delegated to President George W. Bush for dealing with AQ—his administration’s reluctance to define ISIS in its own terms is both a failure of imagination and a consequence of analytical tunnel vision.

¹⁵¹ Connable, *How Insurgencies End*, 114.

¹⁵² Spencer Ackerman, “Obama maintains Al-Qaida and ISIS are ‘one and the same’ despite evidence of schism,” *The Guardian* (October 2, 2014).

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Policy Recommendations

How to tackle the Islamic State is an obvious point of contention. Especially within the policy community, Washington circles remain divided on the best next step forward, even as the Obama Administration okays and begins its quickly-conceived plan for rolling back ISIS. This discussion is defined by three broader issues—probably better thought of as “given constraints”—which are worth mentioning briefly.

First, the Department of Defense has showed very little strategic competence in the Middle East, in general, over the past decade. Years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq revealed little more than our pronounced inability to understand, correctly formulate, and incorporate strategy into MENA policy. (This is, incidentally, the subject of an interesting monograph recently published by RAND¹⁵⁴) If that is not convincing enough, then a quick look at our position toward Syria and Turkey would probably be more self-evident. Second, the Obama Administration is mired in a weak foreign policy, one aimed almost exclusively at balancing opinion and deflecting criticism. And this is true on both the domestic and international levels and with respect to nearly all American foreign interests. Third, the body of scholarly work, legislation, and legal precedence which accumulated post-September 11 have structurally and institutionally bound our abilities to think clearly and act decisively. Years of analyzing the Qā’ida network have warped our understanding of other groups—their strategies, their tactics,

¹⁵⁴ Linda Robinson, Paul D. Miller, John Gordon IV, Jeffrey Decker, Michael Schwille, and Raphael S. Cohen, “Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War,” *RAND Corporation* (2014).

and their goals. Just as we saw with Obama's most recent overture in Iraq, it has also necessitated flamboyant political maneuvering in order to circumvent these boundaries (in this case, the legal boundaries), only further perpetuating the problem.

Despite these structural/institutional problems, a fresh policy perspective is in order. What DOD is dealing with in Iraq and Syria, as argued in depth in the previous chapter, is a relatively new kind of phenomenon, the composite sum of ISIS's surroundings over the past decade. It is not just a terrorist organization, and it is not simply "one and the same" as AQ. Seeing it either of these ways is both misleading and counterproductive. Rather, the Islamic State is an *adaptive* entity, one which has absorbed not only the tactics of its old affiliate, AQ, but even those of western armies like that of the American military. They were there during the US occupation, and they surely saw the ways in which the US fought and how and by what means it interacted with its host people. Through their experience—and they have a lot of it—they know and understand PSYOP, winning hearts and minds; from their knowledge of AQ and their years of insurgency/terrorism, they know how to instill terror and fear; and they know how to work the Media and hold territory. This should inform Washington's policy. Yet even that classification falls short.

The Department of Defense needs to fundamentally rethink the Islamic State. It needs to base its understanding, not only on precedence—the cases of al-Qā'ida and the Taliban, for starters—but also on the own merits of the Islamic State. What is ISIS? What do they want? And how do they plan to get it? Using intellectual resourcefulness and analogizing certainly have their place in policy formation, but given what is at stake for the United States if ISIS succeeds in their endeavors, this should be saved for less-pressing situations with fewer consequences.

In this regard, and on the basis of the evidence presented herein, seven points should accompany—and indeed define—any change in DOD policy with respect to ISIS:

1. **Adoption of a hybrid counterstrategy.** An air-only campaign is unsustainable and counterproductive on the long-term.¹⁵⁵ DOD should increase utilization of tier-one special forces contingents, especially those with a counterterrorism mandate. Teams should provide reconnaissance on training camp locations, leadership movements, and operative activity in urban areas, coordinating with air divisions. This approach was utilized successfully in the early days of the 2001 anti-Taliban Afghan offensive.¹⁵⁶ Special Forces should work closely with local forces and militias, like the Syrian and Iraqi Peshmergas or the Sons of Iraq,¹⁵⁷ to increase counterterrorism capacity, understanding of counterinsurgency and counter-ideology fundamentals, policing ability, and weapons maintenance and operation. This cooperation should also include sustained aid, weapons and ammunitions provisions, and intelligence sharing.¹⁵⁹ This hybrid approach should be population-centric, aimed at: environment formation and perception-shaping; clearing insurgents; holding territory;

¹⁵⁵ Kimberly Kagan, Frederick W. Kagan, and Jessica D. Lewis, “Middle East Security Report 23: A Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State,” *Institute for the Study of War* (September 2014), available at http://www.criticalthreats.org/sites/default/files/pdf_upload/

¹⁵⁶ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (Penguin, 2004).

¹⁵⁷ The United States has a long history dealing with the Kurdish Peshmergas. For one example, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 1996), 369-370. Michael Knights offers some specific policy options for correcting Kurdish weaknesses in “What Iraq’s Kurdish Peshmerga Really Need,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (August 7, 2014).

¹⁵⁸ Colin Freeman, “Iraqi neighbours rise up against al-Qa’eda,” *The Telegraph* (April 12, 2008).

¹⁵⁹ For elaboration on intelligence sharing, see James Igoe Walsh, “Intelligence Sharing for Counter-Insurgency,” *Defense & Security Analysis* 24:3 (2008), 281-301.

building-capacity; and transitioning to host government institutions.¹⁶⁰ This was a COIN approach utilized successfully in the 1940s against the Hukbalahap movement in the Philippines.¹⁶¹ Overt increase in conventional boots should be avoided, as it runs counter to “hearts and minds.” Efforts should include coordination with local political bodies and psychological operations (PSYOP) directed at non-supporters and supporters of the Islamic State. These should encourage defection and internal resistance; obstruct fighter retention and recruitment efforts; and shift blame of civilian casualties onto ISIS through (counter-) information operations (IO).¹⁶²

2. **Disruption of territorial integrity.** Disrupting the contiguity of the Islamic State should be a central effort. DOD aerial contingents and Special Forces should target lines of communication and transportation infrastructure, including major highways, roads, and railways. Destruction of infrastructure should be avoided, as it runs counter to PSYOP effort and social stability. Separating bases of support weakens the Islamic State and its capacity to mobilize operatives and delegitimizes its claims. DOD should coordinate these efforts with local militias and use attritional approaches to weakening and separating bases of support and internal resistance.

¹⁶⁰ Department of the Army, FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 2014).

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 9-2.

¹⁶² These are widely-used tactics in counterinsurgency. See for example Major John Kenneley, “Insurgency Disruption for the Planner,” *Small Wars Journal* (2012).

3. **Disruption of military activity.** Efforts in disrupting and destroying command-and-control centers, communications, and training locations should be sustained, with a strong emphasis on casualty minimization. UAV and cruise missile targeting should be contingent upon field reconnaissance by local militias or Special Forces. DOD should coordinate with their counterparts in the Turkish government to lift restrictions on Incirlik Air Base operations, and to coordinate CT/COIN efforts along the Syrian-Turkish border, where ISIS light armor and weapons platforms are now concentrated. Iraqi and Syrian weapons depots within the boundaries of the Islamic State should also be targeted. Increased deployment of military advisers to Iraq in order to increase antiterrorism and COIN capacity is also advised.

4. **Disruption of governance.** DOD should disrupt governing capacity of the Islamic State. Careful balance between ISIS incapacitation and irreparable damage to Iraqi and Syrian critical infrastructure should be duly exercised. Such an effort may target administrative buildings, media infrastructure, energy sources and other locations peripheral to the most basic social essentials (e.g., markets, hospitals, etc.). This should also include targeting of ISIS leadership personalities (i.e., decapitation strategy), including Baghdadi and his deputies, members of the Shari'a and Shura Councils, and heads of the functional councils.¹⁶³ PSYOP should be directed at local communities to encourage resistance and mass

¹⁶³ Decapitation strikes have yielded successful results in a number of cases, including MNLF, LTTE, and Sandero Luminoso. See Connable, *How Insurgencies End*, 82.

disobedience. Elements from Vietnam, Iraq, and other PSYOP efforts should inform these activities.¹⁶⁴

5. **Severance of financial sources.** DOD, in conjunction with the Department of the Treasury, should work toward disruption of external financial sources, including Gulf-based financiers.¹⁶⁵ Cooperation with regional governments, including the Qataris, Kuwaitis, Emiratis and Saudis, should be an important part of this effort. Disruption of internal financial sources should be given the utmost attention, and will likely require cooperation with the Turkish and Syrian governments and utilization of Special Forces contingents. Lessons learned from the 2001 Taliban counterinsurgency/counter-narcotics campaign, which targeted similarly internally-generated income (and which, in the case of drugs trafficking and production, also negatively impacted on domestic populations, as opium was a staple commodity),¹⁶⁶ should inform these efforts. Oil distribution infrastructure and production sites should be targeted, but not destroyed; highway checkpoints should be eliminated; access to the international financial system should be cut, its finances frozen, and sanctions against its leadership and facilitators implemented.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ The results in Vietnam were decidedly mixed, but some elements, like the Chieu Hoi program, were quite effective. See Michael G. Barger, Maj., “Psychological Operations Supporting Counterinsurgency: 4th PSYOP Group in Vietnam,” MA Thesis for the US Army Command and General Staff College (2007).

¹⁶⁵ Efforts to disrupt AQ funding should inform this—and these efforts are ongoing. See for example: Thomas Joscelyn, “Treasury designates 2 ‘key’ al Qaeda financiers,” *The Long War Journal* (August 22, 2014).

¹⁶⁶ See for example Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009), 215-234.

¹⁶⁷ Patrick B. Johnston, “Countering ISIL’s Financing,” Testimony presented before the House Financial Services Committee on November 13, 2014, published by *Rand Corporation* (November 2014), 6-7.

6. **Disruption of online propaganda.** DOD should implement a counter-propaganda and psych ops strategy for combatting Islamic State social media success. The US government should work with social networking sites to better monitor and respond to this online activity. DOD should increase cyber intelligence and cyber psych ops/counter-propaganda,¹⁶⁸ including creation of fictitious accounts that delegitimize ISIS and dilute its internet presence.

7. **Formation of regional partnerships.** Securing a regional network of partners is crucial to combatting a transnational threat.¹⁶⁹ DOD should redouble its efforts in intelligence sharing, policy coordination, and military cooperation with the Saudi, Qatari, Kuwaiti, Emirati, Jordanian, Israeli, Turkish and Egyptian governments. Multilateralism is the ideal stage, but in many instances bilateral relationships will define these partnerships. Of particular importance is enhancing intelligence cooperation/sharing with the *Turkish government* on a number of issues: movement of individuals across borders; in-flow of Iraqi/Syrian crude oil; ISIS border activity; Kurdish resistance efforts and political machinations; Syrian rebel activity; and other issues.

¹⁶⁸ The US has already conducted counter-propaganda against AQ. See for example: John Hudson, "US Counter-Terrorism Hackers Fight Al Qaeda One Prank at a Time," *The Wire* (May 24, 2012).

¹⁶⁹ Achilles Zaluar and Richard Zeckhauser, "The World of Transnational Threats," Harvard Kennedy School (2002), 1-26.

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APPENDIX A: Summary chart of operational, organizational and strategic differences.

	Islamic State	Al-Qā'ida
STRATEGY		
Unification	Emphasis on group strength: Caliphate first, political change later	Emphasis on opponent strength: political change first, Caliphate later
Sectarianism	Conversion/elimination important	Conversion/elimination later; unity important
Military	Terrorism, insurgency, and conventional military	Terrorism
OPERATIONS		
Territorial Acquisition	12,000 sq. miles of contiguous land in Syria, Iraq	N/A
Governance	Bureaucratic structure; governorates and governors; social service provisions; administrative buildings; institutional structure	N/A
Social Media	Full social media potential	Previously antiquated use of social media, but now full potential
Mass Media	Constant media coverage	Decreasing media coverage
ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS		
Structure	Centralized; statelike, but also asymmetric; large rank-and-file; very coordinated	Largely diffuse; highly asymmetric; small rank-and-file; increasingly uncoordinated
Training Facilities	Operating 12 camps in Syria and 9 in Iraq	
Soldiers/Fighters	30,000 - 100,000 (estimates vary)	3,000-4,000 (estimates vary)
Fighter Retention	High fighter retention	High defection rate
Recruitment	Highly successful recruitment campaign	Stagnated recruitment
Weapons	Advanced weapons platforms, incl. M1A1 main battle tanks, anti-aircraft systems, anti-armor technology, howitzers, and light armor, et al.	Few advanced weapons platforms; weapons primarily asymmetric in nature (i.e., explosives specialists like al-Assiri design innovative IEDs)

	Islamic State	Al-Qā'ida
Finances	Internal sources (e.g., hydrocarbons, taxes, theft, extortion, kidnapping); External sources (e.g., Gulf-based financiers)	External sources only (e.g., Gulf-based financiers)
Membership Composition	Diverse; disproportionately large foreigner contingent	Diverse; disproportionately large foreigner contingent

