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Al-Qaeda's strategic shift

From the far enemy to winning the hearts and
minds of the Ummah

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List of abbreviations

| | |
|------|--|
| AQ | Al-Qaeda |
| AQAP | Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula |
| AQI | Al-Qaeda in Iraq |
| AQIM | Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb |
| AQSL | Al-Qaeda Central Leadership |
| AST | Al-Qaeda in Tunisia |
| CSIS | Center for Strategic and International Studies |
| ICCT | International Center for Counter-terrorism |
| IS | Islamic State |
| ISI | Islamic State in Iraq |
| JN | Jabhat al-Nusra |
| NATO | The North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| U.S | United States |
| WMD | Weapons of Mass Destruction |

1. Introduction

Al-Qaeda(AQ) has transformed the landscape of international affairs and introduced the notion of global terrorism to the general public. It has forced the academic world and scholars to define and redefine the notions of terrorism, counter terrorism and jihadism. It has committed one of the most chilling and brutal attacks this generation has known and indirectly caused the beginning of an ongoing “war on terror”, with AQ being one of the most prominent targets introduced by former president George W. Bush on 16 September 2001 after the attack on 9/11/2001¹.

Former president Barack Obama focused the counterterrorism efforts of the United States (U.S) from foreign wars to AQ. So when Osama bin Laden, one of the founders of AQ, was killed, the Obama administration thought of AQ as defeated. A new enemy emerged from the broken soil of Iraq, the Islamic State (IS). IS did not only manage to govern territory and attract thousands of foreign fighters from Western soil, but they were also successful in attacking the West using lone wolfs and internal cells. The world’s attention and counterterrorism efforts shifted; AQ was old news².

The recent territorial losses of IS in Syria and Iraq however lead to an resumed discussion on the strategic future of AQ. International organizations, like the RAND cooperation, are reiterating the threat of AQ. According to their analyses AQ has adapted their strategy due to the rise of IS, in the shadows of IS and taken advantage of weak and failing states through its affiliates in Syria, Somalia, Yemen, and West Africa. They are slowly but surely becoming a threat³. Other experts believe that since AQ has barely conducted terrorist attacks against the West, their enemy #1, AQ, is no longer a reliable threat⁴. Are these reliable conclusions and how exactly did AQ adapts its strategy in the shadows of IS? To answer that this research will discuss how IS impacted AQ’s strategy, the research question therefore is:

How did the strategy of AQ change due to the rise IS?

¹ History 2019

² Zelin 2017: 1-3

³ Clarke and Lister 2019

⁴ Ibid.

This thesis uses the definition of strategy as *a plan of action designed to achieve a long-term or overall aim*.

Since the rise of IS there have been countless analyses comparing the two terrorist organizations, however almost none discuss the impact IS has on AQ's strategy. AQ has proven to be an adaptable organization, how did AQ adapt to a former affiliate that took the lead in the Jihadi Social Movement (SJM)⁵? And what does that mean for the strategic future of AQ, the answer to that means being able to analyze in which ways AQ is still an threat and what counter terrorism policies could be effective. This is why this topic is not only significant but also a worthy discussion

⁵ Almohammad 2019: 4

2. Literature review

2.1 Terrorist organizations

To have a better understanding on what the modus operandi is of AQ, it is beneficial to digest what a terrorist organization entails and why it would cooperate or compete with another terrorist organization.

Contemporary terrorist organizations can be best viewed as political actors but are often excluded from political participation due to their ideas being too radical, according to Rogers. In order to gather support, pressure political decision makers and spread their ideologies these organizations use terrorism. Because these organizations face an asymmetry versus the government when it comes to power, funding and numbers they revert to non-conventional tactics to achieve their goals⁶. The use of terrorism to achieve a political goal is a strategic decision according to Neumayer and Plümper. Terrorism is often used to obtain intermediate goals. An example of this is the use of suicide bombings by Al-Qaeda in Iraq(AQI) against the Shia population which increased tensions between Sunni's and Shiites. It is said this has been beneficial to the intermediate goals of AQI⁷.

Even though AQ aspires to establish a Caliphate on a long term, their primary objectives are local. The decision to then form international alliances seems random. But it seems that cooperation can often be very beneficial for terrorist organizations like AQ. T. Bacon argues that alliances between terrorist groups is common practice, as terrorist groups are essentially political actors and the formation between international political units happens frequently without regard to time and place⁸. According to Phillips cooperation allows terrorist organizations to increase military strength due to the increased access to both material and human resources⁹. Furthermore Bapat and Bond assert that, especially in the case of organizations being active in the same region and facing the same enemies, cooperation allows organizations then to focus on their own area of operations¹⁰.

⁶ Rogers 2013: 223-224

⁷ Neumayer and Plümper 2009: 717

⁸ Bacon 2014: 6

⁹ Phillips 2014: 337

¹⁰ Bapat and Bond 2012: 795

It is widely recognized that terrorist organizations that cooperate and form alliances become more lethal due to diffusion of tactics. Philips has asserted that cooperation increases the longevity of a terrorist organization. Groups like AQ with a central position and with multiple (in)direct connections can maximize the profits of cooperation and in doing so endure longer¹¹. Terrorist organizations are however inclined to use cooperation opportunistically because of the commitment problem that arises. This is caused by the lack of transparency which causes distrust. Unlike states, terrorist organizations cannot establish institutions to overcome this. In addition terrorist organizations face other bottlenecks when it comes to cooperating. According to Bacon the formation of an alliance could result in attracting more attention from counterterrorism forces because of the increased threat of such an alliance. The alliance also increases the risk of being betrayed or documents being leaked¹². Terrorist organizations furthermore face the security-autonomy trade off; cooperation leads to giving up some degree of independent decision making. If the in-group identities are strong, the exchange of independence could aggravate members regardless of the extra security gained¹³.

Competition between terrorist groups also exists, such as the split between AQ and IS demonstrates. When it comes to competition between terrorist organizations the outbidding theory is most cited. According to S. Nemeth the outbidding theory prescribes that organizations compete for similar resources, the same pool of recruits and public support. The level of violence an organization will use therefore increases to demonstrate their capabilities over the other organizations. Consequently moderate groups are compelled to engage in extreme violence¹⁴. Suicide attacks are seen as the pinnacle of dedication to the cause of jihadism. Once one party in a situation of terrorist outbidding has used this tactic others are likely to follow. According to B. Acosta the longevity of a terrorist organization can increase because of suicide attacks¹⁵. But M. Bloom argues that when it comes to the outbidding theory the social environment is of utmost importance. The social environment in which these suicide attacks occur has to be supportive. If there is no popular support for suicide attacks, these will alienate potential or existing support. In such a setting groups are more likely to refrain from using extreme violence in order to maintain support¹⁶. Those groups will try to free ride on the negative

¹¹ Philips 2014: 337-338

¹² Bacon 2014: 7-8

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Nemeth 2014: 337

¹⁵ Acosta 2016: 5-6

¹⁶ Bloom 2005: 117-118

effects of the group that uses extreme violence. According to Nemeth violence in such a setting might actually decrease¹⁷.

2.2 Perspectives on the strategic shift of AQ

As mentioned before, the counterterrorism activities of the Obama administration were almost entirely focused on defeating AQ, using drone strikes and special operations. This approach yielded success and many AQ leaders were captured or killed, such as the notorious Osama bin Laden. AQ was thought of as an irrelevant organization afterwards. According to Aaron Y. Zelin the Obama administration bought into the false narrative that the Arab Spring which led to the overthrow of some leaders in Arab countries completely discredited AQ¹⁸.

John Brennan the (U.S) Homeland Security advisor even expressed that “the Al-Qaeda narrative is becoming increasingly bankrupt: there is a new wave sweeping through the Middle East right now that puts a premium on individual rights and freedom and dignity; which makes AQ and Bin Laden old news”¹⁹. The conventional idea following the death of Bin Laden was that the core of the group was weakened and due to the rise of IS, the attention of governmental and outside expert analysis was focused on IS²⁰.

Fawaz Gerges, for example, argues in his book *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* that there is a disconnect between the dominant terrorism narrative which portrays AQ as a strategic, existential threat while the real threat is significantly smaller. AQ has won the battle on the psychological level and shattered the peace of mind of Westerners with disproportionate fear for terrorism. This fear is greater and more powerful than the actual capability of AQ. There will never be a closure to the dominant terrorism narrative because AQ cannot be defeated using conventional means because it does not have an army and does not hold territory in a conventional manner. AQ is dangerous and despite the structural weakness it is still able to strike the West. Most of these plots are dependent on amateurs however who lack the training and determination in comparison with their Afghan pioneers²¹. Fawaz Gerges states that the strategic shift to low-level, small attacks is due to an indirect admission of declining

¹⁷ Nemeth 2014: 340-341

¹⁸ Zelin 2017: 2-3

¹⁹ Zelin 2017: 3

²⁰ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

²¹ Fawaz 2011: 192-195

ability²². Reintegrating the stance of collective wisdom that the AQ core has weakened and their strategic shift from focusing on the West to low-level, small attacks locally are due to a decline in capacity. The Homeland Security and counterterrorism program from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) even published a report in 2011 declaring that, according to their analysts, the Arab Spring has fatally undermined AQ's ideology and brought about their inevitable collapse. In their assessment AQ's strategic shift is related to a decline in capability and efforts to uphold their ideology and survive²³. Katharine Zimmer however, who examined the AQ affiliate in the Arabian Peninsula(AQAP), is of the opinion that AQ is prioritizing local fights above the fight against the West because the futures of Sunni-majority countries is at stake. She also believes that AQ senior leadership, also known as Al-Qaeda Central(AQSL), is sensitive to the policy decisions made by the U.S which probably lead to their calculation that a mass-casualty attack in the West would return attention and counterterrorism efforts against AQ instead of IS²⁴.

Because of this consensus in academic studies and the rise of IS, IS became the focus point. Little reports and analysis were written on the state of AQ. It was only after the decline of IS that AQ came to the forefront again. Was AQ indeed old news or did they manage to rebuild and expand in the shadow of IS?

According to the International Crisis Group Special Report AQ has evolved after IS' emergence²⁵. Some AQ affiliates have even managed to become more powerful and seized more territory by grafting themselves onto local insurrections and fighting alongside those instead of trying to fight and absorb other Sunni movements. The evolving strategy was documented between affiliate leaders and a response to new opportunities. The change in strategy may also reflect a change of perspective from Zawahiri, the split with IS might have allowed him to distance the AQ movement from extreme tactics. Some local AQ branches showed more pragmatism with other local militants and communities; they became less extreme and were cautious in killing innocents Muslims and non-Muslims. Some even showed more sensitivity to local norms and values and took popular opinion into account²⁶.

The United States Institute of Peace Report on the Jihadi threat argues that AQ's shift away from the public view since the break with IS and the development of a new "caliphate" may be strategic and

²² Fawaz 2011: 197

²³ CSIS 2011: 8

²⁴ Zimmerman 2017: 50-51

²⁵ International Crisis Group 2016: 23

²⁶ International Crisis Group 2016: 23-25

deliberate²⁷. Controlling territory has been less important to AQ's short term strategy than it was for IS because as Bin Laden has stated: "If our state is not supported by the proper foundations, the enemy will easily destroy it"²⁸. AQ is likely to continue embedding locally, build alliances and further exploit instability. AQ's strategy of staying out of the public view supports them in competing with the IS brand. AQ is likely to continue to adjust its focus to the public perception on the ground even though its long term goal does not differ from IS. They are concluding that "Bin Ladenism has survived Bin Laden"²⁹.

M. Rudner examined AQ's strategic objectives, operational priorities and tactical vectors in the context of the organization's Twenty-Year Strategic plan³⁰. This plan consist of seven stages that are shown below in Table 1. Rudner argues that "available evidence" suggests that the grand strategy of AQ is aimed at establishing a global Caliphate by the year 2020. This examination does not refer to the "available evidence" but uses the growing number of AQ affiliates to substantiate that AQ was busy mobilizing their forces as described in stage 5. According to his examinations the capacities of the core of AQ have been constrained due to counterterrorism efforts but other formal allegiances and Sunni Islamist groups have evolved and are still following this strategy³¹.

Table 1
Al Qaeda twenty-year strategic plan

| Stage | Strategic objective | Timeline | Tactical aim |
|-------|---------------------------------------|-----------|---|
| 1 | "Awakening" | Sept 11 | Provoke U.S. attack on Muslims, galvanize <i>Jihadism</i> |
| 2 | "Opening the Eyes" | 2002–2006 | Force West on defensive |
| 3 | "Arising and Standing Up" | 2007–2010 | Assaults on Turkey and Israel |
| 4 | "Downfall of Apostate Muslim regimes" | 2010–2013 | Saudi Arabia, Jordan, oil-producing countries |
| 5 | "Declaration of Caliphate" | 2013–2016 | Mobilization of Muslim forces |
| 6 | "Total Confrontation" | 2016–2020 | Total war on "non-believers" |
| 7 | "Definitive Victory" | 2020 | Establishment of global Caliphate |

Table 1: AQ's Twenty-year strategic plan³²

Rudner iterates that AQ is still evolving according to their 20 year strategic plan by quoting Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the AQ leader that called on jihadist fighters to wage a war "until the establishment in the Levant of an Islamic state that will restore the Caliphate" in Syria³³. This examination contradicts with

²⁷ Wright 2016: 18

²⁸ Wright 2016: 19

²⁹ Wright 2016: 20-21

³⁰ Rudner 2013: 953

³¹ Rudner 2013: 959-962

³² Rudner 2013: 959

³³ Rudner 2013: 970

the United States Institute of Peace Report on the Jihadi threat in which it is claimed that establishing a caliphate and controlling territory has become less important³⁴. This conclusion is reiterated by C. Lister, in his report on the competing jihadist brands in the Middle East, AQ versus ISIS. Establishing a global caliphate is indeed a long term goal but will take centuries of effort which AQ is aware of. Since the Arab Spring's eruption, which led to unprecedented instability, the local rulers (near enemy) were prioritized over the international enemy (far enemy)³⁵.

According to Lister, AQ's strategic reorientation towards localism was due to the opportunities given by the Arab Spring when the masses demanded regime change. This process of decentralization has given AQ affiliates the opportunity to better embed themselves locally. In his analysis on the social context in which IS operates, Lister states that IS has lost credibility with the local population because of its brutal style of governance which gave AQ a more favorable standing with the local population³⁶. The question which thus arises is: is AQ free riding on the negative outcomes of the strategy of IS and therefore focused on embedding itself more locally?

2.3 Conclusion literature review

As demonstrated above, AQ and its strategy have widely been discussed and analyzed by scholars and institutes. Since the rise of IS several analyses on the comparison between the two have appeared as well. A lot of contradictions in the current available literature on AQ and its strategy remain however. It is evident that AQ has changed its strategy over the years, and it is also evident that AQ has adapted a more local approach since the Arab Spring. What is not evident is what provoked this change exactly and if the prioritization of the local enemy over the far enemy was caused by an adaptation in strategy or by more clearly sticking to an already existing manner of operating in their existing strategy.

This thesis will first look at the roots of AQ strategy and how it has been adapted to suit different geopolitical contexts to secure the survival of AQ. To answer this question whether the change in strategy of AQ was caused by the rise and fall of IS, this thesis will discuss the split between both organizations, which is a broadly discussed topic but rarely analyzed based on sources from within. This thesis seeks to add a perspective on this historic break up and thus improve the academic debate. In order to do so, the aftermath of the split will be analyzed based on the outings of AQ pioneers over the period of 2013 up until today. Finally this thesis will compare the outings of AQ pioneers regarding

³⁴ Wright 2016: 19

³⁵ Lister 2017: 1-3

³⁶ Lister 2017: 8-10

their publicly stated mandated AQ strategies and statistical data. Has AQ indeed transitioned from being a brutal force to winning the hearts and minds of the communities and does the existing data corroborate this?

3. Methodology

My research question relates to a single social phenomenon, and I will therefore approach my research question inductively: I will identify patterns which I will use to formulate an explanation with based on the collected information and data. In order to answer my main research question I first intend to answer four relevant sub questions:

- What is AQs original strategy?

In order to answer this question I will analyze the history of AQ and the roots of their ideology. The answer to this question is relevant to my main research question because it identifies AQs original strategy and what that strategy entails. It's also the starting point in order to identify if there is a change in strategy.

- How did the aftermath of 9/11 and the Arab Spring impact AQs strategy?

In order to answer this question I will look at testimonies from AQ members and reports from counterterrorism organizations to analyze how 9/11 and the Arab spring impacted the terrorist organization. It identifies how AQ has adapted itself due to interventions in their safe havens and changes in the landscape of the Arab region. These major events can also influence strategic shifts, and if so how?

- Did the extreme brutality of IS impact AQ?

In order to answer this question I will analyze the rise and fall of IS and the reason behind the break with AQ. I will not only use secondary resources but also primary recourses like internal testimonies. The answer to this question is relevant to my main research question because it identifies how the strategy of IS impacted AQs strategy

- Is the change of strategy supported by quantitative data on target preferences and attack success rates?

In order to answer this question I will examine the strategic preferences from both AQ and IS, over the period of 2010 till 2017, and compare them. The answer to this question is relevant

to my main research question because it identifies if there is an actual shift in the strategic preferences of AQ .

As my main research question relates to a single social phenomenon the fitting research approach is that of a case study³⁷. The focus rests on one organization: Al-Qaeda. This raises the question to what extent the outcomes of the case study can be generalized; can the findings be applied to other cases? From the onset it should be clear the aim is not to provide general outcomes, since the focus is placed on an extreme, unique case. The outcomes can however provide a better understanding of the modus operandi of AQ, which is beneficial to the analytic community and counterterrorism organizations.

To ensure the reliability and validity of my research, I use primary and secondary sources which include testimonies from AQ members. I incorporated testimonies, direct communication between AQ members and documents published by AQ members because these are the most relevant documents to yield insight into the strategic decisions this thesis is investigating. What is more: these documents have so far received little attention and may therefore indeed add a new perspective to the ongoing debates in the field of research. In adding a qualitative analysis of the quantitative data of two extreme cases in the SJM, and comparing the findings with the qualitative analysis of the aforementioned documents – and in so doing essentially approaching the same question from two angles – I intend to solidify the outcomes of the research.

³⁷ Bryman 2012: 70

4. The origin of Al-Qaeda

القاعدة/ al-qā`ida/ the base

This chapter discusses the origin of AQ and its ideology to digest what AQs initial strategy entailed in order to provide an answer to the first sub question; What is AQs original strategy?

In 2020 it has been more than two decades ago since Osama bin Laden, a Saudi millionaire and one of the prominent founders of AQ, declared war on the U.S on august 23, 1996. It is however imperative to look back further, to the 1980's in Afghanistan. Bin Laden's jihadism established the militant Salafist Islamist multinational organization in 1988 with Abdullah Azam, identified as the intellectual architect by some experts, and several others during the Soviet-Afghan war³⁸.

The organizational forerunner of AQ was the *Maktab al-Khidamat* (Services Office) established in 1984 by Azzam and Bin Laden. It was a network of fund-raising and recruiting offices all over the world. The U.S Government perceived the volunteers to be positive contributors to the fight against Soviet forces in Afghanistan, and therefore no efforts were made to stop the recruitment of non-Afghan volunteers. Towards the end of the Soviet occupation, the U.S intelligence estimated the size of the network to be about 10,000-20,000 "'fighters/volunteers'". The *Maktab al-Khidamat* volunteers in Afghanistan fought alongside the Afghan *mujahideen* factions. Even though the volunteers never directly got financed by the US government, the mujahideen factions received about \$3 billion during the period 1981-1991 and were restocked with U.S military arms via Pakistan. Because of the Afghan mujahideen factions the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan. During this period neither Azzam, Abd al-Rahman, nor Bin Laden, all founders of Maktab and AQ, were known to have openly advocated or planned direct attacks against the U.S³⁹.

AQ , also called the Qaidatul Jihad Organization by its leaders, means " *the base*" which refers to a military base inside Afghanistan for Arab fighters. AQ was established as a guerilla group to fight alongside Afghan mujahideen to fight a holy war (*jihad*) against the invaders⁴⁰. Mujahideen means

³⁸ Katzman 2005: 5

³⁹ Katzman 2005: 6

⁴⁰ Stenersen 2017a: 6-8

those engaged in jihad and is defined as a “military force of Muslim guerilla warriors engaged in jihad”⁴¹.

Azzam especially intended AQ to become an Islamic “rapid reaction force” to intervene whenever and where ever Muslims were threatened. Bin Laden however hoped to deploy the AQ activists to their countries of origin to topple pro-Western Arab leaders. It was during this time that Bin Laden’s influence grew on his likeminded Egyptian inner circle and grew closer to Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri, the operational leader of Al jihad in Egypt who was imprisoned and eventually acquitted for the murder of the Egyptian president A. Sadat in 1981. Al-Zawahiri left Egypt in 1985 to tend to the wounded fighters in Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet war. Because of the ideological differences between the two leaders there was a growing internal power struggle going in. Azzam was assassinated in November 1989; Bin Laden was allegedly responsible for this murder as an attempt to resolve the power struggle. Irrespective who was the cause of Azzam’s death, Bin Laden was able to get control over the *Maktab*’s funds and organizational structures. In the meantime al-Zawahiri grew to be Bin Laden’s main strategist⁴².

4.1 The origins of Al-Qaeda’s Ideology and strategy

AQ’s ideology has its origins in the efforts to reform and modernize faith and society in the late half of the 19th century, the modernist reform in Sunnism. Sunnism is derived from the Arab concept *ahl-al sunnah wa al-jama’ah* (the community of Sunnah). Sunnah, signifying the way Islam is to be lived and practiced, is the largest branch of Islam. Theologians from the University Al-Azhar in Cairo, a center of Sunni orthodoxy, were of the opinion that the modernist reform movement was becoming more heterodox. The movement became known as Salafism (*salaf*) referring to the early uncorrupted Muslim predecessors. The revolutionary tendencies of this movement is the birthplace of AQ’s ideology⁴³.

Salafism in general is concerned with restoring Islam to its origins, and for that reason Salafist Muslims often adhere to a strict interpretation of the Quran. It appealed to many Sunni Arabs that were dealing with resentment and disenfranchisement because of the region’s struggle to deal with the colonial

⁴¹ Saleem 2017: 324

⁴² Katzman 2005: 6-7

⁴³ Henzel 2005: 69

past, neocolonialism and the dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate⁴⁴. Many Arab regimes ended up modeling themselves after Western states. Many revolutionary Salafists however believe that the West and the Jews are out to destroy the religion of Islam and thus engage in a cultural, economic and military struggle. Modern Arab states are also seen as apostates because they facilitate the West. Overall, the Muslim world is in decline and many Salafist groups seek to gain political leverage to use governmental institutions to impose *Shari'a* (Islamic law) and restore the Ummah (the Islamic community)⁴⁵.

Waging a holy war (jihad) is seen as a legitimate way to achieve regime change. The literal meaning of jihad is “*struggle/effort*” and used to describe three kinds of struggle, a personal, collective and violent struggle. Jihad can refer to the internal struggle of a Muslim to resist temptation and strive to be a better Muslim. It also refers to the struggle to build a better Muslim society. Both are seen as the greater jihad, the lesser jihad refers to engaging in a holy war and use force to defend Islam or even expand Islam. Out of the 6234 verses in the Quran only 28 verses mention the notion of jihad, which is why it is one of the most theological contested Islamic concepts that is constantly being re-defined⁴⁶.

Because of the need to justify the violent engagement with Arab regimes, to stall the encroachments of the West in these regimes, the violent branch of the Salafist movement needed a theological foundation. They redefined the concept of *takfiri*, the accusation of a Muslim being a non-believer (apostasy), the use of violence against a “non-believer” for the protection of the Ummah is therefore legitimized. The notion *takfiri* refers to the accusation itself which comes from the notion *kafir* “a Muslim who is declared impure”. Islamic scholars are in agreement that the practice of declaring fellow Muslims *takfir* is forbidden by the Quran, it is in fact a sin. The only religious authority that can declare a follower of the Abrahamic religion a *kafir* is the *Ulema* (a body of Muslim scholars who are recognized as specialist who know Islamic sacred law and theology) after all of the legal steps in the *Shari'a* process have been taken⁴⁷.

Another ideological forefather of the modern jihadist movement is Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian scholar. He was convinced that the current Muslim world is in a state of *jahiliyya* (ignorance), a term used to describe life in the Arabian Peninsula prior to the existence of Islam. According to Qutb only a vanguard, a borrowed term from Marxism meaning a “small core of committed individuals necessary

⁴⁴ Henzel 2005: 70

⁴⁵ Turner 2010: 543-544

⁴⁶ Haykel 2016: 72-73

⁴⁷ Badar et al. 2017: 133-135

to mobilize the masses to communist revolution”, could awaken the Ummah (Muslim community) and rescue it. In his words: “It is necessary that there should be a vanguard which sets out and then keeps walking on the path, marching through the vast ocean of jahilliyya which has encompassed the entire world.”⁴⁸

Abdullah Azzam, who is still acknowledged as one of the most influential jihadist theorists and strategists of the 1980’s, published the article “al-Qaeda al-Sulbah” in 1988 in which he discusses the purpose and function of a vanguard:

“For every invention there must be a vanguard to carry it forward an, while forcing its way into society, endure enormous expenses and costly sacrifices. There is no ideology, neither earthly nor heavenly that does not require such a vanguard that gives everything it possesses in order to achieve victory for this ideology. It carries the flag all along the sheer endless and difficult path until it reaches its destination in the reality of life, since Allah has destined that it should make it and manifest itself. This vanguard constitutes the solid base (al-Qaeda al-subah) for the expected society.”⁴⁹

In 1987 Azzam reaffirmed these ideological ideas and stated in his short book *Join the Caravan* that the vanguard will serve as the “beating hart and deliberating mind” that provides leadership, and strategic and ideological guidance to the Muslim community⁵⁰.

All the AQ’s leaders and ideological forefathers agreed that the Islamic revolution needed leadership and therefore a vanguard. A revolution that lacks both ideological and strategic guidance will eventually exhaust itself. They deemed a leaderless jihad model to be strategically infeasible⁵¹.

Al-Zawahiri’s strategic approach for AQ is embedded in this revolutionary Salafist ideology. He identified and prioritized these goals for AQSL: first, the achievement of ideological coherence and organization, secondly, jihad against apostate Arab regimes and third, the establishment of a traditional Muslim state at the heart of the Arab world⁵². In order to attain this, AQSL needs to “conduct political action among the masses, combined with an urban terrorist campaign against the secular regimes, supplemented with attacks on the external enemy, indicating the U.S and Israel, as a means of propaganda that will strengthen the jihad’s popular support”⁵³. In his book *Knights Under*

⁴⁸ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

⁴⁹ Smith 2014

⁵⁰ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Henzel 2005: 76

⁵³ Ibid.

the Prophet's Banner al-Zawahari reminds his Salafist readers that the Arab apostate regimes are the real targets. He also states that visible attacks against external enemies will cause inevitable retaliation that will rally the ordinary Muslim community to the cause of the revolutionary fundamentalist movement⁵⁴.

⁵⁴ Henzel 2005: 76-77

5. Al-Qaeda and it's challenges

As demonstrated in the literature review, two major events impacted AQ and the Arab region; 9/11 and the Arab Spring. This chapter will analyze how the aftermath of 9/11 and the changes in the region due to the Arab Spring impacted AQs structure and strategy.

5.1 Al-Qaeda's structure and strategy before 9/11

Historically, the leaders of AQ did not seek direct territorial control. AQ was allowed to stay in Afghanistan to grow and expand. Bin Laden even swore an oath of allegiance (bay'a) to Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban, to reaffirm that it was not his intention to seek direct territorial control nor to interfere in their local government. Because of the protection from the Taliban, AQ could work on building and strengthening their organization which resulted in the peak of its recruitment⁵⁵. AQ established a multi-phased training process and professionalized its bureaucratic structure. AQ in Afghanistan established a digital personnel system that included the battlefield experience of their recruits but also performance assessments from supervisors. Their digital network of folders discussed budgets and training manuals as well as scouting reports for possible international attacks⁵⁶.

There is little known about the internal dynamics of AQ during its earlier years in Afghanistan, the arrests of some AQ recruiters that executed external operations brought more insight in how those were arranged⁵⁷. Paolo Jose de Almeida Santos, a Portuguese AQ recruit, who tried to execute the former Afghan King Mohammed Zahr Shah in November 1991, explained in an interview that he directly proposed the plot to Abu Hafs al-Masri (military chief of AQ) and Bin Laden. Santos interpreted the fact that his direct interactions with Bin Laden as a sign of disorganization and a lack of a well-defined hierarchy⁵⁸. However Nasser al-Bahri, Bin Laden's bodyguard before 9/11, stated that he intended to foster a culture of entrepreneurship, and therefore allowed individuals to bypass AQs bureaucracy and present their attack plans direct to the senior commanders amongst which Bin Laden. It was often not him but his deputies that would assess those plans based on their fit with the strategy

⁵⁵ Stenersen 2017a: 7

⁵⁶ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Bergen 2006: 116

of AQ. Santos therefore saw Abu Hafs al-Masri as the real chief of AQ since he was planning all the operations. These insights suggest that there was an operational management model of centralization of decision and decentralization of execution⁵⁹.

The three most prominent attacks (the USS Cole attack; the 1998 embassy bombings; 9/11) engineered by AQ reveal another aspect of that management model. For all three attacks Bin Laden wanted to personally select the perpetrators, which contradicts the principle of decentralization of implementation. Some analysts however believe that this method reinforces the hands-off approach of AQ leadership: the responsibilities for coordination and preparation were still delegated to subordinates. Handpicking the individuals was just for quality assurance⁶⁰.

Some analysts view AQ as a diffuse network and for that reason discount its organizational capacity. Former State Department counterterrorism official David Long even argued in a published article in January 2000 that AQ mirrored “an informal brotherhood rather than a clear, sterling network”, he argued that the group was “a clearing house from which other groups elicit funds, training and logistical support”⁶¹. Even though other counterterrorism analysts see AQ as a hierarchical and increasingly professional organization, the American government officials have had the tendency to downplay the structure of AQ which may have affected the ability to anticipate a complex operation like 9/11. A CIA report on Afghanistan did acknowledge that “Afghanistan provided Bin Laden a relatively safe operating environment to oversee his organization’s worldwide terrorist activities” and the report put a lot of emphasis on the training camps of AQ, stating that they “form the foundation of the worldwide mujahideen network”⁶².

According to the 9/11 Commission Report, government officials were still in doubt if AQ should be seen as a serious threat and it was even a big deal as late as September 4, 2001 even though AQ’s sophisticated training activities had been increased. The 9/11 attacks eliminated any doubt about the capabilities of AQ. The attack also resulted into the rapid dismantling of the physical infrastructure of AQ and disrupted their bureaucracy due to the American invasion in Afghanistan. As a result AQ’s senior leaders are scattered across the Middle East and South Asia, AQ however adapted to these challenges and were still able to expand their geographical presence and reach. AQ’s strategy and

⁵⁹ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

⁶⁰ Stenersen 2017b

⁶¹ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

⁶² DCI Counterterrorist center 2001

structure in the aftermath ended up being more difficult to interpret than the version of AQ before 9/11⁶³.

Several senior leaders settled in Iran to continue operating after the invasion in Afghanistan in November 2002. Even though not all top members were present it marked a rare occasion, as it was not often that AQ leaders came together in person to discuss internal affairs. Abu Musab al-Suri was also present and expressed, during the meeting, that his predictions came true. He had urged the fellow top leaders of AQ several times to cease external operations while AQ was under the protection of the Taliban⁶⁴. He was concerned that if AQ would launch a major attack the Taliban's emirate would collapse and the training camp infrastructure would crumble due to retaliation from the U.S. By the time of the meeting international forces were hunting down prominent jihadists, and general Abu Hafs al-Masri was already captured. Abu Musab al-Suri was convinced that AQ would cease to exist, under those circumstances, as a centralized organization. He therefore proposed they should dismantle its hierarchy and pursue a model of leaderless jihad. By dispersing AQ's network around the globe, individuals and small cells would be able to assume responsibility to continue AQ's military campaign while not being directed by AQ⁶⁵. His perspective was the first stepping stone of a new AQ strategy.

5.2 The man behind the new Al- Qaeda: Abu Musab al-Suri

"Terrorism is a duty and assassination is a Sunnah"- Abu Musab al-Suri⁶⁶

No other individual than Abu Musab al-Suri has done more to conceptualize AQ's new strategy after 9/11. Abu Musab al-Suri is a *nom de guerre*, his birth name is Mustafa Setmariam Nassar, and he is a Syrian jihadist born in Aleppo in 1958 where he studied mechanical engineering. After his studies he joined the Islamic Combat Vanguard, an organization that was connected to the Syrian Muslim brotherhood. According to Ali Sadreddine Al-Bayanouni, former head of the Syrian Muslim brotherhood, Abu Musab al-Suri was known as an "extremist" from an early age⁶⁷. After the bloody crackdown in the Hama confrontations of 1982, Abu Musab al-Suri moved to France and then relocated to Spain where he married Elena Moreno, a Spanish convert. Abu Musab al-Suri always wanted to revive the jihad in Syria and was easily persuaded by Sheikh Abdullah Azzam (founder of

⁶³ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 3

⁶⁷ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 2-3

AQ) to join the Afghan jihad in 1988⁶⁸. Setmariam acknowledged his involvement with the early AQ in an online statement in 2004:

“I had the honor to become a member of AQ and work with the organization until 1990 during which I trained some of the AQ vanguards. I taught martial and military science at AQ camps and the camps of all Afghan Arabs. I specialized in making explosive devices and the carrying out of special operations and guerilla warfare in cities in which I received advanced training in Iraq, Egypt and Jordan⁶⁹.”

In 1991 he left Afghanistan for his old residence in Spain after which he claimed to have lost contact with Bin Laden and AQ. During that time he did publish one of his first books *The Syrian experience on the Islamic movement in Syria* which became popular amongst jihadist hardliners who considered Abu Musab al-Suri to be one of the pioneers. In his book he accused the Islamic movement of being too lazy and not drastic enough⁷⁰. In 1998 he permanently returned to Afghanistan with his family and stated that his time in Europe had benefited his strategic thinking. In Afghanistan he pledged his allegiance to Mullah Mohammad Omar (Prince of the Taliban) and worked for the Defense Ministry of the Taliban as a spokesmen. He also established the famous Al-Ghuraba camp where he trained Arabs and non-Arabs and also founded the Al-Ghuraba Center for studies to disperse jihadist thought as well as the call for global resistance. During this time he grew close to Mullah Omar and was therefore not considered to be affiliated to AQ despite his early on participation in AQ⁷¹. Because of the dispersion of his intellectual ideas combined with his practical experience, Abu Musab al-Suri was well respected among Arab Afghans and a rival to Bin Laden. He openly stated that he was agitated by the latter's claim to leadership of the jihadist movement and his pride: “I think our brother (bin Laden) has caught the disease of screens, flashes, fans and applause⁷².”

Abu Musab al-Suri was one of the ardent critics of the 9/11 especially since Bin Laden didn't get permission from Mullah Omar whom Abu Musab al-Suri had pledged alliance to and, according to him, the fall from the Taliban lead to the fall of the Islamic caliphate. Despite the negative consequences of 9/11, like the American attack on Islam and its followers as he stated in his book, he gave his full backing to Bin Laden, allegedly because Bin Laden pledged alliance Mullah Omar: “When I met Sheik Osama, for the last time in November 2001 during the battles to defend the emirate, we pledged

⁶⁸ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 3

⁶⁹ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 4

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 5

⁷² Cullison 2004

allegiance to the Prince of the Faithful. I pledged to Sheik Osama that I will persist in Jihad and the war against the enemy.”⁷³

Abu Musab al-Suri was fascinated by the impact of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and had built up expertise with making such weapons over the years. He even helped train AQ recruits in the use of poisons and chemicals with Abu Khabab al-Masri who was the WMD Chief of AQ⁷⁴. A letter from him to AQ operatives in Afghanistan, advising them to develop and use “dirty bombs” to halt the advance of the Americans, was the reason U.S authorities issued a \$5 million reward for his whereabouts.

Within the jihadist community his reputation as an extremist hardliner grew. He was known for tracing down defectors of his group to execute them. In the widely distributed videos of his classes to future jihadi at the Ghuraba training camp he often said: “Kill wherever and don’t make a distinction between men, women and children”⁷⁵. Only the best and the brightest of the future jihadist generation were allowed to join the Ghuraba camp and even though it was partly funded by Bin Laden it was completely independent from the other AQ camps. At this camp Abu Musab al-Suri formulated the new strategic concept for jihad called “individual terrorism”. In one of his classes he explained that because of individual terrorism it would be easier to attract more young future jihadi. Secret hierarchical organizations failed to attract young Muslims because of the fear that authorities will reach them when they join such an organization. Individual terrorism was also necessary due to the persisting pressure from “the Jews, Crusaders and lapsed Muslim regimes”⁷⁶.

Abu Musab al-Suri approach was based on his critique of AQ hierarchical structure. In one of his classes he drew a diagram as shown in figure 1, to indicate how easy it was to trace cells back to a leader.

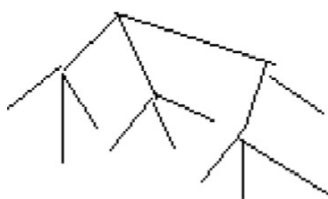


Figure 1: AQ cell structure drawn by Abu Musab al-Suri⁷⁷

⁷³ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 6

⁷⁴ Rej 2016

⁷⁵ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 7

⁷⁶ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 7-8

⁷⁷ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 8

To make sure that individual terrorism has impact you require a significant amount of mobilization to achieve a mass participation jihadist movement. To achieve this Abu Musab al-Suri intended to distribute videotapes of his classes to teach individuals around the world how to incite fellow Muslims to become jihadist, for example, by highlighting “the Jewish-Crusader oppression of Muslims” or “the degeneracy of the Western world/its sin, gays and lesbians”⁷⁸. The attacks should take place in the countries of the residence of these future jihadists. He also informed his trainees on how to organize this new way of jihadism: “You should form a brigade and work directly. I advise your brigade to not exceed ten members. You shouldn’t expand or from too many. In case you are caught, they are all caught.”⁷⁹

The goal of this new strategy is to spread a” Jihadist cancer to face the bad cancer of the world order”⁸⁰. The criteria for the targets according to Abu Musab al-Suri are:

- “where it hurts the enemy and costs him the most”⁸¹
- “where it awakens Muslims and revives the spirit of jihad and resistance”⁸²

To make sure that this new strategy works the individual initiatives needed to be directed through strategic guidance from Abu Musab al-Suri himself or other AQ leaders, to achieve a state of general unity the initiatives should also be credited to AQ. He stated in his classes that Muslims who do not want to fight on the front should call the press and just state that they are from the global Islamic resistance and claim responsibility for any attack around the world⁸³.

AQ has evolved along similar lines as Abu Musab al-Suri’s teachings: they have developed into a looser and broader-based movement. The terrorist attacks in Casablanca, Istanbul, Madrid, Bali, Belgium and London were all initiated by small locally recruited cells contrary to the centralized attacks as 9/11 or as the attacks on the embassies in Africa⁸⁴. As advised by Abu Musab al-Suri, AQ leaders also supported the local cell that carried out the London 7 July 2005 bombings and the same leaders are quick in claiming attacks on European allies by lone wolves or local cells. What contributes to the impact of Abu Musab al-Suri’s ideas is that many of the recruits he trained are now recruiting and training other jihadis globally, like Amir Azizi, an al-Ghuraba trainee who is wanted in connection with the Madrid

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 7-9 and Cullison 2004

⁸⁰ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 9

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Cullison 2004

bombing and helped build up the AQ cell in Spain. It is likely that the majority of the perpetrators of the attacks globally in the recent years have been exposed to and are influenced by Abu Musab al-Suris ideas, especially since his teachings are posted on Islamist websites every day still⁸⁵.

To conclude, Abu Musab al-Suri was the strategist behind AQs strategy after 9/11. The more recent attacks from lone wolfs or local cells in the West during 2016, 2017, 2018, all strike similarities to Abu Musab al-Suri's teachings. Although he was a strategist, and an off- and online teacher he posed a great threat to the West and his arrest in 2005 has removed one of the most articulate thinkers of the jihadist movement⁸⁶. He encouraged future jihadis to adopt brutal methods while having no regard for civilian life just to achieve their goals and introduced AQ to the idea of using WMD's in their fight against the West and its allies.

5.3 The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia in December 2010 when Mohammed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, set himself of fire as a way to protest the seizing of his vegetable stand by the authorities. His sacrificial act served as a catalyst. The many street protests that followed in Tunisia caused the authoritarian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to abdicate his position. This regime change inspired activists in other countries in the region and evoked protests. The Arab Spring thus stands for the series of pro-democracy uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across the Arab world. The participants were demanding increased social freedoms as well as greater participation in the political process⁸⁷. These protests in some cases led to full-scale civil wars like in Syria, Libya and Yemen. In Libya, for example, the uprisings led to the end of the authoritarian regime of Muammar Qaddafi. Libya remained in a state of civil war which contributed to the worldwide refugee crisis. The civil war that erupted in Syria is also seen as the result of the Arab Spring⁸⁸.

Just like the Obama administration many analysts agreed with the common opinion that the Arab Spring which led to the overthrow of some leaders, discredited AQ and its ideology. This is because of the fact that at the beginning of the Arab Spring these events showed that dictators could be

⁸⁵ Cruickshank and Ali 2007: 10-11

⁸⁶ Roggio 2005

⁸⁷ Encyclopædia Britannica 2019

⁸⁸ Ibid.

overthrown without the use of violence. This also happened without AQ being involved which, according to the collective wisdom, showed the irrelevance of the organization⁸⁹.

Even though AQ may have been surprised by the events, they did take advantage of the collapse of autocratic regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Syria which presented an opportunity to expand into countries which had previously been difficult to penetrate⁹⁰. The uprisings swept away old regimes that also served as counterterrorism counterparts for the U.S, which in turn opened up new public places and safe havens for AQ. AQ front groups were subsequently created in Tunisia (Anshar al Sharia in Tunisia - AST) , Libya (Ashar al-Sharia in Libya - ASL), Egypt (Ansar al-Sharia in Egypt - ASE) and Syria (Jabhat al-Nusra - JN). AQAP exploited the chaos and instability in Yemen and even held territory there from mid-2011 to mid-2012. After the fall of Qaddafi in Libya the weapons market flourished, after which the branch Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb(AQIM) took advantage of that and reignited its insurgency in northern Mali⁹¹. It can be concluded that due to the aftermath of the Arab Spring throughout the region AQ has been enabled to widen its reach.

5.4 Strategic reforms

AQ had to adjust and refine its strategy as a result of the changes in the region but also due the lessons learned from the failed jihad attempts in Afghanistan. According to Aaron Y. Zelin the desire to refine was especially rooted in the excesses of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, whose role as the leader of AQI and methods will be discussed in the following chapters⁹².

The reforms that AQ implemented centered largely on greater outreach to local communities. This meant working through local insurgencies, which created the different affiliates, and the practice of *dawa*⁹³. The term *dawa* refers to “activities carried out by Islamists to win adherents and enlist them in a campaign to impose sharia law on all societies⁹⁴”. These activities are often humanitarian activities blended with subversive political activities⁹⁵. The *dawa* approach of AST, for example, included social services which included the distribution of food, clothing, basic supplies and medical care and medicine. These efforts concentrated on rural and impoverished areas of Tunisia that were often neglected by the government. AST has a history of providing emergency humanitarian assistance in

⁸⁹ Zelin 2017: 2

⁹⁰ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

⁹¹ Zelin 2017: 2-5

⁹² Zelin 2017: 2

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Hirsi Ali 2017: 15

⁹⁵ Ibid.

the wake of natural disasters. These services however were accompanied by the distribution of literature to propagate AQs ideology. Because of the provision of social services AST was able to establish a parallel state within Tunisia. AST has been able to portray itself as the champion of those who have been neglected and a critic of the status quo⁹⁶.

In the aftermaths of the Arab Spring and the resurgence of IS, AQSL understood that it had to be cautious with its expansion in North Africa and the region. The previous global counterterrorism architecture had its focus on AQSL, this focus now shifted to IS⁹⁷. AQSL did not want to risk triggering attention from the international security forces and therefore opted for a *covert growth strategy*⁹⁸. This strategy means that “AQSL would deploy envoys to countries affected by the Arab spring and establish affiliates there, but no public announcement about these new relationships would be made⁹⁹.” The covert affiliates were explicitly instructed to mask their links with AQ. This is substantiated with a letter from Zawahiri written in 2013 to Abu Muhammad al-Julani, scolding him for publicly revealing the ties with AQ without asking permission from AQSL¹⁰⁰.

The outreach to local communities is part of this covert growth strategy and aimed at AQ making itself indispensable to local insurgencies by planting deeper roots and becoming intertwined. Because of this strategy analysts were slow to recognize the relationship between AQ and its covert affiliates. When an attack occurred on the U.S consulate in Benghazi in 2012, the intelligence community concluded that AQ was involved. The Obama administration however stated that the attack was the result of spontaneous protests that escalated. Journalists and analysts repeated that and labeled ASL as “purely local extremist organizations¹⁰¹”.

As mentioned before the reason why the analytic community and the Obama administration overlooked the relationship between AQ and its covert affiliates, was because they bought into the notion that the Arab Spring and Bin Laden’s death was the end of AQ¹⁰². This may have led many to overlook key shifts in the AQ strategy. Former president Obama even noted in a speech given in May

⁹⁶ Gartenstein-Ross 2013: 11-12

⁹⁷ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018 & Zelin 2017: 4

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

¹⁰² Zelin 2017: 2

2013 that the post Arab Spring jihadist movement consist of “collections of local militias or extremist interested in seizing territory¹⁰³”.

The obsolete understanding of AQs global strategy prevented many analysts from understanding how cover affiliates fit into AQs growth model since, according to many, AQ was exclusively focused on attacking the “far enemy”. According to scholars like Jarret Brachman and Daniel Byman the shift to a locally oriented strategy is a sign of decline¹⁰⁴. Brachman argued: “AQs primary affiliates have turned inward and are concentrating more on making territorial gains locally, appealing to the local populous and consolidating themselves through low-level criminality than they are on advancing AQ grandiose global agenda, this is a sign of declination¹⁰⁵.”

Such assessments of AQs strategy in the post Arab Spring period might be somewhat confined. When looking back to the original strategy of AQ, developed by its pioneers, the far enemy strategy was a means to an end. This strategy was motivated by the belief that AQ can only topple local regimes if the West cripples first, but was never intended to be an unalterable commitment to prioritize the “far enemy” over the “near enemy”. The Arab Spring revealed that the West would not necessarily intervene in the autocratic states that AQ wants to wage jihad against. In Libya the West stepped in to topple Qaddafi, in Egypt no intervention was implemented when Hosni Mubarak fell¹⁰⁶.

In conclusion, the excesses of al-Zarqawi stimulated AQ to refine its strategy and focus more on local communities, and the events of the Arab Spring created unforeseen opportunities for AQ. It enabled AQ to expand its influence and employ their more locally focused strategy. This shift in strategy was largely overlooked by analytic community, where the popular opinion was that the Arab Spring would be the end of AQ because of a rather restricted interpretation of AQs global strategy.

¹⁰³ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Brachman 2016

¹⁰⁶ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

6. The Islamic State

As concluded in the chapter above it were the excesses of al-Zarqawi that made AQ refine its strategy. To gain further insight into the strategical changes because of these excesses, this chapter will examine how al-Zarqawi's reign and IS impacted AQSL..

6.1 Brutality of IS

AQ managed to survive and rebuild after 9/11 even though the base of the organization was under immense pressure in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This was due to the strategic error the U.S made in the early years of the global war on terror. Due to the negative consequences of the invasion in Iraq such as the inadequate policies of the Coalition Provisional Authority that failed to effectively sustain the state of Iraq, there was a widespread discontent among the Iraqi population¹⁰⁷. Bin Laden even stated that the Iraqi war was a "golden and unique opportunity" for his organization¹⁰⁸.

The insurgency in Iraq gained momentum under the leadership of Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi and his organization Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad/'The Organization of Monotheism and Jihad. To capitalize on the attractive strategic position and robust network AQ formalized their relationship with Zarqawi and he pledged alliance, transforming his group to AQI¹⁰⁹. AQ's leaders, even Bin Laden, harbored reservations about Zarqawi, whom he considered to lack formal education, a street thug and he was prone to violence. Zarqawi maintained a significant amount of autonomy and ignored the strategic objectives from AQ's leaders to pursue a campaign of sectarian bloodletting. Zarqawi's slaughters of Iraqi Shia, reluctance to cooperate with other militant groups and his tendency for extreme violence were conflicting with AQ's methodology for their brand in Iraq. Out of fear that the reputation of AQ would be tarnished, due to his brutality, AQSL sent out letters to motivate him to moderate his strategy. Al-Zawahiri urged Zarqawi to focus on building popular support and avoid the increasement of tensions with the Shia population, making clear that he feared that Zarqawi's approach would alienate the population. As he stated: "the strongest weapon which mujahedeen enjoy is popular

¹⁰⁷ Monten 2014: 181-182

¹⁰⁸ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

¹⁰⁹ Byman 2016: 131

support from the Muslim masses therefore you must avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve¹¹⁰”.

Atiyah Abd al-Rahman echoed al-Zawahiri’s advice in another letter stating that Zarqawi should overlook the flaws of the population and tolerate “a great deal of harm from them for the sake of not having them turn away or turn into enemies¹¹¹.” Atiyah demanded that Zarqawi halted his violent tendencies for the risk of eroding public sympathy for AQ¹¹².

Even though Zarqawi passed away in June 2006 the violent nature of AQI prevailed. Attacking civilians, including children, and kidnapping innocents became everyday activities. As a result, Shiites and even Sunnis formed their own militias, and local Sunni communities also began to cooperate with the U.S against AQI. AQI's violence against Muslims also sparked a rebellion in the jihadist community; jihadists began to distance themselves from the group and criticized AQSL for killing so many Muslims by its local supporters in Iraq¹¹³. Abu Mohammad al-Salmani, commander of the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI) publicly stated: “Al-Qaeda has killed more Iraqi Sunni in Anbar province during the past month than the soldiers of the American occupation have killed within three months. People are tired of the torture. We cannot keep silent anymore¹¹⁴.”

The commander of the Mujahidin Army in Baqubah, Abu Marwan said: “We do not want to kill the Sunni people nor displace the Shia people like Al-Qaeda is doing, what they are doing is contradictory to Islam¹¹⁵”.

Abu Osama al-Iraqi, an Iraqi jihadist, uploaded a video on several jihadist websites on October 26, 2006 and called on Bin Laden to cut ties with AQI because of their deviant behavior. He also wrote a letter to Bin Laden which included: “Dear Sheik, we ask God to convey our words to you and that he not hide them from you and some of those around you, so that you can make the appropriate decision. Either you dissolve AQI’s oath of allegiance, and we will be your sons, able to cope with leading the war and the jihad here, or you remain silent. Don’t expect us to take it well... The keys to the lock of strife are in your hands, so either lock or unlock it¹¹⁶.”

¹¹⁰ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr 2018

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Atiyah’s letter can be found at <https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Atiyahs-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf>.

¹¹³ Byman 2012: 133

¹¹⁴ Hashim 2018: 104

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

This documented evidence supports the argument that the social environment in which the outbidding between terrorist groups occurs is of utmost importance. It was the social environment in which the extreme violence took place that caused AQI's actions to alienate popular support. In order to regain popular support AQI changed their name to Islamic state in Iraq (ISI), and under the leadership of al-Baghdadi the organization was resurrected. This experience however made it clear to many AQ jihadist leaders that a strategy tailored in absolutist ideological terms that is also imposed aggressively is likely to fail. AQ's ideological zeal alienated the local Iraqi population and contributed to the undermining of its project. Many jihadist leaders concluded that the strategy of imposing Islamist rule was thus not viable¹¹⁷.

This new way of thinking within AQSL is reiterated by Abu Musab Abdual Wadud, the AQ leader of AQIM in a letter to his sub-commanders: "the current baby is in its first days, crawling on its knees, and it has not yet stood on its two legs. If we really want it to stand on its own two feet in this world full of enemies waiting to pounce, we must ease its burden, take it by the hand, help it, support it until it stands...One of the wrong policies that we think you carried out is the extreme speed with which you applied Shariah...Our previous experience proved that applying Shariah in this way will lead to people rejecting the religion and engender hatred towards the mujahideen¹¹⁸."

6.2 Rise and fall of IS

ISI played no role in the disintegration of the Syrian state, although al-Baghdadi took advantage of it to expand the scope of its organization and strive for a larger Sunni Islamic state. On behalf of Al-Baghdadi, Abu Mohammed al-Julani was ordered to spread the ideas of ISI in Syria. That led to the establishment of JN. JN turned out to be successful in attracting recruiters and gaining momentum¹¹⁹.

Through the success of JN, al-Baghdadi wanted to expand the scope of ISI. He ordered JN to fully become part of the organization of ISI which would eventually lead to a larger occupation area and to the name change adDawla al-Islāmiyya fi al-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām/Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham(ISIS)¹²⁰. There was a significant difference between JN's approach in Syria and ISI in Iraq though. JN's strategy was mainly rooted in winning over the population by not implementing Islamic law, cooperating with other groups and avoiding extreme brutality. Because of this strategic difference between JN and ISI,

¹¹⁷ Lister 2019

¹¹⁸ Bunzel 2017

¹¹⁹ Bruynseels et al. 2013: 6-7

¹²⁰ Ibid.

JN sought advice from AQLS; al-Julani prior to that reported directly to ISI. Al-Zawahiri, leader of AQ, decided that JN as part of AQ would be active in Syria and ISI would focus on Iraq. Al-Julani mentioned in an interview that he was hesitant to announce the links of its group before to AQ because of the negative popular perceptions. Public association with AQ was not an ideal scenario but preferred over association with ISI because of their brutal tactics. Al-Baghdadi rejected this decision which caused a split in the JN organization, and about 65% of the organization joined ISI¹²¹.

Abu'Abdullah as-Shami, the former spokesman for JN and member of the Sharia Committee, distanced himself in a published letter from the ideology of ISI. JN and AQSL apparently agreed that the strategy used in Iraq would mean suicide for JN in Syria¹²². Attempts to restrain ISI in Syria failed, in areas that they had taken from the Assad regime due to the efforts of JN and other rebel groups, ISI in Syria started to enforce sharia and expel Sunni rebels that fought against Assad. This led to alienation from their supporters inside and outside of Syria and to the introduction of derogatory labels for al-Baghdadi's organization like "*Daesh*" meaning harshness and "*Khawarij*" referring to an extremist group that existed in the early days of Islam and is condemned extensively in Islamic texts¹²³. Those terms expressed concerns in the Muslim world over the aggressive tactics of ISI against other rebels and innocent citizens. AQSL attempts to restrain ISI failed and in February 2014 AQSL had enough leading to the disavowing of ISI¹²⁴.

However, according to ISI spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ISI was never fully part of AQ. The only reason ISI followed the orders from AQ was because of their desire to bring together the various mujahideen¹²⁵. Thanks in part to JN's previous success al-Baghdadi succeeded in taking over Mosul and large parts of Syria. On July 4, 2014, al-Baghdadi declared a new Caliphate, the Islamic State (IS), which was larger than Great Britain together, with 6 million people within its borders¹²⁶.

These events are examples of how terrorist organizations use alliances opportunistically and the subsequent commitment problem that arises leading to distrust because of the lack of institutions to support commitment. These events also exemplify the security-autonomy trade off that takes places in an alliance. IS took back their decision making power once the identity of the group was strong enough and was not relying on AQSL for the extra security benefits.

¹²¹ Hassan 2018

¹²² Van Ostaeyen 2014

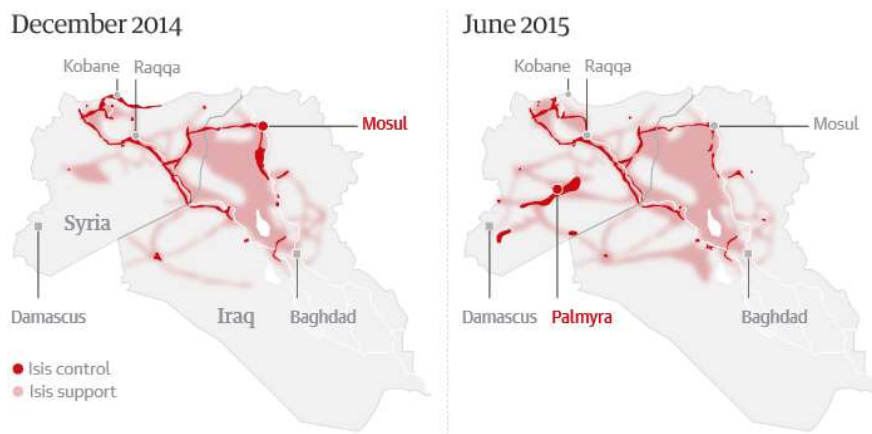
¹²³ Hassan 2018

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Van Ostaeyen 2014

¹²⁶ Byman 2016: 35-36

On August 7, 2014, president Barack Obama announced that it was time for military action in Iraq because of the massacre of Yazidis that could lead to their extinction if no intervention took place¹²⁷. According to the report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Council (OHCHR), IS was responsible for the deaths of 5,000 Yazidi men in August 2014¹²⁸. The first anti-IS Coalition was formed during a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Summit, on September 5, 2014. Great Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Italy, Poland, Denmark and Australia, a major non-NATO ally (MNA), agreed to support Iraq and Syria in their fight against IS through supplies and military aid led by the U.S¹²⁹. At the International Conference on Peace and Security in Paris eighteen countries decided to join the anti-IS Coalition¹³⁰. The brutal beheadings of Western and Japanese journalists by IS was the main reason for Western countries to join in the second enlargement. Thirty three other countries joined the anti-IS Coalition on December 3, 2014 after a deliberation at the NATO headquarters. Since then, the Coalition formally became the Global Coalition against IS. As a result of the many airstrikes from the Global Coalition against IS led by the U.S, IS was eventually driven out of the last pocket of land it held in the Syrian desert town of Baghuz in March 2019¹³¹, as illustrated below:



¹²⁷ The New York Times 2014

¹²⁸ UNAMI and OHCHR 2014

¹²⁹ Nicks 2014

¹³⁰ Tran 2014

¹³¹ France24 2014

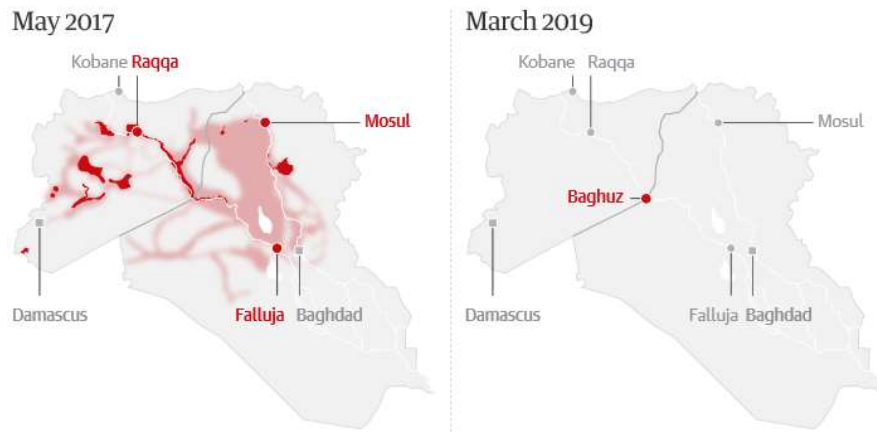


Figure 2: the rise and collapse of the 'caliphate'¹³²

¹³² Chulov 2019

7. Al-Qaeda from inside out

7.1 General Guidelines for Jihad

In the midst of AQSL attempts to rein in ISIS al-Zawahiri published the General Guidelines for Jihad on September 13, 2013. This is the first published document in decades that clearly outlines AQSL strategy. The main goal AQSL had with publishing this document, was to regain control of fighters who use excessive violence. It indicates that the excessive violence of AQ allies and affiliates influenced AQSL to redefine and vocalize AQ's strategy¹³³.

The General Guidelines for Jihad contains two chapters, with the first dedicated to the military work of AQ and the second to the propagational work of AQ. What stands out is that 80% of the entire document is dedicated to the propagational work affirming that the main focus is indeed on reining in AQ's fighters. The military chapter states that AQ targets "the head of (international disbelief, America and its ally Israel (far away enemy) and secondly its local allies(near enemy) that rule our countries"¹³⁴. The purpose of targeting the U.S is to evoke that the U.S will collapse under its own weight because of military, human and financial losses so that the grip on local countries will weaken and the allies who rule it will fall. The basic principle is to avoid targeting the proxies of the U.S except in the countries where confronting them is inevitable like in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Algeria, Somalia, Syria, which are the countries where AQ affiliates are especially active¹³⁵.

The propagational work of AQ aims at creating awareness in the Ummah regarding the threat posed by the "Crusader" (U.S and its allies)¹³⁶. The document also provides necessary guidelines in the light of rules based on Sharia which aims at securing interests and averting harm:

The seventeen guidelines are:

1. Focus on spreading awareness among the general public to mobilize¹³⁷;
2. The foremost duty of all mujahid brothers is targeting the "interest of the Western Zionist-Crusaders alliance in any part of the world"¹³⁸;

¹³³ MacDonald 2013

¹³⁴ al-Zawahiri 2013: 1

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ al-Zawahiri 2013: 2

¹³⁷ al-Zawahiri 2013: 2

¹³⁸ Ibid.

3. Avoid entering into an armed clash with the local regimes and jihadi fighters must take the opportunity to pacify the conflict with local rulers if there is one¹³⁹;
4. Avoid fighting the deviant sects, if they fight the response must be restricted to those who are directly engaged in the fight. Those who do not participate in the fight should not be targeted in their homes or places of worship¹⁴⁰;
5. Avoid meddling with Christian, Sikh and Hindu communities in Muslim lands. AQ is keen to live with them in a peaceful manner after the establishment of the Caliphate¹⁴¹;
6. Avoid fighting or targeting those who have not raised arms against AQ, maintain focus on the local surrogates of the alliance¹⁴²;
7. Refrain from killing and fighting women and children even if they are families of the enemy¹⁴³;
8. Refrain from harming Muslims or destroy their wealth or property¹⁴⁴;
9. Refrain from targeting enemies in mosques, markets and gatherings where they mix with Muslims¹⁴⁵;
10. Respect and defend the honor of Islamic scholars because they are the inheritors of the Prophet and the leaders of the Ummah. They should neither be fought nor killed, only if they commit a military act against the mujahideen¹⁴⁶;
11. Cooperate with other Islamic groups, the differences with other groups should not lead to distraction from confronting the enemies of Islam. If a group that claims alliance to Islam is involved in a fight alongside the enemy the group should be responded with a minimal response, enough to stop its aggression¹⁴⁷;
12. Support the oppressed against the oppressor whether either one of them is Muslim or non-Muslim since this is an obligation in Sharia¹⁴⁸;
13. Encourage and support everyone who supports the rights of oppressed Muslims and confronts those who transgress against them with his words, opinions or actions. Avoid directing any

¹³⁹ al-Zawahiri 2013: 3

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ al-Zawahiri 2013: 4

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

harm towards such people or attacking them verbally or physically as long as they remain supporters and aren't hostile towards Muslims¹⁴⁹;

14. Protect the rights of Muslims and respecting their sanctities, wherever they may be;
15. Provide help and support to the victims of oppression whether Muslims or non-Muslims, against those who oppress them. Supporting and encouraging everyone who helps them, even if he is a non-Muslim¹⁵⁰;
16. The mujahideen must strive to refute every unjust and false accusation made against them. If it becomes clear that they have committed a mistake they must seek the forgiveness of Allah and publicly disassociate themselves from that person that made that mistake and try to compensate those who have been harmed, in accordance with Shariah and to the maximum of their strength¹⁵¹;
17. We call upon the heads of all groups and organizations that work under Quaidatul Jihad Organization and all our supporters and sympathizers to spread these guidelines amongst their followers, whether in position of responsibility or ordinary individuals; for this document contains no hidden secret, rather it is a general policy guideline. Its purpose is only to secure the interest established by the Sharia and avert harm¹⁵².

From these guidelines it can be concluded that the strategy laid out by AQSL is focused on fighting the U.S and its alliances while spreading awareness in Muslim communities. While doing so gradually, the lives of Muslims and non-Muslims must be respected as well as their communities and places of worship. The guidelines are explicit on avoiding extreme violence whether or not one is an ally and reiterates often that inflicting harm on anyone except for the oppressors should be averted¹⁵³.

Only testimonies from AQ members can verify if these guidelines have made any impact or are indeed followed, therefore in the next chapter such a testimony will be discussed and analyzed.

7.2 Thoughts on the ideology of the global Jihad movement embodied by Al-Qaeda

Through interviews with IS, AQ OR JN fighters that either have a Dutch or Belgium background, rare insights can be obtained on the ideological stances and the different strategies that are deployed. In a blogpost discussed and analyzed underneath, a private conversation with a Dutch speaking Jabhat an-

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ al-Zawahiri 2013: 4-5

¹⁵² al-Zawahiri 2013: 5

¹⁵³ al-Zawahiri 2013: 1-5

Nusra member in Syria known as al-Maqalaat is featured. Al-Maqalaat talks about the differences between the methods of AQ and IS, how the methods of IS have affected AQ and why he believes the re-installment of the Caliphate failed.

The question discussed in the conversation with al-Maqalaat's is: "why do you think that the strategy of Al-Qaeda will succeed in contrast to the strategy of ISIS, and could you give us a summarization of both strategies and their distinctions?"¹⁵⁴

According to al-Maqalaat the inevitable collapse of IS and the reason behind it was explained and predicted more than 1400 years ago by Allah, when the Prophet said "O people beware of extremism in religion for those who came before you were only destroyed because of extremism in religion"¹⁵⁵ (van Ostaeyen, 2016, p. 1). The extremism of IS and their "foolish policies"¹⁵⁶ empowered their enemies and made them loose nearly everything they built. At the same time it also led to AQ to focus more on popular support in order to attain support and expand. It caused a strategic shift from focusing on the far enemy to focusing on the near enemy¹⁵⁷. Al-Maqalaat considers popular support for AQ to be one of the most crucial building stones for waging jihad. This is why waging jihad against puppet governments should be avoided, as they are still the Muslim sons, fathers, mothers and daughters of the Muslim Ummah and the Muslim community is not yet convinced of their treachery and animosity. The communities will turn against the mujahideen especially if the mujahideen is weak.¹⁵⁸ He states: "When people are oppressed by their government they will welcome an occupier as a liberator."¹⁵⁹ As support for this claim he notes how the Muslim population welcomed the Kurdish militias and turned against IS instead¹⁶⁰. Jihad is waged to protect and preserve Muslims and their belongings, and IS has shown no consideration to the wellbeing of Muslims lives. This sentiment is reiterated by Abu Muhammaed Al-Adnani when he said: "We will fight to the death, even if crops are destroyed, houses are demolished, honor is disgraced, people are killed and blood is shed"¹⁶¹.

AQ wants to strike sensitive, symbolic and strategic targets which do not have to result in maximum human casualties. IS chooses soft and easy targets that elicit lot of media attention. Zawahiri has warned Zarqawi about the random attacks on public places and stated that this was not in line with

¹⁵⁴ Van Ostaeyen 2016: 1

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Van Ostaeyen 2016: 5-10

¹⁵⁸ Van Ostaeyen 2016: 5-6

¹⁵⁹ Van Ostaeyen 2016: 7

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Van Ostaeyen 2016: 8

the General Guidelines for Jihad, the strategic policy of AQ. Soft methods should always be preferred over harsh methods. Even IS attacks in the West are not tactical; the Orlando shooting was successful but sent the wrong message. The message was interpreted as jihadist are attacking the West because they allow homosexuality, which is not the intention. The intended message was that jihadist are attacking the west because they invade Muslim countries and install oppressive governments¹⁶².

According to al-Maqalaat IS wants to wage a conventional offensive elites-exclusive jihad without any popular support base and is in search of quick and fast victories while AQ wages a defensive fourth generation asymmetric popular jihad that ought to burden the Muslim Ummah as little as possible¹⁶³. A conventional offensive elite – exclusive jihad is seen as waging a war aimed at the expansion of the Caliphate and openly confronting your enemies while completely disregarding possible allies¹⁶⁴. This way of warfare is without regards for innocents and not aimed at minimizing the collateral damage. This way of waging warfare is seen as the reason why IS caused more innocent casualties¹⁶⁵. Defensive fourth generation jihad is defined as decentralized forms of warfare, where the lines are blurred between war and politics, combatants and civilians, defensive jihad is aimed at the oppressor and meant to protect the Muslim community. Therefore aimed at minimizing the collateral damage and avoiding open confrontation with the enemy¹⁶⁶.

Al-Maqalaat affirms that AQ advised IS to return to their powerbase in Iraq and not challenge any Western powers in Syria so that they could continue building a strong military army that could change the balance of power in the future. AQ preferred to fly under the radar but IS wanted to feature prominently in the media¹⁶⁷. Al-Maqalaat concludes that because of the violent behavior of IS, AQ had the opportunity to maneuver and organize in their shadows¹⁶⁸.

This conversation suggests that AQ not only became more vocal about their stance on popular support but also explicitly sought out popular support after concluding that the extremism of IS led to the fall of their Caliphate. It also suggests that the General Guidelines for Jihad are not only followed but highly respected as well.

¹⁶² Van Ostaeyen 2016: 9

¹⁶³ Van Ostaeyen 2016: 10

¹⁶⁴ Bukay 2016

¹⁶⁵ Van Ostaeyen 2016: 11; Bukay 2016

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Van Ostaeyen 2016: 9-12

8. Quantitatively assessing AQ's and IS's strategic priorities

Examining the strategy of jihadi organizations is challenging, but by using quantitative data we may gain more insight. So far this research paper has examined the strategy of AQ and the shift in its strategy in a qualitative manner based on the groups rhetoric, writings of their strategists and testimonies of their group members. It can be concluded that AQ has lost popular support among Muslim communities and the jihad community as a result of the levels of violence used by IS. That method also triggered the international community to undertake action which led to the fall of IS. In the midst of that, for the first time in decades, AQ openly advocated their strategy which focused on averting harm. The qualitative data suggest that due to the impact of the Arab Spring and the rise of IS, AQ started focusing on local communities in order to regroup, grow and gain back popular support in the shadows of IS. In order to verify these changes in strategy this chapter will study quantitative data on target preferences and attack success rates in order to evaluate whether the strategic priorities between AQ and IS differentiate. To substantiate the strategic shift of AQ, civilians, it is expected that their properties and religious and educational institutions were not be high on the list of the strategic priorities of AQ compared to IS.

An recent study of the International Centre for Counter Terrorism_(ICCT) provides a quantitative empirical approach for assessing the strategic priorities of IS and AQ. The study evaluates the organizational strategy of IS and AQ based on their success rate. Success rate is defined by the ICCT as " the subset of actions that deliver a desirable outcome divided by all actions, whether successful or not." ¹⁶⁹ Using this action-based prism, behavioral preferences outline the strategic priorities of an organization¹⁷⁰. In terms of success rate target preferences are assessed to examine AQ's and IS's strategic efficiency¹⁷¹.

The strategic priorities of AQ and IS are assessed based on the triple enemy hierarchy; *far enemy, near enemy and enemy within*¹⁷². The enemy within stands for organizations or individuals that are part of the SJM that are said to destroy the movement and its goals from the inside. According to ICCT the reluctance of IS to cooperate with other organizations resulted in a escalation of considerable

¹⁶⁹ Almohammad 2019: 4-5

¹⁷⁰ Hamming 2017: 63

¹⁷¹ Almohammad 2019: 4-5

¹⁷² Ibid.

infighting, the enemy within was thus added as another element of jihadi organizations enemy hierarchy. After the establishment of the new caliphate of IS, IS took the lead in the SJM. This was also because of the fact that IS was surpassing AQ in the number of attacks against both far and near enemy targets¹⁷³.

The data for the following quantitative assessment by ICCT, that examines the strategic priorities and performance of AQ and IS, is obtained from the Global Terrorism Database¹⁷⁴.

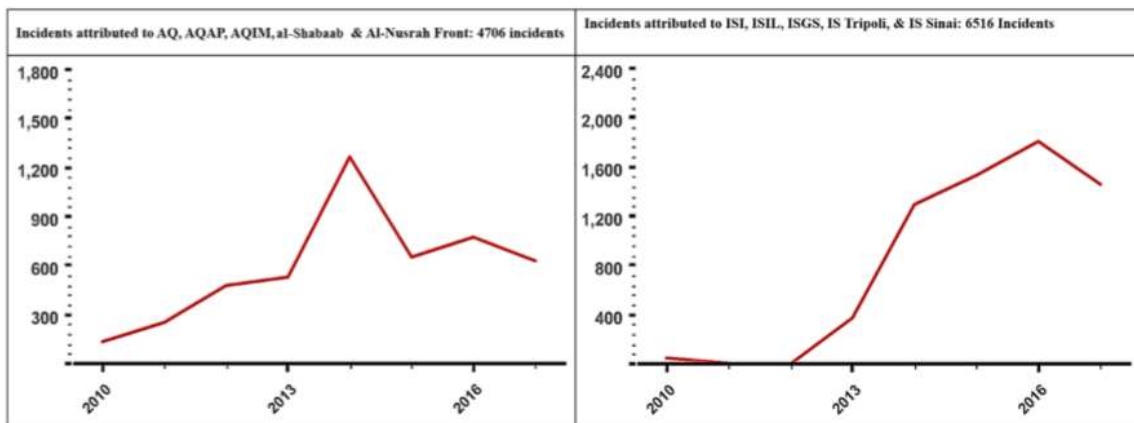


Figure 3. Incident attributed to AQ and IS¹⁷⁵

Figure 3 demonstrates that over a period of seven years IS and its affiliates perpetrated a total of 6516 incidents and AQ and its affiliates 4706 incidents. Figure 4 shows that most of the fluctuations in AQ related incidents are attributed to its Somalian affiliate while the core of IS was behind most of their incidents¹⁷⁶. These numbers alone do not explain much about target priority or strategic efficiency.

¹⁷³ Almohammad 2019: 2-4; Hamming: 63-88

¹⁷⁴ Almohammad 2019: 5

¹⁷⁵ Almohammad 2019: 17

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

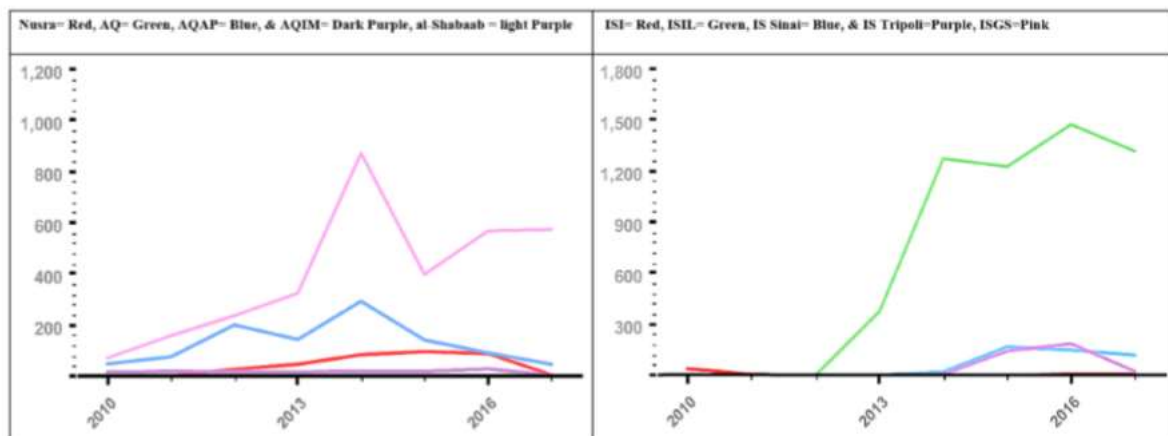


Figure 4. Incident attributed to perpetrating groups¹⁷⁷

By examining the target type we will have a better understanding of the strategic preferences of AQ and IS. Figure 5 compares the target preferences of the 6516 incidents of IS and the 4706 incidents of AQ over a period of 7 years. The figure shows that the military was AQ's most preferred target while for IS this was private citizens and property¹⁷⁸. This data is in line with the testimonies that IS uses more violence against innocents and the Muslim community than AQ, however figure 5 also demonstrates that the local government and private business are high on the target lists of both organizations. The label terrorist/non state militia stands for the enemy within. This category accounts for 6.22 % of all AQ attacks and 7.82% of all IS attacks. This small difference is not significant enough to conclude that AQ shows more restraint when it comes to attacking the enemy within.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Almohammad 2019: 17-18

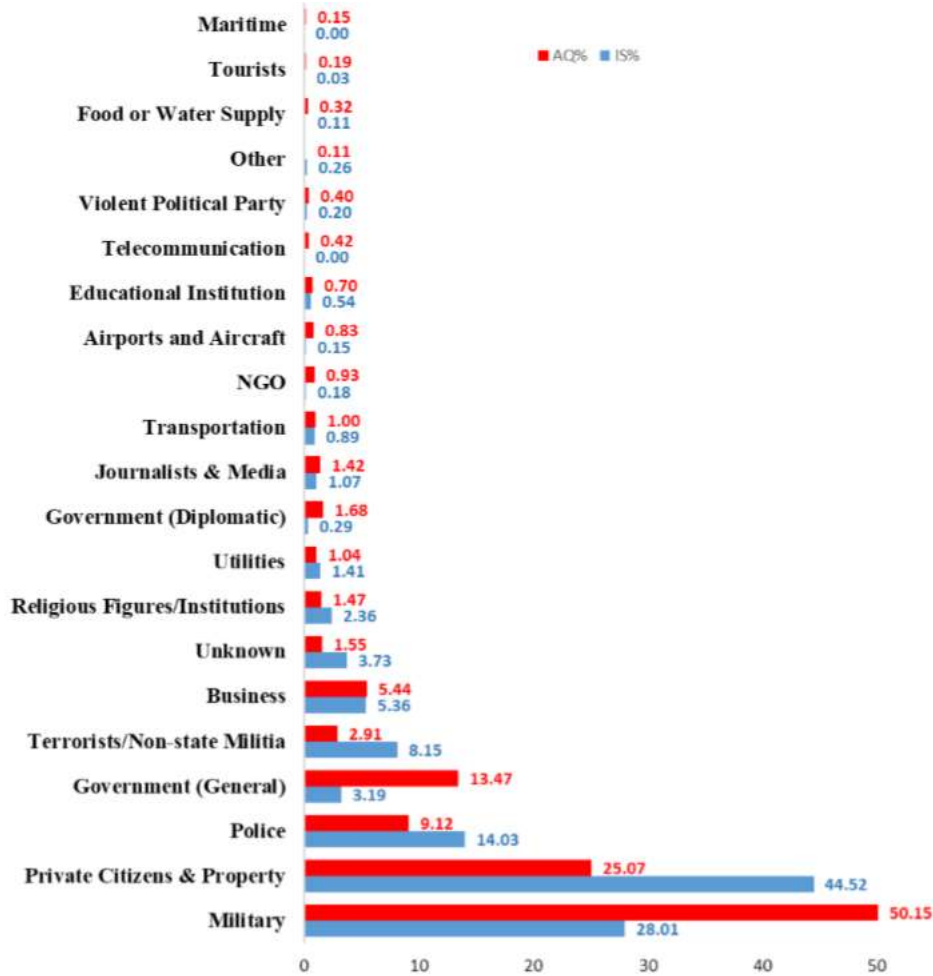


Figure 5. AQ and IS target preference: Near enemy and enemy within¹⁷⁹

The results also indicate that IS perpetrated more attacks as shown in figure 3 and 4, however AQ scored higher on success rates in a lot of areas as shown in figure 6 like attacks against military, religious figures and institutions and civilian targets. As stated before the assessment of the success rate is one way to examine the strategic performance in terms of efficiency in combination with the number of attacks and target selection the assessment gives a better representation of the nature of organizational operations¹⁸⁰. Figure 6 illustrates the success rate of the incidents of AQ and IS. The overall difference between the two terrorist organizations is slim but AQ seems to be more efficient in targeting the military, civilians and educational and religious institutions.

¹⁷⁹ Almohammad 2019: 18

¹⁸⁰ Almohammad 2019: 14

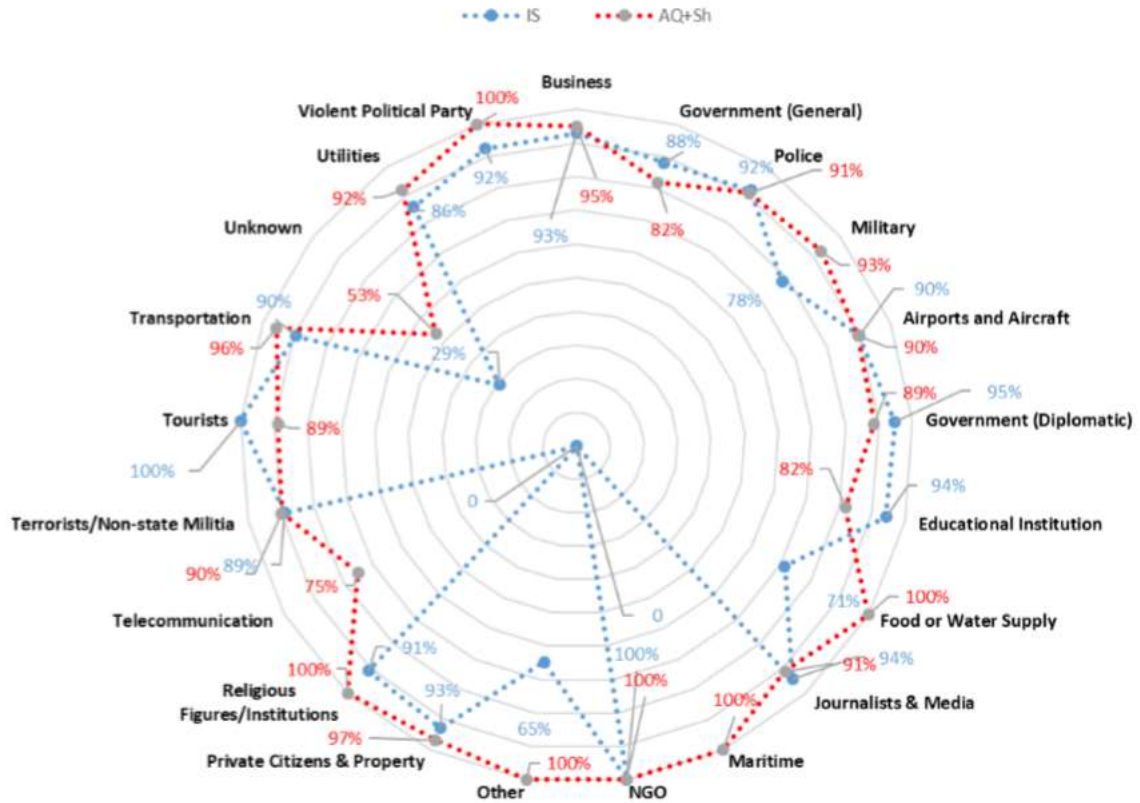


Figure 6. AQ vs. IS success rate: Near enemy and enemy within¹⁸¹.

When it comes to perpetrating attacks against the West, IS is the superior terrorist organization as illustrated in figure 7. This outcome is in line with the assessment of the impact of the Arab Spring and the testimony of al-Magalaat suggesting that AQ made a strategic shift from focusing on the near enemy instead of the far enemy due to their more localized strategy aimed at gaining popular support.

¹⁸¹ Almomhammad 2019: 19

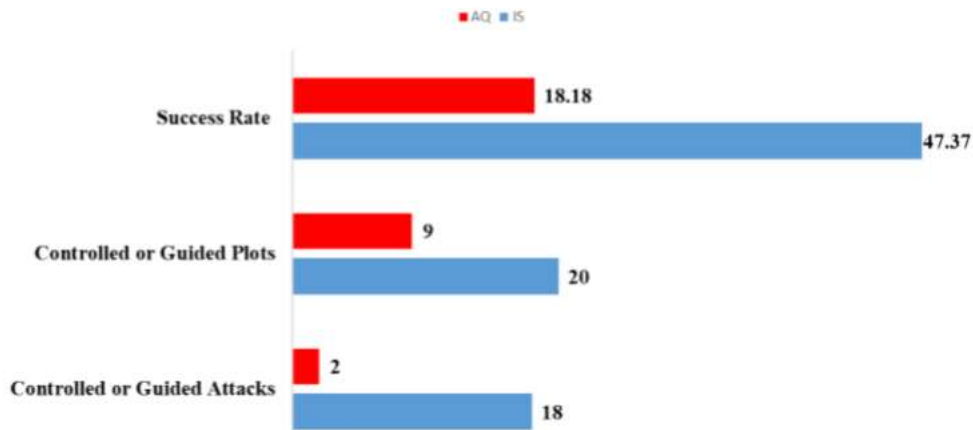


Figure 7. AQ and IS controlled and guided attacks against the West and success rate¹⁸².

These results cast doubt on AQ purported policy of restraint in targeting the Muslim populations and members of the jihadi movement. These results do not appear to indicate that a gradualist strategy of winning the minds and hearts of the people was employed¹⁸³.

¹⁸² Almohammad 2019: 21

¹⁸³ Almohammad 2019: 34

Conclusion

By the use of qualitative and quantitative data based on secondary and primary sources this research paper examines how the rise of IS made an impact on the strategy of AQ. It can be concluded that AQ in the early stages was a centralized organization that employed a strategy where the far enemy was prioritized. This as a means to an end. Due to the aftermath of 9/11 and the loss of several safe havens AQ was forced to become looser and broader-based movement organization. AQ managed to adapt itself but was yet again faced with a major event that impacted the Arab region; The Arab Spring. Many thought the death of Bin Laden and the Arab Spring would mean the end of AQ, however the data suggests that due to the Arab Spring which created instability AQ was able to expand its influence. The methods of IS, used to expand its territory and establish a Caliphate which led to hatred towards AQ and alienation from the Ummah, caused AQSL to refine Q to refine its strategy. Winning the hearts and minds of people by the use of dawa was prioritized in an effort to regain popular support. The Arab Spring presented the opportunity to employ the more localized strategy. However this strategy is also correlated with AQ intertwining itself with local communities to avoid attracting attention from counterterrorism efforts which were focused on IS. However although AQSL vocalized the importance of popular support and averting harm of Muslims and non-Muslims the quantitative data suggest that AQ has not restrained itself.

That said, it is clear that AQ is an organization that can adapt itself quickly. Its focus on intertwining itself with local groups and marginalized areas where it can present itself as a "savior" means that as long as there is not enough focus on structural development aid in unstable countries in the Arab region AQ will always be able to expand its influence regardless of the counterterrorism efforts.

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