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Kommentare (0)

ISIS vs. al-Qaeda: The struggle for the soul of the jihadist movement

By Guido Steinberg

Part V of our [series](#) on ISIS

Since 2003, several organizations in the Arab world swore allegiance to Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda and became part of what was been called “al-Qaeda’s affiliate network”. The emergence of al-Qaeda groups in Saudi Arabia 2003, Iraq 2004, Algeria 2007 and Yemen 2009 convinced many supporters and enemies that there was a truly global network of jihadist groups at work, commanded and controlled by the al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan.

However, the reality was a lot more complicated. Far from being subordinate to Osama Bin Laden and Aiman al-Zawahiri, these organizations were not willing to submit to al-Qaeda command and control. Their relationship with “al-Qaeda central” was rather an alliance between independent partners of different strength. Although the al-Qaeda leadership sometimes influenced decisions taken by the regional groupings, there are numerous examples of “affiliates” ignoring its advice even regarding strategic issues.

1. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and al-Qaeda

ISIS – like its precursors al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia and the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) – has been the most independent-minded al-Qaeda-ally since its inception in 2004. When its Jordanian founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi swore allegiance to al-Qaeda in October 2004, he never planned to submit to Bin Laden’s will. Instead, Zarqawi wanted access to recruitment and financing networks in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf which were dominated by al-Qaeda. By accepting Zarqawi’s oath, al-Qaeda won new followers among Syrians, Iraqis and Palestinians, nationalities who it had not been able to recruit until then. But what seemed to be a win-win-situation in the beginning soon turned into serious disputes. Zarqawi planned to provoke Iraq’s Shiite majority population by issuing brutal bomb attacks on politicians, religious scholars and civilians alike and by instigating civil war. In the ensuing chaos, he hoped to be able to take over the leadership of Iraq’s Sunnis, win the war, and build an Islamic state. Fearing a public backlash in Arab and Muslim countries because of its Iraqi ally’s brutality, the al-Qaeda leadership heavily criticized Zarqawi’s approach and demanded a more realistic strategy, but to no avail. Zarqawi stuck to his anti-Shiite strategy and the Iraqi insurgency collapsed – Zarqawi was killed in June 2006.

2. The Islamic State in Iraq

Shortly after the civil war in Iraq broke out, it became clear that there was another disagreement between the Iraqi al-Qaeda and the senior leadership in Pakistan. In October 2006, the organization declared the foundation of the Islamic State in Iraq and named Zarqawi’s alleged successor Abu Umar al-Baghdadi its leader. Although the declaration of a state might have been seen as following the advice of Bin Laden’s then deputy Aiman al-Zawahiri, the

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new organization called Baghdadi “the commander of the faithful” (Arabic: *amir al-mu'minin*). This title is an honorific traditionally used for the Caliph and its use by the Iraqi organization must have puzzled Bin Laden and his followers. The ISI obviously did not think of itself as subordinate to al-Qaeda, but rather as its successor as the leader of the global fight against the West. In the following months, it turned out that the conflict was as much one over leadership as one over strategies. The ISI demanded that the other Iraqi insurgents submit to the new “state” and accept the leadership of Abu Umar. This demand led to sometimes violent confrontations and the collapse of the Iraqi insurgency in 2007/2008. Furthermore, the events convinced Bin Laden and Zawahiri that their organization and allied jihadists only had a chance reaching their stated aims if they entered into alliances with broader insurgent movements. But although the fundamental difference between the two positions had become clear, the conflict between al-Qaeda and ISI did not come to the fore at that time. This was probably due to a loss of contact between Pakistan and Iraq; it seemed as if the Iraqi organization had been beaten in any case.

3. The war in Syria and the foundation of ISIS

It was the ISI's astounding comeback in 2010 which brought the organization into contact with al-Qaeda again and brought the differences over anti-Shiite strategies and the necessity to win allies back to the fore. The ISI had built new structures in Iraq at that time and – on the background of the American withdrawal which ended in December 2011 – became stronger by the day. Since summer 2011, it even sent operatives to Syria to establish an affiliate organization with the aim to fight the regime of president Bashar al-Assad. These operatives founded the Nusra-Front (*Jabhat al-Nusra*) and quickly tried to escape from ISI control by following a strategy devised by the al-Qaeda leadership in the years before. Instead of claiming control over the insurgency, the Nusra-Front sought to cooperate with its fellow rebels and built especially strong relations to the Salafists and Islamists of the Islamic Front. The aim to topple Assad was more important to the Nusra-leaders than ideological differences, but conflicts with the ISI and its new leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – who tried to assert his control over Nusra – escalated. As a result, Baghdadi declared the foundation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in April 2013 and ordered the Nusra-Front to submit to the new organization. But the latter had at that point grown so close to al-Qaeda that it refused to dissolve and instead asked al-Qaeda-leader Aiman al-Zawahiri to decide on the issue. When he decreed that the ISI should continue operating in Iraq, and the Nusra-Front in Syria, both under the command of the al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan, the conflict between Zawahiri and Baghdadi soon turned into open warfare between the groups in Syria. ISIS prevailed, built a quasi-state in Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria and declared Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the new caliph in June 2014.

4. Two jihadist schools of thought

What had begun as a heated debate between the mother organization and an “affiliate” over strategy in 2005, ended in a violent struggle for the leadership of the (Arab part) of the jihadist movement. This was partly due to personal ambition – Zarqawi and Baghdadi were obviously not willing to accept any superior – but also a reflection of major ideological differences. ISIS' brutal anti-Shiism and absolute claim to leadership reflect its unwillingness to compromise in its fight against its “infidel” enemies. Its main aim is to enforce the adherence to the only true interpretation of Islam (namely its own), no matter what the military or political repercussions. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, has always been more pragmatic and willing to compromise in order to reach its – mainly political and thereby rather earthly – aims. In other words, ISIS is more a Salafist organization, while al-Qaeda's ideology still reflects more Islamist thought. And just as Salafism is gaining followers

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worldwide, ISIS is on the rise, as can be seen by its immense attractiveness for foreign fighters in Syria.



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Tags: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, al-Qaida, Dschihadismus, Irak, IS, islamic state, Islamischer Staat, jihad, Jihadi, Osama bin Laden, Syrien, terrorism, Terrorismus

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