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von gast

in Security Culture,
Terrorismus

Kommentare (0)

Perceptions of IS by the global jihadist movement

By *Andreas Armbrorst*Part IV of our **series** on ISIS

One element within US counter-terrorism strategies is “reducing terrorist group cohesion”, as the think tank RAND recommends in one of its **reports**. The **Combating Terrorism Center** at West Point (CTC)

puts these recommendations into actions. Reports like **“Cracks in the Foundation”** or **“Dysfunction and Decline”** vividly depict the internal disagreement and disunity between al-Qaeda central (AQ) and its regional affiliates, most of all AQ in Iraq (AQI). Albeit these reports are drafted by pundits and certainly provide meaningful and often rare insights into the inner life of the global jihadi movement, they also serve another purpose: to deliberately amplify the very same trend they describe: disunity.

From the very beginning AQ central was on uneasy terms with AQI. Abu Mussab az-Zarqawi mainly followed his own agenda in Iraq and disregarded several instructions. AQ’s central command even stomached the group’s name change from AQI (in between they called themselves Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq) into The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in October 2006, by giving it public support from Bin Laden and Zawahiri. Nevertheless the rifts between AQ and ISI were further deepening.

Adding fuel to the quarrels between both groups seemed to be an opportune strategy back in 2006. The CTC’s effort to create further disunity apparently also struck a nerve, as prominent AQ speakers, such as Abu Yahya al-Libi and Ayman az-Zawahiri, repeatedly felt a need to comment on reports published by the CTC (as-sahab video statement with Ayman az-Zawahiri from May, 4th 2007). Al-Libi openly admitted: “Yes, the ideological war might have an effect on some individuals and perhaps groups, and might cause some confusion and disarray in one place or another. (as-sahab video statement with AYL from Sept., 9th, 2007). It is difficult to tell whether these strategic messages had any impact other than provoking a public reaction from AQ leaders. Equally challenging, however, is the question whether trying to divide the global jihadi movement is a good idea at all.

Whatever the contribution of strategic messaging was, the wish of some counter terrorist strategists came true when Zawahiri announced publicly in April 2014 that **“ISIS is not a branch of AQ and we have no organizational relationship with it.”** It has intuitive appeal to think that a divided movement is in a weaker position to reach its goals than a united one, at least in the long run. But weaker does not necessarily mean that it is less dangerous. Jihadism is not atomised but is divided between two powerful poles with the central command of AQ on the one, and IS on the other side. Both compete for supporters on the ground and fan boys in social media. Within this competition, marketing arguments respond to questions such as ‘who represents the purest Salafi doctrine?’, ‘who produces the better and smarter media?’, ‘who has a legitimate leadership?’, and ‘who can proof its military

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capability?'

If the competition between AQ and ISI is all about doctrine rather than proof of capability than the split might in fact weaken the intellectual basis of jihadism. But it is also possible that major strategic shifts come along with debates about jihadi doctrines. In order to avoid further infighting it is thinkable that AQ and IS split up their strategic responsibilities in the future.

For the sake of argument, let us take the role of a political advisor to the jihadi movement (hypothetically to be sure). Our fictional advisor would recommend that it should be in the responsibility of the IS to lead the regional conflicts in *the war against the near enemy* and to proceed with establishing the caliphate (state building), whereas AQ's primary role is to organise the *war against the far enemy*, taking the role of the foreign ministry *within* the Islamic State. This includes coordinating operations abroad, gathering intelligence, and maintaining secret embassies within Salafi communities in the West.

So far none of the media groups of either AQ (as-Sahab) or IS (al-Furqan) have announced such a plan, and certainly Zawahiri would object the recommendation of our fictional consultant. But looking at the groups who have either supported or rejected the IS caliphate it seems that they indeed somewhat divide along the line of regional vs. global jihad.



Still of jihadi documentary "Clanging of the Swords, Part 4" (with English subtitles) by al-furqan Media. Originally posted on "al_medrar"-Twitter account. Picture taken from jihadology.net.

Seven months after the declaration of the caliphate, the dust has settled and almost all jihadi factions in the world have taken sides either for AQ or IS. Taken together about 30 groups have at least implicitly supported the IS by at least one official statement. Because the AQ/IS divide is essentially about legitimate Islamic leadership (as the fundamentalists believe), no group can avoid this decision or remain neutral on this matter. Nevertheless it is a rather subjective decision because Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as well as Ayman az-Zawahiri served up a plethora of proof for the legitimacy of their leadership. Consequently many jihadi groups were internally divided as their members drifted to both sides. Ansar al-Islam in Syria, for example **first announced and later revoked** its merger with IS. The flip-flopping was apparently the result of an internal split between the leadership and those in charge of the group's public relations via Twitter. The same happened with other groups

Despite the great confusion on the Syrian battlefield and within Social Media, some patterns can be seen in the wider picture: Groups who traditionally had a focus on establishing a regional power basis rather than implementing global strategies have joint IS. This includes Pakistani Taliban (TTP), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Libyan insurgents such Majlis Shura shabab al-Islam, Ansar bait al-Maqdis in Egyptian Sinai and others. Even the Iraqi group Ansar as-Sunna, who refused to join AQ for the last decade, has pledged allegiance to IS and disbanded its old name that was held in high

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esteem by many jihadists worldwide.



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Tags: al-Qaida, Dschihadismus, IS, islamic state, Islamischer Staat, jihad, Jihadi, Sicherheitspolitik, terrorism, Terrorismus, USA

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