

2. JIHADI-SALAFI REBELLION AND THE CRISIS OF AUTHORITY

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Jihadi-salafists are in open rebellion. The sheer audacity of the September 11, 2001 attacks, combined with Osama bin Laden's charisma and financial resources, established al Qaeda as the leader of jihad for a decade. Yet, the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the civil war in Syria shifted the ground dramatically. More ambitious jihadi-salafists have challenged al Qaeda's leadership and approach to jihad, creating deep divisions. For the foreseeable future, this crisis will intensify, and al Qaeda and its chief competitor, the Islamic State, will continue to jockey for position.

In late 2010, the self-immolation of a despairing Tunisian street vendor inspired millions of Arabs to rise up against authoritarian governments. In a matter of weeks, seemingly impregnable Arab regimes started to shake, and a single man had sparked what decades of attacks by Islamists, including jihadi-salafi groups, had not: the overthrow of an authoritarian government. In the wake of this change, a new generation of jihadi-salafists saw unprecedented opportunities to promote their own methods, priorities, and strategy of jihad.

Jihadi-salafists had very little to do with the Arab uprisings themselves, though they quickly realized the importance of capitalizing on new regional dynamics. The fall of authoritarian rulers in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt created contested political and security environments. New governments released thou-

sands of jailed jihadi-salafi leaders and activists. This move not only bolstered the ranks of jihadi-salafi groups, but also provided unprecedented space for them to operate locally with minimal constraints. Meanwhile, the war against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and the ensuing security vacuum in its territory created a new focal point for jihad, attracting thousands of fighters from across the region and beyond. Like others in the region, jihadi-salafists were inspired by a new activist spirit and a growing sense of empowerment. In short, the jihadi-salafists were handed a brand new set of opportunities that could have allowed them to rally together in a stronger-than-ever united front. Instead they began to challenge al Qaeda's central authority and the consensus it had overseen.

New militant groups proliferated across the Middle East and North Africa. In the Sinai Peninsula and Yemen, militants expanded their operations against government targets. In Tunisia, jihadi-salafists promoted da'wa, or proselytization and spiritual outreach, to build new constituencies and contest political space. A variety of groups with diverse goals emerged in Libya. Al Qaeda largely approved of these different approaches because they fell within the broad strategy the organization had pursued for over a decade, and al Qaeda's leaders urged jihadists to take advantage of the opportunities before them.

A mutiny was already brewing when events in Syria and Iraq in 2013 and 2014 exposed deep fissures over leadership, strategy, and what had been largely theoretical debates on Islamic governance. Al Qaeda had worked hard to maintain a consensus for years. After 2011, jihadi-salafists not only rebelled against al Qaeda's authority, they questioned al Qaeda's ultimate goal and how it wages jihad. In June 2014, jihadi-salafists in Iraq declared the caliphate, an unprecedented step in modern times, which shattered the principle of consultation, or *shura*, which many jihadi-salafists respected. More importantly, this rebellion sought to supplant al Qaeda's leadership by forcing jihadists to declare allegiance to and obey a caliph. These jihadi rebels want to set a new course, even if it means creating *fitna*

(strife) or dividing the movement.¹ And they are grabbing power from an aging and seemingly out of touch al Qaeda leadership. This new division is reshaping the jihadi-salafi landscape, and it has widespread implications for future jihadi-salafi tactics, strategy, and priorities.

ROOTS OF JIHADI-SALAFISM

Jihadi-salafists are part of the broader salafi movement.² According to Bernard Haykel, salafists are religious and social reformers who seek a return to the authentic beliefs and practices of the first three generations of Muslims; they adhere to a particular understanding of *tawhid*, or the unity of God, oppose *shirk* (polytheism), view the Qur'an and Sunna (the canonized practices of Mohammad) as the only valid sources of law and authority,³ and are hostile to innovation, or *bid'ā*, often associated with non-Islamic cultural practices that Muslims have come to adopt.⁴ Most salafists argue for obedience to Muslim rulers, including authoritarian ones, and have traditionally opposed jihad against Arab governments because they believe that rebellion is harmful to the umma, or Muslim community.

However, a strain of salafism has emerged over time that embraces violence and articulates this violence as a manifestation of jihad. Diverse groups across the Middle East and North Africa and beyond adhere to this strain; they share a broad goal of waging violent jihad to establish a new Islamic political struc-

1. *Fitna* can refer specifically to discord or strife within the Muslim community. It is an important concept to jihadi-salafists who, for example, accuse rival groups of disrupting the unity of the Muslim umma. *Shura*, or consultation, is an important aspect of decisionmaking in groups like al Qaeda: *fitna* is the opposite of *shura*.

2. For a detailed description and definition of salafism, see Bernard Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action," in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009): 33–57.

3. Salafists are also referred to as Ahl al Hadith (people of the Hadith or Sunna) for their legal focus on the Qur'an and Sunna rather than the four schools of jurisprudence (Hanbali, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanafi). See Roel Meijer, "Introduction," *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009), 4.

4. Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought," 38–39.

ture and society, although they remain deeply divided over the methodology and strategy, or *manhaj*, that would achieve that goal.

What constitutes jihad has varied over time and place. The first two Muslim dynasties, the Umayyads and Abbasids, used jihad as a tool to consolidate control over territory.⁵ Jihad in classical texts distinguishes two forms: offensive jihad, which is the duty of the Muslim community on a collective level (*fard kifaya*), and defensive jihad to repel invaders, which is an individual duty (*fard 'ayn*).⁶ The idea of defensive jihad crystallized during the Crusades and throughout the Mongol invasion, when Muslim lands were under attack. Ibn Taymiyya, a fourteenth-century scholar widely quoted by jihadi-salafists, shifted ideas about jihad from a political-territorial action to an action intended to purify Muslim identity and practice.⁷ Ibn Taymiyya justified violent jihad against the Mongol rulers, arguing that they were not true Muslims because they maintained their own non-Islamic cultural practices and laws.

Modern jihadi-salafists argue that the Muslim world has been under constant attack since the outset of European colonialism in the nineteenth century and demise of the Ottoman caliphate in the early twentieth century. Thus they justify their violent actions as a defensive jihad to protect Muslims against invaders, whether they are British, American, or Western-supported Arab regimes. This understanding of jihad as a defensive duty is significant because it empowers individuals rather than a head of state or Muslim ruler to declare jihad.

5. Paul L. Heck, "Jihad Revisited," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32, no. 1 (March 2004): 106.

6. Classical jurists divided jihad into two modalities. Offensive jihad is initiated by a Muslim ruler (the caliph) and is considered by most to be a *fard kifaya*, a collective duty, requiring only a sufficient number of Muslims to participate as needed to ensure its success. The second modality is defensive jihad, which is waged whenever Muslim lands or people are directly attacked. The defensive modality does not require a Muslim ruler to initiate the fight, nor does it have the same limitations on participants. Since it is a *fard 'ayn*, an individual duty, all must participate. The repeated trio of 'things to defend' seen throughout jihadi texts includes land/home, family, and money. See Sherman Jackson, "Jihad and the Modern World," *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 7, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2002): 1–26.

7. Heck, "Jihad Revisited," 115.

Jihadi-salafism also owes much to two more recent thinkers and ideologues: Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth-century Arabian Peninsula, and Sayyid Qutb in twentieth-century Egypt. The former was a religious reformer who argued for a fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna as the source for Islamic belief and practice.⁸ The latter was a twentieth-century member of the Muslim Brotherhood who was tried and executed for plotting violence against the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Both were outraged by what they perceived as the decay of Islamic society, and both sought—in different ways—to revive the authentic Islam practiced by the first generations of Muslims.⁹

Under the influence of two South Asian revivalist scholars, Abu-l-A'la Mawdudi and Abu-l-Hasan al-Nadwi, Qutb refined two interrelated concepts crucial to jihadi-salafism's justification for violence against Muslim rulers. The first was the notion of *takfir*, or declaring a Muslim an infidel for un-Islamic behavior or thought.¹⁰ The second was a contrast between the existing, corrupt political order in both the Muslim world and the West and an idealized political system based on Islamic law derived from the Qur'an and Sunna which embodied God's sovereignty

8. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab sought to eradicate all vestiges of *bid'a* (unlawful innovations) in the Arabian Peninsula, such as marking the Prophet's birthday, praying at tombs, and use of musical ceremonies in Sufi rituals, which he decried as *shirk*, or idolatry. He argued for a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic theology, based on the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya and the Hanbali school of law. An alliance between ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the Al Saud family eventually solidified Wahhabism's religious control and the Al Saud's political dominance in the Arabian Peninsula. Wahhabism, then, is a salafi movement in that it seeks to emulate the *salaf* in its teachings and practice. Though the terms salafi and Wahhabi are often confused or used interchangeably, not all salafis are Wahhabi.

9. These early Muslim generations or *salaf* were those who lived during Muhammad's lifetime and for about two centuries after and observed his practices. See "Companions of the Prophet," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Women* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).

10. Qutb did not invent the notion of *takfir*. In fact, the practice of *takfir* dates back to some of the earliest days of Islam, when a group later known as the Kharijites ("those who withdrew or broke off") declared the rest of the Muslim community infidels and attacked them. Some in the Muslim world today accuse the Islamic State of representing a new incarnation of the Kharijites.

on earth, or *hakimiyya*.¹¹ Qutb concluded that any system that does not implement *hakimiyya* should be resisted.¹²

In combination with Gulf-inspired salafism, Qutb's ideas provided the ideological foundation for modern jihadi-salafism. Qutb posthumously inspired a generation of militant Sunni thinkers in Egypt and beyond,¹³ and many of those who had studied his thought¹⁴ found their way to Afghanistan in the 1980s—where the jihadi-salafi movement would enter a new phase.¹⁵

11. This contrast opposes *jahiliyya* to *hakimiyya*. *Jahiliyya* refers to the “age of ignorance” and immorality that characterized Arabian society before Islam. Qutb considered the existing political order and all Western political ideologies as *jahiliyya*. On the other hand, a political system based on Islamic law he considered *hakimiyya* or *hakimiyyat Allah*—essentially, God's sovereignty on earth. *Hakimiyya* is itself intimately connected to the caliphate and the salafi movement in general. In his famous text, “Signposts Along the Road,” Qutb idealizes the original salafi community, emphasizing that with the downfall of the caliphate, the Muslim community fell into *jahiliyya*, or ignorance. Once the community is spiritually restored to the status of the *salaf*, the rule of God on earth can be established and enshrined in the caliphate. See Sayyid Qutb, “Signposts Along the Road,” in *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden*, ed. Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009): 129–44.

12. Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, advocated for a similar reorientation of the Muslim community in preparation for the establishment of an Islamic state.

13. Qutb's devotees included Muhammad Faraj, who was executed in 1982 for his role in the assassination of President Anwar Sadat. Faraj was an ideologue for Jama'at al-Jihad. Rather than viewing jihad as a progression from social “Islamization” to structural change, as Qutb did, Faraj instead argued that the first battlefield for jihad and the creation of an Islamic state is the “extermination of infidel rulers.” See “Muhammad 'abd al-Salam Faraj,” and “The Neglected Duty,” in *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden*, ed. Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009): 321–43.

14. Qutb also inspired the ideologies that drove the Gama'a Islamiyya, headed by Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, and the al-Jihad organization headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri. Like Qutb, Zawahiri spent time in prison; the experience helped to radicalize both men and influenced their approach toward jihad and violence. Also like Qutb, Zawahiri declared Arab regimes infidels for their repression of Islam and alliance with the West.

15. For a detailed account of how Arabs formed al Qaeda in Afghanistan, see Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms* (London: Saqi Books, 2010).

THE SEARCH FOR CONSENSUS

The jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union brought together a diverse group of jihadi-salafists from across the Middle East and North Africa. The defeat of the Soviets, however, exposed deep strategic disagreements that had been subsumed by the common fight and shared experiences. Many of the Algerian, Libyan, and Egyptian fighters in Afghanistan returned to their home countries planning to fight their governments. Others, influenced partially by the Saudi regime and quietist or apolitical salafists, believed that violent jihad had ended and that a return to da'wa and proselytization was called for. Yet others were empowered by their victory and sought to refocus jihad against other enemies.

Even those who advocated continuing jihad disagreed about how to do so. Followers of Abdullah Azzam (a leading theorist on defensive jihad) argued that jihad can be waged only against non-Muslim invaders and should focus on anticolonial struggles in Palestine, the Caucuses, and elsewhere.¹⁶ The Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, who led the Egyptian al-Jihad organization and spent time in Egyptian prison, vehemently opposed Azzam's unwillingness to strike Arab governments. Zawahiri argued that authoritarian regimes in the Arab world had ceased to be Muslim. Therefore it was the duty of a (jihadi) vanguard to overthrow them.

During the 1990s, Zawahiri increasingly influenced Osama bin Laden, the scion of a wealthy and well-connected Saudi family who had made a name for himself financing and coordinating Arab fighters in Afghanistan. In 1996, bin Laden announced his intention to evict U.S. military forces stationed in Saudi Arabia following the 1991 U.S.-led war against Saddam

16. Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian-born member of the Muslim Brotherhood, became one of the leading Arab figures in the jihad in Afghanistan. He was an early mentor and teacher of Osama bin Laden, though he opposed the influence of the Egyptian ideologues such as Zawahiri. He was assassinated, along with his two sons, in a car bomb near his home in Peshawar, Pakistan, on November 23, 1989. For an account of Azzam's early role in Afghanistan see Tawil, *Brothers in Arms*, 17–24.

Hussein.¹⁷ In 1998, Zawahiri and bin Laden formally merged their operations to create al Qaeda. Bin Laden and Zawahiri were entrepreneurs and rebels within the jihadi-salafi movement. Al Qaeda represented a new model of jihad that focused on a global struggle against the “far enemy.” The attacks against the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and later those of September 11, 2001, were not only a declaration of war against the United States, they were a rebellion against leading voices in the jihadi-salafi community who argued that war with the West would undermine their common goal of creating a new Islamic polity and society or caliphate.¹⁸ The approach put al Qaeda on a collision course with Arab governments, some of which had provided institutional support for jihad in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Al Qaeda’s new strategy revolutionized jihadi-salafists’ struggle, and its attacks against the United States set a new standard for what could be achieved, silencing counterarguments and attracting fighters, supporters, and sympathizers to its cause.

Al Qaeda’s approach to jihad was based on several strategic principles that distinguished it from other jihadi-salafi groups. First, al Qaeda prioritized global jihad against the United States and Europe (the “far enemy”). Targeting the “far enemy” that supported Arab regimes would make the “near enemy,” those same local governments, crumble from within. Waging jihad in Syria, liberating Palestine, and fighting Shi’a were important causes, but distracted from the more immediate goal of fighting the far enemy.

Second, al Qaeda’s focus on waging global jihad and attacking Western targets meant that it was less immediately concerned with theological questions, such as how and when to implement

17. Osama bin Laden, “Declaration of War against America,” in *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden*, ed. Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009): 436–59.

18. One of the leading salafi scholars opposing the global jihadi shift was Nasir al-Din al-Albani.

shari'a¹⁹ and when to establish a caliphate. This focus contributed to its adoption of an evolutionary methodology or *manhaj* for reaching its ultimate objective—the caliphate. It used religious arguments when necessary to justify its policies, but it was not consumed by them, in part because such theological questions could be divisive. The territorial entities known as emirates, which had been established by al Qaeda's affiliates and by the Taliban in Afghanistan, were seen as a stage in the eventual establishment of a caliphate at a later time.

Third, al Qaeda emphasized the importance of building and maintaining a bond between the Muslim masses and the jihadi project. Al Qaeda's leadership saw Muslim populations as inherently ignorant of religion and unprepared to accept Islamic law without proper religious education and understanding. As a result, they believed that Muslim society must be properly prepared through education and da'wa before imposing Islamic law and establishing the caliphate.²⁰ When Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, then head of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), raised the issue of establishing a caliphate in 2004, al Qaeda's leadership explained that Muslims were not yet prepared, though leaders appeared to support efforts to establish an Islamic state in parts of Iraq in 2006–2007.²¹ Zawahiri argued that an emirate or Islamic au-

19. Shari'a refers to a comprehensive set of regulations that govern every aspect of daily life, not just punishments for crimes.

20. Zawahiri writes that da'wa is an important part of the jihadi mission. It aims "to create awareness in the umma regarding the threat posed by the Crusader onslaught, clarify the true meaning of Tawheed in the sense that the rule and sovereignty belongs to Allah alone . . . by the permission of Allah, this will serve as a prelude to the establishment of the Caliphate according to the methodology of the Prophet." The propagational phase focuses on two fronts: educating the mujahid vanguard who will shoulder the responsibility of militarily confronting the "Crusaders and their proxies until the Caliphate is established," and "creating awareness within the masses, inciting them, and exerting efforts to mobilize them so they revolt against rulers and join the side of Islam and those working for its cause." See Ayman al-Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for Jihad," As-Sahab Media, 2013, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-erba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf>.

21. For a study of al Qaeda in Iraq from 2006 to 2010, see Brian Fishman, "Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq," New America Foundation National Security Studies Program Policy Paper, August 2011, http://security.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/Fishman_Al_Qaeda_In_Iraq.pdf.

thority must be established first to prepare society for the caliphate through spiritual and religious education. In 2012, when al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) proposed an emirate in Yemen, al Qaeda cautioned that it was not the right time: if AQAP proved unable to provide sufficient services and function as a state, this failure might undermine the jihadi enterprise.²² According to al Qaeda's strategy shari'a and proper Islamic governance could not be implemented if these basic needs were not met first.

Finally, al Qaeda was also concerned about not alienating Muslims through excessive violence against civilians, including Shi'a. In some cases it even advocated a form of détente with non-Muslim communities, including Shi'a and Christians.²³ While al Qaeda sees the Shi'a as misguided apostates, Zawahiri argues that at the current juncture al Qaeda should preach to them (and other deviant sects) rather than kill them, unless they attack Sunnis first.²⁴ At one point in 2005 Zawahiri counseled Zarqawi to slow his attacks against the Shi'a and their mosques in Iraq because such actions alienate the rest of the Muslim population. According to Zawahiri, the confrontation with the Shi'a is inevitable but need not take place immediately.²⁵ This sensitivity was a lesson learned from Algeria in the 1990s, when the insurgent Armed Islamic Group (GIA) lost popular support and legitimacy because of excessively violent tactics. Al Qaeda's central leadership has repeatedly invoked the Algerian experience to warn overzealous commanders to restrain themselves from excessive violence that could undermine popular support.

22. Nasir Abdel Karim al-Wuhayshi (Abu Basir), "Second Letter from Abu Basir to Emir of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb," in "Al-Qaida Papers," Associated Press, 2012, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/images/al-qaida-papers-how-to-run-a-state.pdf>.

23. Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for Jihad."

24. *Ibid.*; Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Acknowledging ISIS officially isn't part of AQ," February 3, 2014, <http://justpaste.it/translt>; see original Arabic here: <http://justpaste.it/ea9k>.

25. The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, "Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi (English Translation)," July 2005, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf>; see Arabic original here: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Original.pdf>.

These tenets of al Qaeda's *manhaj* are presented clearly in the group's writings, correspondence, and statements. In another letter to Zarqawi in 2005, for example, Zawahiri gently warns the commander to temper his actions, and cites the importance of popular support in achieving al Qaeda's two short-term goals—removing U.S. troops from Iraq and establishing an Islamic entity in Iraq. The letter states: “We will see that the strongest weapon which the mujahadeen enjoy—after the help and granting of success by G-d—is popular support from the Muslim masses in Iraq, and the surrounding Muslim countries. So, we must maintain this support as best we can, and we should strive to increase it.”²⁶ Zawahiri tells Zarqawi that public executions of prisoners and Shi'a have started to alienate people who do not understand the theological and ideological motivations behind such bloody actions. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a Jordanian-born jihadi-salafi thinker who shares al Qaeda's evolutionary strategy, has also weighed in repeatedly on the need to maintain public support.²⁷ He has accused the Islamic State of “distracting the people and diverting their attention from the Islamic project and burning any popular support and deterring any of the supporters across the Ummah from this current due to their bad practices. . . .”²⁸

Al Qaeda's cautious approach led it to navigate carefully local traditions, sensitivities, and practices. This caution, useful in

26. Ibid.

27. Jordanian born Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi became a leading voice of al Qaeda on both theological and tactical matters. He has consistently criticized jihadists' public display of excessive violence, such as beheadings, for its negative impact on Islam and for undermining the salafi goal of creating an Islamic state. But his repudiation of Zarqawi, his former student, and al Qaeda in Iraq for its indiscriminate violence and targeting of Shi'a civilians made him a target for criticism among some Jordanian jihadi-salafists. For a more detailed analysis of Maqdisi's influence, see Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihad: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 82–84, 244.

28. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, “And Be Not Like Her Who Undoes the Thread which She has Spun, After it Became Strong,” July 11, 2014, *pietervanostaeyen* (blog), <http://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/07/14/and-be-not-like-her-who-undoes-the-thread-which-she-has-spun-after-it-has-become-strong-by-shaykh-abu-muhammad-al-maqdisi/>.

building support networks among local populations out of necessity, also manifested itself in al Qaeda's gradual approach to implementing shari'a. Abdelmalek Droukdal, the emir of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), sent a message of caution in mid-2012 to jihadists who controlled northern Mali: "One of the wrong policies that we think you carried out is the extreme speed in which you applied Shariah, not taking into consideration the gradual evolution that should be applied in an environment that is ignorant of religion."²⁹ AQIM shares Zawahiri's caution in forcing local populations to abide by shari'a before they are properly educated, for fear of alienating them.

As al Qaeda sought to unify, lead, and maintain a jihadi-salafi ideological and strategic consensus based on its *manhaj*, it repeatedly stressed the importance of *shura*, or consultation, in official statements and documents.³⁰ *Shura* was also an important factor in the group's hierarchical governing structure, which places an emir at the top and—as explained in a 2002 document entitled "Al-Qa'ida By-laws"—includes a *shura* or leadership council, executive council, regional councils, and military councils that are directly linked to the emir.³¹ In the decade after September 11, 2001, jihadi-salafi groups across the Middle East and North Africa pledged their allegiance to bin Laden by swearing an oath of allegiance (*ba'ya*) which in turn must be accepted by al Qaeda. Al Qaeda's "brand" and presence grew through franchise or affiliate organizations such as AQIM, AQI, AQAP, and more recently its Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. This bureaucracy and obsession with consensus was intended to strengthen the al Qaeda leader-

29. Letter from Abdelmalek Droukdal composed around July 2012, as published in "Mali-al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook," Associated Press, around July 2012, http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf.

30. See for example "'Al-Qa'ida By-laws (English Translation)' Harmony Document AFGP-2002-600048," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Harmony Program, April 18, 2002, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Al-Qaida-Bylaws-Translation.pdf>.

31. *Ibid.* The *shura* council is the most important body in that it oversees al Qaeda's strategy and considers crucial ideological and practical debates. The council plays an essential consultative role, but the emir has final decisionmaking authority. If he chooses, he can put issues to a vote and abide by the council's decision, but unless he opts for such a vote he is not bound by the council's suggestions.

ship's control and ensure that no decisions on tactics or strategy were taken without their approval. Al Qaeda's authority and the consensus it upheld were further bolstered by respected independent scholars who supported its relatively flexible theological and evolutionary approach, such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filastini, and Abu Yahya al-Shinqiti. These figures collectively inspired and guided a generation of jihadi-salafi adherents in the decade after September 11, 2001.

Al Qaeda's senior leadership understood that it could never unify the many different jihadi-salafi groups. Instead it accepted differences as long as disparate groups demonstrated a vague commitment to jihad and accepted al Qaeda's leadership.³² Al Qaeda was less concerned with dogma and theological debates than with managing a global network of affiliated groups that could build footholds across the region and beyond. Differences over strategy and priorities remained, but affiliates balanced pursuit of insurgencies against Arab governments with al Qaeda's global strategy of attacking Western targets. Moreover, the affiliates largely accepted al Qaeda's guidance when it came to theological and strategic issues such as engaging with Muslim populations, defining legitimate targets, and developing structures of Islamic government. After bin Laden's death in May 2011, many of these groups pledged allegiance to Zawahiri, bin Laden's successor. One of Zawahiri's key challenges was maintaining the unity of jihadi groups that were spread across a wide geographical area, faced different constraints, and operated in different political and security environments.

32. "As far as its relation with other groups is concerned, Al-Qa'ida is less selective: groups wishing to liaise with Al-Qa'ida or receive its support have to commit to jihad and, not to prove a commitment to a theological creed, but essentially to prove their jihadi—non nation-state—credentials. Beyond that, Al-Qa'ida is willing to work with or lend support to jihadi groups, even if they are more inflexible than necessary in matters of faith and practice, or even if they do not conceive of themselves as global jihadis, e.g., Egyptian Islamic Group, Egyptian Jihad Group and others." Nelly Lahoud, "Beware of Imitators: Al-Qa'ida through the Lens of its Confidential Secretary," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Harmony Program, June 4, 2012, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CTC-Beware-of-Imitators-June2012.pdf>.

A BROKEN CONSENSUS

Discord had tested jihadi-salafists in the past. This tension occasionally forced al Qaeda to reassert its leadership and strategy, and made affiliate groups reaffirm their loyalty to al Qaeda.³³ Moreover, disputes within al Qaeda affiliates such as AQIM broke the established chain of command, causing competition and divisions.³⁴ But nothing could have prepared the movement for what was about to transpire in Syria and Iraq in 2013–2014.

Syria provided a new battleground for jihad which helped reignite jihad in Iraq as well. Jihadists largely observed a basic division of labor throughout much of 2012 in Syria and Iraq:

33. In March 2008 Ayman al-Zawahiri released an online book reaffirming al Qaeda's strategy and priorities after criticism that it focused unduly on Iraq and Afghanistan while neglecting the Palestinian issue. See "Zawahiri Tries to Clear Name, Explain Strategy," Transnational Security Issue Report, International Research Center, April 21, 2008, <http://fas.org/irp/eprint/zawahiri.pdf>.

34. In December 2012 Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a local commander in AQIM's southern region, broke from AQIM and formed a new battalion called Those who Sign with Blood. Belmokhtar had an ongoing rivalry with AQIM head Abdelmalek Droukdal, which influenced the split. A letter by AQIM's Shura Council reprimanding Belmokhtar accused him of fragmenting the organization, and failing to commit any major attacks: "Any observer of armed action in the Sahara will notice clearly the failure of the Masked Brigade to carry out spectacular operations, despite the region's vast possibilities...moreover, you have received multiple directives and instructions from the Emirate of the organization urging you to carry out these acts. Despite all that, your brigade did not achieve a single spectacular operation targeting the crusader alliance." The letter continues: "...we consider it a dangerous attempt to secede from the community, fragment the being of the organization and tear it apart limb from limb." In January 2013, a few months after receiving the letter, Belmokhtar launched one of North Africa's boldest attacks ever, on Algeria's In Amenas gas processing facility, followed by two attacks in Niger against a French-owned uranium mine and a military base. For more complete correspondence between AQIM and Belmokhtar see "Letter from the Organization of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb's Shura Council to our good brothers in the Shura Council of the Masked Brigade," in "Al-Qaida Papers," Associated Press, October 3, 2012, http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-belmokhtar-letter-english.pdf; Christopher S. Chivvis and Andrew Liepman, "North Africa's Menace: AQIM's Evolution and the U.S. Policy Response," RAND Corporation, 2013, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR415/RAND_RR415.pdf.

For an account of the In Amenas attack see "The In Amenas Attack: Report of the Investigation into the Terrorist Attack on In Amenas," Statoil, September 2013, <http://www.statoil.com/en/NewsAndMedia/News/2013/Downloads/In%20Amenas%20report.pdf>.

Jabhat al-Nusra, commanded by Abu Mohammad al-Julani, operated in Syria while the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), commanded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, operated in Iraq. Baghdadi, however, had grander plans. In April 2013 he announced that both ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra were dissolved as independent organizations and instead would be reconstituted in one new organization known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).³⁵ The move sparked an immediate outcry from Julani and al Qaeda's leadership. Julani declared his allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri and al Qaeda rather than to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and what became ISIS.³⁶ While censuring the move, Zawahiri reminded

35. Baghdadi announced the dissolution of both the Islamic State of Iraq and Jabhat al-Nusra in favor of a united Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham. He claimed that Jabhat al-Nusra is an "expansion for the Islamic State of Iraq and part of it" and that joining them together officially under the banner of the caliphate, once God wills its establishment, is an avoidance of "calamity," which is likely a reference to *fitna*, describing disunity and discord within the Muslim community. For an English translation of the original video message, see "Give good news to the believers.' The declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham: An audio speech for Amir al-Muminin Abu Bakr al-Hussaini Al-Quraishi al-Baghdadi," Al-Manarah al-Bayda Foundation for Media Production, April 9, 2013, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/shaykh-abc5ab-bakr-al-e1b8a5ussaync4ab-al-qurayshc4ab-al-baghdhc481dc4ab-e2809cannouncement-of-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shc481m22-en.pdf>.

36. What precipitated the rivalry and clash between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra is unclear. One view suggests strategic differences arose between Baghdadi and Jabhat al-Nusra commander Abu Mohammad al-Julani over the timing of declaring an Islamic state. Baghdadi called for doing so immediately while Julani followed al Qaeda's staged approach. Another view suggests that it resulted from a personal rivalry between the leaders of both groups. See Suhaib Anjarini, "The Evolution of ISIS," *Al Monitor*, November 1, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/11/syria-islamic-state-iraq-sham-growth.html>. In his response to Baghdadi's dissolution of Jabhat al-Nusra, Julani does not reject Baghdadi or his actions entirely: the question, rather is one of consultation and *ba'ya*—and Julani wants to clarify that he follows Zawahiri first. In Baghdadi's statement announcing the merger (see footnote 35), he himself acknowledges that scholars, or the ulema, do not support him—he knows he does not yet have consensus: "...as for the sincere Ulema we ask for your support to the religion and call you to join us hasn't time come to dust your feet with the soil of the land of jihad for the sake of Allah? ... I swear by Allah you will find that fear for the sake of Allah is better from [than] the comfortable bed which you sleep in." For Julani's reaffirmation of support for Zawahiri, see "About the Fields of al-Sham," Al-Manarah al-Bayda Foundation for Media Production, April 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/04/10/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rahs-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad>

Baghdadi to focus his operations on Iraq, not Syria, which would remain under Jabhat al-Nusra's purview.³⁷ The split that ensued was more than just political competition for leadership, however: it was about the proper strategy to achieve jihadists' ultimate objectives.

While some jihadists called for reconciling the dispute, the split was about to deepen. In June 2014 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took an unprecedented step of declaring himself caliph of a new caliphate which would simply be called the Islamic State.³⁸ What was underway was nothing less than a rebellion against al Qaeda and an attempt to redefine jihadi strategy.

The split with al Qaeda was more immediately precipitated by Baghdadi's unilateral moves in Syria, but the decaying relationship between al Qaeda and the predecessors of the Islamic State long foretold this clash. What became the Islamic State in 2014 evolved from the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which was formed in 2004 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.³⁹ From the beginning, al Qaeda had difficulty controlling Zarqawi and AQI. Though AQI pursued the "far enemy" by attacking U.S. forces in Iraq, it also intentionally deepened sectarian tensions by attacking Shi'a civilians and minority groups, a strategy that intensified Iraq's civil war and contradicted al Qaeda's approach

al-jawlani-al-golani-about-the-fields-of-al-sham.

37. Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Testimonial to preserve blood of the mujahideen in Sham," *pietervanostaeyen* (blog), May 2014, <http://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/05/03/dr-ayman-az-zawahiri-testimonial-to-preserve-the-blood-of-mujahideen-in-as-sham/>. In May 2014 Zawahiri lectures Baghdadi to "focus on Iraq, which needs more effort, empty yourself for it even if you see yourselves as wronged! To stop this massacre and to focus on the enemies of Islam and the Sunnis in Iraq." Baghdadi is accused here of overstepping his bounds, of ignoring Zawahiri's orders, and ignoring al Qaeda's strategy and plan. Specifically, he implores Baghdadi to "Come back to the Sam' wa Ta'ah (hearing & obedience) to your leaders. Come back to what your Shaykhs and leaders worked for and preceded you in it."

38. On the first day of Ramadan 2014, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, a spokesman for ISIS, declared Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi caliph of the "Islamic State" in an audio statement posted online. See Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, "This is the Promise of Allah," Al Hayat Media Center, June 29, 2014, https://ia902505.us.archive.org/28/items/poa_25984/EN.pdf.

39. Prior to establishing Al Qaeda in Iraq Zarqawi led a group called Tawhid wal Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad).

regarding Shi'a.⁴⁰ AQI gained a reputation for brutal violence against Shi'a, minorities, and eventually against Sunni groups that opposed its actions. By late 2006 AQI adopted the name Islamic State of Iraq and announced the creation of a Sunni state in western Iraq.⁴¹

ISI's fortunes declined once Sunni tribes that had previously accepted its presence began confronting the group in cooperation with the U.S. military. Many of its top leaders were killed by U.S. forces and local Iraqi allies. The group was already badly wounded in 2010, when a mid-level bomb maker, Ibrahim Awad Bu Badri, later known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, became ISI's emir.⁴² Had there been no war in Syria, ISI would likely have remained a shadow of its former self. But the Syrian conflict's sectarian nature fed the extreme violence and tension that AQI and ISI had fostered and capitalized on in Iraq almost a decade earlier, and enabled jihadi-salafists to reemerge in both Syria and Iraq.

In contrast to al Qaeda, which held that conditions were not yet ripe for shari'a or the caliphate, the Islamic State expresses a sense of urgency about both. It understands the importance

40. In 2006 for example AQI bombed the golden-domed Shi'a al Askari Mosque in Samarra and in 2007 launched a series of bombings against the Yazidi community that killed nearly 800 people. See Andrew Wander, "How Suicide Bombings Shattered Iraq," *Al Jazeera*, October 24, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.com/secretiraqfiles/2010/10/20101022161025428625.html>; "Mastermind of Iraq Yazidi Attack Killed: U.S. Military," Reuters, September 9, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/09/09/us-iraq-yazidis-idUSL0930932320070909>.

41. Al Qaeda in Iraq created the Mujahideen Shura Council as a front to run the Islamic State of Iraq. See Fishman, "Redefining the Islamic State," 8.

42. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rose through the ranks of various jihadi-salafi groups in Iraq including the Islamic State of Iraq, though many details of his activities remain murky. According to some accounts he joined Zarqawi as a smuggler in 2003. He may have been imprisoned by U.S. forces in Iraq for a period of time. According to an "official" biography posted online by the Islamic State, Baghdadi earned degrees in Islamic studies and served on al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq's shari'a committees. He allegedly became emir of ISI in April 2010 after the reported death of its former emir. See Peter Beaumont, "Abu Bakr al-Baghdad: The Isis Chief with the Ambition to Overtake Al-Qaida," *Guardian*, June 12, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/12/baghdadi-abu-bakr-iraq-isis-mosul-jihad>. For the Islamic State's "official biography see "A Biography of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," SITE Intelligence Group, July 16, 2013, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/226-the-story-behind-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi>.

of building popular support by providing social services and indoctrinating young people, but it is less concerned than al Qaeda is with popular *approval* of its actions, and has little tolerance for dissent when it comes to its doctrine. The Islamic State believes that the caliphate must be established immediately. According to its key spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, it was the proper time to establish the caliphate because the Islamic State had fulfilled a series of conditions or prerequisites. If the conditions are ripe, it is a sin *not* to establish the caliphate.⁴³ “Running after crowds,” as Islamic State leaders accuse al Qaeda of doing, undermines God’s authority because it forces the jihadi movement to bend its rules—divinely-given rules, as they believe—to popular will, rather than abiding by God’s law.

Not content to simply reject al Qaeda’s advice to pursue change gradually and use violence selectively, the Islamic State has embraced rampant violence. It proudly displays, through social media and other online platforms, photographs and videos of beheadings, crucifixions, and mass executions of prisoners, and it publicly administers other punishments such as flogging. Moreover, it has labeled anyone who opposes its doctrine as an infidel. This broad definition of *takfir* allows the Islamic State to justify killing a wide swath of civilians and opponents.

The Islamic State has marked Shi’a as a primary enemy, and has thus deepened the sectarian conflict in Iraq and Syria. In a departure from al Qaeda’s measured approach toward Shi’a, Baghdadi has called on Muslim youth to carry out jihad against

43. Adnani lists a series of practices that the Islamic State must implement as a prelude to the caliphate: *hudud* or canonical Qur’anic punishment, demolition of grave markers and shrines, release of prisoners “by the edge of the sword,” freedom of movement, appointment of judges, collection of *jizyah* taxes on Christians, collection of *zakat*, and education of the population through religious classes and lessons in mosques. After describing the above prerequisites, he writes: “There only remained one matter, a *wajib kifa’i* (collective obligation) that the umma sins by abandoning. It is a forgotten obligation . . . It is the *Khilafa* (caliphate) . . . —the abandoned obligation of the era.” Having met the requirements, the Islamic State has “gained the essentials necessary for *Khilafah*, which the Muslims are sinful for if they do not try to establish.” See Adnani, “This is the Promise of Allah.”

the “*Safavid rafida*.”⁴⁴ *Safavid* refers to the Safavid or Persian Empire, which adopted Shi’a Islam in the early sixteenth century.⁴⁵ *Rafida* is a derogatory term used to describe Shi’a; it means “those who refused” the correct succession of historical caliphs. Adnani has also explicitly criticized al Qaeda for its approach to the Shi’a: “The difference between the [Islamic] State and Al-Aq’idah...is a matter of crooked religion and deviated Manhaj... a Manhaj which believes...that the filthy Rafidah polytheists are only but accused and they should be preached to, not fought!”⁴⁶ The Islamic State’s position reflects Zarqawi’s earlier views. In a 2004 letter, Zarqawi wrote that “if we succeed in dragging them [Shi’a] into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabeans.”⁴⁷

The Islamic State uses its battlefield success to bolster its religious credentials and legitimacy while undermining its jihadi-salafi rivals. Adnani, for example, claims that God is rewarding the Islamic State with battlefield success because of its piety.⁴⁸

44. Al-Baghdadi, “Allah will not allow except that His Light should be perfected,” Fursan al-Balagh Media, July 2012, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/shaykh-abc5ab-bakr-al-e1b8a5ussaync4ab-al-qurayshc4ab-al-baghdcc481dc4ab-22but-god-will-not-allow-except-that-his-light-should-be22-en.pdf>.

45. The Safavid dynasty ruled from 1501 to 1722 and adopted Shi’ite Islam as the official state religion in part to distinguish itself from the neighboring Ottoman Empire which followed Sunni Islam.

46. Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani al-Shami, “This is not our methodology nor will it ever be,” Chabab Tawhid Media, April 2014, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/shaykh-abc5ab-mue1b8a5ammad-al-e28098adnc481nc4ab-al-shc481mc4ab-22this-is-not-our-manhaj-nor-will-it-ever-be22-en.pdf>.

47. Sabeans, a pre-Islamic people living in Southern Arabia, are considered by Muslims as one of the three pre-Islamic monotheistic religions. Zarqawi likely equates them with people who rejected Islam. For the text of the letter, see “Zarqawi Letter: February 2004 Coalition Provisional Authority English Translation of Terrorist Musab al Zarqawi Letter Obtained by United States Government in Iraq,” February 2004, U.S. Department of State, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>.

48. In “This is not our methodology,” Adnani asks God to destroy the state and deny its victories if it is not fulfilling His will. “O Allah, if this State is a State of Khawarij then break its back, kill its leaders, forgo its banner and guide its soldiers to truth. O Allah, if this is an Islamic State, ruling by Your Book and the Sunnah of Your

He also belittles al Qaeda leaders like Zawahiri and Maqdisi for not actively engaging in battle: they “cannot handle jihad of the elite far away from hotels, conferences, offices, lights, and cameras.”⁴⁹

The rebellion against al Qaeda and its strategy triggered a crisis of authority within jihadi-salafi ranks. As the Islamic State and al Qaeda compete to shape jihadi-salafi strategy—and to be seen as the legitimate shapers of that strategy—the groups have denounced one another, rebutted accusations, and leveled new criticisms. When Baghdadi announced ISIS’s merger with Jabhat al-Nusra, Zawahiri responded by sharply criticizing Baghdadi for violating the principles of *shura*, claiming that ISIS “only consulted themselves” and Jabhat al-Nusra “says they were not consulted.”⁵⁰ He levels the same criticism multiple times: “We were not informed about its [ISIS’s] creation, nor counseled. Nor were we satisfied with it rather we ordered it to stop.”⁵¹ Zawahiri takes the opportunity to reaffirm al Qaeda’s evolutionary approach: “Rather the guidelines of the group is not to announce Emirates/States in this stage.”⁵²

Prophet, fighting Your enemies, then keep it firm, honour it and grant it victory, and establish it upon the earth, and make it as the Khilafah upon the Way of the Prophethood.”

49. Adnani, “This is the Promise of Allah.”

50. Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Testimonial to preserve blood of the mujahideen in Sham.” This particular statement comes more than a year after Baghdadi’s April 2013 announcement of the JN/ISIS merger. Here, Zawahiri condemns the infighting between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS over the past year, lamenting that their conflict has caused the shedding of innocent Muslim blood and caused *fitna* within the community. He urges them to stop fighting and instead, seek reconciliation. In this document, Zawahiri is reviewing the missteps taken by ISIS and its earlier iterations, noting that at each successive juncture it violated *shura*, failed to inform Al Qaeda Central of its plans, and disobeyed orders.

51. The same message is given on February 3, 2014, when Zawahiri officially disowns ISIS. “Firstly: Qae’dat al-Jihad (Al Qaeda) declares that it has no links to the ISIS group.” He reiterates the importance of *shura* and the principle of consultation and affirms that AQ does not create states or emirates without consulting appropriate leaders and scholars. See Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Acknowledging ISIS officially isn’t part of AQ,” February 3, 2014, <http://justpaste.it/transit>: see original Arabic here: <http://justpaste.it/ea9k>.

52. Ibid.

In response to this criticism, the Islamic State launched a series of verbal assaults on al Qaeda's commitment to jihad, doctrinal purity, and authority to lead the umma and jihad. These claims go beyond earlier disagreements and constitute an unprecedented effort to delegitimize and displace al Qaeda's leadership. In April 2014 Islamic State spokesman Adnani harshly criticized al Qaeda and its *manhaj*: "The leaders of Al-Qa'idah deviated from the right manhaj. . . Al-Qa'idah today is no longer the Qa'idah of jihad, and so it is not the base of jihad."⁵³ The implication is that the proper *manhaj* is committed to immediately establishing a caliphate. Al Qaeda's *manhaj*, Adnani continued, "believes in pacifism and runs after majorities"; it shies away "from mentioning jihad and declaring tawhid" and instead mentions "revolution, popularity, uprising, striving, struggle, republicanism, secularism."⁵⁴

Al Qaeda's broad response has been to suggest that the Islamic State's actions violate the principle of *shura* and creates discord or *fitna*.⁵⁵ More narrowly, it has attacked Baghdadi's religious credentials and implied that the group overall acts without the guidance of authoritative and respected religious scholars. According to Maqdisi, the Islamic State "has no consideration for the scholars of the Ummah and its prominent figures."⁵⁶ He added that "not even one scholar from the divine scholars supported them or trusted them or aligned with them."⁵⁷ Of the Islamic State's declaration of the caliphate, Maqdisi writes: "They abrogated their first pledge of allegiance to their leaders and rebelled against their emirs, and they transgressed against their senior figures when they declared the first state, and when they declared the second they shed protected blood and refused to be judged by the Shariah. Therefore, it is our right to ask: What will

53. Adnani, "This is not our methodology."

54. Ibid.

55. See Basma Atassi, "Iraqi al-Qaeda Chief Rejects Zawahiri Orders," *Al Jazeera*, June 15, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/2013615172217827810.html>.

56. Maqdisi, "And Be Not Like Her Who Undoes the Thread."

57. Ibid.

they do after the declaration of the Caliphate?"⁵⁸ The implied answer is that the rebellious and violent acts will continue and in the process will distort both Islam and the jihadi project.

Though the Islamic State rejects al Qaeda's leadership, it on occasion invokes the name of al Qaeda leaders, including bin Laden, who still commands respect in jihadi circles. "So be assured O soldiers of the Islamic State, for we are by Allah's will progressing upon the Manhaj of the Imam Shaykh Usamah [bin Laden], and the Amir of the martyrdom seekers Abu Mus'ab Az-Zarqawi, and the founder of the state Abu 'Umar Al-Baghdadi."⁵⁹ In this way the Islamic State seeks to build on bin Laden's legitimacy by claiming to be his authentic heir, even as the group turns its back on bin Laden's approach to jihad. By claiming to be bin Laden's heir, Baghdadi is explicitly claiming legitimacy over bin Laden's designated heir and successor, Zawahiri.

IMPLICATIONS

The struggle for authentic leadership has created confusion within jihadi-salafi circles, and it has important ramifications for the United States and other governments that share a common goal of fighting violent extremism.

First, competition for legitimacy, authority, and recruits will drive jihadi-salafi groups to more extreme measures and greater violence as groups seek to distinguish themselves from their rivals. Past experience demonstrates that internal tension and competition among violent extremists heightens the threat against Western and local targets. In December 2007, for example, Algerian militants attacked UN headquarters in Algiers, killing over 31 people. The attacks were carried out by the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which had changed

58. Ibid.

59. Adnani, "This is not our methodology." Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was the alleged former emir of the Islamic State of Iraq who was reportedly killed in April 2010. Adnani claims that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi received *ba'ya* in Iraq from Islamic State leaders as the successor to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. See "Who Was the Real Abu Omar al-Baghdadi," *Asharq al-Awsat*, April 20, 2010, <http://www.aawsat.net/2010/04/article55251030>.

its name to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb as part of an official affiliation with al Qaeda in late 2006. Though Algerian militants had long targeted Western interests, the UN attack was AQIM's way of demonstrating to al Qaeda its commitment to global jihad, rather than to a narrow Algerian insurgency. Similarly, Mokhtar Belmokhtar launched the 2013 In Amenas attack in response to disagreements and criticism by AQIM's senior leadership. During the bold operation, 32 fighters attacked the Tiguentourine gas plant and took nearly 800 people from over 30 countries hostage for four days. In the end 40 civilians were killed. The attack was intended in part to undermine AQIM's leadership by demonstrating Belmokhtar's capability and primacy within North African jihadi-salafi circles.

Second, the rivalry is forcing jihadi-salafi groups across the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to choose sides in this internal struggle. Will jihadi groups continue swearing allegiance to al Qaeda's leadership and follow the jihadi strategy put forward by Zawahiri and others, or will they choose the strategy of violence against minorities and the immediate establishment of the caliphate? The Islamic State has called for jihadi-salafists to pledge their loyalty to the group and its goals and to launch attacks wherever possible. At first, some groups called for resolving the dispute. AQIM was one of the first to enter the debate, arguing that consultation and consensus were paramount to the broader movement's unity. In an official announcement, AQIM stated that "...It is obvious to all Muslims and Jihad organizations with a truthful approach that such an announcement (about the Caliphate) cannot come without Shura, in accordance with the command of Allah the Glorious to His believing slaves."⁶⁰ AQIM further reiterated its allegiance to Zawahiri and called on leading scholars to help resolve the dispute in order to

60. "AQIM New Statement: The Year of the Jama'ah . . . The Hope of the Ummah," *INCA News*, July 4, 2014, <http://www.incanews.com/en/africa/596/aqim-new-statement-the-year-of-jamaah-the-hope-of-the-ummah>.

avoid *fitna*. Abu Iyadh al-Tunsi, the leader of Tunisia's Ansar al Shari'a, also issued a statement calling for reconciliation.⁶¹

Some other groups, inspired by the Islamic State's example and call to action, have announced—and sought to demonstrate—their loyalty to the Islamic State. In September 2014, after Adnani called on Islamic State followers to kill Americans and Europeans “in any manner or way,”⁶² an AQIM splinter group in Algeria known as Jund al-Khilafa swore allegiance to the Islamic State and responded by kidnapping and beheading a French citizen.⁶³ In eastern Libya, the Shura Council of Islamic Youth has reportedly sworn allegiance to the Islamic State. Reports also suggest that numerous other groups have pledged loyalty to the Islamic State including the Egyptian group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, which operates in the Sinai Peninsula. In many

61. See Thomas Joscelyn, “Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia Leader Says Gains in Iraq Should Be Cause for Jihadist Reconciliation,” *Long War Journal*, June 14, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/06/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_8.php.

62. Adnani counsels the *muwahidun*—monotheists, or all believing Muslims—to kill non-believers. Notably, he tells Muslims to ignore advice or verdicts from others, once again reiterating the Islamic State's refusal to abide by *shura* or consultative decisions as al Qaeda prefers. He says, “If you can kill a disbelieving American or European—especially the spiteful and filthy French—or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers.” Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, “Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful,” *pietervanostaeyen* (blog), September 22, 2014, <http://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/09/25/abu-muhammad-al-adnani-ash-shami-indeed-your-lord-is-ever-watchful/>.

63. In July 2014, Algerian press reports claimed that Abu Abdullah Othman al-Asemi, an AQIM judge for the central region, declared his support for the Islamic State in an audio recording. On July 4, 2014, AQIM posted a statement reiterating its support for Zawahiri, despite Asemi's alleged declarations. Jund al-Khalifa, the Algerian AQIM breakaway, issued a statement in which AQIM central region commander Khaled Abu Suleimane (Gouri Abdelmalek) claimed leadership of the new group. See “Splinter Group Breaks from al Qaeda in North Africa,” Reuters, September 14, 2014, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/09/14/algeria-security-idINL6NoRFoFo20140914/>; Atef Kadadra, “Al-Qaeda Group Divided on Islamic State,” *Al Monitor*, July 21, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/07/separate-statements-highlight-possible-rift-in-aqim.html>.

cases the validity of these pledges are questionable and statements are often contradicted, demonstrating either deliberate efforts to confuse or internal debates within jihadi-salafi groups over affiliation. The result will be a further fragmentation of jihadi-salafi groups.

Third, identifying with the Islamic State can boost the prestige of smaller militant groups by associating them with a recognized and feared brand name, just as smaller groups used the al Qaeda brand in the past. At the moment, operational links between these smaller groups and the Islamic State remain vague. Should the Islamic State continue growing, its networks could provide assistance and operational guidance to smaller associated groups beyond Iraq and Syria. Neither al Qaeda nor the Islamic State is likely to emerge as a clear winner in establishing a jihadi-salafi consensus. Instead, each will have its own following of affiliate groups and supporters, which will in turn create two competing blocs and strategies. This division will remain fluid, however, and internal disagreements and debate among affiliate groups will likely create ongoing confusion about allegiances among jihadi-salafi groups.

LOOKING FORWARD

The Islamic State's rebellion against al Qaeda has shaken the jihadi-salafi community. Just as bin Laden's decision to attack the United States signaled a dramatic shift in jihadi-salafi goals more than a decade ago, the Islamic State's disregard for al Qaeda's leadership, rejection of its strategy, and declaration of the caliphate is reshaping the jihadi-salafi landscape. Its creation of a quasi-state governing structure with territory, courts, infrastructure, and independent revenue streams has revolutionized jihad in that adherents can experience the goal of jihad—the caliphate—immediately. This self-declared caliphate has attracted thousands of people from around the region, Europe, and beyond.⁶⁴ In some cases foreigners have brought their children or

64. As of September 2014, U.S. government estimates suggest that Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria could total between 20,000 and 31,500. That number

families to live in the geographical entity that the Islamic State established. This allows people to experience jihad in a new way by actively participating in building a new society and political structure. The Islamic State's achievements to date have also inspired a new generation of young people who believe in the power of violence and the goal of immediately establishing a caliphate through direct action. Their battlefield successes (until now) have energized many fighters who interpret their military victories as proof of the movement's authenticity and adherence to God's will.

These successes, however, have also raised high expectations among those who have flocked to join the Islamic State. This means that the rulers of the Islamic State will have to demonstrate (rather than merely assert) that what they have created indeed resembles the state of the earliest Muslims. Controlling territory in Syria and Iraq and declaring a caliphate has allowed the Islamic State to distinguish itself from al Qaeda. It remains to be seen if holding territory will become the new currency of jihadism and whether the caliphate becomes a new rallying point for jihadi-salafists and other—nonviolent—salafists. The Islamic State's legitimacy and identity, unlike al Qaeda's, is defined partly by its territorial control. The loss of contiguous territory or of a stronghold such as Mosul would likely undermine the Islamic State's appeal and legitimacy given the centrality of geographical territory to the movement's identity.

Al Qaeda is now fighting for its legitimacy and leadership. It failed to adjust to the dramatic regional shifts under way in the region or reinvent itself. Yet, it remains a dangerous network and still commands loyalty from thousands of fighters and sym-

might include 15,000 fighting in Syria alone, among them 2,000 westerners. Ken Dilanian, "CIA: Islamic State group has up to 31,500 fighters," Associated Press, September 11, 2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/cia-islamic-state-group-has-31500-fighters>; see also Scott Shane and Ben Hubbard, "ISIS Displaying a Deft Command of Varied Media," *New York Times*, August 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/world/middleeast/isis-displaying-a-deft-command-of-varied-media.html>.

pathizers around the world. It is unlikely to cede leadership of the jihadi-salafi project without a fight. The schism splitting the jihadi-salafi community is unlikely to be resolved in any conclusive way. Instead, for the foreseeable future pressure will mount for jihadi-salafists to choose sides in an increasingly polarized struggle that will define the movement for the next generation.