

The Islamic State Model and Al-Qaeda: A Comparative Perspective

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

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This paper intends to track the development and export of the ‘Islamic State Model’ in order to interpret the continuity and deviation between Islamic State and Al-Qaeda and shed light on the group’s aims, strategy, and ideology in relation to its regional antecedents and other jihadist and Islamist factions. Perhaps the most distinguishing trait of the IS Model in its formative stages is the radical interpretation of the doctrine of *takfir*, or the designation of all Muslims who refuse to adhere to the proper strain of Salafism as infidels. The brutality of this interpretation enabled the group to justify and legitimize targeting almost anybody, and eclipsed groups like Al-Qaeda in brutality and extremism. Many scholars trace IS’s roots to Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who left an imprint of extreme and indiscriminately violent philosophy on the group’s formation¹. During its formative years, IS also exploited the chaos in Iraq and Syria and used geosectarian and national divisions (Sunni versus Shia and Arab versus Persian) to catalyze its rapid expansion and exploit already existing conflicts to sow chaos in the region.

Theologically more inspired by the fatwas of Ibn Taymiyyah rather than the marked Qutbism that characterized Al-Qaeda, IS geostrategically emphasized waging war on the ‘near enemy’ rather than AQ’s prioritization of the ‘far enemy’, rendering the focus of their attacks towards ‘infidel’ or ‘impious’ Muslim governments, rival insurgent groups, and Shia Iran². This exploitation of sectarianism has enabled IS to frame itself as a defender of Sunni interests in the region, all while the group carried out indiscriminate attacks against Sunni Muslims justified by their practice of ‘ultra’ *takfir*. Indeed, although many attacks have focused on fellow Muslims and regional governments, IS has expressed willingness to challenge the US and other Western powers in military conflict in order to bolster their narrative of defending the community and interests of Islam against the impious. However, this seems to constitute a pragmatic shift in tactics rather than a strategic prioritization of the ‘far enemy’ as in the case of groups like AQ.

IS has also adopted a sharply distinct organizational structure to AQ, which initially operated as a small and elite cadre of fighters with an umbrella ideology (although it has experienced significant decentralization, fragmentation, and regionalization throughout the past decade³.) Ideologically, much of the English and Arabic propaganda clarifies that the failure of IS’s so called enemies to embrace the Islamic faith constitutes the principal root of the group’s animosity towards unbelievers. The author of the English language propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, after listing reasons for hatred ranging from the ignorance of atheism, the fallaciousness of alternative religious systems, and aggressive foreign policy, states:

What’s important to understand here is that although some might argue that your foreign policies are the extent of what drives our hatred, this particular reason for hating you is secondary, hence the reason we addressed it at the end of the above list. The fact is, even if you were to stop bombing us, imprisoning us, torturing us, vilifying us, and usurping our lands, we would continue to hate you because our primary reason for hating you will not cease to exist until you embrace Islam. Even if you were to pay *jizyah* and live under the authority of Islam in humiliation, we would continue to hate you. No doubt, we would stop fighting you then as we would stop fighting any disbelievers who enter into a covenant with us, but we would not stop hating you⁴.

Much of the literature on the group and propaganda material released confirms the seriousness with which IS takes its religious claims and supports the argument that the group is a primarily theologically motivated actor and thus ought to be addressed as such from the perspective of security studies. IS also emphasizes the violent implementation of the Shari’a as its primary mode of governance and

¹ Fawaz A Gerges, *ISIS: A History*. Princeton: Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016.

² Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 7.

³ Denise N. Baken and Ioannis Mantzikos, *Al Qaeda: The Transformation of Terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015) Print.

⁴ Dabiq, “Why We Hate You and Why We Fight

prioritizes taking swift, violent jihadist action over more theoretical modes of extracting authority, a point in contradistinction to Al Qaeda. Indeed, this emphasis on military action over political and diplomatic modes of negotiation and reconciliation has long characterized IS and its affiliates and accounts for the group's uncompromising brutality and military acumen towards rival organizations and states. In terms of IS's investment in the construction of stable state structures, the IS has demonstrated limitation and reticence and can thus be described as a 'light totalitarian state'⁵. Relevant to a discussion of the group's organizational and governmental structure is the concept of the establishment of the Caliphate, which was placed at the center of IS's theological and political ideology and again contradicts AQ, which postponed discussion of the Caliphate to an indeterminate future.

Militarily speaking, IS has demonstrated a frenzied and indiscriminate willingness to face vastly superior enemies on multiple fronts and has shown itself unreserved and unphased in making exceptionally risky military-strategic moves. I conjecture that the zealous emphasis on martyrdom and notable 'Apocalypticism' of the group's ideology has contributed to this heedless risk-taking approach to violence that is sharply contrasted by the more measured philosophy of Al Qaeda. IS is also known for its imposition of exceptionally rigid military discipline upon its members, a factor that has undoubtedly contributed to the group's stunningly rapid early territorial gains throughout northern Iraq and Syria. Some other important elements of the IS model relevant to the present study include military professionalism and organization combined with a decentralization of operations and rapid dispersion capability, top down governance, global emphasis on jihad, flamboyantly exaggerated displays of force, and military exploitation of local communities to drive the group's expansion⁶. IS has also demonstrated a variety of different recruitment tactics and strategies, including widespread use of internet propaganda and encouragement of online self-radicalization, coupled with collaboration with freelancers working as "lone wolf" terrorists and pledging allegiance to the group without any previous direct contact or planning.

AQ has demonstrated significantly more restraint militarily, viewing IS's unbridled militarism as a premature step that would expose the group to intolerable retaliation from its many enemies. AQ bided its time in awakening and mobilising the Muslim masses, and showed far more restraint in its military strategy, despite mass casualty large scale attacks such as 9/11 and the 2005 London Bombings. The establishment of an Islamic State and proclamation of the Caliphate should not necessarily be viewed entirely in terms of territorial expansion or control. It is more a strategy for the movement to gain spiritual and military legitimacy over the Muslim *umma* and cast the movement and its adherents as leaders of global jihad. Ultimately, IS has rejected the notion that it must defend static and specified territory to be a legitimate actor in the sphere of global jihad. This nebulous view on territorial holding has undoubtedly served the movement well as its land has rapidly diminished in the Levant. I also conjecture that the unclear views on the necessity of territorial control serve the movement well in terms of its export to distant regions, from Afghanistan to Pakistan to East Turkestan to Sri Lanka. Thus, the Islamic State Model can be viewed more as an instrument of ideological cohesion and ideological propaganda rather than a clear-cut formula for capturing land and establishing territorial holdings. This corrected view has implications for counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies. These strategies should focus more on countering extremist narratives through theology and intracultural argumentation within the *umma* and among reformist Muslims rather than military campaigning, which although necessary and helpful from a security perspective, will not ultimately strip the violent interpretations of credibility among the *umma*.

ITCT does not necessarily endorse any or all views expressed by the author in the article.

⁵ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 11.

⁶ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 9-11.