

# The Islamic State of Al-Qaeda

By [A.J. Caschetta](#) (July 2017)



With Iraqi forces now [controlling most of Mosul](#) and the siege of Raqqa underway, many are predicting the imminent demise of the Islamic State. [most brutal](#) elements of Al-Qaeda [more dangerous](#) terrorist organization. Their rivalry [Hisham al-Hashimi](#), an Iraqi researcher of terrorist groups and an [predicted](#) in October 2014 that “the Islamic State, regardless of how big or small it becomes, will come back to its mother: al-Qaeda.”

In March 2016, American [wrote](#) that “by 2021 al Qaeda and ISIS might reunite—or at least have entered into some form of alliance or tactical cooperation.” By October he seemed to have reevaluated the timeline, [fed the merger debate](#) by

indicating that Iraqi intelligence had discovered “discussions and dialogue between messengers representing Baghdadi and representing Zawahiri.” Allawi warned ominously, “The discussion has started now.”

## A Logical Choice



Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden and Mohammed Atef (Feb 1998 Kandahar press conference)

A merger of Al-Qaeda and ISIS would be eminently logical. From the anarchists of the late Nineteenth century to the founding fathers of the global jihad in the late Twentieth century, terrorists have long asserted that their goals will be achieved only when individual vanguards coalesce into a unified movement.

In *The Terrorist's Struggle* (1880), Nikolai Morozov announced the creation of the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders.

A true merger of Al-Qaeda and ISIS, that is, a union of the people, tactics, specialties, and myths of each group into a terrorist “super-group,” would portend a very dangerous evolution in the global jihad movement.

## People

Al-Qaeda represents the first generation of global jihadis. Of its original leadership (Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden, Mohammed Atef, and Omar Abdel Rahman, a/k/a/ “the blind sheikh”), Ayman al-Zawahiri is the only remaining survivor. Like Rahman, his terror credentials predate Al-Qaeda; his group, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and Rahman’s joined Al-Qaeda after his release from a Jordanian prison in 1999, is the link between the two generations. After the collapse of the Taliban, Zarqawi escaped from Afghanistan and opened his own AQI renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). 2013 brought another name change as it became the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). It was still an Al-Qaeda franchise until February 2014, when Al-Qaeda “inmate of both Camp Bucca and Abu Ghraib.” In honor of the first caliph of Islam (Abu Bakr), he changed his name to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and announced that his group was the new caliphate.



Baghdadi

A merger of Al-Qaeda and ISIS would represent a reunification of the first and second generations of the global jihad movement. But it would also require Zawahiri to share power with Baghdadi, which many people believe is impossible. The death of either Zawahiri or Baghdadi could bring new leadership willing to let go of old grudges. Osama bin Laden's son Hamza, whom some Arab Ali Soufan are already calling the new leader of Al-Qaeda, might be able to bridge the divide and unite an Islamic State of Al-Qaeda.

## Tactics

Al-Qaeda is a clandestine terrorist organization known for the quality of its attacks, whereas ISIS, part militia and part terrorist organization, is known for the quantity of its attacks.

Al-Qaeda has concentrated on spectacular, "theatrical" attacks, what *The 9/11 Commission Report* labels "catastrophic," "grand" and "super" terrorism (p. 343). It

pioneered the multiple-event attack and timed secondary explosions designed to kill onlookers and first responders at the scenes of their primary explosions.

ISIS, on the other hand, holds territory and runs schools and hospitals. It operates primarily as a conventional militia and secondarily as a covert terrorist organization. Its attacks on foreign soil tend to be relatively unsophisticated, with its operators (frequently knives, small arms and vehicles in attacks requiring minimal preparation and that often seem spontaneous.

Milo Comerford, inside the human body. Attacks often require years of preparation and surveillance carried out by multiple cells. When it was protected by the Turabi government in the Sudan (1991-1996) and then the Taliban in Afghanistan (1996-2001), Al-Qaeda's training camps claimed to be ISIS members or whom ISIS claimed as members.

## Myths

The myth of Al-Qaeda begins with Abdullah Azzam's 1979 fatwa calling for defensive jihad in Afghanistan and his boast that he and his coterie of vanguard jihadists (the "Afghan Arabs" as they came to be called) defeated the Soviet Union on the battlefield. After Azzam's death, the boast became bin Laden's. He built on the myth, claiming that his group would take on and defeat the remaining super-power, and he followed through with a series of attacks against the US in the 1990s, peaking on 9/11.

The ISIS myth is centered on the assertion that it is the righteous Islamic caliphate, a claim bolstered by success on

the battlefield, especially in Mosul where Iraqi soldiers fled the battlefield in 2014 and abandoned US materiel. On video for all the world to see, Baghdadi proclaimed the caliphate from the al-Nuri mosque in Mosul on June 29, 2014 (destroyed along with its famous minaret on June 22, 2017 by ISIS as it fled the city). For over three years it has “governed” territory, printed its own currency and witnessed its flag—sometimes versions—raised throughout the world. Another important aspect of the myth is occasionally cooperated when it was expedient. Differences dissolve when survival is at stake. Zawahiri, who began 2017 calling ISIS “call for unity among jihadists.



Isis flag, Left, compared to an Al-Qaeda flag, Right.

Naysayers also overlook the fact that many of the characteristics associated with ISIS actually originated with Al-Qaeda. For instance, the ISIS campaign to recruit over the internet mirrors the strategy of Anwar al-Awlaki, the American strategist for Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Awlaki, who was killed when ISIS was still known as AQI, has been Youtube. ISIS has simply followed his lead. Likewise, Zarqawi made beheading videos a trademark of his group, and his followers have expanded on it, dozens at a time. But this too began with Al-Qaeda. When Khalid Sheikh Mohammed videotaped himself beheading *Wall Street Journal* reporter

cautions Newsweek. Abdul Basit warns in *The National Interest* of “a new jihadi Frankenstein, born from Al Qaeda and ISIS’s marriage of convenience.” A Bruce Hoffman foresees “profound and far-reaching consequences for international security.”

In reality, an official merger of ISIS and Al-Qaeda may not be necessary for our worst fears to come true. They have already been imitating each other for some time, each adopting the successful strategies of the other, with terrifying results.

Hoffman notes that Al-Qaeda has lately shown a “new-found embrace of governance of populations and territorial control,” with Zawahiri working on Al-Qaeda’s image “to portray itself as a more moderate, acceptable alternative to ISIS.” ISIS, on the other hand, has been increasing and expanding its covert terrorist activity (commensurate with its loss of territory) and behaving in a very Al-Qaeda fashion for well over a year.

## ISIS Imitates Al-Qaeda

The most dangerous implications of a merger are already evident—ISIS tactics are becoming more Al-Qaeda-like in quality while not diminishing in frequency. Beginning with the captured on smartphones.

The March, 2016, attack in Salman Abedi attacked the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester on May 22, he targeted young girls with a particularly powerful pink ceramic knife throat-slitting spectacle carried out on the streets was all ISIS. But the attackers also wore Molotov cocktails with them, suggesting that something even more unique, if opportunistic, was planned.

## Conclusion

Former Iraqi intelligence officer Ibrahim al-Somaidaei is another ISIS specialist who foresees ISIS and Al-Qaeda coming together, mostly out of necessity. Somaidaei disagrees. Even if ISIS loses all its current territory, Tamimi writes, “its core leadership can operate” from remote desert areas in Syria and Iraq in “fallback” mode where it could “persist as an international franchise.”

Only time will tell if the two most dangerous fronts of the global jihad will reunite into a common front. Unfortunately, it will not require an Islamic State of Al-Qaeda for thousands to continue dying in the Long War. In fact, if the current trajectory continues with ISIS mimicking Al-Qaeda, a merger may become irrelevant. Al-Qaeda and ISIS may become even more dangerous as near mirror-images of each other competing for new fighters and for the world’s attention.

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