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Rifts in the Global Jihad Family in Syria

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The announcement by al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri that he is severing ties with the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) aroused much interest in the media and surprised many people. However, both friction between al-Qaeda Central and its global jihad affiliates and conflicts among the group's supporters is not unusual. Several years ago there was a prominent public clash between al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Zawahiri, who was his deputy at the time, on the one hand, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder and leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the forerunner of ISIS, on the other.

The recent formal public declaration by Zawahiri did not come from nowhere; it was another stage in the growing tension between him and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of ISIS. The seeds of the conflict were sown last year, when in April 2013 al-Baghdadi announced of his own accord that the group known as the Islamic State in Iraq would be merging with Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and forming a new organization called the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria. The next day, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the commander of Jabhat al-Nusra, announced that he rejected the merger and would not recognize it. This defiant response by al-Julani, who was stationed in Syria by al-Baghdadi himself, made the leaders of the Islamic State in Iraq fearful that its progeny had repudiated its parentage and that al-Julani was denying their authority. For this reason, the commanders of the Islamic State in Iraq decided to establish an umbrella organization that would control all operations in Iraq and Syria, above the Jabhat al-Nusra commander.

Attempting to mediate between the sides, al-Zawahiri mobilized his supporters, including his close associate Nasser al-Wahayshi, leader of al-Qaeda in Yemen. His goal was to preserve unity in the ranks and at the same time maintain his preeminent status as the leader of al-Qaeda Central. In June 2013, after the failure of the reconciliation talks, al-

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Zawahiri issued an audio recording in which he expressed the need for each of the two organizations to operate in its main country of residence. In other words, the Islamic State (ISIS) should operate in Iraq, and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. However, al-Baghdadi chose to respond by taking specific practical steps to implement his intention to operate in both countries, and in fact, beginning in mid-2013, he raised the profile of ISIS in Syria, and at the same time significantly stepped up the organization's activities in Iraq as well. The heightened activity in Iraq was evident recently when operatives from his organization temporarily took over Fallujah and Ramadi, which are located in the western Anbar province. In Syria too, ISIS has become the dominant of the two global jihadi organizations and has even managed to take over several towns in the north, most prominently, Raqqah, with a population of hundreds of thousands. In addition, its operatives have occupied other areas in northeastern Syria, including wide swaths of the province of Deir al-Zour.

Since the start of the confrontation, disagreements and conflicts have developed on the ground between ISIS and other opposition elements, such as the Free Syrian Army and fighters from the Islamic Front, which announced its establishment in Syria in November 2013. These conflicts were manifested in violent clashes between ISIS and Front members, including assassinations by both sides and the kidnapping of operatives. Similar clashes developed between members of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and have recently occurred in the south of Raqqah and Deir al-Zour.

The main criticism of ISIS has been of its brutal behavior toward the local population and its attempt to impose sharia law on the local residents. This drive has included severe punishments for those who deviate from the rigid fundamentalist interpretation of the laws of Islam, strict enforcement of full Islamic dress for women, and a ban on smoking and playing music in public. In December 2013, al-Nusra's leader, in his first public interview, granted to al-Jazeera, expressed reservations about the path of ISIS, claiming that its actions are criminal and heretical. ISIS did not take long to respond. A spokesman for the organization issued a recording in which he threatened to crush those who oppose the organization's path and even offered a reward to anyone who would behead a fighter from the competing organization. In response to the continuing sweeping criticism of his organization, al-Baghdadi issued a manifesto in defense of his men, claiming that the organization under his command was making an effort at reconciliation and that his operatives were doing their utmost to defend the Muslims against their enemies, with most of the fighting directed against the infidel enemies of Islam, i.e., the Shiites in Iraq and Syria. In an audio recording issued in January 2014, al-Zawahiri, in an attempt to highlight his status as the leader of global jihad and to prevent the split in its ranks from spreading, called for an end to the violence among the Islamic organizations fighting Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad and the establishment of a council to mediate the disputes on the basis of sharia principles and Islamic law. However, it appears that at this point,

al-Baghdadi does not intend to capitulate to the dictates of the al-Qaeda leader. His extensive self-confidence following the recent successes of ISIS in Iraq and Syria and his faith in the righteousness of his path as following the course charted by the prophet Muhammad were reflected in recent public comments, in which he stated that between orders given by human beings (meaning al-Zawahiri's edicts) and adherence to the path of the Prophet, which he and his organization represent, the choice is clear.

The internal war among opposition elements and the Islamic organizations in particular has implications both in Syria and in the West. First, the ever-worsening factionalism among the Salafist organizations, whose initial goal was to focus on fighting the Syrian ruler and who are now devoting most of their efforts to fighting among themselves, is playing into Assad's hands. Second, the conflict within the Salafist-jihadi camp is an opportunity for Western countries to attempt to stop the growing threat from global jihadi elements that are establishing themselves in Syria and threatening to spill over from Syria into other parts of the world. The bitter rivalry and resentment among activists from these organizations provides a broad basis for recruitment, counter-propaganda, and exploitation of the internal conflict to weaken and discredit them in the eyes of potential recruits to their ranks.

Thus far it does not appear that the internal conflict has reached the point of an all-out civil war. Moreover, and in spite of the relatively pragmatic image of Jabhat al-Nusra in the world media versus its brutal rival in Iraq, the organizations' shared vision is far from damaged. Both belong to the same ideological stream and draw from the same ideological sources. Their strategic plan regarding the establishment of a state governed by rigid Islamic law on the Taliban model is identical. The difference is mainly in Jabhat al-Nusra's willingness at this stage, for tactical reasons of convenience, to postpone the true battle for Syria's Islamic character to a later date, after the battle against President Assad has been won.

Close monitoring of the developing battle between the organizations can help Israel be better prepared for the anticipated threat from the presence of some 30,000 global jihadi operatives on its doorstep. According to IDF Intelligence head Maj. Gen. Aviv Kohavi, this represents one of the four main threats to Israel's national security in the coming year.

