



# BULLETIN

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## The Islamic State and Al-Qaeda: Two Different Threats

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*The Islamic State, an organisation formerly connected linked with Al-Qaeda, continues to successfully destabilise the Middle East as it directly threatens more countries of the region. This transforms the organisation into one of the most meaningful threats to international order. At the same time, Al-Qaeda, smaller in numbers than the Islamic State, remains the most potent terrorist threat to the West. While attempting to influence the situation in Iraq and Syria, the international coalition to fight the Islamic State should act against both of the aforementioned organisations. It should not, however, prioritise air strikes aimed at Middle Eastern jihadists, but concentrate on providing assistance to Syrian rebels and applying political pressure in Iraq.*

2013 saw a split in the ranks of Al-Qaeda, which resulted in a walk-out from the organisation by its former Iraqi affiliate, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It adopted the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which signalled the jihadists' intention to spread their fight in Iraq to neighbouring countries. After capturing parts of Syria and Iraq, ISIL announced the creation of a caliphate and al-Baghdadi's organisation changed its name to the Islamic State. In the summer, the Islamic State expanded its territory while taking, amongst others, the Iraqi city of Mosul. Its successes energised the international community's reaction and laid the groundwork for the mid-September establishment of the international coalition to fight the Islamic State, which includes Middle Eastern countries and some NATO and the EU members, intent on destroying this organisation. On 23 September, an air force of some coalition members (the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan and Qatar) carried out air strikes on jihadi outposts in Syria. Similar air strikes have been taking place from 7 August in Iraq. Their targets, however, have not only included facilities and command posts of the Islamic State, but also those of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN, the Support Front for the People of Sham) which is the Syrian affiliate of Al-Qaeda. Such scope of the international coalition's military missions suggests that not only is it interested in the Islamic State, but also in other jihadists who directly threaten the West.

**The Threat from the Islamic State.** The Islamic State, with its troops (according to CIA estimates) numbering up to 30,000 men, is successful on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria. Moreover, it is also far more popular in the Muslim world than the AQC, numerically inferior and concentrated in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Its actions destroy the regional political order and cause well-grounded worries in neighbouring countries, which are concerned that the Islamic State is bent on territorial expansion. The Islamic State is not, in contrast to Al-Qaeda, a strictly terrorist organisation, as its ambition is to expand territorially and remain in control in the already captured territories. For this reason, it constitutes a strategic and direct threat to the countries of the region – especially to Iraq and Syria, which have already lost parts of their territory to the Islamic State, but also to Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States. Thus the Islamic State does not imminently threaten the West, despite the fact that more than a dozen thousand volunteers from more than 80 countries (including 3,000 from Europe) could be involved in the Syrian civil war on the side of the jihadists. Theoretically, their potential returns to their old countries of domicile constitute a grave security threat, with France, the UK and Scandinavian countries already arresting some of the returnees who were allegedly planning terrorist attacks in Europe. It must be stressed, however, that such returnees are mostly a threat to other Arab States, whose volunteer contingents in Syria and Iraq are the largest, and their members might

hope that the Islamic State could directly threaten the borders of their home countries. Such a strategy would validate, for example, the use of Jordanian foreign fighters in terrorist attacks within the territory of Jordan, which effectively borders the Islamic State, before commencement of a traditional military offensive in this country.

**The threat from Al-Qaeda.** Al-Qaeda prioritises the U.S. and its allies as those who are to be threatened with terrorist attacks under preparation in the organisation's strongholds. It is, however, negatively inclined towards concentration of jihadi efforts to exclusively seeking success on "secondary" fronts and while fighting other Muslims, i.e., in Iraq and Syria. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda's leader, does not completely dissuade his associates from winning control over territories, along the lines of the Islamic State's actions, but insists on using such territories for the safe preparation of terrorist plots against the West or its broader interests. As the Al-Qaeda's former Iraqi affiliate is evidently on the march, Al-Qaeda itself could be seen as a seemingly irrelevant and solely terrorist threat, but its strength lies in its connections with different affiliates from North Africa and the Sahel, the Arabian Peninsula, Somalia and Syria, where JN numbers up to 5,000 fighters. The leaders of these affiliates publically supported Al-Qaeda in its argument with the Islamic State. Such an attitude strengthens the legitimacy of Al-Qaeda, an international jihadist organisation active in different parts of the world, which will consequently survive and is less threatened by the Islamic State's hostile takeover. The news of the latter's successes and atrocities against Iraqi Shiites, Kurds and Yazidis only help to divert the attention of the international community away from Al-Qaeda. At the same time, however, JN takes UN peacekeepers at Golan Heights as hostages and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is regaining its control over parts of Yemen and plots attacks against the U.S. homeland. There is also news that members of Al-Qaeda are moving from South Asia to Syria, into JN controlled territories, from where the organisation could more successfully attack the West.

**Conclusions and Recommendations.** The creation of an international coalition aimed against the Islamic State will limit the territorial gains of al-Baghdadi's organisation, and undermine its offensive capabilities. However, a weakened Islamic State will survive in Syria as members of the coalition, including the U.S. and European countries, are not ready to co-operate with the Syrian authorities currently combating jihadists in this country. Putting a stop to the Islamic State's expansion will also limit the inflow of foreign volunteers, mostly from the Middle East and Europe, who flock into the jihadist ranks motivated by the battlefield successes of al-Baghdadi's organisation. Simultaneously, Al-Qaeda will remain the most potent terrorist threat to the West and its interests worldwide. These could be threatened through the actions of its affiliates in Africa and the Middle East, for example through attacks on diplomatic missions and regional headquarters, or on the operations of multi-national corporations. The Islamic State could also perform terrorist acts, but it is mostly a guerrilla entity that is waging a war in order to expand the territory of its caliphate. In such conditions, its terrorist capability is subservient to its overall Middle Eastern strategy. One cannot rule out that the European foreign fighters, currently fighting in the ranks of the Islamic State, and interested in returning to their home countries, could effectively be of more use to al-Baghdadi's organisation as rank-and-file soldiers in Syria/Iraq, or as propagandists and motivators for potential terrorists in the U.S. or Europe. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates have all been involved in similar activities from the late 1990s onwards, but the Islamic State might prove more successful in this regard, as it commands thousands of European members in its ranks.

In order to minimise the terrorist threat to the West emanating from the Middle East, it is necessary to concentrate humanitarian, military and intelligence assistance not only on the Islamic State but also on the Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. Air strikes, however, will not be especially effective in this regard, as they could facilitate further radicalisation of the Syrian Sunnis, currently not aligned with JN. They could regard them as an element of the combined anti-Sunni Syrian strategy of the West-Shiite Iranians and Shiite Syrians. A better policy would be a further increase of financial, logistical and training assistance to non-jihadi Syrian rebels, who would then be tasked with fighting both Assad's regime and the Islamic State. Simultaneously, the European countries and the U.S. should provide all required assistance to the Kurdistan Regional Government in its mission to stop further territorial expansion of the Islamic State in Northern Iraq, and also to Turkey, which is intent on sealing its border with Iraq. Similar assistance to the government of Iraq and its armed forces should be conditional on the successes of the new prime minister's, Haider al-Abadi, in achieving meaningful political consensus with the Iraqi Sunnis, elements of which support the Islamic State in its fight with the Shia dominated authorities in Baghdad.