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The future of jihad
What next for ISIL and al-Qaeda?

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Over the past two years, Islamic State (ISIL) has expanded inexorably. In 2013, it carried out 350 terrorist attacks, killing 1,400 people.[1] And its rapid growth hasn't abated since then: it now controls large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq and has, by one estimate, up to 31,000 fighters, of whom between 60% and 75% are ideologically committed core members.[2] It also has access to significant financial resources: one analysis suggests that by mid-2014 ISIL was earning in the region of $2 million per day from sales of oil (although sanctions have probably diminished this);[3] its kidnapping and extortion rackets are estimated to be worth between $35 million and $45 million;[4] other funding streams, such as the sale of antiquities on the black market, are more difficult to assess but likely to be significant.[5]

Indeed, ISIL has grown to such a size that it can now be considered a quasi-government capable of producing laws, implementing policy, managing financial affairs and so on. Not surprisingly, many see it as both a local threat in the short term and a global one in the longer. Western politicians are clearly worried. In a statement delivered on the eve of 9/11,

The image shows a Kalashnikov resting on rocks during a combat operation in the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan's eastern Kunar Province. © Ed Darack/Science Faction/Corbis.

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US President Barack Obama described ISIL as 'unique in [its] brutality'.[6] Equally, in September 2014, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott referred to the 'murderous rage of the ISIL death cult'.[7] However, the rise of ISIL in Syria and especially Iraq took the world by surprise. The speed of its military success, which few terrorist groups of any ideological persuasion have previously matched, caught the international community off guard. Since the summer of 2014, governments have been playing catch-up in their understanding of the nature of the threat that the group presents and how to counteract it.

Barely a day goes by when ISIL isn't in the news or there's no new report detailing its activities, its adroit use of social media or the methods by which it recruits foreign and local fighters. In the midst of all this, al-Qaeda has not only been relatively quiet, but relatively forgotten: there's a sense in which it has become the 'moderate' stream in an increasingly brutal, barbaric and bloodthirsty violent Islamist movement. While ISIL is arguably all those things, al-Qaeda's resilience—and its tendency to be just as brutal, barbaric and bloodthirsty as ISIL—shouldn't be forgotten. ISIL presents al-Qaeda with a real dilemma: the former continues to dominate the headlines, sucking up the 'oxygen of publicity' that terrorist groups need to survive; al-Qaeda's in real danger of being not just overshadowed by a competitor, but priced out of the market entirely. In short, ISIL's rapid rise poses an existential threat to al-Qaeda. Even al-Qaeda's allies, such as Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, and the Egyptian and Malian iterations of Ansar al-Sharia, are turning to ISIL, proffering hands of friendship.

However, the related questions about what the rise of ISIL means for al-Qaeda and how will it react haven't been asked. How will al-Qaeda seek to regain the oxygen of publicity that's central to terrorist organisations if they're to recruit, grow and, ultimately, challenge their enemies? Does the rise of ISIL signal the end of al-Qaeda or might al-Qaeda merge with ISIL, confront it head on or take some other course of action? This short paper focuses on all these questions.

The paper is in three parts:

- a history of the rise of ISIL and its relationship with al-Qaeda, focusing on the areas of tension and agreement as well as the links that particular violent Islamists have to both groups

- an analysis of the key characteristics that make ISIL a real threat and, arguably, the most dangerous terrorist group currently in operation

- based on the preceding analysis, four scenarios that describe how the relationship between al-Qaeda and ISIL might develop, and the ramifications of that development.

> The relationship between ISIL and al-Qaeda requires considerable untangling.

The growth of ISIL

The relationship between ISIL and al-Qaeda requires considerable untangling. In part, this is because ISIL's *jihadi* 'ancestry' is convoluted and complex, riven with changes in name and leadership. In part, it's because the history of the relationship is one of shifting attitudes and power relations between the two organisations. At the heart of the often antagonistic relationship between the two is a deeply entrenched disagreement over different strategic visions. For al-Qaeda, the jihad had to be internationalised and directed at the US and the West.[8] For ISIL, territory in Iraq and Syria had to be occupied and 'Islamised'; only by constructing the 'true' Islamic state (the caliphate, or *khilafa*), its logic runs, can the West be overthrown.

Pledge: 2004–2006

The roots of these differences in strategic visions are to be found in ISIL's *jihadi* ancestors. In 1999, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who would later rise to notoriety for the sheer barbarity he inflicted on Iraq's Shia population through his campaign of beheadings and suicide attacks, established an organisation called *Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* (JTJ). Although JTJ fitted into the wider *jihadi* ecosystem, it remained largely autonomous, and focused on undermining the Jordanian regime in the first instance and then establishing an Islamic state in Iraq and Syria. Osama Bin Laden attempted to bring JTJ under the broader al-Qaeda mantle in 1999 and 2002, but was reported to have been rejected by al-Zarqawi. By 2004, however, al-Zarqawi was low on funding and financing; he recognised the opportunities, in terms of both resources and in *jihadi* prestige, offered by a coalition with al-Qaeda, now at the height of its powers. In 2004, after eight months of negotiations, JTJ was incorporated as a formal, full-blown al-Qaeda franchise under the moniker of al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, more popularly known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).[9]

And yet, although they were united under al-Qaeda's black flag, the two organisations had fundamentally different ancestries, aims and strategic visions. Al-Qaeda Core (AQC) continued to look to attack the West, seeing the US and its allies as the hands that fed local 'un-Islamic' regimes and, by extension, the hands that needed to be severed for the caliphate to be established. AQI, by contrast, remained a far more local organisation, fixated on inciting a sectarian war between Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites as a way of further destabilising an already unstable Iraq.

Indeed, it was precisely this difference in strategic vision that put al-Zarqawi at loggerheads with AQC and its then deputy leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The animosity between the two resulted in al-Zawahiri writing al-Zarqawi a now notorious letter that attempted to persuade him to avoid attacking the Shia population.[10] Al-Zarqawi ignored the entreaties of al-Zawahiri: in November 2005, AQI bombed three hotels in Amman, killing 59, most of them Muslims, some of whom had been at a wedding.[11] A few months later, in February 2006, AQI launched attacks on the Askariya Shrine, one of the holiest in Shia Islam, destroying its golden dome and inciting massive protests.[12]

Autonomy through détente: 2006–2010

Against the backdrop of all this, al-Zarqawi brokered the formation of a coalition of jihadi organisations operating in Iraq under the name of Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (MSM) in January 2006. Al-Zarqawi's logic was to create a broader coalition to stave off criticism of his campaign, but his death in a US air strike six months later had the potential to dissolve the nascent coalition. However, the AQI leadership moved quickly to appoint a replacement in the form of Abu Ayyub al-Masri. Under al-Masri's leadership, AQI rode out the period of instability, consolidated its position and grew in confidence. Crucially, however, al-Masri never formally pledged his allegiance to Bin Laden or, by extension, to AQC. In contrast, when MSM changed its name to al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Iraq (the Islamic State in Iraq, or ISI) a few months later, al-Masri immediately pledged allegiance (baya) to the leader of ISI, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.[13]

It's worth making two points here. First, even under the leadership of al-Zarqawi and certainly under the leadership of al-Masri, AQI was a far from obedient al-Qaeda franchise: orders were regularly ignored, particularly over the anti-Shia approach advocated by al-Zarqawi and al-Masri. Second, al-Zawahiri and AQC never recognised the beginnings of the breakaway in public. From 2006 onwards, AQC continued to lay claim to ISI in public statements and may well have believed that ISI was simply being disobedient or that AQC's messages weren't reaching the leadership.

However, the absence of a formal pledge of allegiance to AQC by al-Masri spelled the beginning of the end of AQC's 'ownership' of ISI. ISI became an increasingly independent entity, with its own leadership, strategic vision and narrative. Indeed, even the decision to declare the state was, according to Adam Gadahn, taken without consulting al-Qaeda's core leadership.[14] By claiming that ISI was under its control in public, but recognising its autonomy in private, AQC strategically had the worst of both worlds.

As ISI became more and more divorced from AQC, it targeted Shia communities even more brutally. Ultimately, this precipitated a massive backlash in the form of a US-funded group called Anbar's Salvation (also known as the Sahwa movement).[15] This not only severely restricted ISI's capabilities, but also caused AQC considerable reputational damage. Al-Qaeda had no control over its unruly former ally, and yet was tarred with the same brush.

Split: 2010–2014

Very little changed after the death of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi in 2010. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (not to be confused with his predecessor) became the leader of ISI and followed his namesake in refusing to swear allegiance to Bin Laden or, after Bin Laden's death, to the new leader, al-Zawahiri. The absence of formal allegiance is a crucial signifier of the relationship between AQC and ISI: although both organisations operated in the same jihadi ecosystem and shared much in the way of ideology, ISI was not a subordinate to AQC, whatever the latter might have said in public. Indeed, the history of ISI–AQC relations at that time was one of respectful disobedience: ISI never formally disavowed al-Qaeda or critiqued its ideological position and strategic outlook; the leadership simply stated its own agendas and visions and pursued those regardless.

The period of respectful disobedience—in effect, as William McCants has argued, a détente—did not last long. Relations between the two organisations deteriorated rapidly after ISI extended its reach into Syria, changing its name as it did to ISIL. For AQC and its local Syrian franchise, Jabhat al-Nusra, this was a step too far. The situation wasn't improved by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's assertion that ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra were one and the same. The claim provoked a verbal conflict between al-Baghdadi and Jabhat al-Nusra's leader, Muhammad al-Joulani, in the first instance, and a military one between the two organisations that killed more than 3,000 people in a matter of months in the second.[16] Al-Zawahiri, presumably reluctant to lend his weight to one side or the other, was slow to step in; when he eventually did so in January 2014, his intervention was widely perceived as timid and anodyne.[17]

Three men from the radical Islamist group al-Nusra, affiliated with al-Qaeda Iraq, in one of their headquarters in Deir Ezzor/Syria. On the left the Palestinian field commander Abu Ishaq, in the middle the regional commander, on the right the al-Nusra media activist "Steve", photo dated 12 March 2013 © Benjamin Hiller/Corbis.

As ISIL continued to make significant headway in both Iraq and Syria, occupying territory and acquiring the oilfields that could fund its vision of an Islamic state, its relationship with AQC became increasingly riven with animosity. By February 2014, Zawahiri had had enough: a statement was released bluntly erasing all ties between the two organisations: 'ISIS is not a branch of the Qaidat al-Jihad group, we have no organizational relationship with it, and the group [al-Qaeda] is not responsible for its actions.'[18] By April, ISIL had shed the last vestiges of its once respectful attitude towards al-Qaeda: Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ISIL's spokesman, released a statement saying, 'al-Qaeda today has ceased to be the base of jihad, rather its leadership has become an axe supporting the destruction of the project of the Islamic State and the coming caliphate …'.[19]

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While AQC has overtly disavowed ISIL, other parts of the wider global jihadi movement, including al-Qaeda's own semi-autonomous franchises, have done the exact opposite and have expressed their support for ISIL and even moved to pledge allegiance to it. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) declared its support for ISIL in August 2014, and it's almost certain that ISIL members are operating in Yemen and that AQAP members are operating alongside ISIL in Iraq. Boko Haram, which has strong links with al-Qaeda, pledged allegiance to ISIL in March 2015. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, an organisation operating in Egypt's Sinai desert, similarly pledged allegiance to ISIL in November 2014, going so far as to refer to itself as 'Sinai Province'.

The threat of ISIL: recruitment, propaganda and finances

Although AQC didn't formally split with ISIL until February 2014, the two organisations had never seen eye to eye. At best, theirs was a loose, but respectful, acknowledgement that they operated in similar environments—a characteristic of the broader *jihadi* movement; at worst, it was full-blown conflict and bloodshed. Underpinning this animosity was a genuine and longstanding difference in their strategic visions. For al-Qaeda, as its great strategic debates of the mid- and late 1990s suggest, the real targets are the 'far enemies' that support what it sees as puppet regimes on Islamic territory. Only by cutting off the hands that feed those regimes, so the logic runs, can a truly Islamic state be established. For ISIL, it's about geography: territory has to be captured and coercively 'Islamised' by the strict and brutal application of sharia, largely involving targeting the local population, particularly the Shia population.

Until the meteoric rise of ISIL, al-Qaeda, its franchises and those autonomous adherents inspired by its ideology had been deemed the most significant terrorist threat to Western states' security. However, ISIL has rapidly risen in its stead and is, without question, the most influential and powerful terrorist organisation currently operating. The threat that it poses is derived from three core characteristics:

• the organisation's ability to recruit large numbers of international fighters to its cause

• its understanding of how to propagate a compelling social media propaganda campaign to draw and sustain support to its cause

• its ability to generate massive financial resources to arm, train and pay fighters and support its interpretation of state building.

Recruitment of foreign fighters

According to most open-source estimates, a minimum of 20,000 people from at least 90 nations have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join extremist groups. Of those, it's estimated that around 80% have joined ISIL, in which foreign fighters—including around 3,700 Westerners—make up half of the fighting ranks. Most of the foreign fighters come from Arab nations, such as Tunisia (3,000), Saudi Arabia (2,500), Jordan (1,500) and Morocco (1,500); however, smaller contingents come from nations as far away as France (1,200), Belgium (440), Indonesia (60) and Australia (175).[20] But these are the official numbers of those who are known about, and the real figures may well be much higher.

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has drawn in foreign fighters at a faster rate and in greater numbers than any past Middle Eastern conflict, including the Afghanistan war of the 1980s and recent US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.[21] According to a report released by the UN in October, the speed at which people from outside Syria and Iraq are swarming into the territory is unprecedented: 'numbers since 2010 are now many times the size of cumulative numbers of foreign terrorist fighters between 1990 and 2010—and are growing.'[22]

Propaganda via social media—online Jihad 3.0

The past 15 years have seen higher and more diversified forms of online activity by violent Islamists. No more powerful example exists than the current media campaign by ISIL, which has largely outrun any government's ability to keep up. Whether it's ISIL's well-oiled media machine, Al Hayat, or the social media feeding frenzy of its fighters and supporters, it has reached a broader audience than al-Qaeda managed in the past. It's possible to point to three key stages of development in the online activity of al-Qaeda, its affiliates and now ISIL.

During the early to mid-2000s, the internet was a primary tool for planning operations and organising meetings between those involved in networks. A second evolution took place as the internet became a conduit for sermons and propaganda, and YouTube videos of jihadists in Iraq, Somalia, Yemen and Afghanistan became easily available. AQAP is widely credited as being the pioneer for the way it disseminated its material to a global online audience through its magazine, *Inspire*. AQAP's charismatic figurehead, Anwar al-Awlaki, was famed for his English-language YouTube sermons, blog and Facebook page, which influenced various people to carry out acts of terrorism.[23]

We've now reached a third stage in the evolution of modern jihadist propaganda, which a *New York Times* article named 'online Jihad 3.0'. A photo shared by pro-ISIL Twitter users shows three bullets, each with a different top: 'A bullet. A pen. A thumb drive … There is a different form of jihad'.[24] ISIL members have pursued the last of these with vigour: they're part of the 'digital age', having grown up with technology, and have become adroit at using the entire range of disseminating tools at their disposal.

JustPaste is used to publish summaries of battles that have taken place, SoundCloud to release audio reports of activities, WhatsApp and Kik Messenger to communicate and send images and videos, and Instagram, Facebook and Twitter to share images, propaganda and messages from the front lines. On Twitter, ISIL uses 'twitter bombs' to redirect trending hashtags to Twitter content and websites related to ISIL. The group also uses 'twitter bots' that repeatedly post the same content several times a day along with popular hashtags such as #worldcup2014 to ensure that references to ISIL trend highly, ensuring that its messages—designed to both intimidate and inspire—reach the broadest possible audience. One analyst, tracking the mentions of ISIL on Twitter in February 2014, found that ISIL registered more than 10,000 mentions of its hashtag per day.[25] There are even Q&A sessions on Ask.FM about joining the group, the logistics involved and what it's like to be on the front lines. ISIL's messages are tailored to its audiences, changing depending on whether they're intended for a local audience or for would-be Western recruits. What it has managed to do is to bring the battlefield, its gore, and the thrill of fighting into the bedrooms of millions in a way unparalleled in the past. One thing's for sure—ISIL's rapid battlefield success, wealth and claims of a caliphate have been an intoxicating blend for those considering joining.

Generating funds

Al-Qaeda depended mainly upon funding from benefactors, beginning with Bin Laden himself and extending to a global network of sympathisers. Its affiliates have gained financially through similar means, as well as kidnapping for ransom, extortion and a range of other criminal activities. At its peak, al-Qaeda's financial network was estimated to be worth around US$300 million.[26] ISIL has managed to transform itself from a group that was mainly reliant on wealthy Persian Gulf donors to one that's largely self-sustaining, with financial resources estimated to be as high as US$2 billion, far outweighing al-Qaeda's financial muscle.[27]

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US intelligence estimates that, at its peak, ISIL was earning more than US$3 million per day from oil resources, looting, kidnapping, human trafficking, smuggling and the taxation of populations that it occupied. Before the US-led airstrikes, ISIL had control of twelve or so oilfields in Syria and Iraq (with an estimated production capacity of more than 150,000 barrels per day). Oil from the fields is smuggled across the borders and sold on the black market in Syria, Turkey, the Kurdistan region of Iraq and, potentially, Iran.[28]

Following its battlefield successes and occupation of various cities, most notably Mosul, ISIL has looted banks, museums and businesses to extract currency and valuable antiquities that are sold in regional black markets. Millions more are made from ransoms paid for kidnapped people, even though there's been a recent shift towards executions of kidnapped international members of the media and non-government organisations. The sale of women and children as slaves has added millions to the group's finances, and taxes on people in ISIL-controlled areas is a rich source of funding, especially when extracted under pain of death. It's estimated that ISIL was benefiting to the tune of $8 million per month from this form of extortion in Mosul alone.[29]

Being such a cash-rich organisation means that ISIL can afford to acquire new weapons on the black market, supplementing those it has acquired from retreating Iraqi forces. It also means that it can maintain large numbers of frontline fighters and make financial donations to the families of those who die while fighting for it. ISIL's financial autonomy means that targeting its financial resources is pivotal to reducing its capacity to fight and recruit, and should be an absolute priority in lowering its appeal and suppressing its strongholds in Syria and Iraq.

What international terrorist threat does ISIL present?

ISIL has devoted a great deal of its efforts to trying to build an Islamic state, or caliphate. It has called on Muslims from across the globe to join its ranks and assist in fighting to build and expand the borders of that state. Since August 2014, there has been a concerning flow of Islamist groups announcing support for, or pledging allegiance to ISIL. Some have come from various small splinter groups which have attempted to use the ISIL brand to gain additional support for their own organisations, yet in recent times we have seen Boko Haram, al-Murabitoun, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and Ansar al-Islam pledge allegiance to ISIL. In total there are 34 confirmed Islamist groups that have moved their support from al-Qaeda to ISIL and appears to illustrate a shift away from al-Qaeda's traditionally dominant sphere of influence.[30]

Rather than adopting a strategy of directly targeting Western nations, as al-Qaeda does, ISIL has wanted to build a caliphate as a basis for strengthening its organisation, ideology and finances. Despite this apparently inward-looking focus, there's no doubt

that beyond its 'state building' phase ISIL presents a threat to Western nations, as al-Baghdadi's globalist ambitions have never been hidden. With the onset of coalition air strikes, ISIL has begun to ramp up its focus on Western nations. Attacks in Canada and Belgium and foiled plots in Australia, France, the UK and elsewhere illustrate the growing internationalism of the group. ISIL's chief spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, has increasingly called for attacks on the West and the defeat of both Washington and Rome.[31]

Clearly, the numbers of foreign fighters being drawn into ISIL's ranks are of great concern to many national governments, which worry about the likelihood of battle-hardened foreign fighters returning to their countries of residence and conducting violent attacks on civilian populations. This is of most concern in countries that have contributed many fighters to ISIL, such as Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and Indonesia, and have weak domestic security forces. The appeal of ISIL's ideology is outweighing that of al-Qaeda and is stretching many states' policy mechanisms for dealing with that ideology and the group's recruitment.

ISIL hasn't, so far, utilised networked terrorist cells to carry out large-scale attacks in Western nations, as al-Qaeda did. Instead, it has pushed for its supporters to carry out attacks using low-level weaponry in their own countries and to film the attacks to promote ISIL and draw more supporters to its cause. Although the former director of the US National Counterterrorism Center, Matthew Olsen, has argued that ISIL has no cells in the US, and that it 'is not al Qaeda pre-9/11', degrading the group's capability now is a prudent approach.[32] It's likely that ISIL will continue to push for international attacks by its followers, especially as it comes under increasing pressure from air strikes in Iraq and Syria. While the West should expect isolated incidents of this type, the direct threat that ISIL poses to those countries geographically close to its centre of gravity is far greater. Significant numbers of foreign fighters from Tunisia, Turkey, Libya, Morocco and Indonesia have been drawn into ISIL's ranks. Those countries have less mature counterterrorism mechanisms and need international support to strengthen their ability to cope with the spread of violent extremist ideology and the repercussions of fighters returning home.

In this undated file photo posted on 27 August 2014 by the Raqqa Media Center of the Islamic State group, fighters of the Islamic State wave the group's flag from a damaged display of a government fighter jet following the battle for the Tabqa air base, in Raqqa, Syria. © AP via AAP.

Al-Qaeda and ISIL — Four Alternative Futures

ISIL poses a genuine threat to security in the Middle East and Western countries. It has sophisticated modes of recruitment, significant funding and a loyal following in the West. Indeed, it's arguably the most threatening terrorist group currently in operation. However, while ISIL threatens regional and Western security, it also threatens al-Qaeda. ISIL has become the 'organisation of choice' for aspiring *jihadis*. With each terrorist act, it dominates the headlines, sucking up the oxygen of publicity that's so vital to terrorist organisations. It has overtaken al-Qaeda and become the 'go to' organisation—the one that would-be *jihadis* invariably seek to join. In this sense, al-Qaeda's being outmanoeuvred and outplayed at its own game, losing the manpower and military means that it needs to achieve its political ambitions.

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For al-Qaeda, something has to give if it's to survive. Based on the available evidence, there are four potential scenarios for al-Qaeda's response:

- Status quo: uneasy bedfellows

   Al-Qaeda has only limited human and financial resources; its adherents in Europe are essentially autonomous and lie beyond the reach and control of al-Zawahiri and the historical leadership of AQC. The franchises in Yemen, North Africa, Indonesia and India remain semi-autonomous, but are equally deprived of the capability to launch international attacks of the type to recapture the imagination and support of aspiring *jihadis*. Direct confrontation with ISIL isn't feasible, not least because it would cause further schisms in the global *jihadi* movement and alienate the remnants of al-Qaeda's support base. Left with little option other than to muddle through in the hope that ISIL is a flash in the pan rather than the resilient organisation that al-Qaeda has proven itself to be, AQC elects for an uneasy stance of tolerating ISIL, neither supporting nor opposing it. In short, rather than seeking to challenge ISIL ideologically or militarily, al-Qaeda accommodates ISIL as an uneasy bedfellow in the wider global *jihadi* movement.

- Merger: putting differences aside

   AQC recognises that its ability to conduct spectacular attacks is currently diminished, and that it doesn't have sufficient resources to achieve its political objectives. Rather than seeking to recapture the imagination of its supporters and increase recruitment, it seeks a formal alliance with ISIL. In joining forces, al-Zawahiri must put to one side the abiding differences between the two groups' strategic visions by forming a pact with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; the merger leads to wider sharing and pooling of resources and exchanges of fighters for specific operations and helps to build a genuinely global *jihadi* alliance. In Iraq and Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL put aside their differences and fight for a common cause, while the wider al-Qaeda movement continues to pursue its internationalist agenda.

- Wither: the failure of confrontation

   Al-Qaeda seeks to regain the limelight and the support of the wider *jihadi* movement by confronting ISIL directly, both militarily through Jabhat al-Nusra and reputationally through its media channels. However, its efforts fail: ISIL is more adept in its media campaign and has sufficient military resources to counter Jabhat al-Nusra. Al-Qaeda loses precious financial and military

resources, compounding failure. Continued attempts to rectify the situation result in yet further losses and, as the movement attenuates, members increasingly defect to ISIL. Over time, al-Qaeda loses its identity before becoming effectively defunct as its remaining members flock to ISIL.

- A spectacular attack: a game of one-upmanship

Al-Qaeda channels some of its remaining resources into a spectacular centrally organised and funded attack. If successful, the attack allows it to regain the headlines and experience a surge in popularity, reputation and, ultimately, recruitment. Having recaptured the limelight, al-Qaeda plots further attacks of a similar magnitude using its new-found resources. As al-Qaeda slowly becomes the terrorist group of choice for aspiring *jihadis*, members of ISIL begin to defect to the more internationalist and globally organised al-Qaeda. ISIL, recognising that it's losing ground to a rejuvenated al-Qaeda, plots significant attacks in an effort to regalvanise the organisation and hold on to its recruits. As its attacks succeed, it recaptures the imagination of its supporters and experiences increased recruitment and popularity. This game of one-upmanship—of repeated efforts to outdo each other in any combination of the magnitude, frequency and targets of terrorist activity—drives each party to increase the ferocity of its campaigns.

All four options are feasible. However, the key factor in determining al-Qaeda's response to the rise of ISIL is the human, military and financial resources that it has at its disposal. If al-Qaeda has sufficient resources to survive, but not to expand or confront ISIL, then it's likely to muddle through, underpinned by its historically strong semi-autonomous franchises in Yemen and North Africa. If, on the other hand, al-Qaeda's senior leadership recognises that its resources are all but depleted, then it's likely to pursue some form of an alliance with ISIL. If it miscalculates both its own strength and that of ISIL, there's likely to be more entrenched and direct confrontation between the two organisations.

Fighters from al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate al-Nusra Front drive in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo flying Islamist flags as they head to a frontline, on 26 May 2015. AFP PHOTO / AMC / FADI AL-HALABI via AAP.

The first three options are marginally less likely than the final—and most worrying—scenario, in which al-Qaeda pursues a campaign of international attacks in order to regain the limelight. There are a number of reasons for this. First, al-Qaeda has, throughout its long and bloody history, shown itself to be a resilient organisation, remarkably adept in exploiting weaknesses in its political environment. Second, while al-Qaeda has been significantly challenged by ISIL, it has shown, not least in Yemen and North Africa, that it still has a loyal following and can still perpetrate significant acts of terrorist violence. Third, al-Qaeda has historically been at its most dangerous when the international community has taken its eye off the ball: in 2000, opportunities were missed to dismantle the nascent organisation, which responded with the attacks of 9/11. Similarly, in 2005, AQAP was all but defeated, but Western governments turned their attention elsewhere and allowed the organisation to re-establish itself. Ten years later, and AQAP is the most threatening of al-Qaeda's franchises.

This leads us to make a single policy recommendation.

> ISIL is a real threat and must be targeted, but al-Qaeda shouldn't be forgotten.

ISIL is a real threat and must be targeted, but al-Qaeda shouldn't be forgotten. Indeed, al-Qaeda should remain a key focus for international counterterrorism efforts. It's a resilient and resolute terrorist organisation, but it's also weaker than it's been for many years. We should use this brief opportunity to dismantle the organisation completely.

Notes

1   Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2014: measuring and understanding the impact of terrorism*, Sydney, 2014, online.

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3   Charles Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State*, The Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 2014, 2.

4   UN al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, *Monitoring team's report on the threat posed by ISIL and ANF*, UN, 24.

5   David Kohn, 'Isis's looting campaign', *The New Yorker*, 14 October 2014, online.

6   Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President on ISIL', 10th Sept 2014, online.

7   Daniel Hurst, 'Tony Abbott intensifies rhetoric about Isis, calling it an "apocalyptic death cult"', *The Guardian*, 30 September 2014, online.

8   Fawaz Gerges, *The far enemy: why jihad went global*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

9   Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State*, 8.

10 Office of the Director of National Security, 'Letter from Al-Zawahiri to Al-Zarqawi', 9 July 2005, Council on Foreign Relations, online; English translation, *The Weekly Standard*, 12 October 2005, online.

11 Hassan M Fattah, Michael Slackman, '3 hotels bombed in Jordan; at least 57 die', *The New York Times*, 10 November 2005.

12 'Iraqi blast damages Shia shrine', *BBC*, 22 February 2006; Sam Knight, 'Bombing of Shia shrine sparks wave of retaliation', *The Times*, 22 February 2006.

13 Aaron Y Zelin, 'The war between Isis and Al-Qaeda for supremacy of the global jihadist movement', *Research Notes 20*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2014.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AQC   al-Qaeda Core

AQI   Al-Qaeda in Iraq

ISI   Islamic State in Iraq

ISIL   Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

JTJ   Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad

MSM   Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen

UN   United Nations

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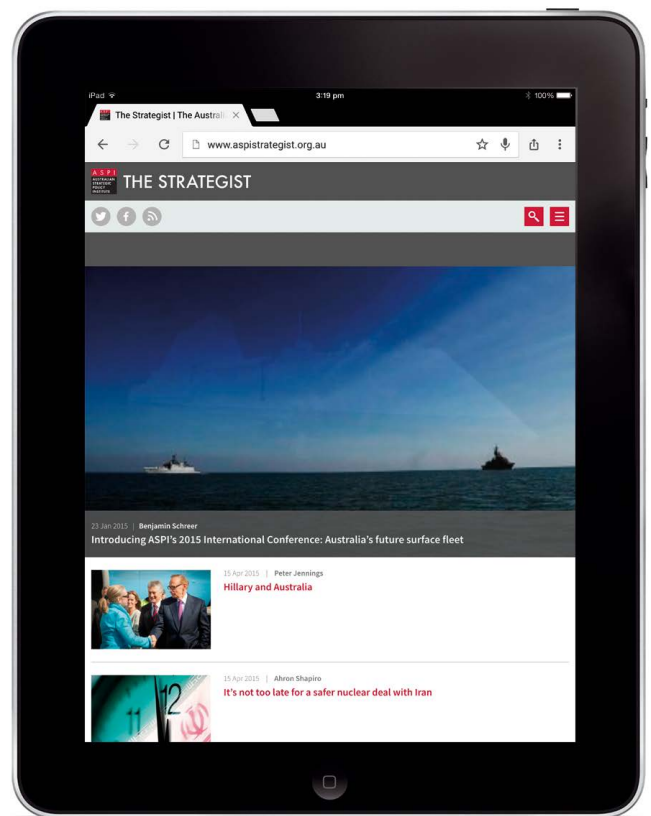Please note specialist publications are not included.

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