



Security Policy Working Paper, No. 9/2016

# Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State: Objectives, Threat, Countermeasures

*Dr. Ulf Brüggemann*

**Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State are two competing Islamist terrorist organisations with global ambitions. But whereas al-Qaeda is becoming increasingly regional in its focus, IS seems to have been seeking to not only establish the caliphate, but to also fight against Western countries since the Paris attacks. What does this mean for the threat situation and what options are there for responding to it?**

A terrorist group that is hardly known to the general public and headed by a charismatic leader commits mass murder by killing 3,000 people. This is followed by further attacks as in Bali, Djerba, Madrid and London. They all underline the existence of a new kind of terrorist threat whose professed objective is to kill as many innocent people as possible, people who accidentally just happen to be at a certain place - on their way to work, on holiday, on a bus. A terrorist nightmare had become reality.

For a long time, it was hard to imagine that this level of terrorist violence could rise any further. Yet the group calling itself Islamic State (IS) has managed to eclipse even al-Qaeda (AQ) with its dehumanised brutality. Moreover, IS has broken away from being a traditional terrorist organisation: By achieving military conquests it controls an area the size of a European country in which it has exercised its totalitarian rule for two years now. Various terrorist organisations on several continents as well as tens of thousands of young men from all parts of the world find themselves drawn so strongly to this that they are swearing allegiance to IS.

As a result, the world today faces not just one, but two terrorist networks with a virtually global reach. Despite having basically the same ideological objectives, they are competing with one another and have adequately proven that they have no inhibitions about killing as large a number of people as possible. How did it come to this? What are the differences between the two groups? How high is the level of the threat each poses to Europe and the United States and what can the Western states threatened by their terrorism do about it?

## **The Development and Agendas of AQ and IS**

AQ has regarded itself as the vanguard of the international jihad since it shifted its objective in the years following the Soviet-Afghan War. Its focus has since been on fighting the so-called “distant enemy”, in other words, the Western allies of Arab regimes, primarily the United States. By creating a global battlefield, AQ first wanted to force the US to discontinue its support of Arab countries such as the Gulf States and Egypt. Then it wanted to topple their regimes, destroy Israel, and establish emirates, that is to say, territory under its control that would be ruled according to sharia law. These emirates were to gradually develop into

the caliphate, a single empire for all Muslims. This process, however, was not intended to be forced on the people in the various countries, but to involve and be supported by them.

The 9/11 attacks may seem to have been spectacularly successful when viewed from this angle, but in fact they turned out to be a disaster for AQ. The first thing AQ lost was its safe haven in Afghanistan, which had allowed the organisation to plan attacks, train fighters and enjoy a high degree of security. AQ's funding arrangements were severely disrupted, and a hunt began for AQ operatives, leading to irreplaceable losses of personnel and culminating in the death of Osama bin Laden himself. Taken together, these setbacks have today virtually incapacitated the classical AQ, that is to say, the organisation as it was when it planned and carried out the 9/11 attacks.

AQ has reacted to the pressure by founding subsidiary organisations. The first opportunity to do so was provided by, of all things, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. In 2004, Jordanian-born al-Zarqawi joined AQ with the group that he had already established in Iraq prior to the invasion and that had until then been independent – the result being al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the forerunner of today's IS. This was followed in 2007 and 2009 by branches in North Africa (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM) and in the Arabian Peninsula (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP); in 2012, a Somali group calling itself al-Shabaab joined the AQ network. AQ has developed its threat potential in recent years in such a way that the threat now emanates from its branches and no longer from its core cell.

A complex mix of reasons (long-standing regional connections, increasing difficulties in its fight against the United States, the entry of alliances with other groups) has led to a significant shift in its focus over the years, as al-Qaeda's original agenda, namely the fight against the distant enemy, is in fact now being pursued only to a limited extent. Although six years ago, AQAP undertook several failed attempts to carry out attacks on international airlines, all the AQ branches now seem to be concentrating on the fight in their own regions and, where possible, bringing areas permanently under their control. The groups that have been most successful in this respect are AQAP in Yemen and, for a while, al-Shabaab in Somalia. AQIM has tried to do the same in Mali, but failed. However they are still conducting attacks on foreigners, as recently in Mali, Burkina Faso and in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire.. Strictly speaking, however, there could be no talk in the last few years of a fight against the distant enemy aimed at prompting him to withdraw from the Islamic world. In practice, AQ's agenda on which the 9/11 attacks were based is at best limited in its applicability, and AQIM is closest to still pursuing it.

The relationship between the AQ leadership and the Iraqi branch AQI was difficult from the start. Above all, the extreme violence flaunted by AQI under Zarqawi's leadership as well as the practice of focussing on attacks against Shiite targets repeatedly provoked sharp criticism from the AQ leadership, which viewed both as completely counterproductive. When AQI grouped together with several smaller organisations to form the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006, it was unclear for quite some time whether or not ISI was even still part of the AQ family. The final break came in spring 2013 when the al-Nusra Front, which was originally an off-shoot of ISI and had been actively involved in the Syrian civil war, publicly refused to accept ISI's claim to supreme authority and instead swore an oath of allegiance to bin Laden's successor, Zawahiri. His decision to treat al-Nusra and ISI as two separate organisations within AQ, one responsible for Syria and the other for Iraq, was rejected by ISI's leader, al-Baghdadi, who instead confirmed the establishment of a new organisation called ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) that operated in both Iraq and Syria. By 2013, ISIS had already managed to extend its influence in Syria at the expense of other rebel groups. The organisation was excluded from the AQ network once and for all in early 2014.

But ISIS then went one decisive step further. In early June 2014, the organisation, whose army had an impressive fighting strength, started its triumph in Western Iraq, renaming itself Islamic State (IS) and so removing any reference to a geographical region. Then they proclaimed the caliphate, with al-Baghdadi as its caliph and therefore successor of the Prophet Mohammed and supreme leader of all Muslims

worldwide. This move electrified the jihadists around the world. The image AQ had of itself as being the spearhead of the international jihad was openly rejected, as the caliphate was intended to be established immediately and not be just a utopian objective. Groups and individuals committed to an extremist, violent form of Islam now had to decide where their loyalties, or at least their sympathies, lay.

On the basis of this brief description of the development of AQ and IS, it is possible to highlight, albeit in a simplified manner, the decisive differences in the agendas and modus operandi of the two organisations:

1. *The Caliphate*: IS wants the caliphate, a theocracy for all Muslims under the leadership of the Prophet's successor, straightaway. AQ, by contrast, sees the caliphate as the end state of a lengthy development.
2. *The Battlefield*: Accordingly, AQ is committed to this day to the fight against the distant enemy, at least as far as its agenda is concerned. Zawahiri reaffirmed this in 2013. IS can be seen more as a revolutionary regime that is attempting to establish a state according to its principles and to aggressively enforce and expand its ideology and claim to power.
3. *Other Denominations*: IS is largely characterised by its anti-Shiite attitude. AQ does not seek conflict with Shiite communities or any other denominations of Islam.
4. *Violence*: IS has developed excessive and flaunted violence as its trademark from the outset. AQ has repeatedly distanced itself from the atrocities typical of IS.
5. *The Lead Role*: Both organisations claim to be the sole leader of the international jihad.
6. *The Generation Issue*: Ultimately, there are two generations of jihad. Whereas AQ still has its roots in the fight against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, IS has evolved from the upheavals that have taken place in the Middle East over the past 13 years.

### **How high is the threat level?**

Some experts express the view that a kind of competition is arising between AQ and IS, which could result in an escalation in the frequency and quality of attacks. The competitive situation in which they find themselves might support this theory. An organisation that lays a claim to the lead role in the international jihad must prove its aptitude and qualification. This fact is not only a matter of mere reputation, but also one of concrete interests, as funding and their appeal for recruits depend to a large extent on how a group is seen.

However, some considerations point in a different direction. IS, at least in its current form, is dependent on the caliphate project. The result is an agenda with a clear regional connection: Iraq/Syria, after that Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan or Sinai. These are the theatres in which the fight for the caliphate is actually being fought, not in cities in America or Europe. Devastating attacks in Europe or the US pose a threat to this core project. What is more, IS knows from experience that a conflict with the United States can threaten the very survival of the organisation. Between 2006, the year IS was founded, and 2011, the year the US troops withdrew from Iraq, the United States managed to drive ISI, that was hated by the local people, to the verge of extinction by conducting a series of coordinated measures ranging from cooperation with Sunni tribes and the establishment of local security by means of a massive military deployment to the elimination of the organisation's leaders – successes that were squandered in Iraq in the following years.

Nevertheless, late 2015 saw IS-related attacks over Sinai, in San Bernardino in California and, above all, in Paris. IS had already gained great public attention in 2014 by decapitating Western hostages and calling for lone wolf attacks in the West. How does that fit in with the safeguarding of the caliphate? The San Bernardino attack was probably the work of self-radicalised assassins. There is hardly any protection against an attack like that; however, it only allows limited conclusions about the Islamic State's own strategy.

In contrast, the attacks in Paris and the bomb attack on the Russian charter plane over Sinai are of interest. The latter was carried out by the IS province of Sinai after Russia had intervened in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Assad regime. So this might have been an act of revenge aimed at undermining support for Putin's policy on Syria among the Russian people and at deterring Moscow from further engagement against IS. It remains to be seen whether or to what degree IS leaders themselves were at all involved. Things are different with Paris. There is adequate proof of connections to Syria so the IS leaders can indeed at least be assumed to have approved of the attack. It is also conceivable that the attack was a combination of an act of revenge and a deterrence operation in response to France's participation in the anti-IS coalition, that is to say, a classic terrorist attack aimed at bringing about a change in France's policy by generating fear. Probably that is also the case for the decapitation of the Western hostages who had already been in the hands of IS for some time, but were killed after the United States intervened in Iraq at the beginning of August 2014. This not only complies with the assessments of many jihadist groups that the West is not willing in the long run to accept its citizens falling victim to terrorism, but also corresponds to the messages of the videos referring to Western intervention.

How conducive such considerations are is questionable, however. Terrorists have repeatedly proved in the past that, in spite of all their tactical intelligence, their thinking is often based on unrealistic premises. Both AQ and IS may indeed consider attacks a good idea even if restraint would be a better option. This is especially true for IS, as it is hardly possible to reliably pin down how ideology functions as a guide for its actions. Apocalyptic beliefs seem to be widespread within it. For example, at least some elements of IS, believing prophecies and seeing their fight in an eschatological context, assume that the "Armies of Rome" referred to in the apocalypse, and today taken to mean the United States, will come to Syria for the final battle before the Last Judgment in order to be destroyed there. IS may even be looking to fight "Rome", either directly on this religious basis or because of expectations of that kind within the organisation.

At the end of the day and with an eye to the latest attacks, the level of the threat posed by IS must also be considered very high in Europe and the United States, especially because the organisation can no longer evade the fight against the West, having come under great pressure both in Syria and Iraq and now, apparently, intended to be fought in Libya, too. The risk of attacks is thus expected to even increase at first, both in that region and in the West itself. The more Germany commits itself against IS – and it will hardly be able to retreat to the position of a mere free rider – the more likely it is to be targeted by IS as well.

It is more difficult to assess the level of the threat posed by AQ. On the one hand, as of March 2016, its agenda remains unchanged and there have been attacks on Western soil that can probably be attributed to AQAP (most recently Charlie Hebdo), even though it is still unclear how far the organisation itself was really involved in planning and executing them. Additionally, AQIM regularly attacks Western citizens in the Sahel region and West Africa. On the other hand, AQAP and al-Nusra in particular are meanwhile clearly focusing on local requirements, including close cooperation with other local actors. This pragmatic and successful approach and not least the cooperation networks would come under considerable strain if the classic AQ agenda were pursued. Al Qaeda's core itself mostly seems to be occupied with ensuring its very survival and is thus presumably unable to take any action. There are apparently even rumours that Zawahiri is considering releasing the branches from their fiduciary relation and thus disband AQ as a joint parent organisation. As a consequence, elements of the network could join IS. Despite all necessary caution, however, the level of the threat posed by AQ attacks in the Western countries seems to be generally lower now than before. The branches in Syria and Yemen are expected to strike deeper and deeper roots in these states, though. What that means for the countries themselves and for the region as a whole remains to be seen.

## **Outlook: How are we to deal with this threat?**

Despite the heavy losses incurred in recent years, AQ has proven to be remarkably resilient and adaptable. The group is under great pressure, but it is alive. Between 2006 and 2011, IS also survived a severe crisis and rose again. Things are similar with Al-Shabaab and the Taliban. In addition to the ability to adapt to new circumstances, this resilience is the result of something more profound, and that is the shortage or complete absence of statehood in the countries in which these organisations are operating. This situation is not going to change in the near future. Expectations that AQ or IS can be defeated once and for all are therefore unrealistic. Terrorism is here to stay.

If necessary, the groups will adapt to the circumstances and maybe abandon proto-state structures in favour of again becoming an army of insurgents, then again a purely terrorist group, and vice versa. The ability of IS to evade has been strengthened even more by the founding of several branches. While not every branch necessarily means a gain in strength, it is alarming from the European point of view that two of the strongest subsidiaries have emerged in the Sinai region and in Libya.

Against this backdrop, it would be naive to imagine that these groups could somehow be defeated for good or that the emergence of new ones could be prevented. The underlying conditions, among them poorly working or failed states, religious currents that have existed for centuries, the marginalisation of certain ethnic groups such as the Sunni in Iraq, and the availability of weapons of all kinds, will not change in the foreseeable future.

For the West, the right way to respond to the challenges of today's terrorism is to remake the strategy of containment. It may not be possible to defeat these groups for good, but it is possible to put them under so much pressure that their ability to do anything is limited considerably and, in the case of IS, the myth of invincibility and dynamism is broken. This calls for a broad mix of measures ranging from military engagement, a crackdown on sources of funding, close cooperation between intelligence services and the promotion of working statehood to the conveyance of a credible narrative that the West is not waging war against Islam.

There will continue to be terrorist attacks, some of them severe – in Africa, in Asia, and in Europe. No matter how horrific these crimes are, it is important for us not to allow ourselves to be driven to blind escalation. In spite of what some people say, the danger posed by terrorism does not threaten Western countries in their very existence. No terrorist attack, not even an attack of the scale of 9/11, which has remained unique so far, can really endanger our states and our way of life. Our society can and must bear the fact that people will be killed by terrorism, just as we have learned to accept far too high death tolls – sometimes even much higher ones – in many other areas without seeing them as a threat to our state or society.

*Dr. Ulf Brüggemann is Counsellor at the Federal Academy for Security Policy. This article reflects the personal opinion of the author.*