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### **FROM AL QAEDA TO ISLAMIC STATE: WHAT HAVE WE MISSED?**

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If one were to look at the American War on Terror statistically, it has been a success because there has been a steady decline in the activity of al Qaeda post 2003 and especially since 2009.<sup>i</sup> The US military operations severely crippled the capabilities of al Qaeda, by targeting their hideouts leading to the death of its several leaders. But the social impacts of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) have not been so favourable. The war left the state of Afghanistan crippled and completely destroyed. Iraq was also attacked on the pretext of possessing weapons of mass destruction and it pushed Iraq into a social, economic and political chaos. Both the countries saw complete regime change after the war, with the Taliban being uprooted from Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein being deposed in Iraq. While a democratic apparatus replaced the governments, one cannot deny the war created an environment of statelessness that predominated the regions when the war was going on and before the new democratic governments were established.

This political vacuum was further utilised by a failing al Qaeda to gather recruits from the families that were torn apart by the war. This approach was not so successful in Afghanistan, but succeeded well in Iraq. This is because the local populace of Afghanistan were themselves against the atrocities of the Taliban and were considerably supportive of the US intervention. However, in Iraq the cause of the war was not completely legitimate and hence the population did not accept the US intervention there. The capture of Saddam Hussein and the delegitimisation of Hussein's Ba'ath Party left many people without jobs. This is because under Hussein's rule it was mandatory for professionals to be a part of the party to be eligible for perks and promotions. Thus rampant unemployment flourished while there was no strong government mechanism to address the issues at



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the centre. This state of political, social and economic turmoil was effectively utilised by al Qaeda's affiliate – al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) which gained popular support by providing relief operations and also funnelling anti-governmental sentiments. However, the AQI also felt that the central leadership of al Qaeda was losing its grip and failing to achieve its mandate as the vanguard of the Islamic world. Disagreements between the two began to grow, and eventually leading to the breaking up of AQI from the al Qaeda's network and formed the Islamic State (IS).

Although fighting for the similar goal of establishing a pan-Islamic rule, al Qaeda and ISIS differ in some critical ways. First, due to its highly prolific activity in the Arab Spring, IS has managed to generate an experienced and battle toughened militia force whose brutality makes al Qaeda operatives look quite gentle. Secondly, IS is not just an armed battalion; it actively seeks to create a "state" by forming a semi-government structure in the areas it controls. This demi-government body undertakes several development projects like building of markets, distribution of food and fuel and management of traffic. The Sunni minority of Iraq, feeling oppressed by the largely Shia dominated Government and security forces and the Shia militias, began to look up to such demi-legal structures to seek refuge and protection. This has provided IS with a considerable social and political support, which has helped it to legitimise its goals.<sup>ii</sup>

This can be compared to the social and charitable activities carried out by Hamas in Palestine, which helped it to win seats in Palestinian elections in 2006. Although many terrorist groups have been known to have a charitable wing, none so far have been able to acquire a definite geography, and control a defined territory although Hamas can be a comparable example with its defacto control over the Gaza Strip. Unlike al Qaeda, which never considered acting like a demi-state apparatus and whose units hid in the mountains, ISIS is more socially integrated, which makes counteractions difficult – both militarily and ideologically. And finally, ISIS is financially more self-sufficient than most other terrorist groups.<sup>iii</sup> Over the years it has managed to secure its own set of



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private donors in the middle east and it has also taken over major oil fields in Iraq and Syria, and oil smuggling is a major source of funding along with ransom, extortion, stealing cash and revenue generated through taxation.<sup>iv</sup>

The rise of the Islamic State has had direct implications on al Qaeda's network, as this was the first time a group had managed to challenge Al Qaeda's supremacy at the helm of the global network of terrorism. This has had a major impact on the functioning on the manner in which the regional terrorist groups would operate. Scholars like Horowitz and Potter have already studied the nature the nature of terrorist alliances. They observe that terrorists groups do not form alliances arbitrarily or purely on matching ideologies, but seek those who have higher capabilities.<sup>v</sup> This is on purely realist perspective, where in each group tries to enhance its own capabilities. By aligning with stronger groups, or groups which are perceived as stronger, smaller regional outfits can ensure for themselves better resources. In the core-periphery structure that Horowitz and Potter explain, the stronger groups form the core while the periphery consists of smaller groups. As the groups on the periphery move closer to the core, the core only gets stronger. This is because, the outreach and the efficacy of the core only increases as more and more terrorist groups start allying with it.

The decline of al Qaeda was a void that the IS easily exploited to gain foothold. With its rise it was evident that it would be challenging the network of al Qaeda. There are three direct incidents that reflect on this. First, in November 2013, IS leader, Baghdadi approached several of al Qaeda's affiliates to check if they would be willing to switch their allegiance to him. Although not much is known about this liaison, but it has been confirmed by a senior al Qaeda Sharia official, Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir.<sup>vi</sup> Secondly, the spokesperson for the IS, Abu Muhammad al Adnani openly called on all of al Qaeda's branches to defect, urging them to issue statements about their approach towards jihad.<sup>vii</sup>



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The third is the most radical step, which is the formation of the Caliphate on June 29 2014. As counterterrorism scholar and analyst Daveed Gartenstein-Ross explains: This declaration was a concept not only about projecting power, but also about establishing a legitimate ruling authority. This is because a caliphate is one of the strongest symbols for the Islamic world as it declares a single unilateral authority over all other Islamic bodies, including the Jihadist organisations. Its official statement announcing the caliphate made this clear by declaring the legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations becomes null by the expansion of the caliphate's authority. The official statement by IS announcing the caliphate made this clear by declaring the legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations becomes null by the expansion of the caliphate's authority.<sup>viii</sup>

Al Qaeda's response to IS has been considerably subdued. The silence of its chief Ayman al Zawahiri over growing abilities of IS can be attributed to the fact that he might be well aware that IS is a new group and with the methods it is employing, it will only enjoy temporary support. In response, he has asked his leaders not to exert brutality and carry out the implementation of Sharia in a gradual manner. This is in direct contrast to the practices of the IS, but could a much more thoughtful approach. Gradual implementation does not come off as severe and abrupt and allows society to adapt to the changes. This can help al Qaeda gain more social legitimacy than the IS. However, with much growing financial capabilities, and especially with control over oil resources, IS does have the ability to yield more damage if it so wishes. Whether these capabilities will lead to a direct confrontation or will lead to a thaw is yet to be seen. The growing capabilities might lead al Qaeda to challenge IS directly or it might even agree to some sort of negotiations leading to a thaw.

At this moment, it is very difficult to predict the path that international terrorism is going to take. It is undoubtedly at a crossroads where the older dominant ideology of al Qaeda is being reshaped by the emerging IS, leading to the metamorphosis of the idea of global terrorism. That being



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said, one must also note that the rise of IS was only possible because of the pre-set conditions that were created by al Qaeda. Al Qaeda was responsible for bringing Islamist ideologies into the global arena of terror. It successfully exploited the socio-political situations in conflict prone regions to grow in size. It was only through these ventures that the IS was able to find a strong foothold. Thus, IS is not completely a new phenomenon in itself. Instead it's the new face of the same phenomenon – i.e. the new face of the international terrorism.

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***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

<sup>i</sup> Global Terrorism Database, START, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism,

<sup>ii</sup> Aersh Danish, "The Emerging Threat of ISIS", *In Focus*, Centre for Air Power Studies, 16 July, 2014, see [http://capsindia.org/files/documents/CAPS\\_Infocus\\_AD0.pdf](http://capsindia.org/files/documents/CAPS_Infocus_AD0.pdf), accessed on 4 August 2015

<sup>iii</sup> Matt Bradley, "Militant Leader Focuses on Gaining Ground", *Wall Street Journal*, see <http://online.wsj.com/articles/iraq-militant-leader-focuses-on-gaining-ground-1402883030>, accessed on 25 July 2015

<sup>iv</sup> See n. ii, accessed on 4 August 2015

<sup>v</sup> Michael C. Horowitz and Philip B. K. Potter, "Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (Sage: California, 2014), v.58, n.2., pp.199-225

<sup>vi</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Zawahiri's Revenge", *Foreign Policy*, see [http://foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/07/31/zawahiris\\_revenge\\_aqap\\_is\\_more\\_dangerous\\_than\\_the\\_islamic\\_state\\_al\\_qaeda](http://foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/07/31/zawahiris_revenge_aqap_is_more_dangerous_than_the_islamic_state_al_qaeda), accessed on 17 July 2015

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid., accessed on 17 July, 2015

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid., accessed on 17 July 2015