

Policy Brief

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The « Islamic State » Organization: a Continuation of al Qaeda or an Emerging rift?¹

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Summary

In 1980, the establishment of the Mujahideen contingent in Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet occupation opened the door to the globalization of jihadism, which until then had been confined to local and national dimensions. This globalization gave rise to the first international terrorist group, Al Qaeda. With the United States' invasion of Iraq, international terrorism took another dimension that culminated in 2014 with the birth of the "Islamic State", also known as Daech. Changes in doctrine, tactics, strategy and even reference and objectives introduced by the new organization inspired the question: is the Islamic state a continuation of Al Qaeda in the form of a simple transformation, or is it the emergence of a new phenomenon?

Explanations of the emergence of the Islamic State have proliferated, and are multiple and diverse:

- For some, it is a direct consequence of the fall of Saddam Hussein. For others, the main ingredient is the resurgence of conflict between Shiite and Sunni fed by Iran's new designs in the region;
- A historical approach to the conditions of the Islamic State's emergence, is the "concretization of an old dream" that has not left the Arab-Sunni subconscious since the demise of the Abbasid Caliphate under the Mongol invasion and the betrayal by Ibn Al 'Alqami, Shiite Minister of the Abbasid Caliphate Al Mou'atassim. The emergence of the Islamic State would be an attempt to materialize that dream of revenge on Mongol and Persian armies and Shi'ite betrayal. This explanation of Arab-Sunni collective passion dictating revenge, coupled with nostalgia for the Caliphate period is not to be overlooked

(Olivier Hanne and Thomas Flichy de Neuville, 2014). Beyond these explanations, it is necessary to ask whether this organization is just a simple continuation of Al-Qaeda or a new phenomenon that has appeared to break with the past.

I. Al Qaeda's paths from Afghanistan to Mesopotamia

1. Islamist movements in the late 1970s and the afghan crisis

At the end of the seventies, the Sunni regimes in the Middle East and North Africa encountered local religious opposition from the reformist movement of the late nineteenth century. More or less related to the Muslim brotherhood, born in Egypt in March 1922, Islamist

1. This Policy Brief is completed by a Policy Paper on the same topic. Policy Paper: "L'organisation « Etat Islamique »: Continuation d'Al Qaeda ou émergence en rupture" - OCP Policy Center, April 26, 2016

organizations that proliferated in the Arab-Muslim world experienced various destinies, but the links between them were very limited in the early eighties.

Radicals, Salafists, fundamentalists, or jihadists, the organizations with a reference to Islam in politics were mostly national and confined to their respective states.

In 1979, the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet army were parallel events:

- The first event exacerbated the actions of Islamist movements in Sunni countries, which sought to follow the model of the Iranian revolution;
- The second event united the same Sunni world in which the idea of a unified jihad against the Soviet invader germinated. Not only did the organizations that prepared for Jihad, but official authorities also supported the idea of actions against the USSR.

2. International Islamic movement against Soviets in Afghanistan

• Abdullah Azzam and bin Laden, the "Arab Afghans"

Three countries, each of which had its own reasons to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, organized the gathering of Jihad fighters: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States.

They mounted an international army of jihadists to help the Afghan Islamist parties in their war against their invader. US, Pakistani and Saudi Arabian intelligence organizations were responsible for coordinating the operation. The Services Bureau (Maktab al-Khadamat) was then created in Peshawar on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The office management was entrusted to Abdullah Azzam, who in 1984 was joined by the young son of a Saudi family, Osama bin Laden. The young Saudi, named deputy by Abdullah Azzam, was responsible for jihad administration and financing. The fighters, referred to as Arab Afghans and equipped, armed and trained by the three previously mentioned countries, pushed the Red Army to resign themselves to withdraw from Afghanistan.

• From Soviet withdrawal to attempts at regionalization

At the end of the war in 1989, Abdullah Azzam and bin Laden found themselves with an army of over 5,000 fighters with no more war to fight. They thought

of making Afghanistan the Base (Qaeda in Arabic) in order to launch an offensive jihad against the West. This base gave them the opportunity to break free from the Pakistani, American and especially Saudi Arabian guardianship. However, the two men developed different ideas about the purpose of jihad. Bin Laden wanted to attack the distant enemy, the West and Israel; Abdullah Azzam first wanted to lead the fight against the Arab-Muslim regimes. The divergence between the two clans eventually led to the assassination of Sheikh Abdullah Azzam on November 24, 1989.

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In the early nineties, bin Laden, still supported by Pakistan and Saudi services, found himself at the head of a mujahideen army that numbered in the thousands. Some fighters had begun to leave Afghanistan to their country of origin or to the Balkans, but the majority still wandered between Khost and Peshawar. The leader of Al Qaeda, who went to settle his staff in Sudan, returned to Pakistan after the seizure of power by the Taliban. He pledged allegiance to their leader Mullah Omar. In pledging allegiance to Mullah Omar, bin Laden wanted, in fact, to turn Afghanistan into a kind of universal Islamic state, serving as the launching pad in the fight against Westerners and providing basic education and training for all groups affiliated with al Qaeda. In September 2011, he succeeded with the spectacular attack on the American homeland.

3. Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi: the link between Afghanistan and Iraq

Abu Musab Al Zarqawi arrived in Afghanistan at the end of the war. Disappointed in not having been able to participate in the Jihad, he returned to Jordan where, in 1993, he helped another Jordanian, Al Maqdisi, in creating and activating the Al-Tawhid Group. They were both jailed in 1995. After his release, following the ascension of the young King Abdullah II in 1999, between 1999 and end 2001 he undertook a long journey that brought him to Jordan, Pakistan and Afghanistan (where he met bin Laden without pledging allegiance to him) before joining Northern Iraq via Iran. He was in northern Iraq at the time of the US Iraq invasion.

On February 5, 2003, Colin Powell announced before the United Nations General Assembly that Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda were linked and that the link was none other than Abu Musab Al Zarqawi. In Powell's statement, Al Zarqawi found the perfect opportunity to become a leader of the terrorist nebula that would take shape in Iraq.

II. The direct causes of the emergence of the Islamic State: From the ISI to the IS via the ISIL

1. The United States invasion of Iraq: Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)

- **Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)**

When the Americans arrived, Iraq had several armed Islamist groups that were comprised of both Iraqis and foreigners. In January 2006, this nebula of groups and networks, Islamists and nationalists established the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC) (Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen fi al-Iraq).

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This council had managed to dominate the Tikrit-Fallujah-Ramadi triangle where it reigned supreme. The occupation of this triangle, facilitated by the intensity of the dominant Sunni population, sought the siege of Baghdad, capital of the former regime that represents the dividing line between areas of Sunni and Shiite influences. Occupying a large territory and with the support of Sunni tribes, on October 15, 2006, a week before the start of Ramadan, the Council announced the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyya), headed by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. Abu Mosaab Al Zarqawi had been killed a few weeks prior by the US military.

- **Decline of the Islamic State of Iraq**

The self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq merely managed the Baghdad Belts strategy developed by Al Zarqawi, which aimed to conquer the Iraqi capital. This conquest

plan, however, had to face two major facts that ended his ambition between 2006 and 2009:

- Operation Surge, where the Americans sent 130,000 soldiers to Iraq as reinforcement by assigning a mission to reclaim the "triangle of death" cities south of Baghdad;
- The sahwat or "Awakening Councils" as the Americans called them attracted some 100,000 men from Sunni tribes who agreed to turn against the jihadists in return for a promise to be subsequently reintegrated into the Iraqi government structures security led by Nouri Al Maliki.

2. Destabilization of Syria: Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

- **Iraq in 2010**

The situation of Iraq in 2010 can be summarized as follows:

- The Islamic State of Iraq was both defeated and crushed;
- The Shiites seized the Iraqi government;
- US troops prepared for withdrawal;
- The population was confronted with the Al Maliki government, which marginalized, chased and humiliated them.

- **Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant**

In this climate of controversy, Abu Abdullah al-Rashid al-Baghdadi who was at the head of the Islamic State of Iraq died, succeeded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The family tree, disseminated by his followers, traces him back to Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, cousin and son in law of the Prophet. This prestigious lineage attributes him noble origins dating back to Quraiche, the tribe of Prophet Mohammad, a lineage that enables him to make claim to the caliphate.

Differences between Al Qaeda and Sunni jihadists in Iraq were apparent despite the cohabitation effort their mutual interests imposed. The Syrian Arab spring proved to be an opportunity for both parties to establish their presence, emancipate themselves from each other, and make better use of one other.

Changes in the social movements in civil war had then drawn to Syria several foreign parties with multiple and conflicting interests:

- Sunni countries in the region, hostile to Bashar's Alawite regime;
- Regional Shiite forces entered Syria to support the regime;
- Westerners were training and equipping the Free Syrian Army;
- In Syria, Russians held their only possibility of access in the Mediterranean;
- For Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, the opportunity to become embedded in the Syrian conflict was to take advantage of in order to benefit from the majority Sunni population in Syria;
- Al Qaeda could not remain indifferent to the revolts generated by the Arab Spring, or it would lose its drawing power. The situation in Syria offered it the opportunity to control some of these revolts and avoid falling into obsolescence.

Thus the Syrian conflict expanded globally, not only between institutional actors such as the states in the region and the major powers, but also with informal actors such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq.

«Differences between Al Qaeda and Sunni jihadists in Iraq were apparent despite the cohabitation effort their mutual interests imposed»

• Proclamation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

The ISI, while continuing to wage war against the Iraqi forces, began in Syria starting mid-2011. The Syrian Abu Muhammad Al-Joulani, former jihadist who fought alongside Al Zarqawi, had climbed the ranks to become one of Al Baghdadi's most distinguished lieutenants. His reputation as a courageous and disciplined fighter together with its Syrian origin made him the best person to lead the jihad in Syria.

By mutual agreement, Al Zawahiri and Al Baghdadi named Al Joulani at the head of Al Qaeda in Syria and gave him the task of creating the group, Jabhat Annusra (The Victory Front). Although it created the structure in 2012, it became officially known in early 2013.

On the ground, Jabhat Annusra began in Syria with the Islamic State of Iraq's resources. The new organization

owed everything to the ISI. The first combatants, the first arms, and the first networks that allowed the anchoring of Jabhat Annusra are all thanks to the ISI. This fact dictated to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi another way of perceiving the situation. Why stay under Al Qaeda if it does not provide any logistics? What added value does Al Qaeda bring to the jihad in Iraq and Syria? And without any added value, why obey Al Qaeda?

Moreover, the jihad in Syria as in Iraq is above all directed against the Shiites, who hold the power and mistreat and marginalize the Sunni populations. This struggle was not Al Qaeda's primary concern, as it had always sought to conserve the power of the ayatollahs in Iran.

Based on this information, in 2013 Al Baghdadi renamed the "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI) to the "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL) also known as the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS). For Al Baghdadi, Jabhat Annusra is part of the new state. The decision was released on April 8, 2013.

3. Consummate break between Al Qaeda and ISIS, self-proclamation of the Islamic State

• Consummate break between Al Qaeda and ISIS

Al Joulani refused subordination to Al Baghdadi and informed al Zawahiri, to whom he publicly pledged allegiance. Al Zawahiri urged the two protagonists to defer to him to settle the dispute. Due to Al Baghdadi's indifference, on May 23, 2013 Al Zawahiri addressed a new message in which he states that, after consulting the Shura of the movement, it was decided to dissolve ISIS, which must now limit its operations to Iraq (and thus again become ISI).

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Al Baghdadi responded by attacking positions held by Annusra, ignoring the instructions and decisions of Al Qaeda. Ayman Al Zawahiri then tried to resolve the matter amicably. He sent an emissary, Abu Khalid Al Souri, to Al Baghdadi to try to convince Al Baghdadi to dissolve the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The envoy failed in his mission, and was killed by Al Baghdadi's fighters.

This time, the consummate break was between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi jihadist movement.

- **Proclamation of the Islamic State: the will of ruptured resurgence**

Following a statement from Al Qaeda claiming that ISIS no longer has any organizational link with Al Qaeda, in a June 29, 2014 statement, Al Baghdadi announced the simultaneous creation of the Islamic state and the caliphate.

Is it a simple change of name? Or does it concern a new structure? The statement responded to three concerns: the limitation to Iraq and Syria did not fit with the Caliphate announcement. Al Baghdadi wanted to take the global jihad leadership away from Al Qaeda and establish the principle of territoriality. By calling itself a "State", Daech could appeal directly to foreigners while bypassing Al Qaeda. Daech may even assert the Caliphate by calling upon the followers of Al Qaeda to pledge allegiance to it.

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