

# Islamism in West Asia-North Africa

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## Beyond the ballot box: Violent extremist Islamism

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Although modern political Islam stems from Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the ideologies that developed in its wake went far beyond its founder's aspirations for a return to religious fundamentals. This ideological evolution is best evidenced in the creation of al-Qaeda. A fierce critic of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda is connected to the Egyptian organisation through the ideas of Brotherhood writer and philosopher, Sayyid Qutb. Qutb's 1964 manifesto, *Milestones*, provides justification to consider 'insufficiently Islamic' governments as apostate targets of violent struggle. The Muslim Brotherhood subsequently turned away from Qutb's message, but al-Qaeda and other organizations built off of his thinking. Their interpretation of Qutb's message justified a violent anti-West vision, one that has become a defining example of modern terrorism.

### The Development of al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda, was founded in 1988 in Peshawar, Pakistan by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Sayyed Imam Al-Sharif, aka "Dr. Fadl", and Osama bin Laden. Zawahiri and Fadl were leaders of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a violent spin-off of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the wealthy, Saudi-born bin Laden came from years of involvement with Afghani *mujahedeen* fighters. Bin Laden brought financial backing while his Egyptian partners contributed militant expertise and philosophical structure to the new organisation.<sup>1</sup> Together, they expanded previous Islamist thinking to envision a violent global struggle, aiming to purge Western influence in the Muslim world and establish a fundamentalist Sunni Islamic state.

Al-Qaeda's first major attack was a 1992 bombing in Aden, Yemen. They quickly developed expertise in events generating widespread economic and human loss, culminating in their attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 11 September 2001.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wander, Andrew. "A history of terror: Al-Qaeda 1988-2008." *The Guardian* 13, July 2008.

<sup>2</sup> "Al Qaeda." Mapping Militant Organizations (2012). <<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/21>>

### Al-Qaeda evolution since America's "War on Terror"

Al-Qaeda's international network has evolved since America launched its counterterrorism offensive following the 9/11 attacks. Its defined hierarchical structure disintegrated, and affiliate movements around the world gained power relative to Pakistan's al-Qaeda central.<sup>3</sup> Demonstrating the challenge of fighting the organisation, in Afghanistan, the initial target of the American offensive and al-Qaeda base during 9/11, al-Qaeda has not yet been eradicated. Instead, the United States is currently expanding their mission in Afghanistan to target the Taliban and other militant groups in addition to al-Qaeda.<sup>4</sup> Al-Qaeda has responded to US operations by supporting less-orchestrated "lone wolf" attacks. In other cases, international organisations have challenged central leadership, revealing internal discord. Thus the 2011 killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, destructive as it was to al-Qaeda's core in Pakistan, caused less damage to branches worldwide.

Outside of Pakistan, al-Qaeda's international presence is most notable in Yemen, Somalia, North Africa and Syria,<sup>5</sup> with smaller pockets worldwide. However since early 2014 a new organisation, the so-called Islamic State, has challenged al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's successor, and made a name for itself within the world of violent, extremist Islamist organisations.

### The rise of so-called Islamic-State

The branch al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), led by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had long drawn ire from bin Laden's successor for shifting the struggle away from the United States and towards Shia Muslims. In 2012, AQI expanded activities to Syria and changed its name to Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), encroaching on the formal Syrian al-Qaeda satel-

<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/21>> 21, November 2014.

<sup>3</sup> McCormick, Ty. "Al Qaeda Core: A Short History." *Foreign Policy*. 17, March 2014.

<sup>4</sup> **Note:** Although al-Qaeda has technically pledged allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar (as reported here: <http://insidethejihad.com/2014/07/analysis-al-qaeda-renews-its-allegiance-to-mullah-omar/>), al-Qaeda and the Taliban are distinct organisations. The Taliban is a South Asian, Pashtun, Islamist nationalist organisation that differs in ideology from al-Qaeda.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

lite, Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>6</sup> The two groups clashed, and al-Zawahiri disavowed ISIS on 2 February 2014. The now self-proclaimed “Islamic State” differs from al-Qaeda by prioritising construction of their version of an Islamic state over anti-West attacks. They have done so through taking over preexisting government structures and taking advantage of the crumbling systems around them. Their antagonism towards the Shia, a vestige of Zaraqawi’s leadership, also sets them apart.



Although much has been made of al-Qaeda expelling ISIS for being “too extreme,” the statement disavowing ISIS indicates that the bigger issue was ISIS’s conflict with Jabhat al-Nusra, and in doing so, threatening to eclipse the remnants of al-Qaeda power. Errant violence by ISIS earned chastisement, but infighting with al-Qaeda’s core Syrian organisation was unacceptable.<sup>7</sup>

ISIS has grown in strength and broadcast its brutality worldwide in a highly orchestrated digital campaign,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Sly, Liz. “Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq.” *The Washington Post*. 3, Feb. 2014.

forcing the international community’s attention and culminating in the American led-coalition to combat them. This development complicates the violent rivalry between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. Recently, two leaders from the rival organisations declared a limited truce in order to combat the “moderate” Syrian rebel organisations the coalition hopes to empower. For now, such agreements are localized and reflect little on broader dynamics but Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS pragmatism may pose a major challenge for coalition efforts in Iraq and Syria.

### Al-Qaeda and ISIS post-2015

There is no sign that al-Zawahiri would reorient more positively towards ISIS, and it is unclear what instances of cooperation between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra indicate for al-Qaeda’s power. In the absence of Osama bin Laden’s unifying guidance, al-Qaeda’s hierarchy has relied on oaths of allegiance by affiliate leaders to al-Zawahiri. For those leaders, breaking away from al-Qaeda is fraught with risk and may encourage disloyalty from their own followers. And in general al-Qaeda affiliates remain loyal.<sup>8</sup> Beyond al-Qaeda, ISIS has demonstrated its ability to gain affiliates as well as consolidate territory. Many militant Islamist groups have sworn fealty. While al-Qaeda may be on the wane, ISIS is still making gains despite coalition opposition.

<sup>8</sup> Berger, J.M. “Islamic State vs Al Qaeda.” *Foreign Policy*. 2, Sept. 2014.



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Emily joins the WANA team to investigate the influence of political Islam in the WANA region, regional legal empowerment initiatives and the continuing impact of Arab Spring. Prior to joining the WANA Institute, Emily was a Fulbright research scholar studying the influence of demographic rifts on Jordan’s HIRAK protest movement. She also interned at the Jordanian Institute of Diplomacy and the American Foreign Service Journal. Emily holds a Bachelor of Science in Political Science from Santa Clara University with a minor in Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies.