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Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

### Al-Qaeda versus the ISIS

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#### **Background:**

Hindsight is always 6/6, the problem is with foresight. All the think-tanks and the mounds of literature across the world had no inkling of the meteoric rise of the ISIS and now that it exists, there is even little inkling of which way it might go. Even Nostradamus got it all wrong. The only common theme that everybody got right is that poverty and religion form a heady mix. A mix potent enough to destabilise the world and put briefly, upset the apple cart in every way known to mankind. Almost overnight, every known paradigm and policy is uncertain and the future parameters even more so.

#### **The Conventional Take**

The standard western theme is to view them as opponents with different goals, means and methods that is most likely to wear out either parties<sup>1</sup>. A full-fledged description of the ISIS and Al-Qaeda is beyond the scope of this paper and hence a broad overview of its basic elements is tabulated below;

<b>Defining Characteristic</b>	<b>Al Qaeda</b>	<b>Islamic State of Iraq and Syria</b>
<b>Origins &amp; Evolution</b>	Founded In Aug 1988 by Osama Bin Laden in Peshawar, Pakistan with US support for anti-Soviet Jihad evolved into	The ISIS is a militant Sunni Muslim extremist group that emerged out of the remnants of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Initially made up of ex-soldiers



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	<p>global terrorist organization by 1996 when Bin Laden declared war on the US. Merged with Egyptian Islamic Jihad in 2001 &amp; conducted 9/11. Al Qaeda continues after Bin Laden was killed in Abbottabad in May 2011. As of 2015, operational strength diminished in Afghanistan-Pakistan due constant US drone attacks, but formidable in Yemen, Libya, Syria and Iran. Thus, broader Al Qaeda network in place with Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) in place in Yemen, Syria and Libya. The Centre of Gravity of Al Qaeda has shifted with the number two in the network, Nasir al-Wihayshi, leading in Yemen.</p>	<p>and Hussein loyalists; it grew as militants led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi infiltrated its ranks. In 2006, Zarqawi was killed in a US air raid and Al Qaeda evolved into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) that further evolved into ISIS after US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Following Syrian civil war, ISIS moved across the border and joined the fight against President Bashar al-Assad. But ISIS had a falling out with al Qaeda central in Pakistan, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri since the death of Osama bin Laden. As of 2015, has established "Islamic State" in Iraq and Syria that undertakes sovereign functions like running the state, selling oil as a state, setting up a Caliphate etc. As of March 2015, the Islamic State has formally recognized seven provinces in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen, bringing it in direct competition with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).</p>
<p><b>Leadership</b></p>	<p>Ayman al-Zawahiri</p>	<p>Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi</p>



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<b>Targets</b>	“Far Enemies” like the US, Saudi Arabia, Israel, India etc.	“Near Enemies” like Shias, Yazidis, Christians, rival Sunnis etc.
<b>Broad Tactics</b>	Unconventional, global, trans-border warfare. Expand global area of influence with attacks like 9/11 in US, London bombings of 2012, Casablanca, Bali, Doha bombings etc. <sup>2</sup>	Conventional, regional warfare aimed at territorial conquest. More territory translates to more troops which in-turn expands to a cycle of more territory, more troops. No global signature in real terms. Though virtual signature by mass media across the globe.
<b>Political Achievement</b>	Wide area of influence across the globe.	Area of influence rapidly expanding. Creation of a ‘state’.

### The Unconventional Inference

The predominant belief is that United States and its allies should try to exploit the fight between the Islamic State and Al Qaeda and, ideally, diminish them both. With that, the problem would resolve. The theory sounds good, reality, as always is more banal. The reality is that the similarities far outweigh the differences and the possibility of both parties fighting and finishing off each other leading to the return of lasting peace is remote. Firstly, the final goal of both the Al Qaeda and the ISIS is the same- to overthrow the “*corrupt*” apostate regimes in the Middle East and replace them with true Islamist governments. Regardless of who wins, the fight for the goal would continue unabated. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly; the most important factor giving rise to their brand of convoluted Jihadism is the heady mixture of poverty and religion. Human resources, particularly impoverished masses fired by religious zeal are the strength of both the Al Qaeda and ISIS. These would not reduce after the next bout of conflict in the Middle



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East. They would only change sides and align with the powers in being. Post-conflict, the levels of poverty would only rise. While other material resources would fall significantly, human resources would not fall at the same levels. The foot-soldiers understand the game and would switch loyalties as per the situation. A new power structure would be in place, new adherents would join and the situation would be back to square one. Nothing stops the emergence of a new radical group with the same set of goals and a different set of means and methods.

### **The Options**

In the best case scenario, a power vacuum would be created and in the worst case, a new power structure would be created that would seek to legitimise itself in the comity of nations. A power vacuum, ideally, provides an opportunity to the world in general to usher in democratic forms of government. Going by past evidence, democracies have historically been known to give vent to the aspirations of most, if not all those who accept community governance. On the other hand, a new power structure can be expected to be war weary and ready for compromise to sustain itself as a state. This would again open the doors to foreign participation without ulterior motives. Commercial aggrandisement is different from ulterior motive and generally benefits both sides. Even a radical structure would need trade and commerce, administration, medicare and a host of other necessities to self-preserve and sustain. There are no easy answers to the imbroglio and every state would crystal gaze and take action as per its best interests. However, rushing in military forces to beef up either party is in no one's interest. It would only rewind the cycle. The focus should be weaning away the masses from what they detest most-grinding poverty. There exist enough material resources for enhanced trade and development. Most of the economy in the region is controlled by the warlords leading to absolutism. Distributing power amongst the masses would reduce the perils of the prevailing absolutism in the region and perhaps



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may provide some succor. The approach seems ambitious; but then it is the Hadith that says *“Paradise is under the shade of swords”*.

*(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])*

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### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ref testimony of Daniel L Byman to US Committee on Homeland Security “Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different Growth, Different Targets”, Brookings Institute, 29 Apr 2015 at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2015/04/29-terrorism-in-africa-byman>

<sup>2</sup> For details, see Paul Cruickshank, “Al-Qaeda: Critical Concepts in Political Science” Routledge Publications London 2013.

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