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Al Qaeda Is Beating the Islamic State

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The Islamic State's lightning offensive through Iraq and Syria last year has dominated the headlines, but the jihadist group that has won the most territory in the Arab world over the past six months is Al Qaeda. On balance, the Islamic State has lost territory during this period—though it still controls more overall than Al Qaeda—most prominently, Tikrit and the southern half of the Salah al-Din province.

What we are likely to see now is a titanic war of ideology and tactics between two vicious, radical groups that together probably command more prestige among Arab peoples than the weak, often delegitimized governments they have outsmarted and outfought. Perhaps the ultimate irony is that, in an era when the threat of terrorist violence is arguably worse than it was on the eve of 9/11, it is Al Qaeda—a decade ago, the scourge of Sunni governments—that may come to be seen as the more acceptable of the two by these same governments.

Here is a snapshot of the two groups' current territorial holdings, though these are changing all the time. In the past year, all of the Islamic State's geographic gains have been minor, such as the town of Baghdadi in Iraq's Anbar province and the Yarmouk refugee camp near Damascus, and they have also been contested, with control of these areas fluctuating between the Islamic State (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL) and its enemies. In contrast, Al Qaeda's affiliated organizations have made striking gains, in particular in Syria and Yemen.

Why have these gains fallen somewhat under the media radar? In part because the Islamic State's media capabilities dwarf those of Al Qaeda, which for years has employed a strategy that emphasizes a quiet presence and deliberate movement and has only occasionally tried to hold and govern territory. Frequently, its affiliates' connections to the Al Qaeda network have gone unannounced, and the group has even worked to hide these ties. This strategy was effective against Western states as well as regional governments that Al Qaeda sought to topple, as Al Qaeda placed itself during the Arab Spring uprisings in a position where it could gain influence and destabilize recognized governments in multiple theaters, eventually allowing itself to erect its own governments from its enemies' ashes.

When ISIL loudly burst onto the scene with its superior skills at public communication, it managed to change many of Al Qaeda's strategic strengths into weaknesses. Essentially, ISIL transformed Al Qaeda's deceptions and clandestine actions from an asset for fighting the West into a liability when it came to competing with the Islamic State for affiliated organizations and recruits. Because Al Qaeda was quiet in comparison to the Islamic State, it seemed not only to Westerners but even to some jihadist movement insiders that the Islamic State was quickly becoming the only game in town.

Al Qaeda's recent gains show, however, that the competition between these two groups is far from over. The Islamic State's challenge to Al Qaeda's holdings and supremacy over the jihadist movement will certainly cause Al Qaeda to adapt. The question is whether Al Qaeda will replicate ISIL by becoming louder and more overt—a rival would-be caliphate, in effect—or if its adaptation will be more unconventional, a kind of fundamentalist jujitsu that waits for the Islamic State to overreach and be destroyed thanks to its baleful prominence in the fight against the West.

Either way, Al Qaeda is on the move, and we need to do a better job of understanding the latest iteration of this threat. Al Qaeda's Syria affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, was at the forefront of a rebel military offensive that captured the city of Idlib, the capital of Syria's northwest province of the same name, on March 28. Idlib's fall represents one of the most significant rebel territorial gains against Bashar Assad's government in two years. Consistent with Al Qaeda's more quiet strategy, Nusra attempted to assuage its allies' fears that it would seek to dominate Idlib, as the group's emir Abu Muhammad al-Jolani stated that the city would be ruled by sharia (Islamic law) but also called for "unity among the groups that won Idlib" and said that they should set up an Islamic court to settle disputes.

Following the fall of Idlib, Nusra led the capture on April 1 of Syria's Nasib border crossing with Jordan, a crucial route used to move commercial goods from Damascus to the Gulf. Nusra and allied rebel factions also have experienced success in Syria's southwestern province of Dara'a, about 70 miles south of Damascus, including capturing key towns like Nawa (population 60,000), Sheikh Miskin (population 24,000) and Bosra al-Sham. In addition to its territorial gains, Nusra destroyed the Hazzm rebel movement, which received U.S. support, over the course of a single weekend.

Meanwhile, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the jihadist group's Yemeni affiliate, has capitalized on the ongoing civil conflict in Yemen between Iranian-backed Houthi Shias, Sunni tribes and forces loyal to president-in-exile Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. AQAP recently managed to gain control over Yemen's fifth-largest city, al-Mukalla, in the Hadramawt coastal region. As part of the offensive, AQAP militants freed some 300 prisoners on April 2, while also seizing a presidential palace and al-Mukalla's security headquarters and raiding the central bank.

About two weeks earlier, AQAP also overran the southern city of al-Houta, the capital of Lahj province. The militants were able to seize the main security barracks, the governor's office and the intelligence headquarters where Al Qaeda detainees were held. Though AQAP withdrew from the city the same evening, the fact that it overran al-Houta demonstrates the group's capabilities. Indeed, AQAP has employed these hit-and-run tactics in other areas. It temporarily seized an army base in the town of Bayhan on February 15, capturing several soldiers and heavy weaponry before leaving the area.

This method of overrunning territory in Yemen without trying to hold it is designed to destabilize the areas, creating multiple chaotic environments that AQAP's opponents will be unable to defend and thus allowing AQAP to ultimately erect governing structures after its opponents are exhausted. Additionally, AQAP has secured a base of public support in these areas from which it can recruit and receive backing, particularly given the Houthis' penchant to make local enemies through their heavy-handedness. All of this prompted U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter to say of AQAP that it can be seen "making direct gains on the ground there as they try to take territory, seize territory in these battle lines."

Al Qaeda's gains have surprised many analysts. After all, the group's strategy is based around having an unassuming presence and conducting some of its expansion through non-Al Qaeda brands. For example, Jabhat al-Nusra had long been affiliated with Al Qaeda prior to its public pledge of allegiance to Al Qaeda's emir, Ayman al-Zawahri, in April 2013. Rather than making a noisy entrance into Syria, Al Qaeda first quietly entrenched itself with Syrian rebel groups. This has put Nusra in a very strong position, as it is now thoroughly enmeshed in the broader Syrian opposition, making rebel groups willing to work with it despite Nusra's connection to Al Qaeda, and also making Nusra difficult for Western powers to attack so long as they still want to support the Syrian opposition against Assad.

Al Qaeda has disguised its presence in other areas, too. Many analysts did not recognize Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi in Tunisia or the Caucasus Emirate as affiliates of Al Qaeda until these groups publicly described themselves as parts of Al Qaeda in recent months. Similarly, the Tunisian government has presented evidence about Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia that, if accurate, means the group has been functioning as an unacknowledged Al Qaeda affiliate for some time.

The jihadist commentator Abdallah bin Muhammad recently wrote an article defending this approach. He quoted Osama bin Laden's view that declaring an Islamic state was "political suicide," since the West would muster its military resources to crush that state. He described Al Qaeda's approach of cooperating with other Islamist groups, and even covertly participating in political processes, as "political guerrilla warfare." (Bin Muhammad singled out Libya as a place where this covert political participation was occurring.)

Though Al Qaeda has controlled territory in the past (including northern Mali in 2012-13, parts of southern Yemen in 2011-12, and most of southern Somalia until al-Shabab was pushed back in 2011-12), it has never been so bold as to declare a caliphate. Indeed, the group has even shied away from declaring emirates. This is because Al Qaeda has never assessed itself to be in a position to hold significant territory for extended periods. Al Qaeda has instead focused on quietly building an organizational structure across multiple countries, destabilizing those countries and preparing to erect its governing structures amidst the chaos that it planned to unleash.

Al Qaeda's strategy is effective in what we might call a two-player game (Al Qaeda vs. non-Muslim powers). But with ISIL's emergence, Al Qaeda now faces a challenge from its own side that understands its ploys—a noisier adversary intent on turning the group's tendency to stay

below the radar into a weapon against it. Al Qaeda's approach is more poorly suited to such a competitor because the Islamic State's emergence was not accounted for when Al Qaeda forged its strategy for North Africa and the Levant. This makes it possible for ISIL to throw a monkey wrench into the plans Al Qaeda had prepared over the course of years.

The Islamic State's approach to global jihadism has been largely the opposite of Al Qaeda's: ISIL is a boisterous organization that constantly seeks the media spotlight and touts its victories (real or imagined) at every opportunity. It is adept at communications, particularly its use of social media, and emerged at a time when the U.S. and other Western states were war-weary after 14 years of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq.

These dynamics allowed the Islamic State to gain a great deal of attention during its rise. ISIL was so hungry to foster the perception that it had momentum that the group even convinced prominent outlets like CNN and The Associated Press that it had taken control of the northern Libyan city of Derna when it was, in fact, only one of a number of armed players there. The Islamic State's subsequent military push into the Libyan city of Sirte appeared calculated to further create the impression of momentum and impress the Nigeria-based jihadist group Boko Haram, which agreed to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State and thus join its network. Essentially, much of the Islamic State's strategy for expansion into Africa had been a long con designed to falsely inflate the group's significance on the continent. In the case of Boko Haram, a major jihadist group was persuaded by this con game.

Also, the Islamic State immediately claimed responsibility for the notorious Bardo museum attack in Tunis, which killed 24 people—mainly foreign tourists—on March 18. However, Tunisian authorities believe the attack's primary architect was not the Islamic State but, rather, Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi, which is aligned with Al Qaeda. If ISIL exaggerated its role in the attack, its immediate claim represents the Islamic State again outflanking Al Qaeda because it understands the group's methods. The Islamic State knew from past experience that Al Qaeda generally doesn't claim credit for attacks while its operatives are still at large, particularly when they are trained operatives who are intended to survive. ISIL thus may have realized that it could issue a claim of responsibility before Al Qaeda was prepared to do so.

Further, the Islamic State recognized that it has the media operations of Al Qaeda—a group that has been pursuing an often covert strategy—outgunned. Given the way media cycles work—and ISIL is very attuned to the media cycle—its false or exaggerated claim of responsibility would dominate the news before anybody could disprove it, at a time when Bardo remained a top headline. Al Qaeda's greater role wouldn't become known until the attack was no longer a hot news item, and, given its disadvantage in media operations, Al Qaeda would have trouble swinging the perception of momentum back to it.

The Islamic State's louder strategy has allowed it to snatch up a couple of important Al Qaeda affiliates, Boko Haram and Egypt's Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. ISIL's strategy for convincing Al Qaeda affiliates to align with it has a number of components. One is to tout its own successes, sometimes embellishing them while providing enough granular information to make the Islamic State's exaggerations seem believable, while never admitting failure. The group's loud claims of success have often been echoed by the news media even when they proved to be inaccurate, as was the case for ISIL's claims to have conquered Derna.

The Islamic State has also employed an “out with the old, in with the new” narrative about its competition with Al Qaeda. In several issues of the group's English-language magazine, Dabiq, the ISIL refers to its ability to do three crucial things: gain territory, maintain momentum and

consolidate its gains. The group often juxtaposes its criticisms of Al Qaeda with references to its slogan, *baqiya wa tatamaddad*, or remaining and expanding.

Part of the Islamic State's criticism of Al Qaeda centers on the latter's inability to create a caliphate over its decades-long existence. In the first issue of *Dabiq*, titled "The Return of Khilafah," the Islamic State presented a chart (right) illustrating the five phases necessary to achieve the caliphate. It explained that while the Islamic State had reached the fifth and final stage, that of establishing the caliphate, Al Qaeda had "become frozen" in the very first phase, that of *hijra* (emigration). In the same issue, the Islamic State highlighted a high-level defection from *Jabhat al-Nusra* to the Islamic State. In later issues of *Dabiq*, the Islamic State would continue to trumpet its ability to inspire defections from Al Qaeda, both from individuals and entire groups. In return for the loyalty of its new supporters, the Islamic State "guarantees ... constant victory and consolidation" despite being surrounded by enemies.

The Islamic State has made several references to Al Qaeda's strategy in Yemen, criticizing the organization's unwillingness to emphasize sectarian attacks against the Houthis and stating that it would resolve Al Qaeda's "mistakes in creed and methodology" with its expansion into the country. Similar to the group's loud expansion into other theaters, ISIL's March 20 suicide bombings targeting Houthi mosques in Sanaa, which killed 137 people, were designed to show off its presence.

The Islamic State's model has been highly disruptive for Al Qaeda, as it has poached two major affiliates and threatens to either capture still others or at least inspire defections from their ranks. But ISIL's model is also a flawed one. Not only does its declaration of a caliphate make the group's legitimacy hinge on the caliphate's continued viability, but the Islamic State has done nothing but make enemies since its advance into Iraq. Further, the group's emphasis on consolidation and momentum means that a failure to maintain the momentum that it trumpets jeopardizes ISIL. Indeed, despite the group's boisterous advance into Africa, the recent military setbacks it has experienced in Iraq at the hands of the coalition aligned against it pose a significant challenge.

The most obvious way for Al Qaeda to respond to the Islamic State's rise is to become more overt than it has been. In an effort to show that it hasn't become obsolete, Al Qaeda could ask its affiliates to more explicitly adopt the Al Qaeda brand and could conduct the kind of shows of force that have made the Islamic State so prominent.

But Al Qaeda could move in an unexpected direction that, as in the past, exploits its adversaries' willingness to view it as a spent force. Rather than becoming more overt, Al Qaeda could instead further de-emphasize its brand, pushing affiliates that lack a known Al Qaeda affiliation to the fore and getting others to shed the Al Qaeda label in order to rekindle a robust relationship with Sunni states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait.

And then it can wait for Islamic State to destroy itself by drawing all the fire. ISIL has moved what political theorists call the Overton window—a range of ideas the public will embrace—with respect to what is "acceptable" behavior for Islamist groups, thus making Al Qaeda appear to be a lesser evil to some Sunni states (as well as to some Western commentators). In addition, the region's growing Sunni-Shia competition might further open the door to Al Qaeda's rehabilitation—and thus to state sponsorship as it operates under new names.

Such a strategy would be risky for Al Qaeda, as creating a front organization for its Iraqi affiliate helped produce the Islamic State's ultimate break from the mother organization. But at the same time, this strategy would be based on the same premises trumpeted by top U.S. officials such as

Vice President Joe Biden: that the coalition's recent string of successes has significantly weakened ISIL. In other words, Al Qaeda may assess that the challenge posed by ISIL will recede sooner rather than later. If the Islamic State loses the city of Mosul, many jihadists may begin to question whether it had ever succeeded in establishing a caliphate in the first place. Despite the risks, such a gambit by Al Qaeda could pay off. After all, this move would bank on its adversaries failing to understand Al Qaeda's subtle and complex strategy—and many analysts charged with understanding the group have displayed an overarching eagerness to declare its incapacity.

So whose strategy is more likely to succeed? The competition between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State will be fierce, and many unexpected developments could occur. They could be vying for supremacy over the global jihadist movement for years. However, Al Qaeda is better positioned for the long term, while it's not clear that the Islamic State is prepared for a metaphorical rainy day. Al Qaeda has survived an onslaught by the world's sole superpower that has lasted a decade and a half, and it isn't clear that the Islamic State poses the mortal challenge that some commentators believe. However, the Islamic State's rise poses a challenge to Al Qaeda that, if correctly exploited, could severely weaken the organization that Osama bin Laden unleashed.

This is why it is so essential that we understand what the shape of the Al Qaeda network is, instead of analyzing the group based on what we would like it to be. The United States has a great deal of opportunity to exploit the cleavages between the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, but if we fail to understand the two organizations' strengths, weaknesses and strategic and tactical postures, the jihadist movement may emerge from this period of competition stronger than before.