

Al-Qaeda Disaffiliates with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

by [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Feb 3, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



Brief Analysis

The recent action highlights a central element in the battle for the global jihadist movement's future -- and could have important implications in the fight for Syria.

On the evening of February 2, al-Qaeda's general command released a statement disavowing itself from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS): "ISIS is not a branch of the Qaidat al-Jihad [al-Qaeda's official name] group, we have no organizational relationship with it, and the group is not responsible for its actions." This is the first time in al-Qaeda's history that the group has publicly disaffiliated itself with a group bearing its name -- even though ISIS has not used the name "al-Qaeda" since 2006. While it remains too early to know its effect in the Syrian context, the statement is significant nonetheless -- both historically and for what it means for the broader global jihadist movement.

Al-Qaeda's repudiation of ISIS is highly reminiscent of the withdrawal of support by the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Abu Qatada al-Filistini, and Abu Musab al-Suri from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in 1996 during the Algerian civil war. Usama bin Laden himself was highly skeptical of the GIA when it denied his request to set up training camps in Algeria, and he worried that the group had a troublesome ideology. Bin Laden even played a role in the creation of a less radical Algerian splinter entity known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 1998, which changed its name to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2007.

Similar to the current situation in Syria, the GIA began confronting other Islamists instead of fighting the Algerian regime. Most notably, the GIA killed Muhammad Said and Abdelrazak Redjam, leaders of the branch of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) that merged with the GIA in 1994, as well as killing Libyan volunteers from the LIFG. Like the GIA, ISIS's overuse of *takfir* (pronouncing a Muslim an infidel) and subsequent liquidation of enemies by any means has been a source of intense grievance from other Syrian rebel groups, as has ISIS's unwillingness to submit to an

independent sharia court and its belief that it is a sovereign state in liberated territory. Acting on this belief, ISIS has extrajudicially killed, imprisoned, and punished other rebels and civilians in northern Syria.

The lessons of Algeria played an important role when al-Qaeda first took umbrage at excesses by al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers (better known as AQI and one of ISIS's earlier names) in Iraq during the last decade, when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was still the leader. One of the letters al-Qaeda sent in 2005 to Zarqawi was from Atiyah Allah Abd al-Rahman al-Libi, one of the Libyans who went to Algeria and survived any onslaught from the GIA. The letter advised Zarqawi not to be so brutal and to focus the group's efforts on the American forces. Libi's lesson from the Algerian experience centered on the importance of not shedding innocent Sunni Muslim blood and the consequences it could create.

Since then, al-Qaeda's senior leadership in Pakistan has implored its branches to refrain from attacking Sunni Muslim civilians and to focus rather on security and military personnel and their infrastructure. And on the whole, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen and Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda's preferred branch in Syria) have stuck to this framework, even though there has been some collateral damage. ISIS has been the exception.

While al-Qaeda's announcement officially ends an imperfect relationship that began in 2004, signs of a rift date back to May 2013. Following ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's April 2013 announcement of the extension of the Islamic state into Syria, Ayman al-Zawahiri tried and failed to nullify Baghdadi's power play, calling for ISIS to stay in Iraq and allow Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) to be the preferred actor in Syria. In defiance, Baghdadi released an audio message stating ISIS would remain in Syria and would not adhere to a division based on the Sykes-Picot deal from World War I.

The rift between al-Qaeda/JN and ISIS at first consisted mainly of sniping between leaders. The open warfare, though, between the rebels -- most specifically the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF), Jaish al-Mujahedin (JM), and the Islamic Front (IF) -- and ISIS since early January 2014 has widened the gap and was likely the main reason al-Qaeda finally let ISIS loose. While JN has, on the whole, stayed out of the rebel infighting, al-Qaeda's announcement could create a scenario in which war between the two is more likely, especially since one of JN's senior clerics, Sultan bin Issa al-Atawi, called for members of ISIS to join JN. The al-Qaeda statement even warns about the huge responsibility that has fallen upon it over resolving the *fitna* (discord).

Although ostracized and isolated, ISIS is neither down nor out. The group has been quite resilient in the face of the onslaught against it in northern Syria. While the initial surprise attack by the SRF, JM, and IF dealt it setbacks, ISIS has been able to come back and retake territory. Part of this is a result of working out ceasefires, the unwillingness of some rebel factions or fighters to take up arms against ISIS, and the gaining of bayat (pledges of allegiance) from a number of battalions, fighters, and tribal clans. ISIS also has independent streams of funding and logistics, reducing the impact of getting cut off from al-Qaeda.

Further, while al-Qaeda, JN, and key religious scholars of the global jihadist community like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatadah al-Filistini have renounced ISIS, others have maintained support for the group, including Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdisi (Egypt), Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia), Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, Abu Sad al-Amili, and a number of grassroots activists. ISIS's continued survival in the face of existential threats could end up undermining al-Qaeda militarily and organizationally. One immediate consequence is that al-Qaeda no longer has an official organizational presence in Iraq.

This all highlights the current struggle and competition for the future of the global jihadist movement. Al-Qaeda's unified movement under its central command post-9/11 appears more of an anomaly than the multipolar jihadosphere observers have seen in the late 1980s, 1990s, and in the era following the Arab uprisings.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](/policy-analysis/iraq)

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](/policy-analysis/north-africa)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)