

How Al-Qaeda and Islamic State differ in pursuit of common goal: strengths and weaknesses

16 Mar 2015 IHS Economics and Country Risk

KEY JUDGMENT

The Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Salafist groups, and even the Muslim Brotherhood all seek the same ultimate goal of re-establishing the historical Islamic Caliphate to govern all Muslim lands, inspired by the example of the first four successors to the Prophet Mohammad. While groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood follow primarily peaceful means to establish an Islamic state through the ballot box, for militant Islamist groups such an objective is pursued through jihad. However, among jihadist groups such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, there are significant differences over the preconditions required and the strategies to follow to achieve the common goal.

IHS assesses that Al-Qaeda's strategy is likely to be more successful in the long term than the Islamic State's, not least because the Islamic State's assumption of a quasi-state status, and the consequent requirement to hold territory, makes it more vulnerable to opposing states' use of conventional military force, particularly air power.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State share the same ultimate goal of re-establishing the historical Islamic Caliphate, but they differ over the strategies needed to achieve the same end. While Al-Qaeda follows a population-focused approach and sees the overthrow of Arab governments as a precondition for the Caliphate, the Islamic State does not envisage specific conditions beyond consolidation of power and expansion of control over defined territory.**
 - **For the Islamic State, territorial expansion of the Caliphate is seen as complementary to consolidation of power. Expansion is seen as bringing the benefit of greater resources and revenue and of provoking a Western military response that drains its strength. Militarily, the requirement of the Islamic State's narrative to capture and hold territory makes it easier for opposing states to target the group with conventional military force. By contrast, Al-Qaeda's population-focused approach, building on grassroots radicalisation, is far more difficult to challenge militarily.**
 - **The Islamic State's media strategy uses multi-media propaganda aimed at recruiting supporters and intimidating enemies. By contrast, Al-Qaeda's media strategy is low key and more reliant on addresses by the leadership, reflecting its efforts to embed itself in local social fabrics with the aim of radicalisation.**
 - **Beyond Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State's strategy to seize territory and impose its dominance on groups opposing its rule is likely to be militarily challenged by state and non-state actors alike and constrained by logistical obstacles. By contrast, Al-Qaeda's population-focused strategy has more space to flourish unchallenged.**
 - **Despite the Islamic State's appeal to would-be young jihadists attracted by its military successes, Al-Qaeda maintains much more legitimacy across North Africa and the Middle East. Its gradual approach of radicalising populations and fighters represents a greater threat in the long term than the Islamic State's geographical reach.**
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DETAILED ANALYSIS

The Caliphate and its place in political and militant Islamism

The concept of a Caliphate, sought by all shades of Islamists, is vague and only half-articulated, reflecting an idealised hazy view of Islamic history. Only the Islamic State claims to have a working model for others to follow, based on the Caliphate it proclaimed in June 2014.

Early Islamic political thinking did not develop a concept of nation state and, in the Middle East and North Africa, nation states were largely imposed by colonial powers as the Ottoman Empire was broken up in the early part of the 20th century. The differing trends of political Islam are all seeking the re-establishment of what they see as a glorious past, in which the historical Caliphate was a global and borderless power ruling over the whole Muslim community (Umma).

The term 'Caliphate' (khilafa) is derived from the word 'Caliph' (successor), referring to those who ruled as successors to the Prophet Mohammad. The Caliphate encompassed the territories occupied by Muslims and historically the central authority ebbed and waned, depending on the political skills and leadership of the ruler and of the governors of provinces (wilayat; singular, wilaya). In jihadist terminology, 'Caliphate' and 'Islamic state' are essentially used as synonymous terms.

The Islamist groups' vision of what a Caliphate should look like today is vague. They agree on the abolition of borders between Muslim lands, governance in accordance with sharia, particularly in matters of criminal law and family affairs, distributing some charity to the needy, and providing basic services. These groups believe that allowing Muslims to become a true Umma again, through abolishing nation-state boundaries, will automatically lead to Muslim global dominance.

In contrast to both Salafists and other jihadists, the Islamic State has developed what it sees as a clear model on how a Caliphate should work and rule. The model places emphasis on early establishment of the Caliphate by use of force and this lies at the core of the group's overall strategy.

Salafists and jihadists differ over the means to achieve the same desired end: Salafists emphasise proselytisation, while classical jihadists place more reliance on the use of force, principally to overthrow 'apostate' governments.

The idea of the Caliphate as an ideal Islamic state ruling the whole Umma according to the principles of sharia (Islamic law), and led by a pious Muslim descendent of the Prophet Mohammad, is shared by Salafists and jihadists alike. The main difference, which essentially distinguishes political from militant Islamists, lies in the means selected to achieve this goal. To political Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists other than Salafist jihadists, the Umma has to be prepared and educated through a constant and long process of proselytisation (dawa) before the ideal Islamic state can be founded. This priority focus on dawa postpones any action related to state building to an indefinite point in the future, as today's Muslim societies are viewed as not yet ready for a true Caliphate. For jihadists, the establishment of the Caliphate has a more immediate time frame, and it requires the use of force to overthrow all 'apostate' governments ruling the Muslim world as the necessary precondition for its establishment.

Figure 1: A comparison of Islamist goals, policy on sharia, and strategies

Islamist group	Salafists (defined as Sunni Muslims who claim to emulate the first generations of Muslims)	Muslim Brotherhood	Jihadists: Al-Qaeda	Jihadists: Islamic State
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Ultimate goal	Re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate	Re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate	Re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate	Re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate
Policy on application of sharia	Apply its moral precepts in personal life, postpone applying it on the state level until Islamic state is built	Apply its moral precepts in personal life as much as possible, postpone applying it on state level until Islamic state is built	Apply its moral and legislative precepts in personal life now, apply family law, criminal law, and other legislation gradually	Apply the most scripturalistic form now, in personal life, family law, criminal law, and other legislation on the state level
Strategy	Proselytisation (dawa) and sometimes elections	Dawa and elections	Dawa and jihad almost equal	Jihad takes precedence over dawa

Salafist and pro-Al-Qaeda jihadists accept the concept of declaration of a Caliphate but criticise the Islamic State's unilateral declaration as premature and invalid, given its perceived failure to follow the correct process. In contrast, the Islamic State sees its de-facto control of territory as sufficient to provide its own legitimacy.

Salafist figures, pro-Al-Qaeda jihadist ideologues and groups, and the Pakistan-based Al-Qaeda leadership have all refused to recognise the Islamic State's Caliphate. Some Salafists dismiss the Islamic State altogether, accusing the group of being the modern example of the khawarij (those who are so extreme that they are outside Islam, referring to a group that emerged 40 years after Mohammad's death and tried to assassinate both claimants to the Caliphate). Core Al-Qaeda has opposed the Islamic State's challenge to its authority and the lack of consultation with its leadership. However, both Salafist and Al-Qaeda opponents of the Islamic State do not fundamentally reject the classical Islamic concepts used by the Islamic State to legitimise its Caliphate, but only its perceived incorrect application. For instance, Al-Qaeda and classic jihadists do not consider it permissible to declare a Caliphate before achieving full political capability (al-tamkin al-kamil), namely the ability to gather a Muslim community (umma) in a defined territory and provide provision for its security. They do not consider the Islamic State as having such a capability over a sufficiently large proportion of the umma. In contrast, for the Islamic State, the control it exerts over large areas of Syria and Iraq is in itself sufficient to legitimise the proclamation of the Caliphate, despite Al-Qaeda's refutation.

Similarly, the Islamic State justifies its proclamation of the Caliph as having been legally sanctioned by a council of Islamic scholars known as "the people who loosen and bind" (ahl al-hall wa-l-aqd). For their part, Salafist and mainstream jihadists do not reject the concept of a council proclaiming the Caliph (given that this is the procedure established by the medieval treatise on the Caliphate). They only oppose the fact that the group which declared Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to be the Caliph Ibrahim consisted of a too small and unrepresentative number of scholars.

Al-Qaeda and affiliates: global strategy

Core Al-Qaeda's strategic priority, as the "vanguard" of a global jihadist movement, is radicalisation of Muslim populations, working with other Muslims to overthrow apostate governments.

Although the desired goal of an Islamic state is the same for both political and militant Islamists, there are differences in the strategies adopted to achieve it, even among jihadists. For Al-Qaeda, popular support is a prerequisite for establishing an ideal and functioning Islamic state. This means that the Sunni community as a whole has to be radicalised before the Caliphate can be established.

Al-Qaeda, first under Osama bin Laden and more recently Ayman al-Zawahiri, has always considered itself as the "vanguard" of an anti-establishment and borderless jihadist global movement, whose actions would ultimately "awaken" the Sunni masses against their "unjust" Arab rulers – this thinking follows a similar line to Leninist revolutionary doctrine. This process of "awakening" avoids the risk of alienating potential sympathisers by ill-treatment of Sunni Muslims and seeks to maintain good relations with other jihadist groups, Islamic movements,

religious scholars, and the Muslims in general, even in the event of disagreement. This approach is evident in Syria, where the only official Al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, has avoided governing on its own, instead typically working through establishing sharia councils in which a number of Sunni opposition groups are represented. In this political framework, the group maintains a position of first among equals, ensuring that no action can be taken against it and that governance complies with sharia.

Core Al-Qaeda's emphasis on attacking the "far enemy" is aimed at weakening the "near enemy" by wearing down apostate governments' "crusader" supporters.

Concurrent with its emphasis on radicalisation, core Al-Qaeda's policy of attacking Western countries and their interests and military presence in the Muslim world serves the long-term objective of the Caliphate, on the basis that it will eventually force the West to stop supporting apostate Arab regimes. The role of its regional affiliates, as core Al-Qaeda sees it, is to rally the population behind them, overthrow local regimes (the "near enemy") and to mount attacks against the West (the "far enemy"). Core Al-Qaeda's priority is the far enemy, as indicated by Bin Laden's statements criticising its local affiliates' "obsession with their local struggles", which reflected the divergence in priorities between the group and its regional affiliates. This is why the Caliphate is not mentioned in Al-Qaeda's founding statements, and why Bin Laden described the group's mission as "fighting the Crusaders, while waiting and preparing the way for the Caliphate". This is also why Bin Laden criticised Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), its closest affiliate, for wanting to declare an Islamic state in Yemen in 2011, when core Al-Qaeda considered the necessary conditions were not yet in place.

In addition to striking at the far enemy's home bases, Bin Laden sought to provoke Western military intervention against the mujahedeen, forcing the West to deploy ground forces that could then be worn down, in order to ensure that these forces could not be used against a Caliphate once one was established.

Islamic State global strategy: "Remaining" through domination and "expansion" by fostering chaos

Islamic State sees itself as emulating the Prophet Mohammad's example, building up a small community of faithful followers, seizing a territory and then expanding it by force of arms.

The Islamic State's approach claims to follow the example of the Prophet Mohammad, who established the first Islamic state with the small group of followers who migrated (the hijra) to the provincial town of Madina before expanding into the rest of Arabia, paving the way for his successors to expand the territories of the Caliphate from China to Spain. This is evident in the group's insistence that it is building a Caliphate "on the path of the Prophet" (khilafa 'ala minhaj al-nubuwwa).

According to the Islamic State's narrative, as articulated in the August 2014 third issue of its online magazine Dabiq (the Syrian location of a supposed end-of-time battle between Muslims and unbelievers), the establishment of the Caliphate in 2014 represented the culmination of multi-phase strategy initiated in 2003 by its then leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. According to the Islamic State, this path began with the hijrah of the mujahedeen to a land with a weak central authority (in this case the Iraqi province of al-Anbar), as Mohammad and his followers had done, "to use it as a base where a jama'ah (organisation) could form, recruit and train members". The al-Zarqawi group then "strived to create as much chaos as possible" using attacks referred as nikayah (focusing on causing the enemy death, injury, and damage). These two actions were meant to emulate Mohammad, particularly his raids against his enemies poorly protected caravans to keep them off balance. As the Islamic State articulated in Dabiq, this was to "prevent any taghut (tyrant) regime from ever achieving a degree of stability" that would enable it to govern and use its security apparatus to "crush any Islamic movement". In addition, the Islamic State claims, al-Zarqawi tried "to force every apostate group present in Iraq into all-out war with his group". (Despite the group's claim, in practice its early approach was a strategy combined both polarisation and building alliances. The Islamic State in Iraq group, established in 2006 and precursor of al-Baghdadi's group, was an umbrella jihadist organisation made up of several Iraqi insurgent Sunni and tribal groups.) After having destabilised the regime, the final phases of the strategy included, according to Dabiq, a

steady campaign of “more complex attacks on a larger scale”, referred to as operations of "tamkin", which were meant to "pave the way for the claiming of territory". All this, the Islamic State concludes, led to the gradual collapse of any authority in Iraq followed by the “mujahedeen quickly entering the vacuum left to announce and establish the Caliphate”.

Despite the group's claim of "following the path of the Prophet", the strategy of seizing territory and retaining power through domination closely matches the one set out by contemporary jihadist strategist Abu Bakr Naji.

The Islamic State's current stated objective is to consolidate the fundamentals of the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq and to expand its borders. According to the Islamic State's vision, achieving the first goal again requires following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, "using military force to defeat those who resist the establishment of the Caliphate". Following this reasoning, the Islamic State considers it permissible to use its military force against a broad range of adversaries, not only foreigners and Shia Muslims, but also Sunni Muslims opposing its rule, or even those failing passively to accept Islamic State's authority. This is especially evident in Syria, where the Islamic State has tried to dominate rival Sunni groups, and Iraq, where the group is engaged in a constant effort to exacerbate the ongoing Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict into a civil war. This approach has enabled the Islamic State to expand its territory into new areas, where the imposition of its own set of rules, the enforced co-optation of local groups, and the provision of some form of local governance are typically the first steps undertaken to consolidate its control. At the same time, and particularly in Syria, this focus on seizing territory and governing, rather than on fighting the Syrian army, has created a perception among other Syrian rebel groups that the Islamic State is, while militarily effective, highly opportunistic, and more interested in pursuing its own agenda than in the overthrow of Syria's President Assad.

The Islamic State's strategy seems to follow several aspects of a book entitled "The Management of Savagery", a jihadist text by Islamist strategist Abu Bakr Naji that proposes a clear plan for how a group of Muslim militants could violently seize land and establish their own self-governing Islamic state. The book, posted on the Internet in 2004, has been cited by several established jihadist groups, including AQAP and al-Shabab, and it remains one of the books most distributed through jihadists' associated media. Although the Islamic State has not openly quoted the "Management of Savagery" in its pamphlets, the group's focus on seizing and governing territory, its use of violence against a broad range of adversaries in order to "shock and deter" and its efforts to polarise Muslim societies between "hypocrites", moderate Muslims, and the "real believers" reflect Naji's proposed strategy.

The Islamic State's broader objective is to expand the borders of its Caliphate. According to the group's narrative, the strategy it has used in Iraq can be replicated to establish wilayat (provinces) elsewhere.

The geographical expansion of the Caliphate is not seen by Islamic State as subordinate to its consolidation of power, but rather the two lines of action are viewed as complementary. The thinking is that the more the Caliphate expands, the greater the resources it acquires, and the more it can consolidate control of its core areas. In his 2014 speech in Mosul on the occasion of the start of the holy month of Ramadan, the Islamic State's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, claimed that "if the soldiers of the Islamic State remain united and commit themselves to being the guardians of religion" they would "conquer Rome" He stated that the group's objective was to forcibly reclaim “all the places where Muslims' rights have been usurped”, namely China, India, Palestine, Somalia, Arabian Peninsula, Iran, Pakistan, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco.

Although Islamic State's members recognise that such an objective will require time and perseverance to achieve, the group is urging jihadist groups to follow its model of creating chaos, in order to establish themselves elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. Specifically, in the August 2014 issue of its Dabiq magazine, the Islamic State says that in locations, including Yemen, the Sinai peninsula, Libya, as well as parts of Tunisia and Algeria, there are areas where a group of militants can form, recruit members, and train them. Even if the areas concerned are not places with weak or non-existent governance, the Islamic State's strategy is that "the place can be formed through a long campaign of nikayah attack carried out by underground mujahedeen cells", which

would compel "apostate forces to partially withdraw from rural territory and regroup in major urban regions". The spreading of chaos, the Islamic State concludes, will eventually destabilise the "near enemy" regime and allow the jama'ah to fill the vacuum by starting to develop a full-fledged state and continuing expansion into territory still under the regime's control. Again, the strategy of expanding territorial control by disseminating chaos and promoting sectarian violence complies with the model proposed in Naji's book.

Differing military strategies adopted by Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State in Syria.

The divergences in approaches between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda are also evident in the differences in their military strategies in Syria. The Islamic State places emphasis on controlling strategic hubs and routes in a largely desert region, preserving its freedom of manoeuvre.

As evidenced by the group's presence along key transportation nodes in Syria and in Libya, the Islamic State's strategy is to control territory in the Arab Sunni heartland that is sparsely populated, but logistically important, to its enemies. As has happened in the Euphrates valley, the group then denies its enemies freedom of movement, and uses its superior freedom of manoeuvre to strike its enemies opportunistically, gradually wearing down their will to fight. The group uses its tight operational control and its agility to give ground when it cannot win, and to advance on where its enemies are weak. The group can then use its intelligence network to make its military tactics highly opportunistic and unpredictable. An example of this strategy is the group's attempts to control the roads between Mosul and Aleppo. Doing so allows the group to redeploy forces as necessary between two key cities, without being sucked into fighting for them, while governing a sparsely populated heartland. The small size of the population means that the group does not need to commit very large resources to internal policing and that the provision of services to the local population is a relatively easy challenge.

In contrast, Al-Qaeda's affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, has spread thinly across Syria, building alliances and making its co-operation essential to the success of the insurgent campaign against Assad's forces.

By contrast, Jabhat al-Nusra has made itself an indispensable force for the opposition. It has shared its expertise in making large improvised explosive devices (IEDs), deployed suicide bombers in support of opposition offensives, and provided capability that regularly tips the balance in major operations, such as the attack on the Wadi al-Daif base in Idlib in December 2014, the offensive on Taftanaz airbase in early 2013, and the defence of Aleppo against the government's ongoing offensive.

Also unlike Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra has spread itself thinly across Syria, until recently avoiding taking control of territory on its own. Data collated using IHS Conflict Monitor methodology shows only 10 examples in which Jabhat al-Nusra expelled an insurgent group from territory (all in late 2014), 34 instances in which it expelled the Islamic State from territory (mostly early in 2014), and 83 instances in which it expelled the Syrian army or allied forces. Therefore, it has created an image of being committed to toppling Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, and of being a genuine ally of the opposition. This has paid dividends in terms of its relations with other groups and, more broadly, in terms of public perception. Similarly, AQAP's strategy in Yemen has been heavily focused in forging alliances with local Sunni and Salafist tribes, portraying itself as the only fighting force able to stop the territorial advances of the Shia-Zaydi Houthi movement. This has allowed AQAP to expand its recruitment base and extend its operations in traditional Sunni tribal heartlands.

Differing information strategies adopted by Al-Qaeda and Islamic State.

The Islamic State's information strategy is aimed at recruiting, building a hierarchical organisation and intimidating its enemies. In contrast, Al-Qaeda's strategy does not seek to grow the movement, but rather to build a decentralised but highly secretive structure that radicalises the population with which it engages.

The Islamic State is certainly more appealing than Al-Qaeda to the younger generations of jihadists and foreign fighters keen to join jihad. The deliberately horrific violence employed by the group is attractive to many, and is also bringing it media and political attention. Central to this effort is the Islamic State media strategy, which, in contrast to that of Al-Qaeda, which uses videos to broadcast 'talking-head' speeches by the leadership, relies heavily on a very professional combination of high-definition images and videos publicising both its brutal violence and its social outreach initiatives, spread on the Internet by a cohesive network of supporters on social media. Much of this propaganda is published in Western languages, which serves the objective of reaching a broad audience, both to intimidate its enemies and to recruit jihadist fighters from Western countries.

In contrast, the example of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria illustrates the very different information strategy employed by an Al-Qaeda affiliate. The group's strategy does not aim at attracting fighters from other groups. Its military organisation relies on maintaining a highly mobile elite formation that would be hindered, rather than helped, by greater numbers. This explains the far quieter media approach of Jabhat al-Nusra. The group does not issue many statements, although it has a centralised and consistent presence on Twitter, mainly in Arabic. The main focus of its propaganda is both on publicising its military successes against the Syrian army, which aims at fostering its image as the real fighting force to defend the Muslims, and on showing how its social outreach programme for the Syrian population is implemented to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian population, rather than to attract consensus, as done by the Islamic State. As such, Jabhat al-Nusra does not use public displays of brutal violence against Sunni Muslims because its aim is not to cow the population into submission. Instead, it is seeking to encourage a radicalised population to govern itself by sharia, so becoming a willing host population for mujahedeen.

Conclusions

Despite the Islamic State's strong appeal among the younger generations of would-be jihadists, the low-key radicalisation approach proposed by Al-Qaeda enjoys much more appeal across North Africa and the Middle East. In the long term, Al-Qaeda-inspired groups are likely to be in a far stronger position to attract sympathisers in other conflict areas in the region.

The Islamic State continues to attract strong critics from moderate Muslims and jihadists alike for its use of horrific violence against a range of enemies that Islamic State's critics perceive as unnecessarily large, and for its attempt to command and dominate, or exclude, rival groups. By contrast Al-Qaeda, especially through Jabhat al-Nusra, has preserved and reinforced its image as being engaged in the real fight to defend the Muslim community. In the long run, this places Al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra in a better position to win 'hearts and minds' among moderate Muslims and adherents to its world view in the region.

Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, are far more likely to be viewed by local populations as forces for stability, social justice, and good governance, making them far more attractive to Islamist moderates and businesses seeking to challenge their governments in countries such as Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, the strategy of Jabhat al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda to radicalise fighters and populations, rather than the draconian imposition of the group's interpretation of sharia, has more potential to succeed in other conflict areas in the region, and is more difficult to counter by states using conventional military force. Although Al-Qaeda's emphasis on the long-term nature of the struggle to establish its Caliphate has been challenged by the more immediate gains of the Islamic State, the group retains the enduring capacity to attract a larger

spectrum of supporters and the ability to use its regional affiliates in a manner that protects it from setbacks in any particular theatre of operations.

Beyond Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State's strategy to seize territory and impose its dominance on groups opposing its rule is likely to be militarily contained by both state and non-state actors and constrained by logistical obstacles. By contrast, Al-Qaeda's population-focused strategy has more space to flourish unchallenged.

The strategy of seizing territory through chaos and a sustained campaign of militant attacks against security and government assets, as proposed by the Islamic State, is highly unlikely to succeed in those countries, such as Saudi Arabia or Jordan, with intelligence services with a track record of penetrating militant groups, or those with effective special forces and rapid-response capabilities, such as Algeria.

Even in a country such as Libya, where there is no central government authority and the strategy of the local Islamic State affiliate of disseminating chaos and seizing territory is proving successful, the existence of competing militant and tribal actors opposing Islamic State as an entity considered external to the country's dynamics is likely to challenge the Islamic State's geographical expansion.

In Egypt, the Islamic State's territorial expansion strategy is heavily focused on rural and sparsely populated areas in the Sinai Peninsula. Although the Sinai favours a protracted insurgency against Egyptian security forces, large deployments of concentrations of jihadist fighters, on a scale seen in Syria and Iraq, would be highly vulnerable to airstrikes.

This key vulnerability in the Islamic State strategy is evident in Iraq, where the US-led air campaign has largely halted the Islamic State's advances. Nevertheless, the Iraqi government would need to reach a lasting political agreement with the Sunni community before it can hope to retake and control key population centres in Anbar, Nineveh, and Salaheddine, regardless of coalition air support. Even given this currently unlikely scenario, Islamic State would have to be driven out of Mosul and Raqqa, and denied de-facto control of its current heartland, requiring a solution to the Syrian conflict, before it would be likely to suffer lasting damage. The fact that much of the military effort needed to achieve this goal would have to come from external players, currently the US-led coalition and Iran, would enable Islamic State to sustain its narrative and revert to a guerrilla campaign.

By contrast, Al-Qaeda's population-focused strategy and its effort to radicalise fighters and populations, rather than abruptly imposing a new set of laws, has more potential to succeed in densely populated areas. For instance, we are seeing in Egypt the emergence of small radical groups in urban centres which are trying to attract and radicalise a growing number of secular youth. Their messages use secular themes interspersed with highly charged religious language, depicting the Egyptian government as "apostate", advocating "martyrdom", attacking the "secular dictatorship" and calling for "attacks on Zionists". The state's frequent use of lethal force against anti-government protesters is likely to foster the growing radicalisation of this youth, especially within the Islamist camp. This has the potential to expand the pool of potential recruits for more militant groups, especially those following Al-Qaeda's population-focused strategy and primarily operating in urban areas.