

SICHERHEITSPOLITIK-BLOG FOKUS



JANUSZ BIENE • MARTIN SCHMETZ

KALIFAT DES TERRORS

INTERDISZIPLINÄRE PERSPEKTIVEN
AUF DEN ISLAMISCHEN STAAT

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Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf den Islamischen Staat

Aus der Reihe:
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INTERDISZIPLINÄRE PERSPEKTIVEN AUF DEN ISLAMISCHEN STAAT

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(Hrsg.)



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Inhalt

Einleitung <i>Janusz Biene und Martin Schmetz</i>	1
Das Dabiq-Magazin als Rekrutierungswerkzeug des IS <i>Daniel H. Heinke und Hazim Fouad</i>	7
Der Islamische Staat und die Islamisierung des Abendlandes <i>Christoph Günther</i>	13
ISIS' Politics of Sex <i>Mathieu Guidère</i>	19
From Resistance to Rule: Islamic State's Order of Violence <i>Holger Marcks</i>	25
ISIS vs. al-Qaeda: The struggle for the soul of the jihadist movement <i>Guido Steinberg</i>	31
Division of the global jihadi movement: chance or threat? <i>Andreas Armbrorst</i>	37
Der Islamische Staat in Nordafrika: Expansion zwischen Wunsch und Wirklichkeit <i>Florian Peil</i>	43
Islamic State and Boko Haram: How dangerous is the partnership? <i>Dr. Yan St-Pierre</i>	49
Zwischen Paranoia & Propaganda: Dschihadistische Gruppierungen und ihre IT-Sicherheit <i>Martin Schmetz</i>	55
Vergesst Assad <i>Dr. Bente Scheller</i>	63
How to deal with IS? Lessons Learned from Afghanistan <i>Thomas Müller</i>	67

Die guten Bösen? Mit der Islamischen Republik gegen den Islamischen Staat <i>Thomas von der Osten-Sacken</i>	71
Returning from the IS: Experiences from the counseling service HAYAT-Germany <i>Julia Berczyk</i>	77
Muslim Critique of IS Ideology <i>Hazim Fouad</i>	85
Im Netz gegen Dschihadismus: Prävention mittels sozialer Medien <i>Patrick Möller</i>	89
Autoren	95

Division of the global jihadi movement: chance or threat?

Andreas Armborst

One element of US counter-terrorism strategies is »reducing terrorist group cohesion«, as the RAND Corporation recommends in one of its reports¹. The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC) puts these recommendations into action. Reports like »Cracks in the Foundation«², »Dysfunction and Decline«³ or »Harmony and Disharmony«⁴ vividly depict the internal disagreement and disunity between al-Qaeda central (AQ) and its regional affiliates, in particular AQ in Iraq (AQI). Besides providing rare and meaningful insights into life of the global jihadi movement, they also serve the purpose of deliberately amplifying the very same trend they describe: disunity.

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- 1 Davis, Paul K., Kim Cragin, Darcy Noricks, Todd C. Helmus, Christopher Paul, Claude Berrebi, Brian A. Jackson, Gage Gvineria, Michael Egner and Benjamin Bahney. Social Science for Counterterrorism (2009): Putting the Pieces Together. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, in: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG849>, last accessed 22.06.2015.
 - 2 Brown, Vahin (2007): Cracks in the Foundation. Leadership Schisms in al-Qa'ida from 1989-2006, in: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/cracks-in-the-foundation-leadership-schisms-in-al-qaida-from-1989-2006>, last accessed 22.06.2015.
 - 3 Fishman, Brian (2009): Dysfunction and Decline. Lessons Learned From Inside Al-Qa'ida in Iraq, in: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/dysfunction-and-decline-lessons-learned-from-inside-al-qaida-in-iraq>; 22.06.2015.
 - 4 Forrest, J.F./Brachman, J./Felter, J. (2006): Harmony and Disharmony Exploiting al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities. Combating Terrorism Center. West Point.

Indeed, early on AQ central was on uneasy terms with AQI because its former *emir*, Abu Mus'ab az-Zarqawi, mainly followed his own agenda in Iraq often disregarding recommendations by bin Laden and Zawahiri. AQI's indiscriminate *takfiri* tactics against Iraq's Shia population caused a loss of reputation for the entire al-Qaeda group. Albeit unhappy about Zarqawi's rampage, AQ's leadership remained silent about the issue in public, presumably because it feared that signs of disunity could cause further bad press. AQ's central command even stomached the group's name change from AQI into The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in October 2006. But despite this act of accommodation, the rifts between AQ and ISI deepened further.

Thus, adding fuel to such jihadist quarrels was a suitable strategy back in 2006. US counter-terrorism experts began to exploit ideological and organizational weaknesses by »generating smarter, more effective ways to impede its growth and nurture the means for its eventual disintegration«⁵. To this end, state-funded experts analyzed internal documents from al-Qaeda, looking for signs of organizational, personal or ideological discord. Indeed, these reports found their targets: RAND and CTC reports were among the documents found in Bin Laden's »prison-hideout«⁶ in Abbottabad.⁷

The deliberate efforts to create further disunity apparently struck a nerve, as prominent AQ speakers, such as Abu Yahya

5 Forrest, J.F./Brachman, J./Felter, J. (2006): Harmony and Disharmony Exploiting al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities. Combating Terrorism Center. West Point, 3.

6 According to an investigation of Seymour Hersh, the Pakistani Intelligence Service (ISI) held bin Laden captive in Abbottabad. The White House disclaims this version. See Hersh, Simon (2015): The killing of Osama bin Laden. London Review of books 37(10), 3-12, in: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n10/seymour-m-hersh/the-killing-of-osama-bin-laden>, last accessed 18.07.2015.

7 See declassified material published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2015): Bin Laden's bookshelf, in: <http://www.dni.gov/index.php/resources/bin-laden-bookshelf?start=8>, last accessed 18.07.2015.

al-Libi and Ayman az-Zawahiri, repeatedly felt a need to comment publicly on reports published by the CTC.⁸ In an As-Sahab video statement published on September 9, 2007, Al-Libi openly admitted: »Yes, the ideological war might have an effect on some individuals and perhaps groups, and might cause some confusion and disarray in one place or another«.

It is difficult to tell whether the strategic messages of the CTC had any impact other than provoking a public reaction from AQ leaders. Equally challenging, however, is the question of whether trying to divide the global jihadi movement was a good idea at all. What would be the difference if ISI broke away from al-Qaeda in 2006 rather than in 2014, when Zawahiri announced publicly that »ISIS [the successor of ISI; A.A.] is not a branch of AQ and we have no organizational relationship with it«?⁹

The speculative answer to this question is that it would have made a difference in the most critical time when the Islamic States struggled for legitimate leadership in Iraq. When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was assigned as emir of the group in 2010 ISI was almost defeated by the coalition of US forces and the Sunni tribal leaders of the Anbar province. In this desperate situation the group resorted to a seemingly contradictory recruitment strategy: it utilized its ideological assets and salafi reputation to recruit new followers among the Sunni population. But at the same time it opened the organization to less pious individuals, namely ex-Baathists: »revolutionary Islamist credentials were no longer essential – if you could recite a few lines of the Qur'an and grow a beard, you

8 See, for instance, the As-Sahab video statement by Ayman az-Zawahiri from May, 4th 2007.

9 Van Ostaeyen, Pieter (2014): al-Qaeda disavows ISIS in Syria, in: <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/02/03/al-qaedas-disavows-isis-in-syria/>, last accessed 18.07.2015.

could sign up<<, a former member of ISI remembers.¹⁰ Camp Bucca and other prisons were used as recruitment centers and insurgent universities. The political players among the new recruits did not necessarily believe in the salafi ideology, but they understood that the ideology could be exploited to gain power.

If, at this time, al-Qaeda central had expelled ISI, the recruitment of Iraqi and foreign fighters would have been much more difficult for two reasons: potential recruits with religious ambitions would have been reluctant to join a group that is at odds with its own spiritual leaders, such as Zawahiri and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. And this in turn would have prevented the less pious political players from investing their resources in an organization that lacks ideological integrity and legitimacy among its core members.

In 2014 the situation was quite different. Ideological integrity is not as important for ISI as it was in 2010. Through the unfortunate coincidence of the Syrian civil war, the US troop withdrawal, and anti-Sunni politics in Iraq, ISI saw a resurgence not because but despite of its ideological integrity. The same salafi doctrine that helped ISI gain credibility and legitimacy all of a sudden impeded its strategic maneuverability. Among Islamist strategists there is a long lasting debate on how to weight doctrinal imperatives vis-a-vis strategic imperatives and opportunities.¹¹ Al-Qaeda tends to promote the former at the expenses of the latter, for ISI the priority is the opposite.

10 Malik, Younes, Ackerman, Khalili (2015): How ISIS crippled al-Qaida. The Guardian June , 15, 2015, in: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/10/how-isis-crippled-al-qaida>, last accessed 18.07.2015.

11 Lia, Brynjar 2007: Abu Mus`ab al-Suri's Critique of Hard Line Salafists in the Jihadist Current, in: CTC Sentinel 1: 1, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/abumusab-al-suri%E2%80%99s-critique-of-hard-line-salafists-in-the-jihadist-current>, last accessed 01.07.2015.

After ISIS was dismissed from the al-Qaeda franchise 2014, it appeared to be literally liberated from former ideological restraints. For many jihadists worldwide it became apparent that the leadership of IS had hijacked AQ's ideology and was now discarding it. With its new >independence< IS not only acted on its own behalf, it also claimed leadership over the entire global jihadi movement. The Jordanian cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a hitherto uncontested authority in the global jihadi movement, unsuccessfully tried to reconcile both groups. Aware of Maqdisi's authority, IS tried to persuade the cleric to join the newly established caliphate, offering him and other prominent intellectuals a reward of one million Dollar.¹² Because Maqdisi refused the offer, IS emplaced Turki al-Binali (a former student of Maqdisi) as a >>counter-cleric<< and >>scholar-in-arm<<.¹³

The doctrinal independence changed IS's conduct of war: It commits acts that even AQ militant scholars consider to be a breach of Islamic military law, such as ethnic cleansings, burning prisoners of war, and indiscriminate attacks of Iraq's Shia population. IS also changed its organizational style. Instead of building an international franchise system, as AQ did, IS consolidates its power through a system of self-governed provinces (*wilayat*).¹⁴ However, it seems to be only a matter of time until the first dispute bet-

12 Malik, Younes, Ackerman, Khalili (2015): How ISIS crippled al-Qaida. The Guardian June , 15, 2015, in: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/10/how-isis-crippled-al-qaida>, last accessed 18.07.2015.

13 Bunzel, Cole (2014): The Caliphate's Scholar-in-Arms, in: <http://www.jihadica.com/the-caliphate%E2%80%99s-scholar-in-arms/>, last accessed 18.7.2015; Bunzel, Cole (2015): Bin'ali Leaks: Revelations of the Silent Mufti, in: <http://www.jihadica.com/the-caliphate%E2%80%99s-scholar-in-arms/>, last accessed 18.07.2015.

14 Zelin, Aaron (2015): The Islamic State's model. In: Project on Middle East Political Science, in: Islamism in the IS Age, Pomeps Studies 12, in: http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/POMEPS_Studies_12_ISAge_Web.pdf, last accessed 22.06.2015.

ween IS and one of its *wilayats* becomes public. At that point, counter-terrorists will have to reflect whether one should try to exploit these frictions or not. The lesson learned from the experience of al-Qaeda, Jabhat an-Nusra and IS is that these deliberate efforts have limited impact. There is also no longer an element of surprise in this strategy as jihadi activists have become used to the ideological war. Timing is another concern: a deliberate strategy to sow discord might bear fruits at times it is no longer favorable. When movements divide, they might have very good reasons to do so as the example of the Islamic state shows.