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Brothers Killing Brothers

The Current Infighting Will Test al Qaeda's Brand

Brian Michael Jenkins

Terrorists often resolve internal disputes the old-fashioned way: They kill each other.

This was demonstrated on February 22, 2014, when members of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are believed to have carried out the suicide attack that killed Abu Khaled al-Suri, a founding member and leader of Ahrar al-Sham, a rival coalition of Islamist rebel groups in Syria. ISIL denied responsibility in a formal press release, and factional killings are not uncommon among Syria's rebels, but ISIL had already acquired a reputation for killing its rivals. (In November 2013, ISIL apologized for beheading another al-Sham leader, claiming that it mistakenly thought he was a Shiite militiaman, and it has publicly announced executing rival commanders since then.)

Until recently, ISIL was al Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq, but when the group asserted its authority over Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), another

al Qaeda affiliate fighting in Syria, JN's leader objected. Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda's leader, sided with JN and instructed ISIL to back off. At the same time, Zawahiri dispatched al-Suri to resolve the dispute between the two groups.

Al-Suri had credentials and credibility in the jihadist universe. A comrade-in-arms of Osama bin Laden, al-Suri had fought in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Trusted by Zawahiri, he was presumed to also wield considerable influence among ISIL's fighters. The dispute was to be settled by litigation, and al-Suri was empowered by Zawahiri to set up a Sharia justice court to rule on the matter. None of this impressed ISIL's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who declared that he answered only to God, not Zawahiri. Not surprisingly, then, ISIL's opponents blamed Baghdadi's group for the killing of Zawahiri's messenger.

Al Qaeda's Expulsion of Its Affiliate in Iraq

Faced with this open defiance, Zawahiri took the unprecedented step of publicly expelling ISIL, suspending its franchise, and stripping it of its claim to be part of al Qaeda's global enterprise. The split will test the value of al Qaeda's brand.

Quarrels have become commonplace within al Qaeda—both between the core organization and its affiliates around the region and within the affiliates themselves. Although al Qaeda's leaders have quarreled in the past over strategy, tactics, and targets, an open break like this is unprecedented and creates real risks for both ISIL's and al Qaeda's leadership. What happens next?

The rebellious ISIL is not likely to back down. And now that al Qaeda's supreme leader has declared ISIL a renegade, he cannot allow it to succeed in creating a rival center of power. That sets up a showdown that could turn an internal dispute into a schism that cleaves across the jihadist universe.

A Challenge for Al Qaeda, an Opportunity for the United States

ISIL's disobedience suggests that al Qaeda's recent expansion, opening more jihadist fronts, may have weakened its central control while increasing its exposure to centrifugal forces and internal fissures. In addition, the organization's dysfunction could create new intelligence and propaganda opportunities for the United States. The internal purges and personal dangers resulting from the infighting could prompt defections and betrayals. And instead of defending Islam against perceived infidel aggression, new volunteers to al Qaeda now face the prospect of killing or being killed by rival jihadists, a less-attractive proposition.

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A number of issues divided ISIL from its allies in Syria. ISIL's brutal tactics against Muslim civilians risked alienating the entire rebellion's local support and discouraged international backing. However, this should not be overstated. It is not clear how much popular support Syria's rebels actually have, and as for imperiling the rebellion's finances, while ISIL's deliberate savagery turned off fastidious Western governments, the jihadists' private bankrollers in the region appear to be less squeamish.¹

And it certainly does not mean that JN, al Qaeda's chosen banner-carrier in Syria, or the other Salafist groups fighting there practice a kinder, gentler mode of warfare. Clearly, some of the worry about killing innocents is anti-ISIL propaganda, although JN and the other Sunni Islamists in Syria may indeed want to avoid the kind of brutality that alienated Sunnis from al Qaeda's predecessor in Iraq while ISIL continued its campaign of unlimited violence. ISIL itself claims that it has learned the lesson of Iraq's Anbar Awakening, when the barbarity of al Qaeda's local affiliate caused the population to turn against it. ISIL's foes could also exploit a nationalist theme—JN and the other groups are seen as being mostly Syrian, while ISIL reportedly has a greater number of foreign commanders and fighters.

Perhaps a bigger factor fueling the conflict among Syria's Islamists has been the growing strength and predominance of ISIL.

ISIL posed a threat to al Qaeda's distant leaders in Pakistan, but that is an internal al Qaeda problem, which Syria's rebels have little interest in solving. More seriously, ISIL's rapid growth threatened the other rebel groups who became increasingly concerned that it would come to dominate the rebellion while following its own agenda.

Accusations and Open War

Occasional skirmishes between fighters of the Islamic Coalition, an assemblage of Syrian Islamist rebel groups, and ISIL units escalated in January 2014 after JN announced that it would join forces with other groups fighting ISIL. The anti-ISIL rebels justified their assault on ISIL, declaring that the people of Syria could no longer tolerate being abused by foreign fighters, by which they meant ISIL's Iraqis and other foreigners. ISIL responded by calling on its fighters to crush the other rebel groups. To underscore the point, ISIL's men promptly began executing captured rebel fighters. The next day, ISIL's opponents struck back, seizing ISIL's headquarters in Aleppo. In retaliation, ISIL assassinated the commanders of two rival groups. Syria's rebels had started their civil war.

Zawahiri signaled his support for the anti-ISIL forces in early February, when he publicly stripped ISIL of its al Qaeda affiliation. Then, on February 26, JN issued an ultimatum to ISIL, giving it five days to accept mediation to end the fighting or be expelled from the region, warning, "By God, if you reject God's judgment again, and do not stop your arrogant overlordship over the Muslim nation, then [we] will be forced to launch an assault against this aggressive, ignorant ideology and will expel it, even from Iraq." (The inclusion of this last phrase raises suspicions that al Qaeda's

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central leadership may now be working with JN to lay the groundwork for JN to eventually replace ISIL in Iraq.)

ISIL answered that it would not rule out arbitration, but it complained that JN's leaders tried to defeat it "when they saw it was becoming more powerful." It accused JN of mounting a military and propaganda campaign aimed at harming the image of ISIL and turning the people against it.

By March, according to some sources, as many as 3,000 had been killed in the fighting, but information on the ground is thin, and it is hard to say exactly what is going on.² ISIL was forced to abandon (or it strategically retreated from) some of its positions in Northern Syria to consolidate its strongholds in the eastern part of the country. It is not clear whether ISIL's withdrawal was forced or the group simply wanted to avoid an all-out war with other Islamists. In January, ISIL had warned that if its rivals did not lift their siege of its forces, it would withdraw from Aleppo, a move that would lead to the reoccupation of the city by Syrian government forces.³ Meanwhile, Syrian government forces have taken advantage of the rebels' disarray, driving them from a number of key towns.

The expulsion of ISIL means that al Qaeda now has no affiliate in Iraq, turning what once was the vanguard of its global jihad and for a while the principal recruiting attraction for young fighters drawn to bin Laden's ideology into a costly internal struggle. Al Qaeda faces a rival jihadist upstart in the heart of the Arab world.

Zawahiri may have feared that if he did not move against ISIL, it would grow to become a rival center of power and eventually dominate the global jihad.

To take the extraordinary step of expelling it, Zawahiri, a strategist, had to calculate that the benefits of separation and the danger of the potential confusion it might cause outweighed the risks of continued association. Zawahiri's statement blamed ISIL for causing the catastrophe in Syria. Al Qaeda's central leaders may also have feared that ISIL's insubordination and unchecked growth would create a greater threat to its authority in the future than the risks resulting from an open break.

Remote leadership by an already weak central command requires making the right guesses—al Qaeda central cannot impose its authority but must align itself with the realities in the field. Stripping ISIL of its al Qaeda credentials could have been a miscalculation. Zawahiri, perhaps misled by JN's own assessments, may not have an accurate appreciation of the relative strengths of the forces in Syria. If ISIL turns out to be the stronger movement, al Qaeda's command over the global movement would be seriously weakened. But Zawahiri may have feared that if he did not move against ISIL, it would grow to become a rival center of power and eventually dominate the global jihad.

What are Zawahiri's options now? Al Qaeda's central command initially may have thought that expulsion would suffice to force ISIL's prodigal leader to mend his ways and accept mediation. Zawahiri's statement left room for discussions leading to some sort of reunion. Whether Zawahiri genuinely sought reconciliation is

not clear, but ISIL's assassination of al-Suri and the escalation of fighting among Syria's jihadists ended the possibility.

JN and the Islamic Coalition could pound ISIL into insignificance or push it back into Iraq, where ISIL is also trying to hold on to Fallujah and other territory it continues to control. That could turn out to be a long and bloody contest among the rebels, and Syrian government forces would be the ultimate beneficiary. Facing universal condemnation from respected jihadist clerics, declining financial support, and defections from his forces, ISIL's commander might be persuaded to return to the fold. That seems unlikely. Alternatively, he could be overthrown or betrayed by his own lieutenants, which could be followed by the welcome return of his fighters.

A political settlement is possible through the mediation mentioned by Zawahiri in his earlier communications, an offer renewed by JN and not entirely rejected by ISIL. Each participant in the dispute would name its judges and abide by their collective decision. That, however, could be seen to make Baghdadi and Zawahiri equals before the court and therefore a humiliation to the al Qaeda commander. Or the schism might spread through al Qaeda, dividing the jihadist movement into pro- and anti-Zawahiri factions or shattering it altogether.

While the fighting between ISIL and its rivals continues in Syria, both sides are pursuing propaganda campaigns to sustain the loyalty of their own fighters and outflank their opponents politically. This part of the contest can be seen through postings on official websites, alleged leaks appearing on Twitter, and other social media postings. It is not possible to verify the veracity of these on the ground, but they offer fascinating glimpses into the thinking of the contestants.⁴

Neither of the belligerents wants to appear unreasonable and reject mediation outright. Each pretends to be the aggrieved party while blaming the other for the impasse. Without naming ISIL but clearly referring to the group's actions as "sedition," Zawahiri, in a message issued on April 4, 2014, called on every Muslim to "disavow all those who refuse arbitration" by an independent Sharia court.⁵

Some of ISIL's foes have asserted that it is a creation of the Syrian government, designed to sow dissension among the rebels and destroy their reputation. ISIL's supporters have responded by comparing their Syrian opponents to the Iraqis in Anbar province who, during the war in Iraq, betrayed the resistance to cooperate with the American occupiers against al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda has sent respected and reliable veterans to Syria—men who can match Baghdadi's jihadi street creds and lure his fighters away. Both sides are reaching out to the jihadist ulama, soliciting clerics to support their position with religiously sanctioned rulings and calling for members of the rival camp to defect.

The fluid loyalties of the rebel movement facilitate switching sides. It is not a matter of Syrian soldiers defecting to the rebels, which is now dangerous to do, or of rebels defecting to the government. Syria's rebels move from one rebel group to another, following their commanders, looking for better salaries, or seeking more action. The ability of fighters to make their own decisions about whom they will follow can work both for and against defections. One ISIL commander warned that if forced to publicly swear allegiance to ISIL's leader, he would lose half of his fighters. Another commander admitted to confidants that he wanted to leave ISIL, but his lieutenants opposed a switch. If he did not swear loyalty to ISIL, his life would be in danger from his own men.

Both sides are determined to portray their own ranks as solid. ISIL reportedly has demanded new oaths of loyalty to its leader. Loyal clerics intensified their sermons, warning that defection would result in execution and eternal damnation. Security detachments have been established to identify and eliminate any internal faction that poses a danger. Defectors were warned that they would be treated as heretics, for whom the sentence is death. A secret security apparatus assassinates dissenters and defectors. One senior ISIL commander reportedly argued for ISIL publishing the names of those who had been eliminated in order to discourage others from contemplating defection. Anyone publicizing a defection is subject to a death sentence. When defections did occur, they were covered up by pronouncements of new pledges of support.

In a move that would be familiar to many politicians, both sides are lining up endorsements from prominent figures in the jihadist universe outside of Syria. A pro-ISIL website regularly announces pledges of support from other al Qaeda fronts. These may, in fact, not reflect official endorsements by leaders of these fronts; they may be comments by individual commanders within the groups.

The Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem, an al Qaeda-linked group operating in the Sinai and Gaza, came out publicly in support of ISIL. This is not surprising, since earlier reports indicated that volunteers from Gaza had joined ISIL. Decisions by local al Qaeda affiliates to support ISIL appear to be influenced by the allegiances of the foreign fighters in Syria. Many volunteers from Gaza, Tunisia, and Libya joined ISIL, causing

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affiliates in those countries to lean toward ISIL in the dispute. Somalia's al Shabaab appears to be on Zawahiri's side. Conflicting statements from some of al Qaeda's other affiliates suggest that the split between al Qaeda central and ISIL may exacerbate internal divisions within their own ranks. Underlying fault lines are hard to discern. And as any political campaigner would recognize, there are fence-sitters who will wait to see which way the wind blows.⁶

Al Qaeda's Rapid Expansion Has Unleashed Centrifugal Forces

Could this have happened under Osama bin Laden? Bin Laden remained suspicious of anything outside his immediate control. After prolonged negotiations with groups aspiring to the al Qaeda franchise, some lasting years, mergers happened because he was unable to stop them. Other aspirants were successfully resisted.⁷ Following bin Laden's death, Zawahiri, his longtime lieutenant, managed to stay in charge of the disparate al Qaeda enterprise, but he did not inherit bin Laden's moral authority and was viewed less as al Qaeda's commander than as its ideological commissar. Under Zawahiri's weakened command, the process of mergers and the creation of new affiliates accelerated.

In part, al Qaeda's rapid expansion reflected opportunities offered by the Arab uprisings. That does not apply to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or al Shabaab, both of which took the field long before the Arab Spring. Al Qaeda's geographic spread

Infighting weakens the organization, and a weakening organization encourages more infighting.

over the past several years has been interpreted by some analysts as a sign of its growing strength—certainly it demonstrates that the al Qaeda banner still has appeal. But it might equally be seen as a sign of al Qaeda's weakness—a lowering of the bar to membership, evidence of its growing dependence on its affiliates and allies and its inability to impose its will on rebellious and recalcitrant field commanders. In the long run, al Qaeda might be able to reel in its more unreliable components, assert more control over them, demand their obedience, and call upon their resources to assist in global operations. But without a stronger center, perhaps operating from safer bases in Pakistan or a new base in Afghanistan after the Americans withdraw, the possibility of that achievement seems remote.

For now, it appears that future action by al Qaeda central will most likely take the form of propaganda—orchestrated denunciations of ISIL leader Baghdadi's betrayal of the global jihad and his behaving in a way that creates al Qaeda's dreaded disunity (*fitna*) and prolongs Assad's rule. Al Qaeda has already given advance approval to anyone inside ISIL who decides to remove Baghdadi and has endorsed the armed offensive against ISIL. Meanwhile, al Qaeda's leaders could wait for Iraqi government forces to bloody ISIL's fighters in Fallujah, then move in to create a new affiliate on the remains of the old.

Zawahiri and his colleagues holed up in Pakistan will make further pronouncements—they want to be seen as having influence, but the fact is that they are distant observers with only limited ability to affect the situation on the ground. Infighting weakens the organization, and a weakening organization encourages more infighting. Zawahiri will have great difficulty extricating al Qaeda from this vicious circle.

Terrorist Infighting Has a Long History

Battles between rival rebel groups and within terrorist organizations are not uncommon. Disputes derive from differences over ideology that are often incomprehensible to outsiders, strategy, tactics, rules of engagement, and negotiations to end a conflict. Terrorists may compete with each other, sometimes in deadly battles, for the control of sources of financing. Some of the internal struggles are about leadership.

A recurring issue of contention is whether to employ terrorist violence without limits or to operate within self-imposed constraints to avoid alienating local communities and distant supporters. The escalation of terrorism over the past several decades and the apparent determination of today's terrorists to kill in quantity without discrimination would seem to indicate that the self-imposed constraints that governed earlier terrorist behavior have eroded. But even al Qaeda's bloody-minded leaders worry that killing too many civilians, especially Muslims, alienates support in the Muslim community. However, others, like Baghdadi, see utility in unbridled violence. It gets attention, creates terror, and attracts recruits of a particular bloody-minded type.

This kind of tension seems built into terrorist groups. Ideologues resort to terrorist tactics to achieve their goals, but their campaigns attract hardline recruits for whom violence seems an end in itself. They reject any self-imposed constraints as faint-hearted. If things are not going well, it is because the violence is insufficient. If things are going well, more violence will accelerate progress.

Another especially divisive issue is any sort of dialogue that could end the fighting. Terrorists see this not merely as betrayal of the cause but, in the case of al Qaeda, as being against God's

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will. To many, peace-seeking is a personal threat. Terrorist groups are composed not of conscripts yearning for the fighting to end so that they can go home, but of self-selecting volunteers who, often dissatisfied with their lives, seek the risks and opportunities that membership in a terrorist group offers—a new identity, a new life, assumed status as a self-proclaimed warrior, the excitement of courting death, a presumed license to kill, pleasure in pursuing baser instincts. It is a sad comment that terrorist groups do not recruit in the conventional sense. They exalt violence and invite participation.

The foreign fighters who have assembled under ISIL's banner exemplify this tendency. To begin with, many of ISIL's members are Iraqi, and they are a wild bunch even by terrorist standards. Attracted to ISIL by its reputation for unlimited violence, foreign fighters, including a number of Chechen commanders, have also become associated with its bloody campaign. They have no postwar futures and little interest in ending the conflict.

Devoted exclusively to their causes, terrorists should be immune to material gain. They are not. Financing terrorist groups often involves criminal activity—armed robberies, ransom kidnappings, extortion, smuggling—which can be lucrative. For some, maintaining cash flow becomes an end in itself that can be

threatened by ending the conflict. We have seen this in al Qaeda and in other terrorist groups. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) was deeply involved in extortion and insurance fraud, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) became deeply involved in ransom kidnapping and drug trafficking.

Internal Feuds, from the Russian Revolution to the Palestinian Civil War

Quarrels between Russian socialists, Bolsheviks, and anarchists often turned deadly. In his book *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell described the demoralizing internal disputes and liquidations that consumed the Spanish Republic during Spain's civil war.

The IRA has a long history of schisms that turned lethal. Its agreement to end its campaign against the British in return for independence for the island's 26 southern counties in 1922 was repudiated by the group's hardliners and led to a bitter civil war between the holdouts and their former comrades who made up the Irish Republic's new army. Michael Collins, the IRA's own commander, who negotiated the agreement, was assassinated. Hundreds more died in the struggle, which was marked by summary executions and atrocities. The civil war ended in 1923, but the IRA did not renounce its campaign against the Republic until many years later.

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Dissatisfaction with the feeble official IRA response to the growing civil strife in Northern Ireland led to the formation of the Provisional Irish Republican Army in 1969. After decades of terrorism, it too agreed to a truce with the British in 1997, prompting the irreconcilables, calling themselves the "Real IRA," to initiate another murderous internal feud.

Two rival organizations—the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the Algerian National Movement (MNA)—claimed to represent Algeria's independence movement during the early years of the Algerian War. Efforts to unite the two failed, and the struggle turned violent. Both organizations were determined to drive the French out of Algeria and were willing to use terrorist tactics to do so, but both also aspired to control Algeria after independence. The immediate issue, however, was determining who would control the collection of funds willingly donated or extorted from the Algerian population, especially the better-off Algerian expatriates working in France. This led to the so-called "café wars," a bloody contest of assassinations and bomb attacks in the cafés of Algiers and Paris directed at each group's operatives and supporters. Between 4,000 and 5,000 were killed, and more than 10,000 were wounded in the infighting.

In the 1970s, Argentina's urban guerrillas included the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), the Peronist Armed Forces (FAP), the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), and the Montoneros, each of which represented a sliver of left-wing ideology. Overall, the guerrillas commanded significant numbers of combatants and resources, but they were plagued by internal divisions. The ERP split into the ERP-Red Faction and the August 22 Faction, while FAP split into FAP-17 (for October 17) and FAP-CN (for National Command). Dissident members of the FAR and FAP-17 then

joined the Montoneros, while FAP-CN went to the ERP. Some of these schisms reflected narrow ideological differences. Others reflected differences about tactics and targets—e.g., was it proper to assassinate corrupt union officials? The internal divisions, which encouraged defections and betrayals and facilitated infiltration by the authorities, may have been more costly to the guerrillas than the information extracted by torture.

Guerrillas opposing the Colombian government fielded the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), the National Liberation Army (ELN), FARC, and the 19th of April Movement (M-19), which often divided into further factions, leading to defections and assassinations. Guerrillas in Peru's Shining Path and Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) fought each other and killed dissidents in their own ranks.

As the bewildering array of group names and initials attest, the Palestinian movement from its beginning was riven with factions. Yasir Arafat, the leader of al Fatah and chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), an umbrella group of paramilitary groups and terrorist organizations, frequently faced internal opposition, principally from hardliners who opposed anything that hinted at ending the violent confrontation with Israel. For the most part, these disparate groups rarely attacked each other; they simply competed to carry out the most spectacular terrorist attacks, thereby attracting support and recruits and satisfying their various state sponsors.

Arafat managed to keep control of extremists in his own ranks by fielding new, more violent groups, using new names to avoid Fatah itself being designated as a terrorist organization but still under Fatah control. Black September and the al-Aqsa Brigades are examples. To maintain his leadership and the overall unity of the

Palestinian movement, Arafat was obliged to reject even advantageous offers to settle the conflict with Israel. The transition to political legitimacy was dangerous. Giving up the armed struggle risked infighting, as evidenced by the split between Hamas and Fatah, which led to a brief civil war in 2007 in which several hundred fighters and dozens of bystanders died. Hamas won, and the Palestinian Authority lost control of Gaza.

Few of the quarreling factions in these historical examples ever managed to reconcile their differences. Not surprisingly, men already dedicated to violence generally settle their differences violently or via betrayals to the authorities, even if at great cost to their stated cause.

Nevertheless, the internal divisions did not doom the movements. Some were weakened by infighting, but Algeria's FLN defeated its rival and went on to drive the French out of Algeria. Irish extremists and South American guerrillas fought on for decades. In some cases, divisions fostered competition that led to higher levels of violence, but this often provoked public outrage, enabling governments to pursue a harder line.

Al Qaeda's Internal Quarrels

Al Qaeda's leaders place great importance on maintaining unity. In their view, disunity—fitna—is the cause of Islam's weakness. Disunity prevented a unified response to the Crusades. Disunity allowed external foes to conquer and occupy Muslim territory piecemeal. Al Qaeda's recent expansion, combined with a diminishing central role and the ever-present danger of centrifugal forces,

The internal divisions did not doom the movements.

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could dissipate the unity necessary to sustain its current global effort.

Al Qaeda, therefore, has tried hard to maintain unity, but there have been a number of serious internal differences. In the late 1980s, Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, a co-founder of al Qaeda, quarreled with bin Laden, then his deputy, about strategic priorities—Azzam wanted to focus on the Palestinian issue, while bin Laden was more determined to bring down secular Arab regimes. Azzam was killed by a roadside bomb shortly after the quarrel. Some suspected that Zawahiri, who disagreed with Azzam’s strategy, may have been behind the assassination or that he was at the very least responsible for inciting Azzam’s murder by spreading rumors that Azzam was an American spy. However, there is no concrete evidence, and there were other suspects as well. Azzam’s death led to a period of chaos and strife among the jihadists in Afghanistan as others jockeyed to take control of the movement.

Zawahiri’s April 4, 2014, message refers to past divisions in al Qaeda, including a warning from al-Suri that he saw in Syria “the seeds of sedition, which he experienced in Peshawar” in the early days of the Mujahideen struggle. Zawahiri went on to say that the current infighting in Syria reminds him of Algeria in the 1990s,

when jihadists belonging to the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) descended into internecine warfare and the indiscriminate slaughter of Muslims. This led to the “spiritual death of that group followed by [its] physical death.”⁸

Problems with defiant al Qaeda commanders occurred before the present split. In 2005, Zawahiri counseled Musab al-Zarqawi, then leader of al Qaeda’s newly created affiliate in Iraq, that his killing of fellow Muslims and all-out assault on Shias could cost al Qaeda support in the broader Muslim community. Zarqawi, who had never easily placed himself under bin Laden’s command and who proudly called himself the “sheikh of slaughter,” ignored Zawahiri’s advice and escalated his attacks. The following year, Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. airstrike. Some suggested that al Qaeda itself had betrayed him to the Americans. This was not the case, but it underscores the paranoia that permeates the terrorist universe.

Al Qaeda also faced divisions in its North African affiliate, AQIM. The decision by Algerian fighters belonging to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) to put themselves under al Qaeda’s banner appears to have been little more than a marriage of convenience—AQIM never entirely bought into al Qaeda’s global jihad; its objectives remained primarily local. Troubles within AQIM derived from a personal rivalry between Abdelmalek Droukdal, AQIM’s overall commander, and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, AQIM’s commander in the south. Geographic distance and fundraising through criminal operations gave Belmokhtar increasing autonomy and independent power. The break came when Droukdal tried to restore his authority by making Belmokhtar subordinate to a new southern commander, then later expelling him from AQIM. Belmokhtar promptly formed his own group, while pledging his

continuing loyalty to al Qaeda. The two entities now operate independently. Distance probably has prevented an open clash.⁹

The 2012 decision by al Shabaab's leader, Moktar Abdirahman Godane, to become al Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia provoked internal resistance. By 2013, internal disputes, in particular Godane's dictatorial style of leadership, escalated into open warfare between the factions. Godane ordered the arrests and executions of a number of senior al Shabaab commanders. Others, including Omar Hammami, an American who became a popular spokesman for the group, left the group but were later killed by Godane's faction. Disillusioned and disgusted by the infighting, a number of al Shabaab fighters quit the movement and left Somalia. Some may even have defected to the government.

Can Al Qaeda's Internal Disputes Be Exploited?

External actors have exploited the internal battles of terrorist groups for their own reasons. The British government had an interest in seeing the hardliners defeated in the IRA's civil war in the 1920s and provided arms and ammunition to the Irish Free Forces. British authorities similarly wanted to destroy the hardline groups that could disrupt the truce it negotiated with the IRA in 1997. Israeli authorities saw an interest in preventing Arafat from establishing leadership over a united Palestinian movement and actively encouraged Islamists in Gaza, hoping they would be an effective counterweight to Arafat's nationalist forces; but the Israelis also found it necessary to go after his hardline opponents, including Hamas. South American governments were able to exploit the divisions in the ranks of the left-wing guerrillas who opposed them. When Zawahiri's letter criticizing Zarqawi's brutal tactics in Iraq

was intercepted, U.S. authorities decided to discredit Zarqawi by making it public.

As the al Qaeda enterprise adds new affiliates and its central command continues to be weakened by constant pressure from U.S. and allied counterterrorism operations, it will face increasing centrifugal forces. While these divisions may weaken the overall jihadist movement, they do not necessarily lessen the immediate terrorist threat.

The split in Syria confirms the reality of a divided al Qaeda with a weakened center, but divisions in al Qaeda's ranks will not end the worldwide jihadist terrorist campaign. Palestinian groups, fragmented by ideology and personalities, competed with one another in spectacular violence. Rivalry between groups in Argentina, Colombia, and Peru did not slow their terrorist campaigns.

Zarqawi answered Zawahiri's complaints about killing Muslims by carrying out a massive terrorist attack in Jordan in which 60 people, mostly Muslims, died. (The attack, however, brought tens of thousands of Jordanians into the streets to denounce al Qaeda's terrorism.) In part to demonstrate his independent power, AQIM's Belmokhtar launched a major attack on the Amenas gas facility in Algeria, killing 68 people, more than half of them Muslims. And to underscore the power of its hardline global jihad faction, al Shabaab carried out an attack on a shopping mall in Nairobi, killing 67.

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Replacing one big al Qaeda with many smaller al Qaedas does not reduce the total number of terrorists, but it may reduce their overall strategic capability. And while internal divisions do not get the United States out of the terrorists' line of fire, they will preoccupy al Qaeda's leaders, while quarreling jihadists may spend more of their time and resources killing each other.

When adversaries are bent upon self-destruction, the best course is to let them get on with it, but there will be developments that call for action; doing nothing becomes a decision. A fragmented al Qaeda poses greater intelligence challenges, but it also potentially opens up new sources of intelligence. Shifting loyalties may increase opportunities for infiltration, and there may be some "walk-ins"—terrorists who are disillusioned, on the run from their own side, seeking revenge, or simply eager to betray their opponents.

The biggest opportunities may lie in countering al Qaeda's future recruitment. What al Qaeda now offers the young and restless is opportunities for violence under the cover of moral certainty. Infighting creates uncertainty. Denunciations, emirs threatening to crush one another, the murder of respected jihadist leaders, the prospect of killing or being killed by fellow jihadists ought to be less attractive propositions. Assuring the widespread exposure of this ugly reality could be useful, and it has the additional benefit of being true.

When adversaries are bent upon self-destruction, the best course is to let them get on with it

Exploiting the favorable circumstances created by the current divisions in al Qaeda requires detailed local knowledge and political-warfare know-how—generally not America's strong suit. In Iraq, the United States benefited from having American troops on the ground, enabling it to recruit a network of local informants. A dedicated effort enabled the American command to recognize and exploit growing local hostility to al Qaeda's ruthless extremism and turn Sunni tribes against the jihadists. These capabilities are more difficult to develop remotely. There is no large American presence in Syria, and the Syrian situation is more complex than the Iraq situation was. Moreover, U.S. goals transcend Syria and should be aimed at al Qaeda's global enterprise. Pursuing this unprecedented opportunity will require the creation of a dedicated task force to act as a focal point for analysis and action.

Notes

¹ For a description of the dynamics driving Syria's civil war, see Jenkins, 2014; see also Jenkins, 2012.

² "ISIL Says It Faces War with Nusra in Syria," 2014.

³ ICT Jihadi Monitoring Group, 2014.

⁴ One of the most interesting sources is a series of tweets from a Twitter user calling himself @wikibaghdady. These appeared in Mortada, 2014a, b.

⁵ Joscelyn, 2014.

⁶ For additional discussions of the al Qaeda split, see Gartenstein-Ross, 2014; Lahoud and al-Ubaydi, 2014; al Tamimi, 2014; Watts, 2014a, b; "Jihadi Competition After al Qaeda Hegemony—Part 3 of Smarter Counterterrorism," 2014.

⁷ I am grateful to Andrew Liepman for this point.

⁸ Joscelyn, 2014.

⁹ Liepman, 2013.

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About the Author

Brian Michael Jenkins is a senior adviser to the president of the RAND Corporation and author of numerous books, reports, and articles on terrorism-related topics, including *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* (2008, Prometheus Books). He formerly served as chair of the Political Science Department at RAND. On the occasion of the ten-year anniversary of 9/11, Jenkins initiated a RAND effort to take stock of America's policy reactions and give thoughtful consideration to future strategy. That effort is presented in *The Long Shadow of 9/11: America's Response to Terrorism* (Brian Michael Jenkins and John Paul Godges, eds., 2011).

About This Perspective

Terrorists often resolve internal disputes the old-fashioned way: They kill each other. Battles between rival rebel groups and within terrorist organizations are not uncommon. Internal feuds have characterized terrorist movements throughout modern history, from the Russian Revolution to the Palestinian civil war.

In February 2014, members of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are believed to have carried out the suicide attack that killed Abu Khaled al-Suri, the leader of a rival coalition of Islamist rebel groups in Syria. In response, Ayman al-Zawahiri took the unprecedented step of publicly expelling ISIL from al Qaeda. An open break like this creates real risks for both ISIL's and al Qaeda's leadership, setting up a showdown that could turn an internal dispute into a schism that cleaves across the jihadist universe.

In addition, it could create new intelligence and propaganda opportunities for the United States. If ISIL turns out to be the stronger movement,

al Qaeda's command over the global movement would be seriously weakened. The biggest opportunities for exploiting al Qaeda's internal disputes may lie in countering al Qaeda's future recruitment. The prospect of killing or being killed by fellow jihadists ought to be a less attractive proposition than defending Islam against perceived infidel aggression. However, exploiting the favorable circumstances created by the current divisions requires detailed local knowledge and political-warfare know-how. Pursuing this unprecedented opportunity will require the creation of a dedicated task force to act as a focal point for analysis and action.

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Questions or comments about this paper should be sent to the author: Brian Michael Jenkins, RAND Corporation, 1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138, (310) 393-0411, x 6288, Brian_Jenkins@rand.org.

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