

Heirs of Zarqawi or Saddam? The relationship between al-Qaida in Iraq and the Islamic State

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between al-Qaida in Iraq and Islamic State, asking what remains of AQI within the current incarnation of IS. The study is based on available information concerning the backgrounds and the roles of the top leaders within AQI/IS over the last ten years, with a particular focus on their respective relationship to the Baath party, AQI, and al-Qaida Central. Despite the apparent historical continuity between AQI and IS, there are several differences concerning the background and networks of the respective leaderships. A case can be made that Jabhat al-Nusra is connected to some of same regional networks that established AQI, while IS is more of an extension of the Iraqi faction within AQI and of other indigenous networks like the Baath party and other insurgent groups.

Keywords: ISIS, al-Qaida, Jihadism, Iraq, leadership

Introduction

The historical origin of the group known as “the Islamic State” (IS) has been traced back to the Jordanian Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi and his establishing a training camp for Arab foreign fighters in Herat, Afghanistan, at the turn of the century. Scholars and IS itself have described the establishment of an Islamic State as the fulfillment of Zarqawi’s vision.[1] At the same time, IS has also been described as the heirs of Saddam Hussein and the Baath party that ruled Iraq with an iron fist from 1968 until it was disbanded in the wake of the U.S invasion of Iraq in 2003.[2] There is an element of truth in both descriptions. Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), the group founded by Zarqawi in Iraq in 2004 was the leading faction behind the founding of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in October 2006 together with several other Iraqi insurgent groups. In 2013 ISI became known as the Islamic State in Iraq and in Syria (ISIS), and from June 2014 as “the Islamic State” (IS). Yet, since 2006 several of ISI’s top leaders, including veterans of AQI, have been killed and replaced with new leaders. In 2010 almost the entire top echelon of ISI was eliminated and replaced with a new generation of leaders. Among this new generation of leaders there are very few known AQI veterans. Instead, the top leadership of IS seems to have been populated by former Iraqi officers who were removed from their positions when the Iraqi army was disbanded in 2003.

Either interpretation has implications for our understanding of the group, its agenda, and the international threat it poses. Should the Islamic State primarily be interpreted as a religious cover for a resurgent Baath-party aiming to recapture power in Iraq and seeking to exploit the foreign fighters’ ideological zeal, or is the group’s main motivation genuinely to establish and expand the so-called Islamic State? This paper assumes that the top leadership of a terrorist group, their respective backgrounds, their experience and connections can shape a group’s agenda, strategy and target selection.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to study the relationship between AQI and IS and what remains of AQI within the current incarnation of IS. The study is based on available information concerning the backgrounds and roles of the top leaders within AQI/IS the last ten years, with a particular focus on their relationship to the Baath party, AQI, and al-Qaida Central. The official martyr biographies issued by AQI/ISI is an important source for the paper, in addition to other sources. It is sometimes difficult to confirm the veracity of these

biographies, and it is especially difficult to find reliable information on the background on the current IS leaders as there often exist multiple accounts, often both from pro- and anti-IS sources. Still, the available sources are rich enough to reveal some general patterns in the leadership composition.

I argue that the influence of AQI diminished over time as several of the founding fathers of AQI were killed and replaced with new leaders who not had been members of AQI. This process appears to have been partly a consequence of an internal struggle for power between the remnants of AQI and the new leaders that gradually managed to sideline the old AQI-generation. It could also be argued that the establishment of IS's Syrian branch, Jabhat al-Nusra, was partly an effect of this internal power struggle, one that formalized the split between the two different factions. Most of the networks associated with AQI and its founder Zarqawi seem to have joined or supported Jabhat al-Nusra, not IS.

The role of AQI veterans within the Islamic State in Iraq

The relationship between AQI and IS might best be described as a continual process of integration and merger between the original, non-Iraqi founders of AQI and various indigenous Sunni Arab networks that in the end totally incorporated what once had been known as AQI. For an overview of the backgrounds of the founders of AQI see Tables 1 and 2 at the end of the article.

After Zarqawi arrived in the camps of the Kurdish militant group Ansar al-Islam in 2002 in Iraqi Kurdistan together with some of his close companions from the Herat camp, he sowed the seeds of what was to first become known as *Tawhid wal-jihad* (TWJ) and from October 2004 as *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* (the al-Qaida Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers or Mesopotamia), most often referred to as al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI).[3] Through his capacity as head of a training camp in Herat designated for recruits from the Levant, Zarqawi had established networks in several of Iraq's neighboring countries, such as Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. These networks would prove effective in recruiting a number of the foreign fighters pouring into Iraq immediately before and after the invasion in 2003. But as will be illustrated below, there was also an important Iraqi contingent within TWJ/AQI.

Over time, the share of Iraqis within AQI increased, a process helped by events such as the killing of Zarqawi in June 2006 and the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq four months later. The death of Zarqawi was important because it deprived AQI of its charismatic leader and iconic founder. His successor Abu Ayyub al-Masri has been described both as less charismatic and less assertive, and as someone who failed to inspire the rank-and-file members of the group.[4] Growing internal discontent, combined with the increased rebel infighting following the establishment of ISI in October 2006, propelled some the non-Iraqi members of AQI to leave Iraq and instead help establish groups in other countries.[5] Studies of the Lebanese group known as Fatah al-Islam, for instance, have argued that former AQI members and other veterans who had left Iraq in disappointment were central in establishing the group.[6] One of those who left Iraq and AQI following the death of Zarqawi was reportedly Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, the current top leader of Jabhat al-Nusra. He left for Lebanon where he gave assistance to the jihadi group known as Jund al-Sham, but according to most accounts he returned to Iraq where he was arrested and joined ISI when he was released in 2008.[7] Another person who reportedly left Iraq after the death of Zarqawi was the Jordanian AQI veteran Mustafa Abd al-Latif Salih aka Abu Anas al-Sahhaha who in 2012 became one of Jabhat al-Nusra's leading commanders in southern Syria.[8]

In many respects the gradual Iraqification culminated in 2010 when counterterrorism operations removed almost the entire top leadership of ISI, including the Egyptian AQI-veteran Abu Ayyub al-Masri who succeeded Zarqawi as leader of AQI and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, the first leader of the Islamic State in Iraq.

Most observers agree that AQI formally ceased to exist in November 2006 when AQI leader Abu Ayyub al-Masri pledged allegiance to ISI leader Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and announced that AQI and all its members were to integrate into ISI.[9] AQI and its former leaders did, however, retain much influence within the new organization. AQI was after all the principal group behind the establishment of ISI and by far the most powerful of the founding groups. Several of the top leaders of ISI came from the ranks of AQI, such as Abu Ayyub al-Masri, who served as the so-called “war minister” of ISI from 2007 and from 2009 as “prime minister” (*al-wazir al-awwal*).[10] Some sources, including pro-IS ones, also suggest that the head of ISI, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, came from the ranks of AQI.[11] Also, other AQI veterans assumed senior positions within ISI, such as Abu Zahra’ al-‘Issawi who, according to his martyr biography, became ISI’s information minister in 2007.[12]

However, several of the leaders of the other co-founding insurgent groups also took important positions within ISI. For instance, Muharib Abdallah al-Juburi, the former leader of Saraya al-Ghuraba’ (Battalion of Strangers) was given the job as official spokesperson of ISI.[13] Abd al-Rahman al-Falahi, who served as the deputy of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and as ISI’s “prime minister” from 2007 to 2009, had been the leader of the group Saraya al-Jihad.[14]

The influence of AQI within ISI seems to have gradually diminished as the former AQI veterans were killed and replaced by new leaders with different pedigrees. Very few of the leaders who came in after 2010 seem to have been members of AQI. Some of them belonged to other insurgent groups that had joined ISI, often while being imprisoned together with AQI/ISI-members. For example, Abu Ali al-Anbari, one of the top leaders of IS and Baghdadi’s second-in-command in Syria, is reported to have joined Ansar al-Islam after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but was expelled from the group due to allegations of financial corruption.[15] Abu Yahya al-Iraqi, who replaced Haji Bakr following the latter’s death in February 2014, had reportedly been a member of the insurgent group known as the Islamic Army in Iraq, but had joined ISI while imprisoned in Camp Bucca.[16] Some sources also claim that current IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi came from a group known as Jama’at al-Jaysh Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama’a, one of the co-founding groups of ISI.[17]

Another important difference between AQI and the leadership of ISI is that, while the top leaders of AQI and ISI until 2010 were Afghan Arab veterans who had met and knew the leadership of al-Qaida, very few of the leaders after 2010 had. For an overview of the backgrounds of the ISI(S) top leadership between 2010 and 2014, see Table 3 below.

Many observers have commented on the apparent disagreements between Zarqawi and the top leadership of al-Qaida, who found Zarqawi too extreme and too willing to target both Shiite and Sunni civilians. However, it could be argued that the al-Qaida leadership and Zarqawi, at least initially, agreed to disagree and enjoyed a working relationship. Through his position as the head of a training camp in Herat established in cooperation with and supported by the al-Qaida leadership, Zarqawi was integrated into the wider al-Qaida network.[18] As will be illustrated below, these networks became crucial for facilitating Zarqawi’s stay in Iraq. Zarqawi’s successor, Abu Ayyub al-Masri had belonged to Zawahiri’s group Egyptian Islamic Jihad during the 1990s and he seems to have been close to Zawahiri in Afghanistan.[19] During his conflict with IS in 2013-2014, Zawahiri said the al-Qaida leadership had trusted Abu Umar al-Baghdadi because they had known him for a long time (although there is no information indicating that they ever met). In the same message, Zawahiri said that he and bin Laden never had heard about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi nor his second in command, Abu Sulayman Nasr li-Din Allah, when they became leaders of ISI in 2010.[20]

There are some important exceptions to this pattern. For instance, the current spokesman of IS, the Syrian Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, is, according to several sources, a veteran of AQI. A pro-IS biography claims

that Adnani was one of several Syrians who had pledged allegiance to Zarqawi “in the early 2000s”. He came to Iraq in 2003 and the biography presents several details concerning Adnani’s activity as part of TWJ/AQI in Iraq, although few of these details can be confirmed by other sources. Detractors and alleged ex-members of IS insist that Adnani and Zarqawi never met.[21] Regardless of when he joined the group, it seems that al-Adnani became spokesman of ISI sometime after the group’s decapitation in 2010. The first references to Adnani as spokesman for the group are from around 2011.[22]

Another important exception is Abu ‘Ala’ al-‘Afri, who is believed to have served as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s deputy following the latter’s injury in a U.S. airstrike in March 2015 until al-Afri allegedly was killed in May. According to several accounts, Abu Ala’ travelled to Afghanistan in 1998, although there is little information on his activity there. He reportedly pledged allegiance to Zarqawi in 2004 and was appointed to important positions such as Zarqawi’s deputy, as AQI’s emir of Mosul, and as AQI’s “liaison officer” to the al-Qaida leadership in Pakistan.[23]

Thus, Abu Ala’ al-Afri represents a link between AQI and IS. However, based on the scant information available, it would appear that he belonged to a pro-AQI and a pro-al-Qaida faction within ISI that was sidelined after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became leader of ISI. It has been claimed, for instance, that al-Afri was bin Laden’s preferred candidate to become the new leader of AQI. It has also been claimed that al-Afri was more open to reconciliation with Jabhat al-Nusra, IS’s Syrian breakaway faction and the official Syrian branch of al-Qaida.[24] Abu Ala’ al-Afri’s long experience and pedigree from AQI, combined with his alleged charisma would make him a top candidate for a leadership position in ISI post-2010 at a time when the group desperately was in need of qualified and experienced leaders. However, it seems that he was not given important positions right away, but had to work his way up through the ranks of the group. It has also been claimed that there were deep disagreements between him and elements within the group, and that he at some point was excluded from the group.[25] This could be explained by the fact that he was one of the few top leaders of ISI without a known military background and therefore did not belong to the “Baathist” networks dominating ISI since 2010.

There are also other indications that an internal power struggle followed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s ascension to the leadership. For instance, Jamal Hamdani, one of the few in ISI’s Shura Council who voted against the appointment of Baghdadi as the new leader, was reportedly later assassinated for his objections.[26] Alleged pro-Zawahiri elements within ISI reportedly instigated a rebellion against Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in late 2010. The rebellion was supposedly led by Abd al-Karim al-Jubouri, one of ISI’s leaders in Mosul. He and others who were opposed to Baghdadi either quit the organization or were liquidated by the pro-Baghdadi wing within ISI.[27] Accounts from alleged ex-ISI members also claim that the former Baathist officers who in 2010 became the dominating faction within ISI systematically sidelined or even killed the old non-Baathist veterans within ISI.[28]

The role of AQI veterans within Jabhat al-Nusra

It would appear that the establishment of Jabhat al-Nusra in 2011 to some extent formalized and exacerbated the split between the old AQI-generation within ISI and the new generation dominating ISI from 2010. In contrast to IS, several of the founding fathers of Jabhat al-Nusra seems to have been AQI veterans and former companions of Zarqawi. For instance, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, was reportedly close to Zarqawi and left Iraq following the latter’s death. He later returned to Iraq where he was arrested and imprisoned in Camp Bucca. After his release in 2008 he became responsible for the Mosul chapter of ISI, until he left for Syria in 2011 (on orders from Baghdadi) to establish what was to become

Jabhat al-Nusra.[29] Also Abu Anas al-Sahhaha who in 2012 became one of Jabhat al-Nusra's leading commanders in the southern regions of Syria (Dera'a), had been close to the original founders of AQI. [30] According to jihadi sources he had arrived with Abu Anas al-Shami, the Jordanian religious advisor to Zarqawi, and served as his assistant.[31]

Abu Anas al-Sahhaha's predecessor as Jabhat al-Nusra's emir of the southern areas was another long-time companion of Zarqawi, Iyad al-Tubaysi aka Abu Julaybib. Abu Julaybib was a veteran of Zarqawi's camp in Herat who had accompanied Zarqawi to Iraq. He was also a part of Zarqawi's close family through his marriage to one of Zarqawi's sisters.[32] There are few details about his role in Iraq, but he apparently stayed there for several years before he in 2011 was ordered by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to travel to Syria and help establish Jabhat al-Nusra.[33] Like Zarqawi, both Abu Anas al-Sahhaha and Abu Julaybib hail from the Jordanian town al-Zarqa.[34] There were also other members of Zarqawi's extended family who have been associated with Jabhat al-Nusra. For instance, Muhammad Yasin Jarad, Zarqawi's cousin and son of Yasin Jarad, who served as one of the trainers in the Herat camp, fought with Jabhat al-Nusra and was killed in January 2013.[35] For an overview of the backgrounds of the original founders of Jabhat al-Nusra, see Table 4 below.

In addition, several of the al-Qaida veterans who have played crucial roles within Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria seem to have had previous dealings with Zarqawi. For instance, Abu Firas al-Suri, an al-Qaeda veteran operating in Syria on behalf of Jabhat al-Nusra, cooperated with Zarqawi ahead of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 in order to establish a foothold for al-Qaida in the Levant.[36] Abu Humam al-Shami, yet another al-Qaida veteran affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra, stayed in Iraq for four months prior to the fall of Baghdad in 2003 and met with both Zarqawi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri. He later returned to Iraq after he was briefly arrested in Syria and became head of "the mujahidin service office" (*maktab khidamat al-mujahidin*) where Zarqawi's new recruits were trained.[37] Moreover, some of the leaders of the Syrian insurgent group known as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham might have belonged to AQI. For instance, the Ahrar al-Sham leader Abu Ayman al-Hamawi was according to Ahrar al-Sham and anti-IS sources a close companion of Zarqawi.[38]

One important exception is Abu Mariya al-Qahtani aka Maysar Abdalla al-Juburi. Compared to the other original founders of Jabhat al-Nusra (see Table 4), he stands out not only as an Iraqi but also due to his alleged membership in Saddam Hussein's Fida'iyin. He seems to have been highly critical of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's leadership and staunchly opposed to the merger between ISI(S) and Jabhat al-Nusra. It is however not entirely clear if he joined Jabhat al-Nusra due to disagreements with al-Baghdadi or if he mainly was critical of how al-Baghdadi/ISI treated Jabhat al-Nusra.[39]

The role of former officers in AQI and in IS

The two most common patterns in the profiles of the post-2010 leadership of ISI is their background as former officers and/or Baath officials and as former inmates of the U.S-run prisons in Iraq. This does not necessarily imply, however, that they can be described as agents of Saddam Hussein and the Baath party.

First of all, former Iraqi officers already played important roles, not only within IS, but also within AQI and its predecessor Tawhid wal-Jihad (TWJ). Primary sources issued by AQI suggest that most of these former officers belonged to a Salafi undercurrent that emerged in Iraq during the 1980s and especially in the 1990s due to the so-called "Faith Campaign" (*al-hamla al-imaniyya*) initiated by Saddam Hussein. This campaign influenced the Baath party itself and several studies have concluded that the regime turned increasingly Islamic during the 1990s.[40] Although the Faith Campaign partly was intended to contain the dawning Salafi trend in Iraq, the 1990s witnessed an increased influence from Salafism, especially within the armed

forces. As the regime tried to curb the rise of a Salafist movement and arrested several Salafi adherents, this trend mainly operated underground and clandestinely.[41]

According to primary sources from AQI, several of their Iraqi founding fathers belonged to this clandestine Salafi trend within the Iraqi army and were allegedly persecuted by the regime of Saddam Hussein due to their Salafi beliefs. For instance, according to the martyr biography of Abu Talha al-Mawsuli, who became AQI's emir of Mosul and of northern Iraq, had become influenced by Salafism in 1997-98 while serving as a part of Hussein's Special Republican Guard.[42] Abu Maysara al-Iraqi, who served as spokesman both for TWJ and AQI, was a former officer who had established a clandestine group during the rule of Saddam Hussein.[43] Umar Hadid, who in 2004 would become crucial for facilitating AQI's presence in Fallujah, had belonged to a violent Salafi group active in Fallujah during the 1990s.[44] Some accounts indicate that Hadid had served in Saddam Hussein's Special Republican Guard until 1994, but it is difficult to verify this claim.[45] Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, the first leader of ISI (2006-2010), seems to have a similar background. Although there has been much confusion concerning his identity, most accounts agree that his real name was Hamid Dawud Khalil al-Zawi. According to some sources, including pro-IS ones, al-Zawi was an officer in the Iraqi army who either left or was dismissed from the army after joining an Iraqi Salafi group in 1985 and becoming a leading figure within the Iraqi Salafi community.[46]

Thus, one similarity between AQI and IS is that former officers had prominent roles within both organizations. However, an important difference seems to be that while the former officers of AQI left or were dismissed from the Iraqi army *prior* to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the former officers of IS seems to have remained in their positions until the old Iraqi army was dissolved following the invasion. And at least according to anti-IS sources, few, if any, of the current IS leadership belonged to the Iraqi Salafi community or were particularly religious.[47] Several of the top ISI leaders after 2010 such as Abu Ali al-Anbari, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, Muhammad al-Nada al-Juburi, Abu Ayman al-Iraqi, and Abu Faysal al-Zayidi have been described as former officers and/or Baath officials. According to several accounts, including confiscated internal IS-document, it was Haji Bakr, a former Colonel in the Iraqi Revolutionary Guard and former Baathist, who—after the death of the previous ISI-leaders in 2010—promoted several ex-Baathist to leadership positions and reorganized ISI along a Baathist model.[48]

In addition, after the fall of the former regime in 2003, there were several reports of an alleged marriage of convenience between Baathists and militant Islamists belonging to al-Qaida.[49] Although there were important ideological disagreements between Baathists and al-Qaida, tactical cooperation is conceivable given their common goal of destabilizing and removing the new U.S.-installed regime in Iraq.[50] Few studies have presented concrete evidence on this cooperation, however, except for some claims such as an alleged meeting between Zarqawi and Iraq's former vice-president 'Izzat al-Douri in June 2004, where al-Douri reportedly swore obedience to Zarqawi.[51] In addition, the history of the relationship between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida reveals a mutual distrust of each other. Almost all postwar studies from U.S. government institutions concerning the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaida have concluded that the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaida was limited or non-existent.[52] In August 2002, after Saddam had been made aware of the presence of foreign Islamists in Iraq, he ordered his intelligence chiefs to find them as he feared the danger these foreigners could pose.[53] This mutual distrust seems to have continued after the toppling of Saddam Hussein, and according to a document found after the capture of Saddam Hussein he warned Iraqis against cooperating with the jihadists and the foreign Arabs as they had a different agenda than the Baathists.[54] Likewise, incipient members of AQI warned the Arab volunteers from fighting on behalf of the "infidel" Saddam Hussein and his regime.[55]

However, as mentioned above, the Baath party itself had been influenced by Islam during the decade prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and many of the former officers and Baath-members were central in the formation of Islamic motivated insurgent groups in the wake of the collapse of the old regime, such as the Islamic Army in Iraq (*Jaysh al-Islami fi 'l- 'Iraq*) and the 1920 Revolution Brigades (*Kata'ib Thawrat al- 'Ashrin*).

It is also important to distinguish between those former regime elements who still could be described as unreformed Baathist and those who had been part of the regime or the armed forces, but not necessarily adhered to the ideology of Baathism or who fought for the return of the Baath party. It is, after all, 12 years since the fall of the Iraqi Baath regime, and both Iraq and Syria have gone through dramatic changes during these years. For those who are still motivated by Baathism, it would make more sense to join the group known as the Men of the Army of the al-Naqshbandia Order (*Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandiyah*) or JRTN. The group has been described as the “de facto armed wing of the Baath party”[56], but the ideology of the group has been described as a mixture of Baathism, pan-Arabism, and Islam.[57] Until recent reports on his death, this group was led by Iraq’s former vice-president ‘Izzat al-Douri who was both a well-known Sufi leader and charged by Saddam Hussein to lead the Faith Campaign during the 1990s. However, due to his Sufi background he was not in favor of the rise of Salafism that the Faith Campaign resulted in, and he instead promoted a “Sufi network” within the Baath party and the armed forces.[58] As recently pointed out by Aymenn al-Tamimi, there has been more of a competition between JRTN and IS in order to be the dominating Sunni Arab insurgent group in Iraq than a “marriage of convenience”.[59] Thus, even if one accepts the argument that IS is dominated by former Baathists and former Iraqi officers, it is still difficult to argue that IS is the “Baath party resurgent”. If anything, it could be argued that they represent only a segment within a multifaceted organization, if representative of the Baath party at all.

Another common denominator among the top leaders of IS is that several of them were held in U.S-led prisons such as Camp Bucca. Prisons have traditionally been an effective area of recruitment for AQI/IS.[60] AQI members, petty criminals, and other insurgents were often detained together and were given a large degree of self-rule within the prisons. Despite only constituting a small minority, the hardcore extremists were often in a position to dominate and to intimidate the other inmates.[61] Several of the former Baathist were reportedly influenced by the ideology of AQI/ISI in prison. This, in combination with a shared enmity toward the Shiite-dominated regime of Nuri al-Maliki, may have facilitated cooperation and integration of AQI members, former Baathists and other incarcerated insurgents. The prisons may have served as a melting pot from where the current incarnation of the Islamic state emerged. When several of the inmates escaped or were released, they rebuilt ISI – by a mix of a Baathist-inspired organization and a jihadi-inspired ideology. [62]

Conclusion

Despite the apparent historical continuity between AQI and IS, the background and networks of the respective leaderships differ. Jabhat al-Nusra appears to be connected to some of same regional networks that established AQI, while IS is more of an extension of the *Iraqi* faction within AQI and within other indigenous networks like the Baath party and other insurgent groups. With some important exceptions, like Umar al-Shishani, few of the many foreign fighters who have joined the group since it announced its presence in Syria in 2013, have risen to the top tier of IS. However, the focus in this article has been on the top leadership of ISI(S) from 2010 to 2014, prior to the declaration of the Islamic state and the caliphate in June 2014 and the international offensive against the group. Several of the top leaders have been killed during the last year, and thus replaced with yet a new generation of leaders where IS’ foreign veterans most likely will increase their

influence. It has for instance been reported that foreign leaders, like the Saudi Badr al-Shaalan, the Tunisian Tariq bin al-Tahar bin al-Falih al-Awni al-Harzi and Turki ibn Mubarak al-Bin ‘ali from Bahrain have recently gained importance within IS.[63]

One interesting implication of these findings is that local leadership does not necessarily result in a local strategy. Although the leadership of IS has been dominated by Iraqis without prior experience from other conflict areas, and while several of the top leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra belong to the old networks associated with al-Qaida and AQI, it is IS which has taken the more transnational and expansive approach. Jabhat al-Nusra has followed a somewhat more cautious and local strategy, aiming to gradually increase their influence in Syria without clearly specifying a regional or global strategy beyond Syria. On the other hand, given Jabhat al-Nusra’s strong connections to al-Qaida and associated networks and their recent success in gaining strength and local allies in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra may represent a potent and long-term international threat.

Table 1: AQI members included in the series “From the Biographies of the Distinguished Martyrs”[64]

Name	Nationality	Former Baath	Relation to Zarqawi	Afghan veteran
Abu Usama al-Maghribi	Moroccan			
Abu Huraira al-Hijazi	Saudi			
Abu Umayr al-Suri al-Halabi	Syrian			
Al-Haji Thamer Atrous	Iraqi	X		
Abu Hamza al-Urduni	Jordanian		X	X
Sayf al-Umma	Saudi			X
Abu Tariq al-Yamani	Yemen			
Abu Khabbab al-Filastini	Palestinian			X
Abu Omar al-Masri	Egyptian			X
Abu Sulayman al-Filastini	Palestinian			
Al-Hazbar al-Nahdi	Saudi			
Abu Abdallah al-Turki	Turkish		(X)	X
Abu Khalid al-Suri	Syrian/Palestinian			
Umar Hadid	Iraqi	X	X	(X)
Abu Faris al-Ansari	Iraqi	X		
Julaybib Al-Muhajir	Saudi		X	
Abu Basir al-Emirati	Emirates			
Abu al-Hur al-Ansari	Iraqi			
Abu Turab al-Najdi	Saudi			
Abu Hamza al-Shami	Syrian		X	X
Abu Nasr	Egyptian			
Abu Nasir al-Libi	Libyan		X	
Abu Abdallah al-Shami	Syrian		X	X
Abu Muhammad al-Jaza’iri	Algerian			
Abu al-Ghadiya/ Sulayman Khalid Darwish	Syrian		X	X
Abu Ja’far al-Maqdisi	Lebanese		X	
Tariq al-Wahsh	Iraqi	(X)	X	
Abu Radwan al-Tunisi	Tunisian			
Abu Maridyah al-Yamani	Yemeni			
Abu Turab al-Libi	Libyan			
Abu Tariq al-Tunisi	Tunisian			

Aqil al-Masri	Egyptian		X	
Abu Dujanah al-Yamani	Yemeni			
Abu Ubaidah Al Makki	Saudi			
Abu Ayyub al-Iraqi	Iraqi			
Abu Azzam al-Iraqi	Iraqi		X	
Abu Anas al-Shami	Jordanian		X	X
Abu Usama al-Tunisi	Tunisian		X	
Abu Anas al-Tuhami	Yemeni			
Abdallah al-Salih	Saudi			
Abu Hassan al-San'ani	Yemeni			
Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi	Iraqi	X	X	
Abu Zahra' al-'Issawi	Iraqi		X	
Abu Thabit al-Shami	Palestinian/ Syrian		X	

Table 2: Other top leaders of TWJ and AQI (2003-2006)

Name	Nationality	Former Baath	Relation to Zarqawi	Afghan-veteran
Abu Musab al-Zarqawi	Jordanian		X	X
Abu Ayyub al-Masri	Egyptian		X	X
Abu Talha al-Mawsili	Iraqi	X	X	
Abu Maysarah al-Gharib	Syrian		X	
Abu Muhammad al-Lubnani	Lebanese		X	(X)

Table 3: Top leadership of ISI(S) 2010-2014 [65]

Name	Nationality	Former Baath	Relation to Zarqawi	Afghan-veteran
Abu Muslim al-Turkmani	Iraqi (Turkmen)	X		
Abu Muhammad al-Adnani	Syrian		X	
Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	Iraqi			
Haji Bakr/Abu Bakr al-Iraqi	Iraqi	X		
Abu Ala' al-Afri	Iraqi (Turkmen)		X	X
Abu Ali al-Anbari	Iraqi (Turkmen)	X		
Muhammad al-Nada al-Juburi	Iraqi	X		
Abu Ayman al-Iraqi	Iraqi	X		
Abu Ahmad al-Alwani	Iraqi	X		
Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Bilawi	Iraqi	(X)	X	
Nasir al-Din Allah Abu Sulayman	(Non-Iraqi)			(X)
(Abu Faysal al-Zayidi)	Iraqi	X		
Abu Umar al-Shishani	Georgian/Chechen			

Table 4: Original founders of Jabhat al-Nusra (2011-2012)

Name	Nationality	Former Baath	Relation to Zarqawi	Afghan-veteran
Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani	Syrian		(X)	
Abu Mariya al-Qahtani	Iraqi	X		
Abu Anas al-Sahhaba	Jordanian		X	
Iyad al-Tubaysi	Jordanian		X	X
(Abd al-Aziz al-Qatari)	(Iraqi)		(X)	(X)

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Notes

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[64] The table includes only those AQI members who joined AQI prior the establishment of ISI in 2006. Only information mentioned in the biographies has been included, and some biographies have not been included as it is impossible to cull relevant information from them. Cases where sources contradict each other have been marked by an (X).

[65] Only those leaders who have been confirmed as belonging to the top echelon of the group have been included. Regional and local leaders have not been included.