

# Unmasking the Islamic State

## Operational Culture Comparative Analysis and Identification of al Qaeda and the Islamic State

by Hamid Lellou

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “You must not fight too often with one enemy, or you will teach him all your art of war.”<sup>1</sup> After more than two decades of dealing with al Qaeda (AQ), we are still struggling to understand an enemy that is constantly adapting to a changing situation. The 2003 surge in Iraq didn’t defeat AQ. Rather, arbitrary arrests and the jailing of Iraqis at Camp Bucca prison helped this organization spawn a new entity, the Islamic State (IS), which has morphed into a monster of its own. “We could never have all got together like this in Baghdad, or anywhere else,” a former top IS leader (Abu Ahmed) told *Guardian* reporter Martin Chulov. “It would have been impossibly dangerous. Here, we were not only safe, but we were only a few hundred meters away from the entire al Qaeda leadership.”<sup>2</sup> Understanding

**>Hamid Lellou is a Middle East/Africa Linguist and Operational Culture Analyst.**

this new monster (IS) and how they differ from AQ is key to deciding what actions to take next.

### Here’s the first clue: IS is not AQ

*Virtual Space (AQ) vs. Physical Space (IS).* AQ exists as an ideological organization without headquarters, where people sign up to fight for ideals. In an effort to create a large uprising, AQ created multiple cells that could operate independently. While the IS has created a physical space, they pretend to function as a state by offering services, passports, salaries (\$550 for locals vs. \$1,200 for foreigners), and charity.

*Amirul-Mu’minin* (Commander of the faithful) said: “O Muslims everywhere, glad tidings to you and expect good, raise your head high, for today—by Allah’s grace—you have a state and khilafah (Caliphate), which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership”<sup>3</sup>

*Life after death (AQ) vs. Life during life (IS).* The AQ organization proposes an intangible dream and one-way ticket—(*IstishHaad: martyrdom*) while the IS proposes a physical dream with one-way ticket if killed or to enjoy a dignified life under the Khilafah. “The goal of establishing the Khilafah has always been one that occupied the hearts of the mujahidin since the revival of jihad this century.”<sup>4</sup>

*Kill the West (AQ) vs. Create a State (IS).* AQ’s target has always been the west. “O America, O allies of America, and O crusaders, know that the matter is more dangerous than you have imagined and greater than you have envisioned. We have warned you that today we are in a new era, an era where the state, its soldiers, and its sons are leaders, not slaves.”<sup>5</sup> The strength in the IS’s ability to establish a state lies in the fact that much of its administrative and military leadership were former members of the Baathist party that were fired during Bremer’s debaathification policy. They already possess skills in running an organized government, building infrastructure, and developing military strategy.

*Secret Gathering and Internet (AQ) vs. Theatrical communication via YouTube (IS).* While the two organizations have a lot in common, their main difference resides in elements of their *modus operandi*—including their



Area controlled by ISIL is in dark orange. (Map from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.)



**Detainees at Camp Bucca.** (Photo by SSgt Shawn Morris.)

mode of recruitment. AQ has been in the business for a while, even before the Internet era. Over the years, AQ's recruiting techniques have evolved from popular speeches and preaching at mosques and madrassas to video streaming (YouTube). However, with the help of IT-savvy westerners the IS's communications technology remains unbeatable. The Web gives the IS an enormous pool of young people connected to the Internet.

*Call to Muslims to follow the "True Islam" (AQ) vs. Call to all those who feel a Spiritual Void (IS).* If you believe that you can track the IS by monitoring only Jihadists forums, then you are doomed.

Unlike AQ, who targets disappointed but vulnerable young Muslims who are dissatisfied with their leadership and Muslims' situation in the world, the IS casts a wide net targeting worldwide youth, regardless of their faith, origin, nationality, or social background. Youth that are thirsty for justice and inspiration.<sup>6</sup>

*West is the cause of all problems (AQ) vs. You can be the solution to all problems (IS).* AQ focuses its efforts on U.S. targets and does whatever it can to drag U.S. forces to the region. Their intent is to bleed the U.S. economy and exhaust Americans so that they will stop supporting Muslim *Taghut* (unjust Mus-

lim rulers). According to Gen Petraeus's former adviser in Iraq (Dr. Kilcullen),<sup>7</sup> AQ applies four basic tactics:

1. Provocation: To provoke a massive retaliation from government mixing between terrorists and civilians. Examples: 9/11, *Sunni/Shi'a* attacks in Iraq, Chechen School.
2. Intimidation: To prevent local population from cooperating with governments or coalition forces or countries. Examples: Spain 2004, UN in Baghdad 2003.
3. Protraction: Insurgents seek to prolong the conflict in order to exhaust their opponents' resources.
4. Exhaustion: To impose cost on the opponent government, overstress its support system, tire its troops.

In its quest to convey a message to the American people, the IS has so far emphasized attacking American interests in the region. "There is no evidence of [Islamic State] planning attack on US soil."<sup>8</sup>

However, "concerns emerge over Islamic states' ability to inspire or direct attacks on global scale."<sup>9</sup>

*Leave behind all possessions (AQ) vs. Come make your home here (IS).* Terrorism and radicalism are nothing new. At some points, all religions and ideologies have witnessed or undergone some form of radicalism. AQ followed this kind of trend, calling people to leave behind everything for martyrdom. However, there is something unique about the IS. The whole idea of being a terrorist organization, selling itself as a state, recruiting as a sect, and finally fighting simultaneously as a regular army and insurgent group is rather disturbing. They are offering a new beginning, "*Hi-jra (migration to Islamic land)* is obligatory for doctors, engineers, scholars and specialists—there are homes here for you and your families."<sup>10</sup> In their own tainted view, they see themselves as the statue of liberty for the Middle East and the revival of the region.

*Terrorism vs. insurgency.* Although the definition of terrorism varies from one agency to another, AQ's worldwide cells fit the criteria for terrorism. However, the IS—as an armed organization that controls a territory as large as England and provides services to as

### Can you Guess "Who is Who?"

- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| • Virtual space                 | • Physical space                                |
| • Life after death              | • Life during life                              |
| • Kill the West                 | • Create a state                                |
| • Secret gathering & internet   | • Theatrical communication                      |
| • Call to follow true religion  | • Inspirational call to all with spiritual void |
| • West is the cause of problems | • You can be the solution to all problems       |
| • Leave behind all possessions  | • Come make your home here                      |
| • Terrorism                     | • Insurgency                                    |

**Figure 1.**

many people as six million civilians who don't necessarily share its values—has become at best an insurgency and at worse a dictatorship.<sup>11</sup>

## Determining Center of Gravity

From the analysis above, you can see that the only thing that the IS and AQ have in common is their ideology. They diverge in almost all other aspects. But this common element is something we cannot ignore. It began two hundred years ago when reformist scholar Ibn Abdelwahhab allied himself with Beni Saud, which led to the Wahhabi state of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, whose political ideology continues to affect the region. If we look carefully at AQ and the IS, the essence of their ideology comes from Wahhabism, not to be confused with *Salafiyah*. While AQ began as a group politically dissatisfied with Wahhabism, the IS rose from an alliance with dissatisfied AQ members and renegade Iraqi Baathists.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the question would be who is more dangerous? Which one is stronger? Which one should we focus on?

In the last year, most media attention has been focused on the IS; however, AQ has been around for more than 20

---

**... the only thing that the IS and AQ have in common is their ideology. They diverge in almost all other aspects.**

---

years. With knowledge of the organizational differences, let's look at each one's center of gravity (CoG). In physics, the CoG is the point at which an object is in equilibrium. If we need to hit the target hard enough to destroy it, we must hit

it at its center of gravity. If it is hit at a point above, below, or at either side of the CoG, the object will be destabilized, either shifting, spinning, or tipping, but in the end remains intact. We can imagine the IS as a cup of coffee on a table, while AQ is a scattered group of cookies. If you look at the cup of coffee, you can fairly easily estimate its center of gravity. But what about those cookies representing AQ? How would you calculate their combined CoG? It is much easier to find the center of gravity of a single mass (IS) than of a group of satellites (AQ).

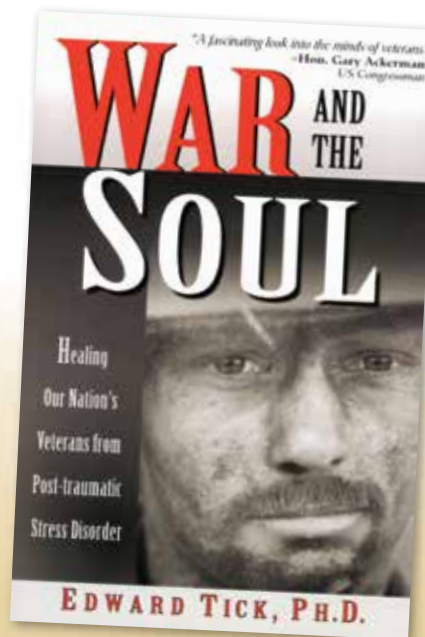
Immediately, the IS presents a much more eminent danger for the Middle East. As for U.S. interests, we cannot forget that AQ has carried out the largest terror attacks in history, on U.S. soil. Nevertheless, if the IS survives to its fifth year, it will become a greater danger to Europe and the U.S. In addition, if the IS begins to accept satellites or no vetted organizations could weaken

# The Tragedy of PTSD

*Compellingly revealed as an Identity Disorder by an internationally recognized psychotherapy expert the book establishes the key to healing by nurturing a positive identity based in compassion and forgiveness.*

**WAR AND THE SOUL** (Paperback)

083560831X Member Value Price: \$17.96 Non-Member Price: \$19.95



**www.marineshop.net • 888-237-7683**

**The MARINE Shop** • 300 Potomac Ave. • Quantico, VA • 703-640-7195

**The MARINE Shop at Camp Lejeune** • Building 84, Exchange Annex • Camp Lejeune, NC • 910-451-7500

Your purchases at **The MARINE Shop** help fund the MCA&F Programs that support Marines! Learn more at [www.mcafdn.org](http://www.mcafdn.org).



**The MARINE Shop**  
Serving Marines Around the World  
Operated by the Marine Corps Association

**GET MEMBER VALUE PRICING –  
JOIN TODAY!**

[www.mca-marines.org](http://www.mca-marines.org) • 866-622-1775





the IS' CoG, it could make them more dangerous to U.S. interests. If we don't give the IS "*le coup de grâce*," its surviving elements will resurface and will probably reinforce AQ since their *modus operandi* works well in hiding.

### How Can We Use This Knowledge?

At some point, we must admit we were wrong and made mistakes. This is the only way to ensure that this will not happen again. "Even now, five years after the U.S. closed down Bucca, the Pentagon defends the camp as an example of lawful policy for a turbulent time."<sup>13</sup> Whether the camp was lawful is for someone else to debate, but there is no doubt that it was effective—but not for us. It was effective in developing the leadership of the IS; currently, 17 of the 25 most important IS leaders spent time in U.S. prisons in Iraq. However, some of these leaders are becoming disillusioned by the extreme violence that the IS is using. We could use this violence to our benefit by offering them another alternative: press Baghdad to share power and resources with all its constituents, including the Arab Sunni and Kurdish population. This approach will reduce people's grievances and cut the ground from under the IS's feet.<sup>14</sup>

Although the IS controls a space larger than England, provides limited services to its constituents, and planned to print its own currency by the end of July 2015, it is still politically incorrect to call the IS a state. "Successful U.S. wars have been fought against states; insurgencies (such as the North Vietnamese) have proven much harder foes. Thinking about the battle against the IS in traditional military terms will do no good."<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the IS is bigger than a terrorist organization. Terrorists kill people—including civilians—randomly or with planned attacks, but they do not occupy areas, provide services, or print their own currency. The IS uses brutal tactics by killing its prisoners or those believed to be spies. It also controls large lands of Iraq and Syria and provides services to those living under its authority. By the end of July, it planned to print its own currency.<sup>16</sup> If this is not a state, an ordinary terrorist organization, or an insurgent group, I propose

that we frame it as a hybrid terrorist insurgent organization; a sophisticated insurgency organized group with elements that behave like state actors. Our approach should be simultaneous combined tactics that we would use as if we were fighting a terrorist state.

By framing the problem this way, we will be able to use the battlespace framework and, therefore, simultaneously use all lines of operation: legs, good governance, information operation, combat operations (but no direct U.S. participation), train and employ forces, essential services, and economic development.

Einstein once said, "If I had an hour to solve a problem, I would spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions."<sup>17</sup> The clock is ticking. The evidence is out there. Let us be smart in analyzing our enemy so that we can develop solutions that will give us a long-term strategic win.

### Notes

1. Napoleon Bonaparte, "Napoleon Quotes on War," accessed at [http://www.napoleonguide.com/maxim\\_war.htm](http://www.napoleonguide.com/maxim_war.htm).
2. Martin Chulov, "ISIS: the Inside Story," *The Guardian*, (New York: 11 December 2014), accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com>.
3. "The Return of Khilafah," *Dabiq Online Magazine*, (WorldAnalysis.net: 6 July 2014), 4, accessed at <http://worldanalysis.net/14/2014/07/english-publication-iraq-dabiq-issue-1>.
4. Hamid Lellou, "Which GPS are we using in the Middle East?" *Your Middle East*, (9 November 2014), accessed at <http://www.yourmiddleeast.com>.
5. Hamid Lellou, "Lost in Translation: ISIS's Intention Was in Their Name, But We Missed It," *Small Wars Journal*, (Bethesda, MD: 4 August 2014), accessed at <http://smallwarsjournal.com>.
6. "Inspire Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" *Inspire AQ magazine*, (Al-Malahem Media Foundation: 27 September 2011: 7.6), accessed at <https://publicintelligence.net/inspire-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-magazine-issue-7-september-2011>.
7. "The Return of Khilafah," 37.

8. Dounia Bouzid, Christophe Caupenne, and Sulayman Valsan, CPDSI, "La Métamorphose Opérée Chez le Jeune par les Nouveaux Discours Terroristes, Bouzar Expwetises cultes et cultures," *Le Centre de Prevention Contre les Derives Sectaires*, (November 2014), accessed at <http://www.bouzar-expertises.fr/metamorphose>.

9. David Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 28–32.

10. Speech by Bruce Hoffman, "The Jamestown Foundation, Eighth Annual Terrorism Conference," Washington, DC on 9 December 2014.

11. Greg Miller, "Tentacles Extend for Islamic State," *The Washington Post*, (June 28, 2015), accessed at <http://www.pressreader.com/usa/the-washington-post-sunday/20150628/281509339837507/TextView>.

12. "The Flood," *Dabiq Online Magazine*, (WorldAnalysis.net: 16 September 2014), 7, accessed at <http://worldanalysis.net/14/2014/07/english-publication-iraq-dabiq-issue-1>.

13. Oliver Libaw, "How Do You Define Terrorism?" *ABC News*, (New York: 11 October 2014), accessed at <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=92340>.

14. Chulov.

15. Jon B. Alterman, "Monsters, Inc.," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (Washington, DC: 25 June 2015), accessed at <http://csis.org/publication/middle-east-notes-and-comment-monsters-inc>.

16. Kamal Half, "IS Prepares to Print its Own Currency by the end of Ramadan," *Raialyawm.com* (June 2015), accessed at <http://www.raialyawm.com/?p=277260>.

17. Albert Einstein, "Quote on Problem Framing," *GoodReads.com*, accessed at <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/60780-if-i-had-an-hour-to-solve-a-problem-i-d>.

