



Inevitable Structural Conflicts of Terrorist Groups

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Most studies focus on the degree of cooperation among terrorist groups, despite the fact that conflicts between such groups overshadow any cooperation and extend far beyond their leadership and members, as the majority of victims are innocent civilians .

In 2015, Brian J. Phillips published a study on the competitiveness and conflicts among terrorist groups between 1987 and 2005, revealing that the majority of them had engaged in violent conflicts with one another for reasons other than different goals and ethnicities. Luke Walter observed in a study published by Leiden University how their attempts to outmaneuver one another is a major cause of such competitiveness and conflict. They flex their muscles by carrying out the most heinous attacks, increasing the level of violence in target countries. They use violence to fight both their opponents in addition to states and societies. Suicide attacks represent the pinnacle of terrorist dedication in the midst of this competitive outplaying. A suicide operation is followed by another out of rivalry.

Conflict Motives

1. Power Differences:

The disparity in power sparks conflict between rival terrorist organizations. Fearing for their lands and resources, or engrossed in negotiations to end conflict with states, the powerful seek to destroy weaker, rapidly rising organizations. According to Mohammed Hafez and Emily Kalah's study, Fratricide in Rebel Movements, weaker organizations seek to challenge stronger dominating ones by having greater representation. In the whirlwind of this rivalry over the redistribution of power, conflicts erupt and no winning organization shall be exempted from the challenges posed by seeking greater power and influence .

2. Power Parity:

Power Parity may lead to combat since it provides a great incentive for conflict parties to grab power, ensure their own security, and eliminate any threat. The more their notions vary, the more intense their aggression becomes against one another, resulting in conflicting goals and eroded trust, and yielding zero-sum results. Any gain is a loss to the other side, making coexistence or power-sharing impossible.

3. International Sponsorship:

In civil-war environments where terrorist organizations operate, external actors often intervene directly or rely on them to serve their own interests. Sponsoring them is an effective, less-costly means for state sponsors of terrorism. They provide them with arms, funds, supplies, or shelters, hoping they would become more disciplined and cohesive enough to serve their goals .

External sponsorship either unites or undermines the unity among terrorist organizations by inciting some insurrectionists to challenge their rivals. This often happens due to the conflicting interests and the political agendas of state sponsors of terrorism, whereby their variety gives terrorist organizations the chance for greater autonomy and helps relieve pressure from any external actor against them.

The Persistence of Conflict

What aggravates conflict among terrorist organizations even more is drawing on contrasting, hard and fast foundations: “Good versus evil” and “Islam versus blasphemy”. This puts disparate rivals in the same boat where they seek extremely ambitious goals with their unrealistic closed-off mindset. They prefer destroying their rivals to competing with them, drawing on a fragile, ignoble morality that justifies their brutal killings of innocent civilians and members of rival organizations. These traits stem from their extremist ideologies that do not allow any conformity to other perspectives and close the door on compromise with groups that share the same intellectual assets but disagree on planning and implementation .

Intrinsic Feature

An essential component, if not the foundation, of terrorist organizations is conflict and killing. External factors have fueled it. However, it began within those groups and has spread across time and space. Conflicts have escalated among many terrorist organizations over the last three decades, including the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in

Algeria, al-Qaeda in Iraq, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These organizations targeted other similar ones.

- **The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria**

In December 1991, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won 188 seats out of 430 in the first round of parliamentary elections and was about to win the majority in the second round in 1992. However, the suspension of elections led to “the dark decade” in Algeria that witnessed civil strife and widespread terrorism. Several insurgent groups emerged, such as GIA and the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) (the armed wing of FIS). GIA and FIS had different visions regarding the conflict and its objectives as manifested in their outlook on democracy in Islam, the legitimacy of Islamists joining secular political regimes, and resorting to violence for establishing the Islamic state.

Since the onset of the Algerian civil war, GIA declared Algeria an apostate state, including the regime, its supporters, staff, and security forces, and escalated the conflict to a full-scale war. It considered democracy a bid’ah (innovation) and jihad the only way to oust secular rulers, rejecting any negotiations or reconciliation with moderate elements of the regime under the motto: “no truce, no dialogue, and no reconciliation .”

GIA launched a full-scale campaign to overthrow the regime, starting with clashes with security forces, then targeting government officials in 1993. In early 1995, the indiscriminate bombings or deliberate attacks on villages and inspection units accounted for the greatest proportion of civilian casualties.

Meanwhile, on May 4, 1995, AIS criticized this approach and retaliated with an open war, issuing a statement giving GIA leaders one month to repent and join its troops, then issuing an explicit threat to eight FIS leaders that they should stop speaking on behalf of the Islamic movement. On June 13, 1995, the GIA issued a statement allowing its members to shed the blood of those they referred to as «the bloodthirsty» both inside and outside of Algeria, and they later became involved in clashes with AIS in which 60 militants were killed .

GIA continued to issue warnings and threats until it declared war on AIS on January 4, 1996. Later that month, it killed 100 AIS operatives and 40 leaders. The killings continued to reach other armed groups and former supporters in a series of 76 massacres between November 1996 and July 2001 .

Then, the Algerian civil war ended after GIA had failed to achieve its goals through terrorism and after its fighters had joined other extremist groups, including the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which later called itself “al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb” (AQIM) in 2007.

- **Al-Qaeda in Iraq**

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 produced resistance across the ideological spectrum, including nationalists, Baathists, and Islamists, which was divided into two sections. The first comprises most nationalist Islamist organizations, such as the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI), the Mujahideen Army (MA) in Iraq, the 1920 Revolution Brigades, and the al-Nasser Salah al-Deen Brigades. They aimed at reintegrating Sunnis in the post-Saddam regime and at placing them on an equal footing with Shiites and Kurds. The second comprises al-Qaeda and pro-violence organizations that refuse democracy, pose a threat to Shiites, and aim to turn Iraq into an Islamic state.

Al-Qaeda carried out full-scale violence in Iraq, targeting occupation forces, the Iraqi economic infrastructure, security services, government officials, foreign contractors, Shiite and Kurdish parties, militant groups, voters, and Sunnis who were willing to work with the new regime .

It then plotted to instigate sectarian strife by carrying out attacks against Shiite civilians in markets, mosques, funerals, and religious celebrations. Meanwhile, it presented itself as the sole leader of resistance. It founded the Mujahideen Shura Council in 2006, declared Iraq an Islamic state, and called other movements to join. Those who refused were targeted in open clashes. Furthermore, IAI, the 1920 Revolution Brigades, the Mujahideen Army (MA) in Iraq, and Ansar al-Sunnah, accused al-Qaeda in Iraq of the murder of dozens of their fighters and affiliates.

- **ISIS and its so-called State**

By 2013, the Syrian war, airstrikes in Iraq, and the withdrawal of American troops had helped the terrorist organization Daesh reestablish and legitimize its presence in the region. Daesh declared the so-called caliphate and demanded that all Syrian rebel groups swear allegiance to its perished successor Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi .

It also continued to attack other factions and described the conflict with polarizing phrases that left no room for objectivity. It regarded all Shiites and Nasserites (Alawites) as enemies, and the Kurds, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham

(Islamic Movement of Free Men of the Levant), and Islamists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to its vision.

Conflicts between ISIS and other organizations escalated into an inter-factional war in 2013. The first target was the FSA-affiliated Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades. ISIS executed 18 of its members in August 2013 for refusing to pledge allegiance, sparking a war in which dozens of fighters were killed on both sides. Al-Tawhid Brigade was next, where clashes broke out over the main neighborhoods in Aleppo, followed by Jaysh al-Islam, a strong group in rural Damascus. ISIS released a video titled: “Repent before we get you”, documenting the beheading of 12 fighters of al-Nusra Front and Jaysh al-Islam. The latter retaliated by filming the execution of 18 ISIS fighters in a video titled: “Jaysh al-Islam’s Revenge Against Apostate Traitors.”

- **Al-Qaeda and ISIS**

Though ISIS is rooted in the principles of the former Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s “Islamic State in Iraq”, al-Qaeda’s representative in Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s declaration of his so-called caliphate in Iraq and the Levant led to breaking ties with al-Qaeda in February 2014. The two groups competed over recruiting new members from extremist circles to assert their power. A schism began among the highest levels of command. In July 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the second emir of al-Qaeda at the time, reproached al-Zarqawi, al-Qaeda’s leader in Iraq, for the excessive violence and indiscriminate slaughters of Shiites in Iraq. However, al-Zarqawi ignored the message and continued with his bloodthirsty agenda .

Following the declaration of ISIS’s so-called caliphate in 2014, al-Zawahiri severely chastised al-Zarqawi and accused ISIS members of iconoclasm and deviation from al-Qaeda’s ideology and approach. On July 15, 2022, al-Zawahiri retaliated against ISIS, stating that the caliphate al-Qaeda seeks is distinct from ISIS’s caliphate, which is founded on the unknown, lies, and bloodshed. ISIS, on the other hand, considers al-Qaeda and its affiliated organizations to be apostates who seek to undermine the jihadist agenda and destroy the caliphate .

Following the murder of al-Zawahiri, conflict resurfaced, with al-Qaeda aiming to re-enter the scene, drawing on its historic legacy, and ISIS portraying itself as the sole representative of the jihadist approach, believing al-Qaeda had deviated from it. According to Afghan media leaks, the attempted assassination of al-Zawahiri was plotted by ISIS in Afghanistan (Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)) under the

command of Shahab al-Muhajir. This prompted al-Zawahiri to relocate from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region to Kabul, capital of Afghanistan, where he was assassinated.

Conclusion

Conflict and competitiveness among self-generated terrorist organizations sprout on a daily basis, feeding on their closed-off extremist ideologies, deviant visions, and fragile, ignoble practices that contradict Islamic moderation and tolerance. All of this makes their conflicts and dedication structural and inevitable.