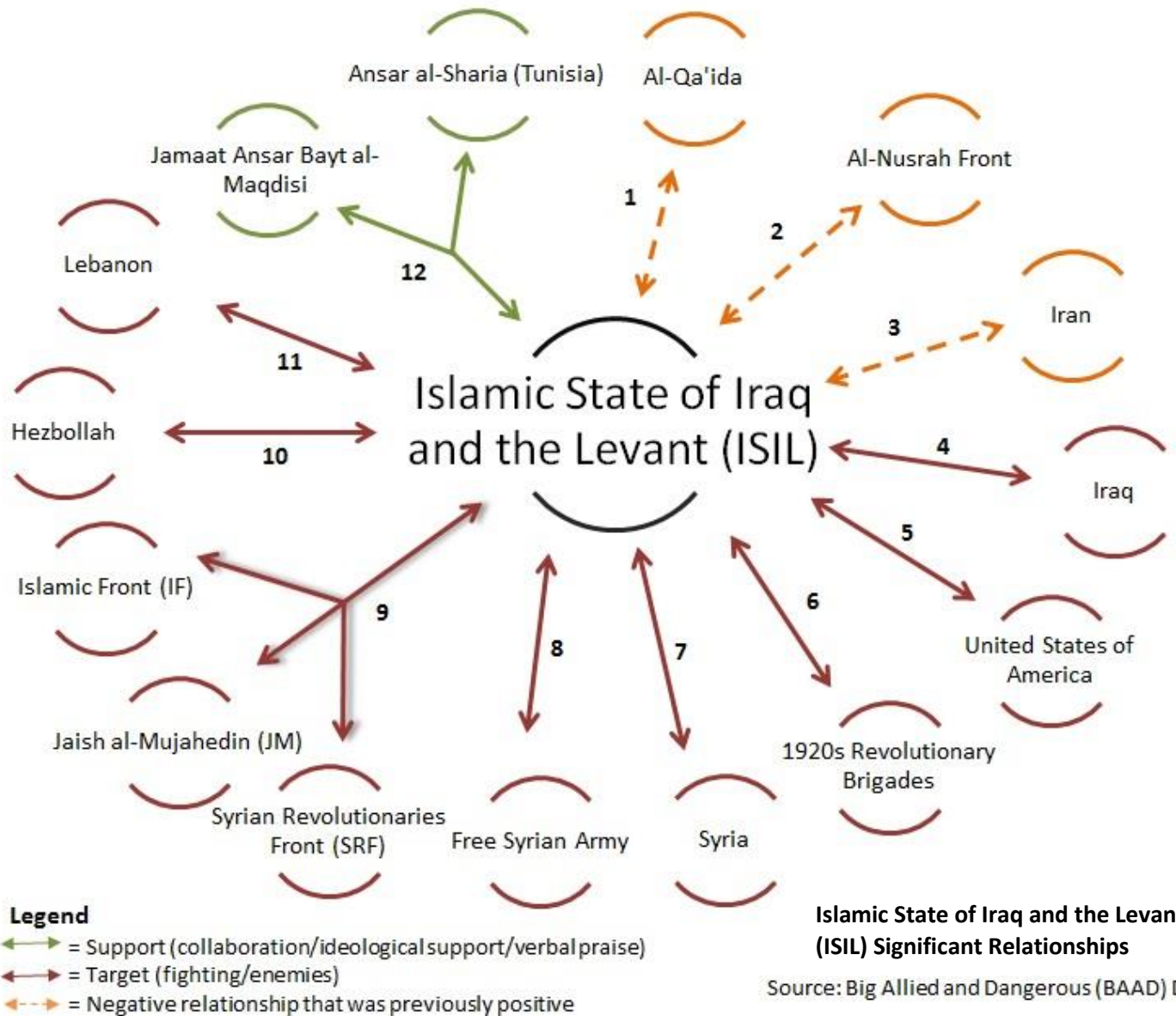


## The Evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL): Relationships 2004-2014

### ISIL RELATIONSHIPS, 2004-2014



### NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIPS THAT WERE PREVIOUSLY POSITIVE

- 1) The group currently known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was originally founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi's first connection with al-Qa'ida began in 2000 when he sought out Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan and requested assistance in creating al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, a network focused on overthrowing the Jordanian government.<sup>1</sup> Zarqawi initially avoided the post 9/11 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led surge in Afghanistan by relocating to Iran and then, in 2002, to Iraq.<sup>2</sup> At the request of al-Qa'ida leaders, Zarqawi began facilitating the move of militants into Iraq to combat coalition forces. However, Zarqawi did not formally

swear allegiance to and join under the umbrella of al-Qa'ida until 2004.<sup>3</sup> This strengthened relationship was reflected in Zarqawi's network changing their name to Tanzim Qa-Idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, commonly referred to as al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI).<sup>4</sup> The association persisted as AQI continued to develop, forming the Mujahidin Shura Council (MSC) in 2006 and, after Zarqawi's death later that year, changing their name to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) under the command of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi in October.<sup>5</sup> ISI's relationship with al-Qa'ida was characterized by ideological schisms, with al-Qa'ida leaders voicing concern that the organization's indiscriminate and brutal tactics were isolating them from public support in Iraq.<sup>6</sup> The relationship continued to deteriorate in 2013 when Abu Umar al-Baghdadi attempted to claim al-Nusrah Front under his command—a claim that was rejected by al-Nusrah Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani who instead pledged allegiance directly to Al-Qa'ida.<sup>7,8</sup> Al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri attempted to mediate, supporting Jawlani as the official Syrian branch of al-Qa'ida.<sup>9</sup> In defiance, ISIL increased operations in Syria including targeting members of al-Nusrah Front. As a result, Ayman al-Zawahiri denounced ISIL on February 2, 2014, officially ending al-Qa'ida's affiliation with the group.<sup>10</sup>

- 2) **Al-Nusrah Front** was originally founded when Abu Umar al-Baghdadi sent Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani along with militants to Syria to set up a front.<sup>11</sup> In April 2013, al-Baghdadi announced the expansion of ISI to Syria, officially rebranding the organization as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIL).<sup>12</sup> Al-Nusrah Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani was not consulted before the announcement and denounced al-Baghdadi's claims, confirming instead his allegiance directly to al-Qa'ida's leadership.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, the groups clashed in Syria, with each targeting militants from the opposing organization and solidifying their break.
- 3) On February 16, 2012, the United States Department of Treasury designated the **Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS)** as a supporter of terrorism for provided funding and arms to ISIL (then al-Qa'ida in Iraq)—however their report does not provide specific evidence or dates.<sup>14</sup> Iran has collaborated with al-Qa'ida based on their common opposition to the United States' involvement in the region. In 2001 when Zarqawi fled coalition forces in Afghanistan, the MOIS allowed him and others safe haven in Iran.<sup>15</sup> However, subsequent to ISIL's 2014 advancement in Iraq, the Iranian government has voiced their support of military action against the group.<sup>16</sup>

## GROUPS THAT AQI/ISI/ISIL HAS TARGETED HISTORICALLY

- 4) Since 2003 the organization has been working to overthrow the **Iraqi government**, expel United States forces and establish a government under their interpretation of Islamic law.<sup>17</sup> They have continued to clash with the government and the military has led campaigns against the group.
- 5) In 2003 the organization began targeting **United States**-led forces in Iraq. They have also criticized the influence of Western actors, such as the U.S., but choose to focus on the “near enemy” rather than threaten the U.S. homeland.<sup>18</sup>
- 6) The **1920s Revolutionary Brigades** was originally formed to combat the United States-led coalition forces in Iraq. However, according to the Long War Journal, in 2007 they began coordinating with U.S. forces in order to expel ISIL militants from the region and have focused their efforts on mitigating the influence of ISIL.<sup>19</sup>
- 7) ISIL began campaigns against the **Assad regime in Syria** in 2011, gaining notoriety for their highly brutal tactics including decapitations and enforcement of Sharia wherever they gained territory.<sup>20</sup> As ISIL's relationship with other rebel groups continued to fracture, they increasingly changed the focus of their attacks to other Islamic coalitions striving to overthrow the Syrian regime.<sup>21</sup>
- 8) Since gaining a foothold in Syria, ISIL has clashed with other rebel groups in the region, including assassinating commanders of the **Free Syrian Army**.<sup>22</sup>
- 9) Since 2014, ISIL has been publically denounced by and exchanged fire with several active groups in Syria, including the umbrella **Islamic Front (IF)**, the **Jaish al-Mujahedin (JM)**, and **Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SFR)**.<sup>23,24</sup>
- 10) In 2011 **Hezbollah** sent troops to Syria on behalf of the Assad regime and has clashed with rebel forces there, including ISIL.<sup>25</sup> The groups are ideologically opposed and have targeted each other in Syria and in Lebanon.

11) In early 2014, ISIL declared **Lebanon** as a target due to Hezbollah's involvement in Syria.<sup>26</sup> Violence has spilled across the Lebanese-Syrian border as ISIL and al-Nusrah have both perpetrated suicide attack against Hezbollah.<sup>27</sup>

## GROUPS THAT CONTINUE TO SUPPORT ISIL\*

12) According to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, as of the beginning of 2014, **Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdisi** and **Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia)** have both continued to offer verbal support for the ISIL and their actions.<sup>28</sup>

\*current reports from Iraq indicate that ISIL does have some degree of support from local Sunni communities and groups who oppose the current regime led by Nouri al-Maliki.

### ABOUT THIS FACT SHEET

**START** is a U.S. Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Center of Excellence headquartered at the University of Maryland.

This Background Report was funded through the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) by the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs through Award Number 2012-ST-061-CS0001, CSTAB 3.2. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or START.

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Data are drawn from the Big Allied and Dangerous (BAAD) project, which focuses on the creation and maintenance of a comprehensive database of terrorist organizational characteristics and linking that data to prominent event, insurgency and country-level characteristics datasets. The project is led by START investigators Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer through the Project of Violent Conflict at Rockefeller College, University at Albany-SUNY.



<sup>1</sup> Gambill, Gary. "Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi: A Biographical Sketch." *The Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Monitor*. December 15, 2004. Volume 2: Issue 24. [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=27304#.U6giffldXyE](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=27304#.U6giffldXyE)

<sup>2</sup> Corera, Gordon. "Unraveling Zarqawi's al-Qaeda Connection." *The Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Monitor*. May 5, 2005. Volume 2: Issue 24

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<sup>3</sup> "February 2004 Coalition Provisional Authority English translation of terrorist Musab al Zarqawi letter obtained by United States Government in Iraq." United States Department of State. February 12, 2004. <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/31694.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Felter, Joseph and Brian Fishman. "Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records." *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*. January 2, 2007. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaidas-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-a-first-look-at-the-sinjar-records>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Zelin, Aaron Y. "Al-Qaeda in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS (Part I)." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. September 10, 2013. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-in-syria-a-closer-look-at-isis-part-i>

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<sup>8</sup> Jones, Seth G. "A Persistent Threat: The Evolution of al Qa'ida and Other Salafi Jihadists." *RAND National Defense Research Institute*. June 3, 2014. 7-8. [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR637.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR637.html)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Zelin, Aaron Y. "Al-Qaeda Disaffiliates with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham". *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. February 4, 2014. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-disaffiliates-with-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham>

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<sup>13</sup> Zelin, Aaron Y. "Al-Qaeda in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS (Part I)." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. September 10, 2013. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-in-syria-a-closer-look-at-isis-part-i>

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