

Seven Years of Terror: Jihadi Organisations' Strategies and Future Directions

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This paper aims to provide practitioners and academics with an empirical approach for assessing the current state and future directions of the Salafi-Jihadi Movement's (SJM) member organisations. Making use of available data, it taps into the Islamic State's (IS) and al-Qaeda's (AQ) strategic priorities. Then, the article maps and examines various strategies of the broader SJM using game theory. It assigns numerical representations to these strategies based on both the quantitative analysis of AQ's and IS's strategic priorities and published assessments of jihadi organisations' strategies. The findings suggest that Localisation is the most pragmatic approach when compared to global undertaking for winning the hearts and minds of jihadi constituencies or proto-state building. Moreover, the results indicate that to regain hegemony of the SJM, AQ may opt to orchestrate terrorist attacks against the West. The model also shows that IS scores the highest payoffs through using guerrilla warfare methods and sleeper cells—as well as by rebuilding its depleted capacities and carrying out attacks that polarise Sunni communities. The paper concludes by providing implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Keywords: Al-Qaeda; Islamic State; strategy; enemy hierarchy; game theory

Introduction

Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) are part of the broader Salafi-Jihadist Movement (SJM) and are believed to share the same general objective; both organisations aim to establish a state for the *Ummah* (Muslim community).¹ While IS's *baqiyyah wa tatamaddad* (enduring and expanding) maxim captures its strategy for achieving this objective, AQ is thought to ascribe to a gradualist approach.² IS claimed that state building is attainable and should not be delayed. To implement its enduring and expanding strategy,³ IS used its ideological, militant, social, and economic instruments of power.⁴ AQ's gradualist strategy dictates that the establishment of such a state requires meeting several conditions, such as educating and gaining the support of Muslim populations in those areas in which its affiliates, front organisation, and allies operate.⁵ Central to AQ's incremental approach is winning the hearts and minds of local populations, in part through establishing alliances with local rebels and tribes as well as establishing sharia courts to influence the social and ideological discourse of populations it seeks to control.⁶ The group views these undertakings as preconditions to establishing a viable state for the Ummah.⁷ AQ contends that IS's failure to account for these factors short-circuited its expansive state-building efforts.⁸

In addition to IS and AQ, jihadist organisations with global reach and ambitions, the SJM consists of numerous regional and national groups whose resources, opportunities, and collective identities manifest in cooperation, mergers, and rivalry.⁹ AQ and IS have competed for years for the hegemony of the broader SJM, and their perspectives on and actions towards establishing a state for the Ummah have been at the heart of this contention.¹⁰ For the SJM as a whole, the establishment of a state based on strict Salafist precepts has been a unifying objective, with offensive jihad as the overarching method.¹¹

¹ David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith, "Beyond Belief: Islamist Strategic Thinking and International Relations Theory," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 2 (2010): pp. 242-66.

² Barak Barfi, "AQAP's Soft Power Strategy in Yemen," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 11-12 (2010): pp. 1-5; Ryan Evans, "From Iraq to Yemen: Al-Qaida's Shifting Strategies," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 10 (2010): pp. 11-5; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross et al., "Islamic State Vs. Al-Qaeda: Strategic Dimensions of a Patricidal Conflict," *New America*, December 2015, https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/12103-islamic-state-vs-al-qaeda/ISISvAQ_Final.e68fdd22a90e49c4af1d4cd0dc9e3651.pdf; and Colin P. Clarke, and Assaf Moghadam, "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," *Orbis* 63, no. 3 (2018): pp. 347-371.

³ Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (NY, NYC: Routledge, 2013).

⁴ Lina H. Khatib, "The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* 29, 2015, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC53_Khatib_ISIS.pdf.

⁵ Gartenstein-Ross et al., "Islamic State Vs. Al-Qaeda: Strategic Dimensions of a Patricidal Conflict."

⁶ Clarke and Moghadam, "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat."; Jennifer Cafarella, "Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for Al Qaeda," Middle East Security Report 25, *Institute for the Study of War*, December 2014, <http://www.understandingwar.org/jabhat-al-nusra-syria-islamic-emirate-al-qaeda>; and Yassir Abbas, "How Al Qaeda is Winning in Syria," *War on the Rocks*, May 10, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/how-al-qaeda-is-winning-in-syria/>.

⁷ Gartenstein-Ross et al., "Islamic State Vs. Al-Qaeda: Strategic Dimensions of a Patricidal Conflict."

⁸ Robin Wright, "After the Islamic State," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/12/after-the-islamic-state>.

⁹ Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation among Terrorist Actors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Tricia Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Jerome Drevon, "The Jihadi Social Movement (JSM) Between Factional Hegemonic Drive, National Realities, and Transnational Ambitions," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): pp. 55-62.

¹¹ Joas Wagemakers, "Revisiting Wiktorowicz: Categorising and Defining the Branches of Salafism," in *Salafism After the Arab Awakening: Contending with People's Power*, ed. F. Cavatorta (Oxford, England:

By taking this perspective on the SJM, it can be studied as a form of ‘contentious politics.’¹² This allows the strategies and actions of the various actors within the SJM to be assessed based on such elements as their organisational mode (centralised vs. decentralised),¹³ doctrinal positions, ideological commitment, as well as their various operational preferences.¹⁴

By doing so, this paper aims to provide practitioners and academics with a novel approach for assessing the current state and potential future directions of the SJM’s member organisations. The intention is to present a methodical framework for assessing the persistent threat of the global jihadist movement, one that anchors its premises on quantitative data and sound qualitative analysis. As such, it may allow practitioners to tailor better-informed policies.

This piece begins by discussing how strategic choices can inform the actions of terrorist organisations within the SJM. The following section outlines jihadi organisations’ enemy hierarchy, the data used to examine AQ’s and IS’s preferences and performance, and the analytical tools for assessing these organisations’ strategies. The article then reviews the status and strategies of AQ and IS, before turning to these terrorist organisations’ target preferences and strategic performance. After demonstrating and discussing findings on these group’s target preferences and strategic performance, the paper maps the strategies of SJM’s member organisations. This effort concludes with discussing the main findings and their implications.

Assessing AQ’s and IS’s Strategies

Examining the strategies of jihadi organisations is a challenging undertaking. Generally speaking, researchers have examined terrorist organisations’ strategies based on these

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 Oxford University Press, 2017); Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Youseff H. Aboul-Enein, *Militant Islamist Ideology: Understanding the Global Threat* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013); Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Bunzel, Cole, “Jihadism on Its Own Terms,” *Islamism and the International Order Working Group, Hoover Institution*, Stanford University, May 17, 2017, <https://www.hoover.org/research/jihadism-its-own-terms>; Lahoud, Nelly, *The Jihadis’ Path to Self-Destruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, eds., *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013); Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Hurst & Co, 2016).

¹² Colin J. Beck, “The Contribution of Social Movement Theory to Understanding Terrorism,” *Sociology Compass* 2, no. 5 (2008): pp. 1565-81.

¹³ Centralization is about hierarchal mechanisms, structures of decision-making, and authority within an organization. It reflects organizational settings wherein the authority, oversight, and decision-making power follow a top-down structure.

¹⁴ Drevon, “The Jihadi Social Movement (JSM) Between Factional Hegemonic Drive, National Realities, and Transnational Ambitions,” pp. 55-62; Michael Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda’s Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Roel Meijer, “Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong as a Principle of Social Action: The Case of the Egyptian al-Jama’al al-Islamiyya,” in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. R. Meijer (London: Hurst & Co, 2009), pp. 191-195; Brynjar Lia, and Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged al Qaida Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27, no. 5 (2004): pp. 355-375; Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, “The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks,” *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008): pp. 437-449; Walter Enders and Xuejuan Su, “Rational Terrorists and Optimal Network Structure,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 1 (2007): pp. 33-57; Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

groups' rhetoric,¹⁵ the writings of their strategists,¹⁶ and/or perpetrated attacks.¹⁷ Each method is prone to certain methodological and analytical caveats. For example, jihadi organisations are not believed to operate in a state of full information, their perpetrated attacks are not necessarily informed by their overarching strategies. Violent organisations may carry out attacks that satisfy rather than maximise the strategic value of such attacks.¹⁸ One may argue that jihadi organisations are not creatures of strategies and master plans but rather operationally informed, aware of their goals, and able to strategically prioritise based on available alternatives. Moreover, research on the writing of jihadi organisations' strategists recommends treating these materials speculatively.¹⁹ Strategies are likely down to a composite of factors.²⁰ This effort examines the strategies of members of the SJM based on their targeting priorities and success rate as well as qualitative assessments of these organisations' strategies. It also evaluates the scrutinised strategies against the writings of jihadi scholars (e.g., *Management of Savagery*, *Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, etc.).

Building on recent research on intra-jihadi competition, and based on the principle of revealed preference,²¹ this paper gauges AQ's and IS's strategic priorities based on a triple enemy hierarchy, namely: *far enemy*, *near enemy*, and *enemy within*.²² The competition between members of the jihadi current is expected to impel such organisations to engage in an outbidding process.²³ Until the start of the so-called Arab Spring in late 2010, AQ—then the uncontested leader of the SJM—led the movement in terms of attacks against the far enemy (e.g. North America and Western Europe).²⁴ According to AQ's thinking, attacking the far enemy will deter such states from supporting elements of the organisation's near enemy -That is to say, countries that jihadis believe should be ruled under a strict Salafi method and creed (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, etc.).

However, after the announcement of the new caliphate in mid-2014, IS took the lead in the SJM, surpassing AQ in the number of attacks against both far and near-enemy targets and gaining the upper hand in the struggle for the attention of would-be recruits. Among other things, this competition between IS and AQ for the hegemony of the movement

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¹⁵ For example, see: Max Abrahms, Nicholas Beauchamp, and Joseph Mroszczyk, "What Terrorist Leaders Want: A Content Analysis of Terrorist Propaganda Videos," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 11 (2017): pp. 899-916.

¹⁶ For example, see: Ahmed S Hashim, "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 4 (2014): pp. 69-83; and Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ For example, see: Tore Refslund Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): pp. 63-88.

¹⁸ Karl-Dieter Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁹ Brian A. Jackson and Bryce Loidolt, "Considering al-Qa'ida's Innovation Doctrine: From Strategic Texts to "Innovation in Practice," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 2 (2013): pp. 284-310.

²⁰ Eric Van Um, "Discussing Concepts of Terrorist Rationality: Implications for Counterterrorism Policy," *Defence and Peace Economics* 22, no. 2 (2011): pp. 161-79.

²¹ This principle suggests that patterns in operations are indicative of preferences.

²² For review on the hybrid enemy hierarchy (near and far enemy), please see: Fawaz A Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Inc., 2007); For further justification on the inclusion of enemy within (a.k.a., internal enemy), please see: Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," pp. 63-88; For more detailed typology, please see: Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²³ Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Donatella Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²⁴ Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State," *Brookings Doha Center*, March 13, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf>.

resulted in the escalation of a rhetorical war as well as considerable infighting. This phenomenon captures another element of jihadi organisations' enemy hierarchy;²⁵ namely, the 'enemy within,' or those organisations or individuals who—while ostensibly part of the SJM—are claimed to be destroying the movement and its goals from the inside.

The number of jihadi players in the same sphere of operations, their respective strength, and the dynamics of their interactions (e.g. are they rivals, are the partners, etc.) influence the long-term objectives of the SJM's member organisations.²⁶ Competition among jihadi groups may lead to the prioritisation of organisational survival over long-term strategic objectives.²⁷ The desire to be seen as the leader of the SJM, whether on a global or local level, or the need to survive in the face of attacks by competitors, can shape operational activities in ways that may not seem to align with stated ideological preferences. That said, the following subsection outlines the employed data and analyses.

Method

In organisational research, strategy defines the mechanism through which an entity balances the way it responds to external threats and opportunities based on its resources and capabilities.²⁸ In this sense, an organisation such as AQ or IS tailors its strategic priorities by assessing its capabilities and resources. One way to evaluate an organisational strategy is to tap into its success rate.²⁹ Success rate refers to the subset of actions that deliver a desirable outcome divided by all actions, whether successful or not. From this action-based prism, behavioural preferences outline an organisation's strategic priorities.³⁰ Success rates can be used to tap into the strategic performance of an organisation in terms of efficiency in pursuing its strategic priorities.³¹ As such, to examine AQ's and IS's strategic efficiency, target preferences are assessed in terms of success rates. Target preferences are inspected based on the outlined triple enemy hierarchy. The quantitative analysis relies on data from (i) the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and (ii) Hamming's 2017 list of directed or guided plots and attacks against the

²⁵ Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," pp. 63-88.

²⁶ Ibid; Drevon, "The Jihadi Social Movement (JSM) Between Factional Hegemonic Drive, National Realities, and Transnational Ambitions," pp. 55-62; Wahid Brown, *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in al-Qa'ida from 1989-2006* (Westpoint, N.Y. Military Academy, Combating Terrorism Center, 2007); Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qa'ida and its Periphery* (Westpoint, N.Y.: Military Academy, Combating Terrorism Center, 2010); Clarke and Moghadam "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," pp. 347-371; Cole Bunzel, "A House Divided: Origins and Persistence of the Islamic State's Ideological Divide," *Jihadica*, June 5, 2018, <http://www.jihadica.com/a-house-divided/>; and "Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State," *Jihadica*, October 3, 2017, <http://www.jihadica.com/caliphate-in-disarray/>.

²⁷ Drevon, "The Jihadi Social Movement (JSM) Between Factional Hegemonic Drive, National Realities, and Transnational Ambitions," pp. 55-62

²⁸ Charles Warren Hofer and Dan Schendel, *Strategy Formulation: Analytical Concepts* (ST. Paul, MN: West Publ., 1978); and Robert M Grant, "The Resource-Based Theory of Competitive Advantage: Implications for Strategy Formulation," *California Management Review* 33, no. 3 (1991): pp. 114-135.

²⁹ Todd Sandler, John T. Tschirhart, and Jon Cauley, "A Theoretical Analysis of Transnational Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 77, no. 1 (1983): pp. 36-54; Martin E Smith, "Success Rates For Different Types of Organizational Change," *Performance Improvement* 41, no. 1 (2002): pp. 26-33.

³⁰ Tore Refslund Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): pp. 63-88.

³¹ Hofer and Schendel, *Strategy Formulation: Analytical Concepts*; Sandler, Tschirhart, and Cauley, "A Theoretical Analysis of Transnational Terrorism."; and Smith, "Success Rates For Different Types of Organizational Change."

West.³² While the former is used to examine organisational strategic priorities and efficiency in targeting elements of the near enemy and enemy within, the latter is used to assess the same indicators for the far enemy. Hamming's database of terrorist attacks and plots against the jihadi organisations' far enemy covers all missing cases in the GTD and thus, was used in investigating this element of the jihadi organisations' enemy hierarchy.

Like other open source event-based datasets, the GTD has certain limitations. This database relies on media reports to list events perpetrated by nonstate actors. Of course, "the media may report inaccuracies and...there may be conflicting information or false, multiple or no claims of responsibility."³³ As noted by one of the reviewers of this paper, data on events perpetrated by the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), a predecessor group of the IS, may be incomplete. The nature of ISI's operations (i.e. the use of covert tactics) may have left a number of incidents perpetrated by this group undetected and unreported.³⁴ This is likely the case for the GTD, and thus, this caveat extends to the current effort. Nevertheless, the GTD is one of the largest datasets on terrorist attacks outside the West.³⁵ Additionally, comparative assessments suggest that observations recorded in this database highly correlate with trends in other datasets.³⁶ The GTD is a useful database for examining worldwide trends of terrorist attacks.³⁷ It also allows for examining research hypotheses using game-theoretic analysis.³⁸

Game theory is a useful tool to examine strategic interactions and choices of agent pairings, such as counter-terrorism practitioners and terrorist organisations.³⁹ These pairings include, but are not limited to, the interaction between policymakers and terrorists,⁴⁰ mechanisms and strategies for the allocation of resources to minimise risks emanating from suicide bombers;⁴¹ the feasibility, or lack thereof, of economic

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³² As discussed through the section of triple enemy hierarchy, this effort uses data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The data is obtained from GTD: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2017). Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>; and National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2018). Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd> and National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2017a). Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>. The data on attacks against Western countries is obtained from a list published in Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences." It is worth noting that this author found only one plot that was an accounted for in Hamming's list. Details on the plot emerged after the publication of his list.

³³ Gary LaFree, "The Global Terrorism Database: Accomplishments and Challenges," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4, no. 1 (2010), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/89/html>.

³⁴ Brian Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

³⁵ Max et al., "What Terrorist Leaders Want: A Content Analysis of Terrorist Propaganda Videos," pp. 899-916.

³⁶ Global Terrorism Database Senior Staff, "The Challenges of Collecting Terrorism Data," Washington Post, August 6, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/08/06/the-challenges-of-collecting-terrorism-data/?utm_term=.82059cbc8d9a.

³⁷ Todd Sandler, "The Analytical Study of Terrorism: Taking Stock," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): pp. 257-71.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Todd Sandler and Kevin Siqueira, "Games and Terrorism: Recent Developments," *Simulation & Gaming* 40, no. 2 (2009): pp. 164-192: Quotation from pp. 164 to 165.

⁴⁰ Todd Sandler, John T. Tschirhart, and Jon Cauley, "A Theoretical Analysis of Transnational Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 77, no. 1 (1983): pp. 36-54.

⁴¹ Vicki Bier, Santiago Oliveros, and Larry Samuelson, "Choosing What to Protect: Strategic Defensive Allocation Against an Unknown Attacker," *Journal of Public Economic Theory* 9, no. 4 (2007): pp. 563-87; Scott Farrow, "The Economics of Homeland Security Expenditures: Foundational Expected Cost -

assistance in dealing with international terrorism;⁴² modus operandi of terrorists and their target selection;⁴³ and counter-terrorism campaigns and their impact on terrorist organisations' recruitment efforts.⁴⁴ This tool proved appropriate in studying the interaction between extreme and moderate factions of a terrorist movement.⁴⁵ It is also helpful in developing scenarios that result from competition between terrorist organisations⁴⁶ and in outlining organisational measures for deterring members from switching to other organisations within the same movement.⁴⁷ Building on recent work on AQ's and IS's strategies, and the findings of the quantitative assessment of AQ's and IS's triple enemy hierarchy, this paper makes a number of assumptions to map and examine the SJM's strategic decision tree using game-theoretic analysis.

The Status and Strategies of AQ and IS

Before turning to the assessment of AQ's and IS's enemy hierarchy, it is worthwhile to detail the current state of affairs for both organisations. This brief review will also factor in developing the strategic scenarios of the SJM's members.

Since IS declared its caliphate in mid-2014, AQ failed to compete with its jihadi rival in terms of perpetrating attacks against their common far enemy. Between January 2010 and August 2018, AQ controlled or guided two terrorist attacks in the West; for comparison, IS controlled or guided 18 attacks in the West.⁴⁸ The loss of its chief of external operations in 2009 and the elimination of Bin Laden in 2011 possibly altered AQ's capacity to perpetrate such attacks.⁴⁹ Also, unanticipated events (e.g. the so-called Arab Spring) and AQ's opportunistic nature may have shifted AQ's attention from the far to the near enemy.⁵⁰ This shift in AQ's strategic priorities is a subject of debate. A US government assessment suggested that AQ, challenged by IS, was weakened and

Effectiveness Approaches," *Contemporary Economic Policy* 25, no. 1 (2007): pp. 14-26; Robert Powell, "Defending Against Terrorist Attacks with Limited Resources," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 3 (2007): pp. 527-41; and Jun Zhuang and Vicki M. Bier, "Balancing Terrorism and Natural Disasters—Defensive Strategy With Endogenous Attacker Effort," *Operations Research* 55, no. 5 (2007): pp. 976-91.

⁴² Jean-Paul Azam, "Suicide-Bombing as Inter-Generational Investment," *Public Choice* 122, no. 1-2 (2005): pp. 177-98; and Ethan Bueno De Mesquita, "The Quality of Terror," *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (2005): pp. 515-30.

⁴³ Eli Berman and David Laitin, "Hard Targets: Theory and Evidence on Suicide Attacks," *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper 11740 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2005); and Sanjay Jain and Sharun W. Mukand, "The Economics of High-Visibility Terrorism," *European Journal of Political Economy* 20, no. 2 (2004): pp. 479-94.

⁴⁴ Daniel Jacobson and Edward H. Kaplan, "Suicide Bombings and Targeted Killings in (Counter-) Terror Games," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 5 (2007): pp. 772-792.

⁴⁵ Ethan Bueno De Mesquita, "Conciliation, Counterterrorism, and Patterns of Terrorist Violence," *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005): pp. 145-76.

⁴⁶ Gil S. Epstein and Ira N. Gang, "Understanding the Development of Fundamentalism," *Public Choice* 132, no. 3-4 (2007): pp. 257-71.

⁴⁷ Kevin Siqueira, "Political and Militant Wings within Dissident Movements and Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 2 (2005): pp. 218-36.

⁴⁸ Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," pp. 63-88. Both terrorist attacks were in France. They were the Merah 2012 and Charlie Hebdo 2015 terrorist attacks.

⁴⁹ Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda's External Operations Chief thought Killed in US Strike in Pakistan," *Long War Journal*, December 11, 2009,

https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/12/al_qaedas_external_o.php.

⁵⁰ Charles Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 8, No. 9 (2015): pp. 13-8; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "How al-Qaeda Survived the Islamic State Challenge," Hudson Institute, 1 March 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/research/12788-how-al-qaeda-survived-the-islamic-state-challenge>; and Aaron Zelin, "Introduction," in *How Al Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State*, ed. Aaron Zelin, Policy Focus # 153 (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2017).

struggling to maintain its status in the SJM.⁵¹ Observers, both in the analyst and scholarly communities, argued against these findings.⁵² Some analysts and scholars suggest that AQ's failure is not solely dependent on a diminished capacity to carry out attacks against its far enemy but rather on changing strategic priorities in terms of enemy hierarchy, contending that AQ's shifted its attention to local theatres (e.g. Syria).⁵³ These assessments argued that AQ shifted to a gradualist approach to win the hearts and minds of local populations in its affiliates' and front organisations' sphere of operations.⁵⁴

Available evidence hardly suggests that AQ's gradualism and shift allowed it to "weather the storm of the Islamic State's geographic expansion."⁵⁵ It could be argued that IS's territorial defeat in Syria and Iraq resulted from its fratricidal nature and the intensive counter-terrorism campaign launched by its long list of instigated near and far enemies, rather than AQ's strategic wisdom.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, AQ gradualism is evidenced by, among other things, its effort to exert influence on militant jihadi groups and populations under their control. For example, it established sharia courts and advised its affiliates to avoid violence against Muslims whenever possible.⁵⁷ That said, AQ's failure to keep its Syrian affiliate, al-Nusra Front, on a leash cast doubt on the effectiveness of its gradualist approach. It is also unclear whether AQ is more strategic in its purported focus on the near enemy. Such an assertion still demands some form of quantitative support.

Whatever the case, this paper does not challenge the notion that AQ is an evolving organisation that poses a threat to nation states where it maintains operations, albeit through affiliates and front organisations, and to the West as its sworn far enemy.⁵⁸ Previous work on AQ suggests that the group is a strategically flexible, adaptable, and agile organisation,⁵⁹ arguably due to its organisational 'culture' of "centralisation of decision and decentralisation of execution."⁶⁰ As such, accounting for AQ's affiliates in terms of strategic adaptability and emanating threats may provide a useful lens to the overall organisation's strategic performance.⁶¹ For instance, al-Qaeda in the Islamic

⁵¹ US Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2016," US Department of State, 2016, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2016/>.

⁵² For the debate on AQ's relevance see; Bruce Hoffman, "Al Qaeda: Quietly and Patiently Rebuilding," *The Cipher Brief*, 30 December 2016, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/al-qaeda-quietly-and-patiently-rebuilding>; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design," *Hudson Institute: Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 1 June 2018, <https://www.hudson.org/research/14365-how-al-qaeda-works-the-jihadist-group-s-evolving-organizational-design>; and Bruce Hoffman, "Al Qaeda's Resurrection," *Expert Brief, Council on Foreign Relations*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>.

⁵³ For example, see: Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design."; Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," pp. 63-88; Hoffman, "Al Qaeda: Quietly and Patiently Rebuilding."; Hoffman, "Al Qaeda's Resurrection."; Clarke and Moghadam "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," pp. 347-371; for example, debated the findings of Country Reports on Terrorism (2016).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Clarke and Moghadam "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," p. 350.

⁵⁶ Mohammed Hafez, "The Curse of Cain: Why Fratricidal Jihadis Fail to Learn from Their Mistakes," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 10 (2017): pp. 1-7.

⁵⁷ Clarke and Moghadam "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," pp. 347-371; Cafarella, "Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for Al Qaeda."; and Abbas, "How Al Qaeda is Winning in Syria."

⁵⁸ Daniel R. Coats, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," 13 February 2018, 10, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/Final-2018-ATA---Unclassified---SASC.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Bruce Hoffman, "The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs*, May 2008,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2008-05-03/myth-grass-roots-terrorism>.

⁶⁰ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design,";

⁶¹ Clarke and Moghadam "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," pp. 347-371.

Maghreb (AQIM), al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shabaab, and al-Nusra Front (a.k.a. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham), AQ's affiliates in North Africa, Yemen, Somalia, and its former affiliate in Syria continue to (i) endure and be resilient to mounting Western and local attacks, (ii) maintain influence in their sphere of operations, and (iii) establish front organisations.⁶²

With the rapid losses that IS endured as of late, analysts began to assess the possibility of ultimate organisational defeat and debate the potential structure and refuges IS may look for to compensate for such major setbacks.⁶³ The majority of published analyses, however, suggest that the organisation will make a comeback.⁶⁴ It is believed that IS core anticipated being pressed and has made strategic arrangements to deal with such massive territorial losses. This is courtesy of (i) its control of a large swath of land and population during its rise, (ii) its clandestine network and hidden resources, (iii) the

⁶² On AQIM please see: Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Dilemmas of Jihadist Loyalty," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): pp. 166-72; Jacob Wirtschafter and Karim John Gadiaga, "Africa Becomes the New Battleground for ISIS and Al-Qaeda and They Lose Ground in the Mideast," *USA Today*, 25 October 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/10/25/africa-becomes-newbattleground-isis-and-al-qaeda-they-lose-ground-mideast/796148001/>; and Heni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "Ansarul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso," *CTC Sentinel* 11, No. 3 (2018): pp. 21-6. On AQAP, please see: Sudarsan Raghavan, "Still Fighting al-Qaeda US Airstrikes are Pounding the Group in Yemen, yet the Militants Fight on Fiercely," *Washington Post*, 6 July 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/07/06/feature/as-a-u-s-shadow-war-intensifies-in-yemen-al-qaeda-is-down-but-not-out/?utm_term=.5cb5ef032124; and N°174/Middle East Report, "Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base," *International Crisis Group*, 2 February 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-al-qaeda-expanding-base>; on al-Shabaab, please see: Jason Warner, "Sub-Saharan Africa's Three 'New' Islamic State Affiliates," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 1 (2017): pp.28-32; Tricia Bacon, "This is Why Al-Shabaab Won't be Going Away Anytime Soon," *Monkey Cage*, *The Washington Post*, 6 July 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/07/06/this-is-why-al-shabaab-wont-be-going-away-any-time-soon/?utm_term=.75ee22025323; Tricia Bacon, "Strategic Progress Remains Elusive in America's Expanded Air Campaign against Al-Shabaab," *War on the Rocks*, 5 March 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/strategic-progress-remains-elusive-americas-expanded-air-campaign-al-shabaab/>; and Conor Gaffey, "How al-Shabab Overtook Boko Haram to Become Africa's Deadliest Militants," *Newsweek*, 2 June 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/goo/isis-africa-al-shabaab-boko-haram-619010?11oc.encReferrer=aHRocHM6LY93d3cuZ29vZ2xLMNvbS8%3D&11oc.ua=1&11oc.dv=14>. On al-Nusra Front, please see: Charles Lister, "Al-Qaida's Complex Balancing Act in Syria," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): pp. 122-9; and Tore Refslund Hamming and Pieter Van Ostaeyen, "The True Story of al-Qaeda's Demise and Resurgence in Syria," *Lawfare*, 8 April 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/true-story-al-qaedas-demise-and-resurgence-syria>.

⁶³ Daniel L. Byman, "What Happens When ISIS Goes Underground?" *Brookings Institution*, 18 January 2018a, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2018/01/18/what-happens-when-isis-goes-underground/>; Colin P. Clarke, "How ISIS is Transforming," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 September 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-09-25/how-isis-transforming>; and Jonathan Spyer, "Welcome to Syria 2.0," *Foreign Policy*, 25 January 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/25/welcome-to-syria-2-0/>.

⁶⁴ Benjamin Bahney and Patrick B. Johnston, "ISIS Could Rise Again," *The RAND Blog*, 15 December 2017, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/12/isis-could-rise-again.html>; Michael P. Dempsey, "How ISIS' Strategy is Evolving," *Foreign Affairs*, 18 January 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-01-18/how-isis-strategy-evolving>; Michael P. Dempsey, "10 Takeaways from the Fight Against the Islamic State," *War on the Rocks*, 12 March 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/10-takeaways-from-the-fight-against-the-islamic-state/>; Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: ISIS hasn't been Defeated," *FDD's Long War Journal*, 22 February 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/02/analysis-isis-hasnt-been-defeated.php>; Haid Haid, "ISIS's Military and Economic Roots Start to Take Hold Again in Syria," *Syndication Bureau*, 1 July 2018, <https://syndicationbureau.com/en/issis-military-and-economic-roots-start-to-take-hold-again-in-syria/>; and Daniel L. Byman, "Where Will the Islamic State Go Next?," *Lawfare*, 22 June 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/where-will-islamic-state-go-next>.

volatility of Syria and its fractured jihadi scene, and (iv) Iraqi government's possible mishandling of territories liberated from IS.⁶⁵

During its rise, IS, then ISIL or ISIS, led operations to *break the borders*⁶⁶ (i.e. seize and control territories in Syria and Iraq), and establish footholds in and receive pledges of allegiances from jihadi groups operating beyond its controlled territories. In the days of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the mantra was *Baqiyyah* (enduring) and became *Baqiyyah wa Tatamaddad* (enduring and expanding) in its transformation to ISIL and then IS.⁶⁷ Scholars and analysts suggested that IS core will likely employ ISI's strategy (i.e. enduring) and wait for circumstances to change so it can make another comeback.⁶⁸ To do so, IS core would operate as a covert insurgency focused on guerrilla warfare, "inciting sectarian tension and amplifying polarisation; coercing, intimidating, and co-opting marginalised Sunni communities; and exacting "revenge" attacks and assassinating rivals and collaborators."⁶⁹ There is already some evidence to substantiate the

⁶⁵ Seth G. Jones et al., *Rolling Back the Islamic State* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1912.html; Asharq Al-Awsat, "Experts: ISIS Still Capable of Recapturing Iraqi Areas," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 19 January 2018, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1148291/experts-isis-still-capable-recapturing-iraqi-areas>; Hassan Hassan, "Zawahiri's Statements Reveal Plenty About Syria's Fractured Jihadi Scene," *The National*, 29 November (2017a), <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/zawahiri-s-statements-reveal-plenty-about-syria-s-fractured-jihadi-scene-1.679892>; Hassan, Hassan, "Zawahiri's Statements Reveal Plenty About Syria's Fractured Jihadi Scene," *The National*, November 29, (2017a), <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/zawahiri-s-statements-reveal-plenty-about-syria-s-fractured-jihadi-scene-1.679892>; Patrick B. Johnston et al., *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR192.html; Hassan Hassan, "Down But Not Out: ISIL Will Regroup and Rise Again," *The National*, 25 December 2017b, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/down-but-not-out-isil-willregroup-and-rise-again-1.690559>; Raja Abdulrahim, "Islamic State Returns to Guerilla Warfare in Iraq and Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 January 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-returns-to-guerrillawarfare-in-iraq-and-syria-1514889000>; Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 11 (December 2017c): pp.1-8; Michael R. Gordon, "Areas Newly Seized from ISIS Seen at Risk of Backsliding," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 December 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/we-havenot-yet-seen-the-full-impact-of-isis-sleeper-cells-coming-back-to-life-1.722796>; and Eric Schmitt, "The Hunt for ISIS Pivots to Remaining Pockets of Syria," *New York Times*, 24 December 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/24/world/middleeast/last-phase-islamic-state-iraqsyria.html>.

⁶⁶ Al-I'tisam, *Kasr al-hudūd* (Breaking the Borders), 2014.

⁶⁷ ISI is the predecessor of ISIS. For review, please see: Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*.

⁶⁸ Ibid; Clarke and Moghadam, "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat."; Shiraz Maher, "Islamic State is Not Beaten and Will Return," *The New Statesman*, 17 October 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2017/10/islamic-state-notbeaten-and-will-return>; and Hassan Hassan, "ISIL Sleeper Cells in Iraq are a Warning Sign the Extremist Group is Already Reforming," *The National*, 28 March 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/isil-sleeper-cells-in-iraq-are-a-warning-sign-the-extremist-group-is-already-reforming-1.716800>.

⁶⁹ Asaad Almohammad and Charlie Winter, "From Directorate of Intelligence to Directorate of Everything: The Islamic State's Emergent Amni-Media Nexus," *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Forthcoming 2019): p.5. For review, please see: Hashim, "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate," pp. 69-83; Joby Warrick, *Black flags: The rise of ISIS* (New York: Anchor, 2015); William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: Macmillan, 2015); Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*; Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror - updated edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016); Lawrence Wright, *The Terror Years: From al-Qaeda to the Islamic State* (New York: Vintage, 2016); Ali Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2017); Gerges, Fawaz A, *ISIS: A History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017); and Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation among Terrorist Actors*.

mentioned arguments.⁷⁰ However, unlike its ISI forebear, IS has footholds in localities across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia,⁷¹ and thus, IS core in its current state, combined with its branches (Wilayat) are arguably stronger than ISI ever was before 2011.

IS might be able to operate as both “a clandestine insurgency in-theatre and a global terrorist network out-of-theatre, thereby keeping up with its *baqiyyah wa tatamaddad* maxim for months, if not years, to come.”⁷² Therefore, as in the case of AQ’s affiliates, accounting for IS’s branches adaptabilities and emanating threats should be considered when assessing IS’s strategic performance. The difference, however, is that IS core’s performance in terms of executed operations is likely to be higher than that of AQ core. With this brief review, the next section addresses both terrorist organisations in terms of their strategic priorities and efficiency. Extrapolating on the following empirical findings and in reconciliation with relevant literature, the paper outlines and examines a strategic decision tree of SJM’s member organisations.

Triple Enemy Hierarchy

The following quantitative assessment examines the strategic priorities and performance of AQ and IS in targeting elements of their enemy hierarchy. The data for the assessment of AQ and IS attacks against the near enemy and enemy within were obtained from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).⁷³ At the time this analysis was carried out, GTD had not released data on incidents that occurred after December 31, 2017. Therefore, the assessment and discussion will only examine the period between 2010 and 2017. GTD registers data as incidents perpetrated by nonstate actors when

⁷⁰ Haid, “ISIS’s Military and Economic Roots Start to Take Hold Again in Syria.”; Borzou Daraghi, “After the Black Flags of ISIS, Iraq Now Faces the White Flags,” *Buzzfeed*, 1 April 2018, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/borzoudaragahi/isis-iraq-white-flags-syria-newname/>; Liz Sly and Salim Mustafa, “ISIS is Making a Comeback in Iraq just Months after Baghdad Declared Victory,” *Washington Post*, 17 July 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/isis-is-making-a-comeback-in-iraq-less-than-a-year-after-baghdad-declared-victory/2018/07/17/9aac54a6-892c-11e8-9d59-dccc2c0cabcf_story.html?utm_term=.5d0856e870bd; Ahmed Aboulenein, “Islamic State Makes Comeback in Iraq with Switch to Guerrilla Tactics” *Reuters*, 23 July 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-security/islamic-state-makes-comeback-in-iraq-with-switch-to-guerrilla-tactics-idUSKBN1KEoMH>; and Asser Khattab, “ISIS Jihadis Kill more than 160 in Southern Syrian City,” *Financial Times*, 26 July 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/f5436c94-901e-11e8-b639-7680cedcc421>.

⁷¹ Abdulbasit Kassim, “Boko Haram’s Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism,” In *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency*, ed. J. Zenn (New York: West Point CTC, 2018); Aaron Zelin, “The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Notes*, 45, January 2018, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/foreign-fighters-in-libya-consequences-for-africa-and-europe>; Thomas M. Sanderson, “Black Flags over Mindanao: ISIS in the Philippines,” *Testimony Presented before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific*, 12 July 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/black-flags-over-mindanao-isis-philippines>; Nicholas A. Glavin, “Remaining and Expanding: Why Local Violent Extremist Organizations Re-flag to ISIS,” *Small War Journal*, 18 May 2018, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/remaining-and-expanding-why-local-violent-extremist-organizations-reflag-isis>; The Economist, “Jihad’s next battleground: The fight against Islamic State is moving to Africa,” *The Economist*, 14 July 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/07/14/the-fight-against-islamic-state-is-moving-to-africa>; The Economist, “The new Caliphate: Jihadists are trying to take over the Sahel,” *The Economist*, 12 July 2018, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/07/12/jihadists-are-trying-to-take-over-the-sahel>; Byman, “What Happens When ISIS Goes Underground?”

⁷² Almohammad and Winter, “From Directorate of Intelligence to Directorate of Everything: The Islamic State’s Emergent Amni-Media Nexus,” p.3.

⁷³ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (2018a).

such incidents are intentional and involve violence or intimidation;⁷⁴ “GTD does not include plots or conspiracies that are not enacted, or at least attempted.”⁷⁵

The analysis of AQ’s and IS’s target preferences and strategic performance in terms of near enemy and the enemy within starts on January 1, 2010 and ends on December 31, 2017. In reconciliation with earlier arguments, the scrutiny of the performance of the global players of the SJM could be assessed based on AQ core combined with its affiliates and IS core and its branches. To that effect, the operations of AQ core and two of its most prominent affiliates, AQAP and AQIM, and its former Syrian affiliate, *al-Nusra Front* (a.k.a. Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham), in terms of reported incidents in the GTD, are examined.⁷⁶ As shown in later sections, this analysis accounts for al-Shabaab separately, given its outsized effect as an AQ affiliate. This additional comparison will allow for coding of numerical representation of AQ strategies for game theoretic analysis. Similarly, incidents attributed to IS core (ISI and ISIL) and its branches in Egypt (Sinai Province of the Islamic State, a.k.a. IS Sinai), Libya (Tripoli Province of the Islamic State, a.k.a. IS Tripoli), and at the border between Niger and Mali (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, a.k.a. ISGS) were assessed.

Figure 1 demonstrates that for the scrutinised period, IS core and the three examined branches perpetrated 6,516 incidents (i.e. enacted plots and attacks) and AQ core and its three selected affiliates perpetrated a total of 1,509 incidents. In other words, IS was responsible for 81.20 percent and AQ was responsible for 18.80 percent of all incidents, showing a higher capacity for IS in this comparison.

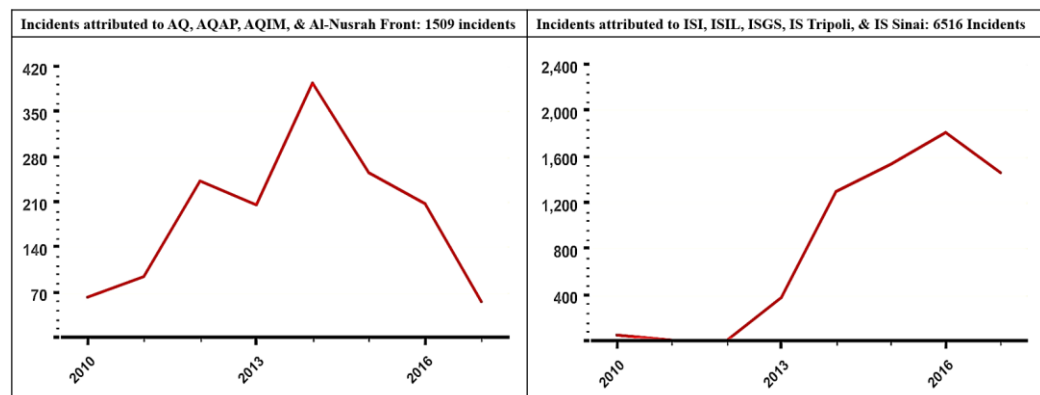


Figure 1. Incidents attributed to AQ and IS⁷⁷

Moreover, Figure 2 indicates that the fluctuation in the incidents attributed to AQ is primarily due to those inflicted by AQAP and to a significantly lower degree by its former Syrian affiliate. From 2012 until the end of 2017, incidents attributed to IS increased rapidly and, unsurprisingly, IS core was behind most of them. Nevertheless, the number

⁷⁴ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2018b). Global Terrorism Database [Codebook]. Retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

⁷⁵ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) 2018b: P.11

⁷⁶ This paper considers Al-Nusra front prior to January 2017 an AQ affiliate. This analysis dose not treat Al-Nusra as an AQ affiliate after the group rebranded itself into Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in January 2017. For review see: Aymen J. Al-Tamimi, "From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham," *KAS Syria/Iraq Office and the Al-Nahrain Center for Strategic Studies*, 29 June 2018, <http://www.kas.de/syrien-irak/en/publications/52977/>.

⁷⁷ Source: GTD. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START). GTD [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

of incidents alone does not sufficiently explain target priority, much less strategic efficiency.

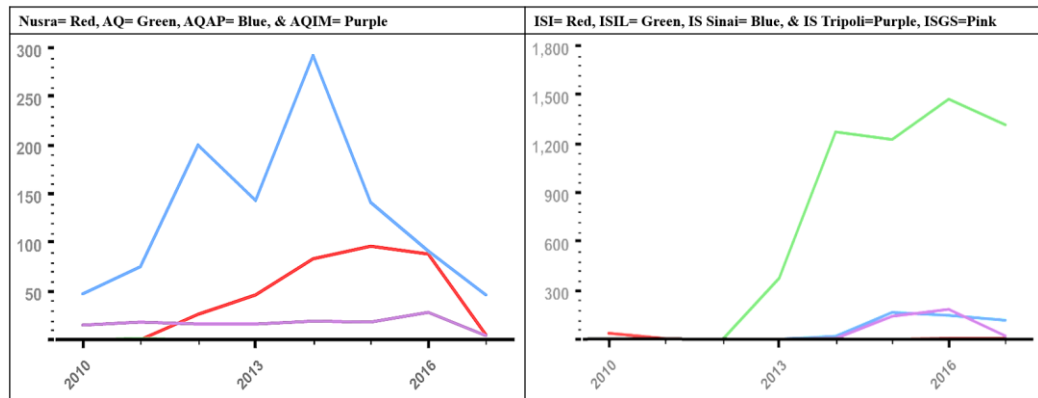


Figure 2. Incidents attributed to perpetrating groups⁷⁸

If we are to investigate the target type of incidents perpetrated by IS core and its three selected branches, and AQ core and its three examined affiliates, we may have a better understanding of both organisations’ strategic preferences. Figure 3 shows that the military was AQ’s most preferred target. This category accounted for 45.66 percent of all attacks committed by AQ core and its selected affiliates. For IS, private citizens and property were the preferred targets and accounted for 44.52 percent of IS attacks. This category was the second on AQ’s target list (21.67 percent of all its attacks). The military constituted IS’s second most preferred target, receiving 28.01 percent of all attacks. Figure 3 also demonstrates that local governments and their security services and private businesses are high up on both organisations’ target lists.

⁷⁸ Source: GTD. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START). GTD [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

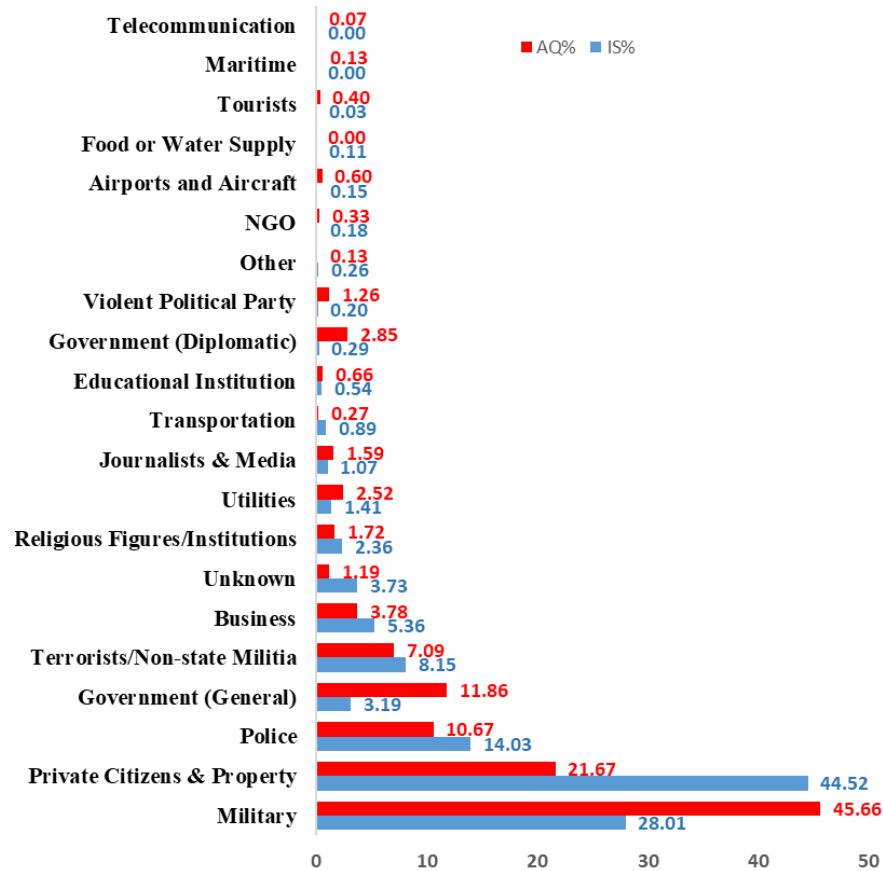


Figure 3. AQ and IS target preference: Percentages of attacks against the near enemy and enemy within⁷⁹

According to Hamming’s qualitative assessment, the enemy within was not approached in the same fashion by AQ and IS; AQ showed more restraint, through Hamming’s assessment of IS and AQ leadership speeches, in tackling threats emanating from this new enemy category.⁸⁰ Attacks against the enemy within appear under the label *terrorist/non-state militia* in GTD’s categories of target type (Figure 3). Examining attacks against the enemy within requires removing cases that involve non-jihadi groups and organisations. After accounting for cases that raised doubt (e.g. involving elements of the Free Syrian Army) or involved groups from outside the Sunni Jihadi current (e.g. Hezbollah), 21 of the 531 incidents perpetrated by IS and 13 of the 107 incidents perpetrated by AQ were removed.⁸¹ However, the picture did not change much after omitting such incidents. This enemy category accounted for 6.22 percent of all AQ attacks, and 7.82 percent of all IS attacks. In other words, IS preferred to attack this target category by only 1.6 percentage points more than AQ. These findings are consistent with Hamming’s assessment of the rhetoric of IS and AQ, which highlighted the significance of this element of the enemy hierarchy to each organisation.⁸² However, there does not seem to be any significant difference in the approaches taken by AQ and IS against this target category. For IS it ranked fourth on its enemy list, after civilian,

⁷⁹ Source: GTD. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START). GTD [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

⁸⁰ Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," pp. 63-88.

⁸¹ It is likely that the author missed some cases due to the limited information on such attacks. Therefore, the results need to be assessed with caution and further scrutiny is required.

⁸² Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," pp. 63-88.

military, and police targets. For AQ it ranked fifth, after military, civilian, general government, and police targets.

That said, in terms of numbers of attacks (including failed attacks) and target selection (target rank), IS seems to project a higher capacity regarding attack numbers, with civilians and military targets at the top of its list. AQ appears to have lower capacity as to the total number of attacks, with military and civilian targets ranking first and second. AQ's purported prioritisation and gradualism—like, for example, avoiding attacks against civilians and members of the jihadi current—does not seem to withstand scrutiny for the period between 2010 and 2017. This may suggest that the lower number of attacks AQ perpetrated against civilians and members of the jihadi current were likely a matter of capacity rather than deliberate avoidance in the pursuit of its gradualist strategy. Nonetheless, the previous figures show that IS shows less restraint in targeting civilians and elements of the jihadi current. To that end, it remains unclear whether the rank of target types is borne merely out of opportunistic circumstances.

One could argue that the number of attacks and target selection alone does not account for the nature of organisational operations (strategic vs. opportunistic) and their strategic priorities. As outlined earlier, this paper defines strategy as an organisational mechanism to respond to external opportunities and threats in reconciliation with its capacity and resources. As discussed, assessing success rate is one way to examine an organisation's strategic performance in terms of efficiency.⁸³ GTD accounts for both failed and successful incidents that are perpetrated by terrorist organisations.⁸⁴ As such, the success rates for IS (core and the three selected branches) and AQ (core and the three examined affiliates) were calculated using GTD (Figure 4).⁸⁵

The results indicate that while IS used its higher capacity to perpetrate attacks against elements of its enemy hierarchy (Figures 1-2), AQ scored higher on success rates at many fronts (Figure 4). For instance, its success rates were higher than that of IS for attacks against military (by 13%), religious figures and institutions (by 9%), and civilian targets (by 2%). Nevertheless, IS demonstrated higher success rates in attacking diplomatic (by 14%) and general government assets (by 5%), and in terms of attacks against police (by 2%) and members of the jihadi current (by 1%). As displayed in Figure 4, the difference between the two organisations' success rates in attacking elements of the jihadi current is slim.

That said, it is noteworthy that IS still managed to outbid AQ in terms of successful attacks against military, religious figures and institutions, and civilian targets by 788, 114, and 2,387 attacks, respectively. To this end, the assessment thus far substantiates common assertions regarding IS, but not AQ.⁸⁶ This again shows that IS, while less efficient on several fronts of its enemy hierarchy, still outbids and outperforms AQ at most fronts.

According to the earlier exemplification of strategy and strategic priorities, the results suggest that in terms of target selection and successful attacks in targeting the near enemy, IS appears to be a superior entity for the period between 2010 and 2017.

⁸³ Smith, "Success Rates For Different Types of Organizational Change."

⁸⁴ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) (2018b).

⁸⁵ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) (2018a).

⁸⁶ For example, see: Hoffman, "Al Qaeda: Quietly and Patiently Rebuilding."; Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design."; Hoffman, "Al Qaeda's Resurrection."; Clarke and Moghadam "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," pp. 347-371.

However, AQ seems to be more efficient in attacking military, religious, and civilian targets. Also, AQ appears to be more efficient in targeting educational institutions and utilities. As such, the results cast more doubt about AQ’s purported restraint in targeting Muslim populations and members of the jihadi current in the pursuit of its gradualist approach for the period between 2010 and 2017.

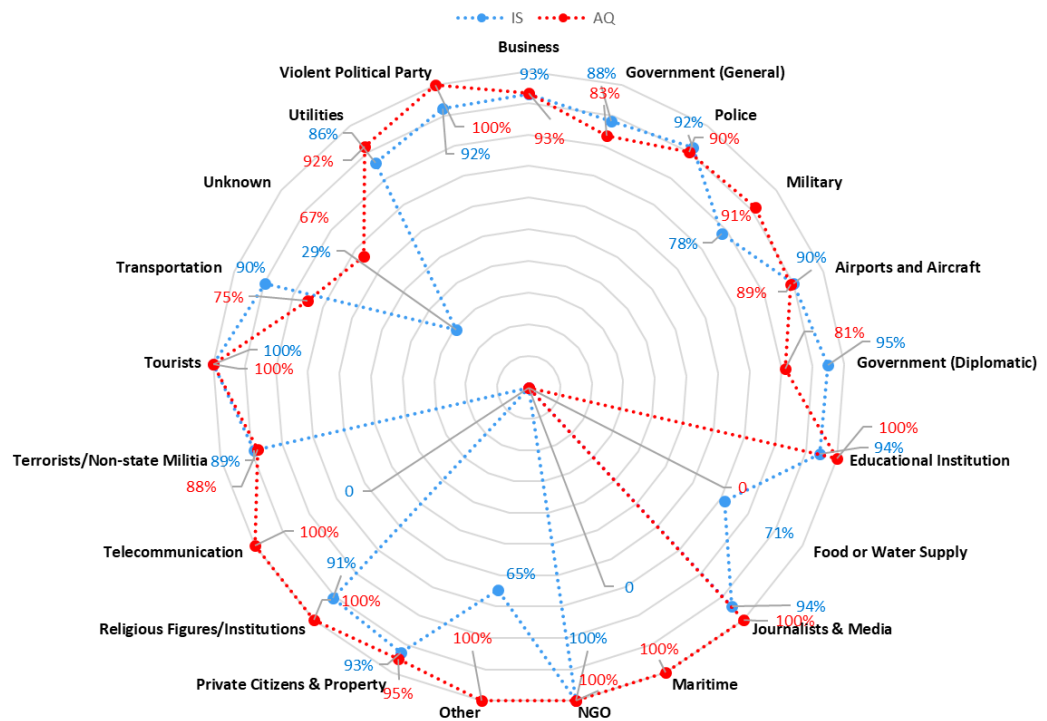


Figure 4. AQ vs. IS success rate: Near enemy and enemy within.
 Note: 0 denotes that the organisation did not attempt to attack the target.⁸⁷

Accounting for Al-Shabaab

One may argue that the exclusion of Al-Shabaab, AQ’s affiliate in Somalia, from the comparison could have altered the results in favour of IS. Also, previous research suggests that AQ functions under the principle of “centralisation of decision and decentralisation of execution.”⁸⁸ Al-Shabaab was one of the most active AQ affiliates in the years leading up to 2018. It was also deemed the most deadly terrorist organisation in Africa in 2016, a title that had long been reserved for Boko Haram, the Nigerian terrorist organisation.⁸⁹ As such, this study accounts for al-Shabaab separately because this affiliate’s outsized effect makes it an analytical outlier. The need to bring attention to al-Shabaab’s capacity to perpetrate attacks and the need to factor its influence in AQ’s strategic performance prompted the decision to examine its influence in a separate comparison.

⁸⁷ Source: GTD. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START). GTD [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

⁸⁸ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, “How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group’s Evolving Organizational Design.”

⁸⁹ Gaffey, “How al-Shabab Overtook Boko Haram to Become Africa’s Deadliest Militants.”; Bacon, “Strategic Progress Remains Elusive in America’s Expanded Air Campaign against Al-Shabaab.”; Bacon, “This is Why Al-Shabaab Won’t be Going Away Anytime Soon.”

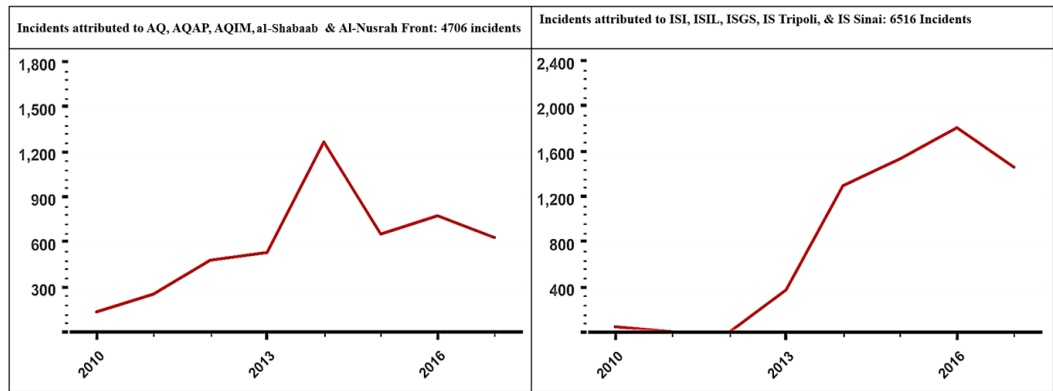


Figure 5. Incidents attributed to AQ (including al-Shabaab) and IS.⁹⁰

Figure 5 shows that such inclusion added 3,197 incidents to AQ perpetrated attacks. Thus, most of the fluctuations in AQ-related incidents are largely attributed to its Somalian affiliate (see Figure 6).

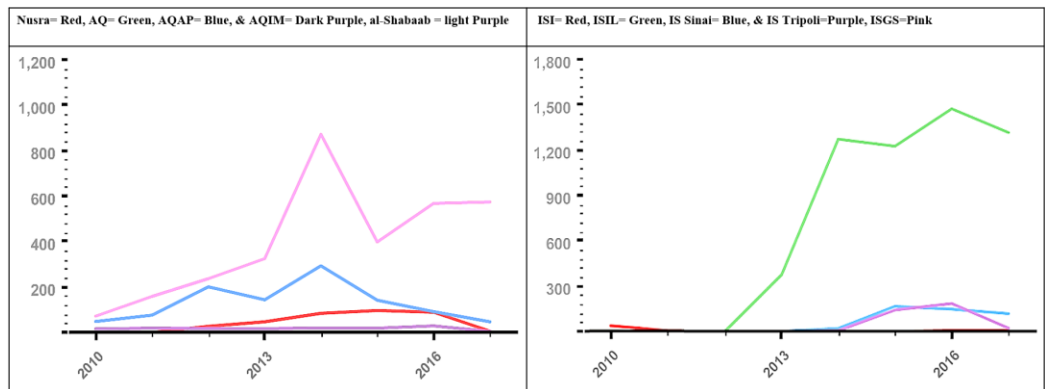


Figure 6. Incidents attributed to perpetrating groups (including al-Shabaab).⁹¹

While the capacity of AQ to perpetrate incidents significantly increased in this comparison, its preference in terms of the targets' ranks of near enemy and enemy within did not experience much change (Figure 7). Military, civilian, general government, and police targets remain AQ's top four target types. However, the inclusion of al-Shabaab made terrorist/non-state militia targets (inclusive of the enemy within) the sixth on AQ's target list. It was the fifth target priority of AQ before the inclusion of al-Shabaab. Notably, the inclusion of al-Shabaab allows AQ to outbid IS in terms of the number of perpetrated attacks against military targets by 535 attacks. Also, AQ, in this comparison, outbids IS in attacking general government targets by 426 attacks. Nevertheless, while AQ still perpetrates lower number of attacks against civilians, adding this African affiliate multiplied such incidents by 3.61 times (from 327 to 1180 incidents).

⁹⁰ Source: GTD. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START). GTD [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

⁹¹ Source: GTD. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START). GTD [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

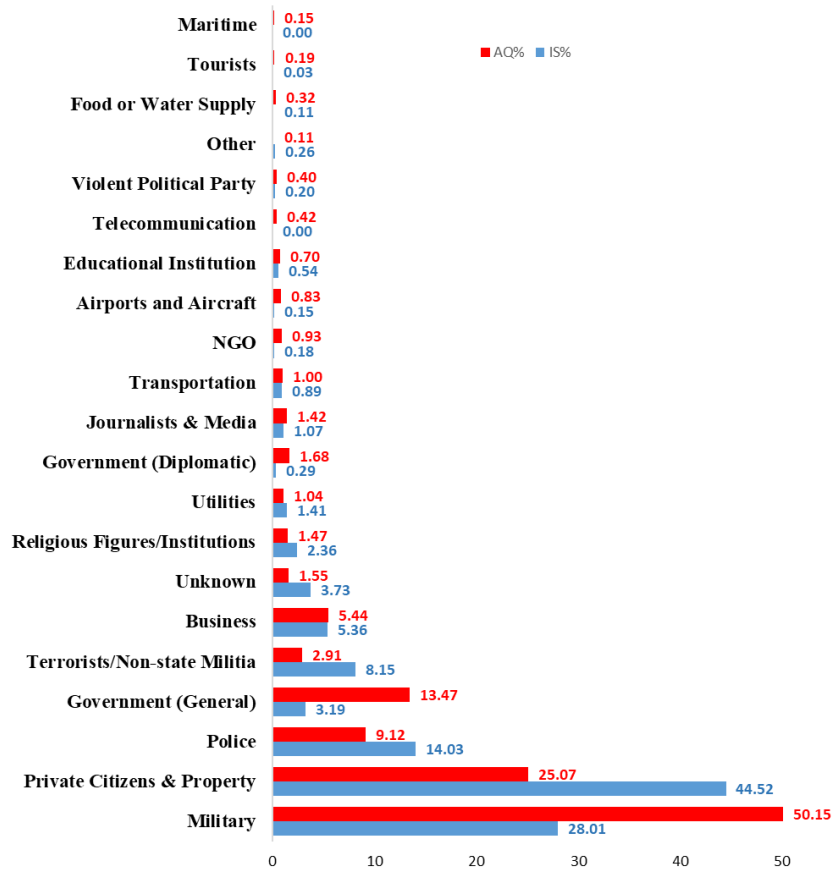


Figure 7. AQ (including al-Shabaab) and IS target preference: Near enemy and enemy within.⁹²

As discussed earlier, organisational strategies of AQ (core and affiliates) and IS (core and branches) are assessed based on their success rates. Figure 8 depicts the latest comparison between AQ and IS. This Figure indicates that AQ is more efficient than IS in its use of violence against military, members of the jihadi current, and civilian targets by 15 percentage, 1 percentage, and 4 percentage points, respectively. Not only does AQ show more efficiency in attacking military targets, but also outbids IS by 721 successful attacks.

However, this analysis casts more doubt on AQ’s purported restraint in attacking Muslim populations and elements of the jihadi current for the period between 2010 and 2017. If Gradualism requires AQ core and its affiliate to avoid targeting Muslim populations and infighting with members of the jihadi current, the number of its perpetrated attacks coupled with its strategic areas of success do not paint a picture of a strategic organisation following the script of its purported ‘long-game’ play. Moreover, while these findings suggest that AQ is more efficient in targeting certain elements of its enemy hierarchy, IS capacity to perpetrate attacks coupled with its success rate allows the terrorist organisation to outbid its rival in the SJM. These findings support the US Department of State’s 2016 assessment.⁹³ The exception, though, is that AQ in this comparison projects higher capacity and efficiency in attacking military targets. In almost all other strategic areas of focus for both terrorist organisations, IS seems to be the

⁹² Source: GTD. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START). GTD [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

⁹³ US Department of State. “Country Reports on Terrorism 2016.”

superior entity and AQ appears to be striving for relevance in the SJM. It is noteworthy, however, that this assessment does not look at the shape of AQ in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 but rather as a player of the bipolar global SJM and for the examined period between 2010 and 2017.

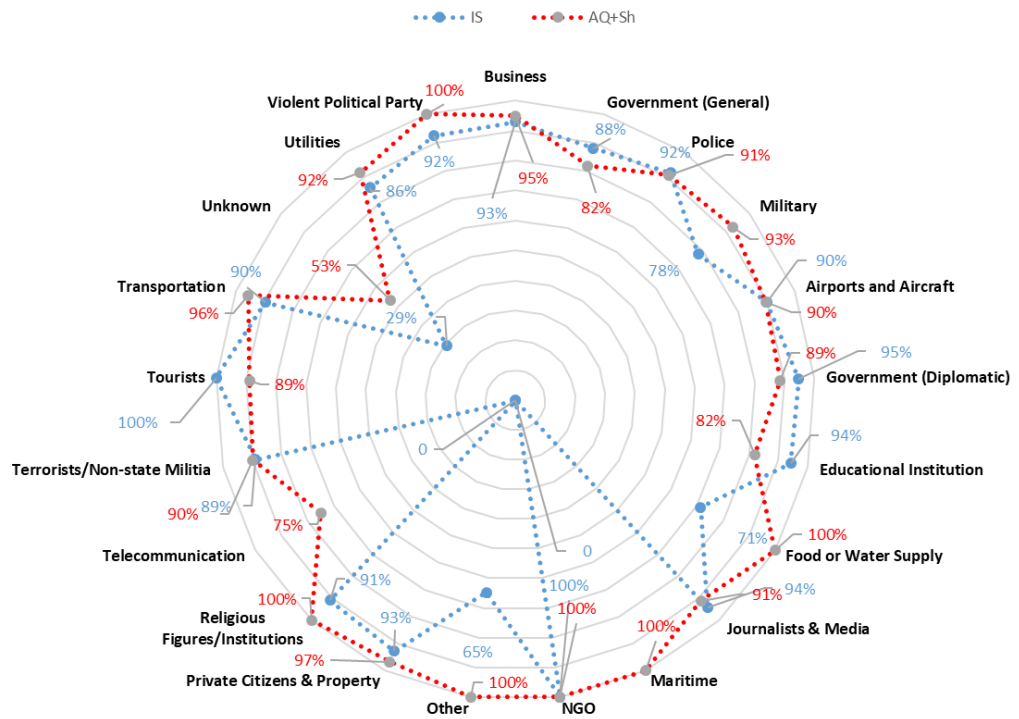


Figure 8. AQ (including al-Shabaab) vs. IS success rate: Near enemy and enemy within. Note: 0 denotes that the organisation did not attempt to attack the target.⁹⁴

Capacity Building

This sub-section assesses both organisations’ capacity building efforts, with and without al-Shabaab, in terms of their efficient use of political violence. In so doing, the author relies on the two latest GTD’s datasets, namely, 2016 and 2017.⁹⁵ The main reason for this comparison is to examine whether AQ benefited from IS decline or improved its efficiency in targeting elements of the near enemy and enemy within. This analysis allows for the inspection of the difference in IS efficiency between (i) a period of expansion and initial defeat (2016), and (ii) a period increased defeat (2017). This could facilitate reading the future direction of the organisation. In other words, this comparison may allow the scrutiny of an organisation that shifted its strategic priority from expanding and enduring back to merely enduring.

⁹⁴ Source: GTD. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START). GTD [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

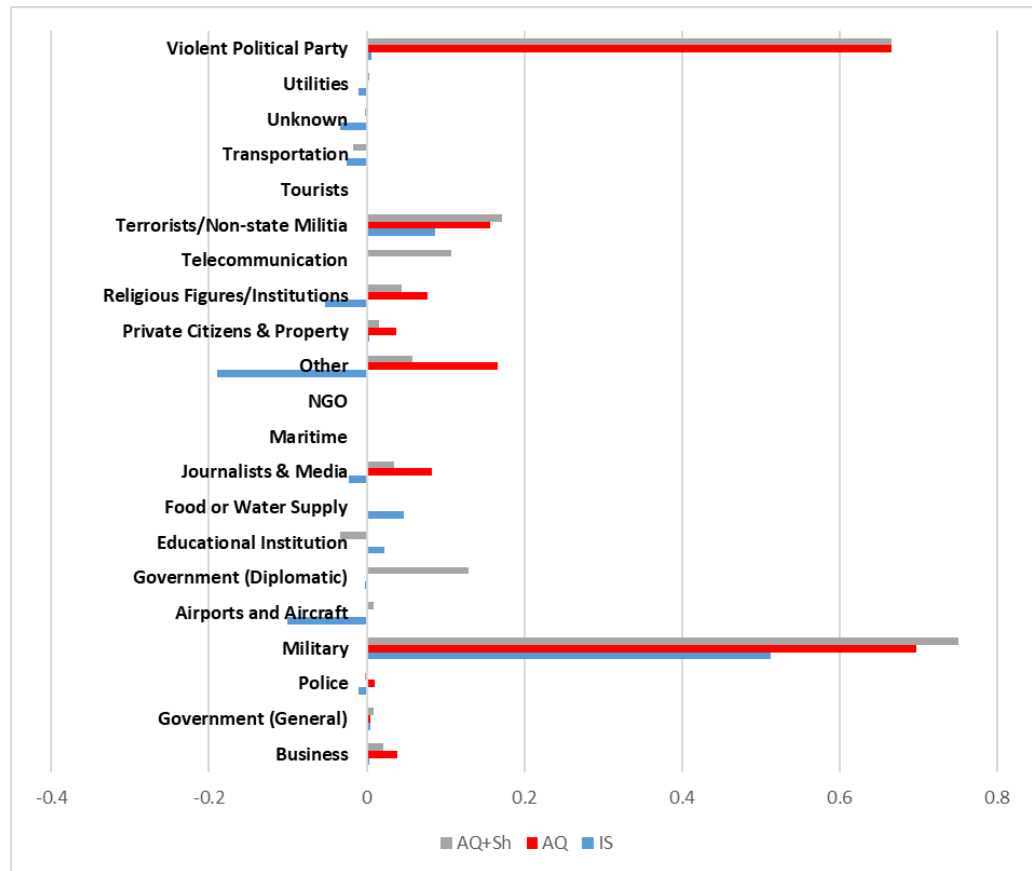


Figure 9. AQ vs. IS: Capacity gains and losses.

Note: AQ = Core, AQAP, AQIM, and al-Nusra Front. AQ + Sh = Core, AQAP, AQIM, al-Shabaab, and al-Nusra Front.⁹⁶

The above figure demonstrates the difference between AQ’s and IS’s success rates by the end of 2016 and 2017. The findings show that AQ’s higher success rates might have resulted from capacity building efforts rather than just waiting for IS’s capacities to decline. Interestingly, Figure 9 indicates that AQ and IS scored higher success rates in attacking military targets by the end of 2017 than they did by the end of 2016; while IS’s success rate increased by 51 percentage points, AQ’s success rate increased by 69 percentage points. When the assessment accounted for al-Shabaab, AQ scored an even higher success rate (75 percentage point increase). For almost all of AQ’s top target priorities, the findings show that AQ managed to increase its efficiency rather than benefit from IS’s declining success rate. Also, AQ appears to have had grown more efficient in targeting rivals from the jihadi current.

Far enemy

Hamming (2017) compiled a list of guided and controlled attacks and plots in the West to highlight IS and AQ attacks against the far enemy.⁹⁷ Consistent with previous work on the phenomenon, Hamming accounted only for attacks and plots with clear evidence that the perpetrating group had planned or orchestrated them.⁹⁸ The author identified

⁹⁶ Source: GTD. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START). GTD [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

⁹⁷ Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," pp. 63-88.

⁹⁸ Hegghammer, Thomas, and Petter Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State’s Commitment to Attacking the West," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): pp. 14-30.

only one guided or controlled plot that was deemed as coordinated or guided after the publication of the list mentioned above.⁹⁹ Therefore, this paper included this plot and relied on Hamming's list in assessing controlled or guided attacks between 2010 and 2017 and in examining AQ's and IS's success rates (Figure 7).¹⁰⁰ IS, unsurprisingly, is the superior terrorist organisation for the examined period in terms of its capacity to perpetrate attacks; while IS controlled or guided 38 attacks and plots, AQ perpetrated a total of 11. As for the success rate, IS outperformed AQ by 2.6 times. Thus, not only did IS outbid AQ in attacks against its far enemy, but it was also more strategically efficient in perpetrating political violence against this element of its enemy hierarchy.

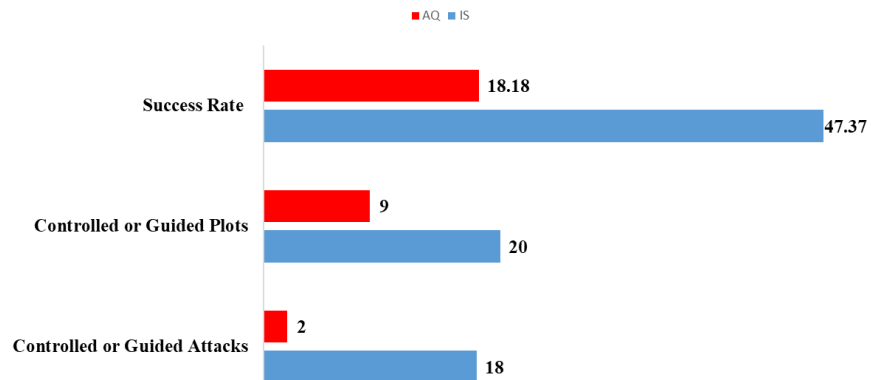


Figure 10. AQ and IS controlled and guided attacks against the West and success rate.¹⁰¹

Discussion

Comparing AQ core, AQAP, AQIM, al-Shabaab, and al-Nusra Front to IS core (ISI and ISIL), IS Sinai, IS Tripoli, and ISGS seems to support the notion that AQ shifted attention to its near enemy. However, the results do not support that AQ maintained restraint in attacking civilian Muslims. While the number of these attacks is significantly lower than that of IS, civilian Muslim populations reflect AQ's second most preferred target. That said, if AQ intended to keep its affiliates from attacking local Muslim populations and from getting into intra-jihadi infighting in pursuit of its gradualist approach, the assessed perpetrated incidents for the core organisation and the selected affiliates do not appear to indicate that such a strategy was employed. Additionally, al-Nusra Front's divorce from AQ is arguably a strategic failure on the part of AQ's leadership. Nevertheless, even with the loss of al-Nusra Front, AQ emerged as the stronger and more resilient terrorist group in terms of capacity building and efficiency (success rate) in attacking the militaries of its near enemy when al-Shabaab is included in the comparison.

Moreover, the *Management of Savagery* and *Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State in Iraq* are two strategic blueprints that can arguably be used to assess IS strategic success.¹⁰² According to these strategic blueprints and the previous

⁹⁹ For example, see: Andrew Zammit, "New Developments in The Islamic State's External Operations: the 2017 Sydney Plane Plot," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 9 (2017): pp. 13-18.

¹⁰⁰ See Appendix B in Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," pp. 63-88.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Abu Bakr Naji, "The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through which the Umma Will Pass," translated by John M William McCants, *Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University*, 2006; Murad Batal al-Shishani, "The Islamic State's Strategic and Tactical Plan for Iraq," Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor* 12, no. 16, 8 August 2014, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-islamic-states-strategic-and-tactical-plan-for-iraq/>; Hashim, "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate.,"; and Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*.

analysis, IS seems to be a strategic organisation that achieved its strategy, at least to a certain level, by the end of 2016.¹⁰³ However, by the end of 2017, the picture had changed and IS has lost most of its territory in Iraq and Syria. This possibly reflected on its performance and standing in the SJM. IS core is undoubtedly weakened. However, this might not be the result of AQ's superior vision, but rather due to the wrath of stronger foes (e.g. US aerial campaign, special forces assistance).¹⁰⁴ Notwithstanding IS's massive setbacks, it remained a strong competitor in the SJM.

It should be noted that this author does not argue against the notion that IS and AQ are flexible, agile, and adaptable organisations. This paper subscribes to these assessments. A key characteristic of these organisations is indeed that both are learning organisations.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, AQ has restructured and reprioritised its strategic objectives since 9/11.¹⁰⁶ Arguably, such changes can result from threats or opportunities, either foreseen or otherwise. Still, when assessing strategic success or failure, it is important not to lose sight of which time period is being examined. AQ and IS are foremost, based on the reading of this author, opportunistic organisations. Strategies are part of the narrative for such entities. AQ somehow receives the privilege of being considered a 'long-game' strategic player; often given the arbitrary number of planning for 15 years ahead.¹⁰⁷ However, one ought to acknowledge that after over 30 years this long-game is becoming a never-ending one. In the last three decades, strategic priorities were reorganised to cope with political shifts and threats. AQ will undoubtedly continue to evolve and might restructure itself. AQ and IS are both learning and opportunistic organisations; however, strategic re-planning can result from strategic failure, especially, setting unreasonable objectives and incompetence, rather than a fixed supreme vision and mission.

That said, the results suggest that AQ (incl. core and affiliates) has the agility and flexibility to reconfigure its localised strategies. This indicates that despite the decentralised organisational approach, AQ demonstrates a culture of collective learning and capacity building. It is argued that AQ's evolution is a subject of its pragmatic approach in learning from its trials and errors.¹⁰⁸ These findings show that AQ is an adaptive organisation that learns from its failures and continuously reconfigures its operations to use its scarce resources more efficiently. While less adaptive, IS's more centralised approach also seems to demonstrate a learning organisation that became more strategically efficient in targeting military targets during years of mounting pressure (Figure 9).

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¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Hafez, "The Curse of Cain: Why Fratricidal Jihadis Fail to Learn from Their Mistakes."

¹⁰⁵ Hashim, "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate."; Lister, "Al-Qaeda Plays a Long Game in Syria," pp. 13-8; Stenersen, "Thirty Years after its Foundation—Where is al-Qaida Going?," pp. 5-16; Clarke and Moghadam, "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," pp. 347-71; Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design."; Warrick, *Black flags: The rise of ISIS*; McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*; Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror - updated edition*; Wright, *The Terror Years: From al-Qaeda to the Islamic State*; Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State*; and Gerges, A. *ISIS: A History*.

¹⁰⁶ Stenersen, "Thirty Years after its Foundation—Where is al-Qaida Going?."

¹⁰⁷ Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State*.

¹⁰⁸ Joshua A Russo, *Insurgent design: the re-emergence of al-Qa'ida from 9/11 to the present*, PhD diss. (Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School, 2015).

SJM Game-Theoretic Analysis

One way to outline and examine strategies of member organisations of the SJM is through game theory.¹⁰⁹ Building on the empirical results of AQ's and IS's enemy hierarchies, and the views from the literature on AQ and IS strategies (section 3), this paper infers the SJM's game in an extensive dynamic form.¹¹⁰ The author employs extensive game-theoretic analysis to examine extended scenarios (i.e. strategies and

¹⁰⁹ Ken G Binmore, *Game theory and the social contract: just playing. Vol. 2* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT press, 1994).

¹¹⁰ For resources on IS and AQ strategies, please see for example the following citations: Paul Cruickshank and Mohannad Hage Ali, "Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 1 (2007): pp. 1-14; Hashim, "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate."; Warrick, *Black flags: The rise of ISIS*; McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*; Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria," pp. 13-8; Elisabeth Kendall, "Al-Qa'ida & Islamic State in Yemen: A Battle for Local Audiences," *Jihadism Transformed: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's Global Battle of Ideas* (2015): pp. 89-110; Celine Marie I. Novenario, "Differentiating Al Qaeda and the Islamic State through Strategies Publicized in Jihadist Magazines," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 11 (2016): pp. 953-67; Hoffman, "Al Qaeda: Quietly and Patiently Rebuilding."; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror - updated edition*; Wright, *The Terror Years: From al-Qaeda to the Islamic State*; Wright, *The Terror Years: From al-Qaeda to the Islamic State*; Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State*; Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*; Gerges, A. *ISIS: A History*; Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation among Terrorist Actors*; Stenersen, "Thirty Years after its Foundation—Where is al-Qaida Going?."; Leah Farrall, "Revisiting al-Qaida's Foundation and Early History," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): pp. 17-37; Don Rassler, "Al-Qaida and the Pakistani Harakat Movement: Reflections and Questions about the pre-2001 Period," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): pp. 38-54; Drevon, "The Jihadi Social Movement (JSM) Between Factional Hegemonic Drive, National Realities, and Transnational Ambitions," pp. 55-62; Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences," pp. 63-88; Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria," pp. 13-8; Filiu, "Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Dilemmas of Jihadi Loyalty," pp. 166-72; Rhiannon Smith and Jason Pack, "Al-Qaida's Strategy in Libya: Keep it Local, Stupid," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): pp. 190-9; Clarke, "How ISIS is Transforming."; Bahney and Patrick B. Johnston, "ISIS Could Rise Again."; Jones et al., *Rolling Back the Islamic State*; Johnston et al., *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010*; Gordon, "Areas Newly Seized from ISIS Seen at Risk of Backsliding."; Schmitt, "The Hunt for ISIS Pivots to Remaining Pockets of Syria."; Maher, "Islamic State is Not Beaten and Will Return."; International Crisis Group, "Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base."; Warner, "Sub-Saharan Africa's Three 'New' Islamic State Affiliates," pp.28-32; Gaffey, "How al-Shabab Overtook Boko Haram to Become Africa's Deadliest Militants."; Bacon, "Strategic Progress Remains Elusive in America's Expanded Air Campaign against Al-Shabaab."; Bacon, "This is Why Al-Shabaab Won't be Going Away Anytime Soon."; Wirtschafter and Gadiaga, "Africa Becomes the New Battleground for ISIS and Al-Qaeda and They Lose Ground in the Mideast."; Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design."; Hoffman, "Al Qaeda's Resurrection."; Clarke and Moghadam "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," pp. 347-371; Spyer, "Welcome to Syria 2.0."; Dempsey, "How ISIS' Strategy is Evolving"; Dempsey, "10 Takeaways from the Fight Against the Islamic State." Joscelyn, "Analysis: ISIS hasn't been Defeated."; Haid, "ISIS's Military and Economic Roots Start to Take Hold Again in Syria."; Byman, "What Happens When ISIS Goes Underground?"; Byman, "What Happens When ISIS Goes Underground?"; Asharq Al-Awsat, "Experts: ISIS Still Capable of Recapturing Iraqi Areas."; Hassan, "Down But Not Out: ISIL Will Regroup and Rise Again."; Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond."; Hassan, "Zawahiri's Statements Reveal Plenty about Syria's Fractured Jihadi Scene."; Abdulrahim, "Islamic State Returns to Guerilla Warfare in Iraq and Syria."; Raghavan, "Still Fighting al-Qaeda US Airstrikes are Pounding the Group in Yemen, yet the Militants Fight on Fiercely."; Hamming and Ostaeyen, "The True Story of al-Qaeda's Demise and Resurgence in Syria."; Nsaibia and Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso." For a review on the use of game theories in the study of terrorism please see: Sandler and Kevin Siqueira, "Games and Terrorism: Recent Developments."

sub-strategies).¹¹¹ This approach's generalisability is limited to the studied strategies.¹¹² The sequential/extensive approach is selected because members of the SJM are engaged in dynamic strategic interactions (e.g. cooperation, merger, competition, hegemony, infighting, etc.).

For the purpose of this study, the SJM's game is made up of three active players, namely: (i) IS, (ii) AQ, and (iii) local members of the SJM. The game is also inclusive of two passive players, specifically, (i) Near States (i.e. near enemy) and (ii) Far States (i.e. far enemy). Furthermore, this game encompasses several possible strategies that the active players can take and the strategies' respective utility functions (i.e. payoffs of the mapped strategies). In assessing the strategies, *dominant strategies* and *Nash equilibrium* are examined and discussed. The analysis of dominant strategies is applied under strict condition and thus, it identifies the strategy with the best utility for a player regardless of other players' strategies.¹¹³ Nash Equilibrium specifies strategies for the SJM's players wherein no single player is incentivised to unilaterally change its strategy.¹¹⁴ Nash Equilibrium picks specific strategy/strategies of the many possible strategies for each active player. The game assumes that players prefer higher payoffs. Without mergers or the submission of a player to another (e.g. declaration of allegiances to IS), players cannot force other players to change their strategies at a fixed point. To that end, some strategies that are good for individual players (IS, AQ, or local groups) might be bad for the SJM.

This effort employs Gambit 15.1.1, a software for game-theoretic computation, to assess strictly dominant strategies and Nash equilibrium.¹¹⁵ However, prior to the employment of this tool, a few assumptions had to be made; particularly, the selection of sequential strategies and their respective payoffs. For instance, the three active players of the SJM are represented by their respective strategic approaches, namely, Gradualism (AQ), Caliphate or proto-state building (IS), and Localisation (local members of SJM). The SJM's payoffs equal the sum of payoffs, gains and losses of the three active players. Moreover, it is assumed that for IS and the other two active players, payoffs range between -5 and 5.

For instance, in years of retreat, the strategy of IS - then ISI - was to endure. Polarisation of Iraqi communities was a strategic method of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a predecessor organisation of ISI. This method aimed to marginalise and mobilise members of the Sunni community (tribes, local groups, and individuals) to do AQI's bidding.¹¹⁶ In the coming years, IS may resort to this old approach to secure the allegiance of members of the jihadi current or marginalised Sunni communities (individuals or groups). In doing so, IS could attack government and symbolic targets (near enemy). In reconciliation with previous

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¹¹¹ Michael P. Wellman, "Methods for Empirical Game-Theoretic Analysis," In *21st National Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, pp. 1552-1555, Boston, 2006.

¹¹² Michael P. Wellman and Achintya Prakash, "Empirical Game-Theoretic Analysis of an Adaptive Cyber-Defense Scenario (Preliminary Report)," In *International Conference on Decision and Game Theory for Security*, pp. 43-58, Springer, Cham, 2014.

¹¹³ Steven Tadelis, *Game theory: An Introduction* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹¹⁴ Martin J. Osborne and Ariel Rubinstein, *A Course in Game Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 1994).

¹¹⁵ Richard D. McKelvey, Andrew M. McLennan, and Theodore L. Turocy, GAMBIT Project, Gambit: Software Tools for Game Theory, 2018, <http://www.gambit-project.org/>.

¹¹⁶ For example, see: Warrick, *Black flags: The rise of ISIS*; McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*; Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror - updated edition*; Wright, *The Terror Years: From al-Qaeda to the Islamic State*; Soufan, *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State*; and Gerges, A. *ISIS: A History*.

research, and the above quantitative assessments, in this scenario IS is assumed to score 3 out of 5 maximum utility points,¹¹⁷ and near enemy is assumed to register a 3-point loss. If the far states (e.g. US) are engaged in developmental programs or capacity building initiatives to assist near states (e.g. Iraq) to defeat IS, the loss such states endure is assumed at 1 point. Given that polarisation also impacts members of the jihadi current, local members of the SJM are proposed to lose 1 point when other groups or individuals declare allegiance to IS. Under this scenario, AQ is assumed to endure a loss of 2 points. As such, this strategic option for IS will add 1 point in payoff to the SJM. That said, while these payoffs are made based on the referenced studies and the quantitative analysis, the approach is highly subjective. Moreover, this assessment is not inclusive of the various strategies that the active players may employ. As it stands, the dynamic game is a limited strategic tree of the three outlined active players of the SJM.

Dominant strategies

If we consider the strategic decision trees of the three active players' approaches (i.e. Gradualism, the Caliphate, and Localisation) as the three choices for the SJM, the assessment of the strategy of the greatest utility for the SJM is possible (i.e. Strictly Dominant Strategy).¹¹⁸ The analysis suggests that out of the three strategic approaches, Localisation provides the SJM with the highest utility (Figure 11). In that scenario, the SJM's payoff is at 5. This outcome results from the combination of IS payoff (-1), AQ payoff (1), and Local Jihadi Organisation payoff (5). This strategy inflicts a loss of 3 points upon the near enemy and leaves the far states unprovoked. To a certain level, this approach resembles that of the jihadi strategist Mustafa Setmariam Nasar (a.k.a. Abu Musab Al-Suri).¹¹⁹ However, unlike that of al-Suri, this localised approach has no foreign-oriented agenda.¹²⁰



Figure 11. SJM's strictly dominant strategies: fourth level elimination of dominated strategies.

Note: All unreachable strategies are removed in this analysis. Red Lines = SJM; and Orange Lines = Local Members of SJM.

That said, in accordance with the underpinning theory, Gambit omits the strategies that seem 'unreasonable' based on the numerical representations of the strategies. The removal of all dominated strategies (i.e. the opposite of dominant strategies) as displayed in Figure 11, though, may prove problematic as the SJM is not an actual entity and players are not always bound by fully informed and rational choices.¹²¹ Therefore, the elimination of dominated strategies was assessed based on the four levels that Gambit allowed to be inspected. To that end, Figure 12 illustrates three strategic approaches for the SJM, depicting its three active players. The resulting strategic tree suggests that the dominant strategy of AQ, under its gradualist approach, when it comes

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Osborne and Ariel Rubinstein, *A Course in Game Theory*.

¹¹⁹ For review, see: Cruickshank and Ali, "Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda," pp. 1-14.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Opp. *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements*.

to the near enemy is to merge affiliates. Even when AQ's purported strategic shift was coded into strategies (i.e. focus on the near enemy), the strategic relevance of its brand seems to demand the organisation direct attacks against two elements of its enemy hierarchy (near and far enemies), either through the core organisation or through an affiliate. Thus, a hybridised enemy hierarchy seems to be the dominant approach for AQ.

Under the same conditions (Figure 12), the Caliphate, as IS's strategic approach, is represented through the organisation's two overarching strategies of enduring and expanding. To endure, the analysis suggests that the most dominant sub-strategies are (i) polarisation and (ii) restructuring as a means to allow for the reliance on guerilla warfare methods. Moreover, this strategy demands a special focus on its near enemy, occasional attacks against its far enemy, and avoiding attacks against members of the jihadi current (i.e. the enemy within). It is likely that such sparse attacks on Western states are essential for IS to maintain supremacy in the SJM and to project a competitive advantage when compared to AQ. Training also seems to be central for strategic capacity building. The analysis of data from GTD showed that by the end of 2017, AQ was the leading organisation in terms of capacity building (Figure 9). Therefore, consistent with the empirical findings, IS endurance appears to demand capacity building through further training. To expand, if that proves possible, the dominant strategy is to break the borders through the activation of sleeper cells.¹²² This seems unlikely, but the activation of sleeper cells may solidify IS operations in Syria and Iraq without having to claim the removal of borders.

Securing bay'at, another dominant strategy, is arguably a more likely approach to assure IS's expansion.¹²³ The results suggest that motivating or coercing elements of the jihadi current is a strategically dominant approach.¹²⁴ However, if IS fails to coerce or co-opt them or to motivate them to pay allegiances, the organisation may face a strategically undesirable option of opting for attacks against the enemy within. Expansion, as an element of IS's overarching strategy, seems to demand more concrete attacks against its far enemy. As projected by earlier research, and shown through the campaign to defeat IS, attacks against its far enemy could render the overarching aim of expansion unattainable.¹²⁵ However, such attacks also serve as a vector of recruitment.

¹²² For example, see: Johnston et al., *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010*.

¹²³ For example, see: Glavin, "Remaining and Expanding: Why Local Violent Extremist Organizations Reflag to ISIS."

¹²⁴ For example, see: Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror - updated edition*; Wright, *The Terror Years: From al-Qaeda to the Islamic State*.

¹²⁵ For example, see: Hafez, "The Curse of Cain: Why Fratricidal Jihadis Fail to Learn from Their Mistakes."

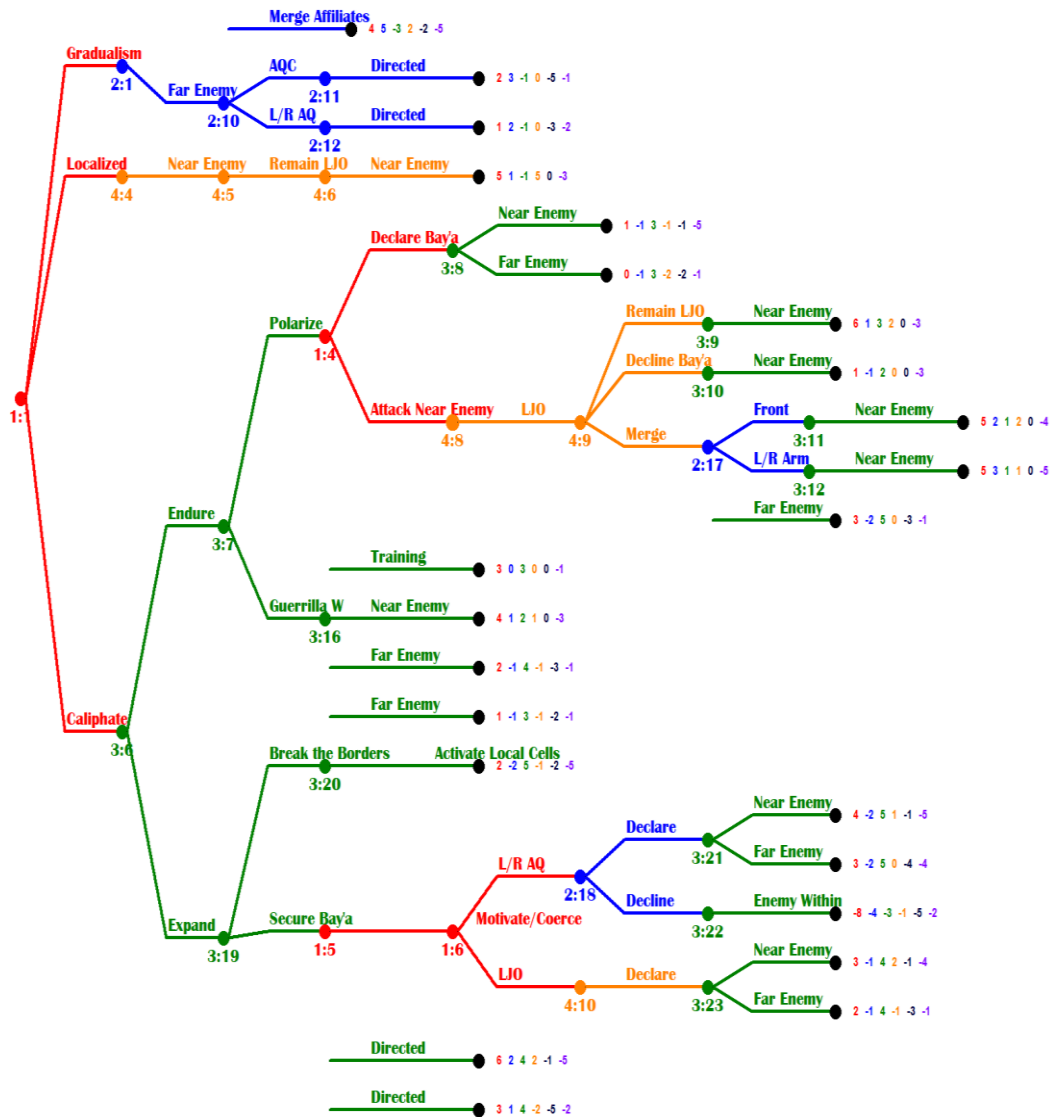


Figure 12. SJM's strictly dominant strategies: First level elimination of dominated strategies.

Note: All unreachable strategies are removed in this analysis. Red Lines = SJM; Green Lines = IS; Blue Lines = AQ; and Orange Lines = Local Members of SJM.

As outlined earlier, Localisation is the most dominant strategy for the SJM and thus, this element will persist throughout all four iterations (Figure 11-14). When the second elimination was applied (Figure 13), AQ disappeared from the strategic game tree of the SJM. This was possibly due to the damage and stigmatisation it causes to local jihadi organisations, should they merge with other AQ affiliates, become a front or an affiliate of AQ, or cooperate with it.

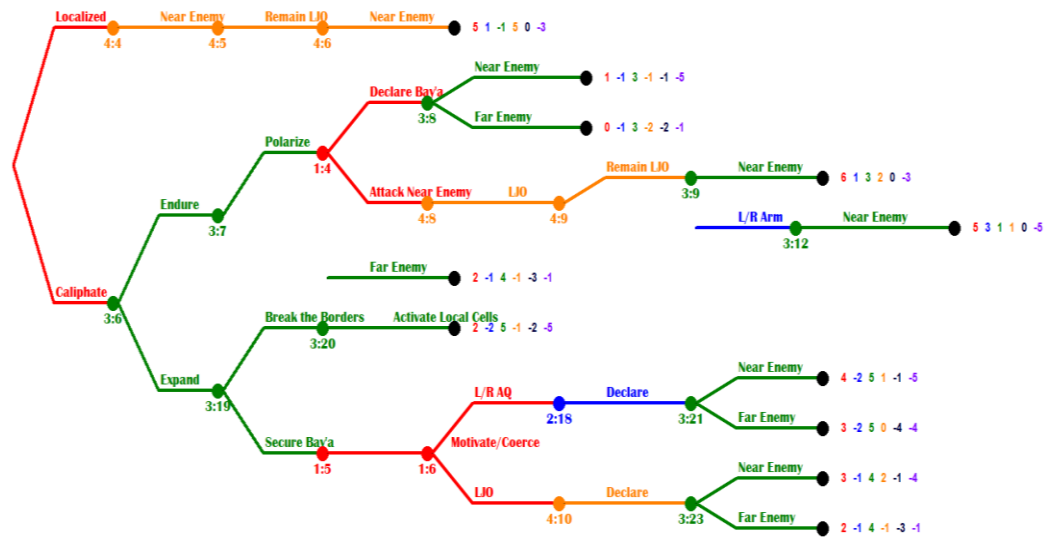


Figure 13. SJM’s strictly dominant strategies: Second level elimination of dominated strategies.

Note: All unreachable strategies are removed in this analysis. Red Lines = SJM; Green Lines = IS; Blue Lines = AQ; and Orange Lines = Local Members of SJM.

Localisation is also the strategic approach of local member organisations of the SJM. Given that this analytic method prefers strictly dominant strategies over dominated strategies, the omission of AQ was likely. This analysis suggests that when the model evaluated the localised approach of local members of the SJM against AQ’s reprioritisation to shift its focus to domestic localities, the strategic game ruled out AQ’s domestic priority in favour of the localised approach of locally born and focused members of the SJM. This iteration is also consistent with the views of Abu Musab al-Suri.¹²⁶

As for IS, enduring remains a strategic alternative with polarisation constituting its dominant strategic approach to achieve such an objective. That said, the alternative under this iteration suggests that IS should not coerce organisational members of the jihadi current to declare bay’at. In this sense, polarisation serves as a tool to marginalise and recruit individuals and motivate organisations to join IS’s ranks.

Expansion also continues to be a dominant strategy for IS. The activation of local cells is also present in this strategic game tree. This again supports the strategic value of the so-called IS *amni* (security forces).¹²⁷ However, when IS tries to coerce local jihadi groups to fall in line, this form of strategy suggests that IS should not get into jihadi infighting. Moreover, attacks against the far enemy remain a strategic part of its overarching strategies of enduring and expanding, albeit more strategically during years of expansion. The third elimination (Figure 14), presents expansion as IS’s most dominant strategy. Securing bay’at as an expansive strategic method seems to demand hybridisation of the enemy hierarchy (near and far enemy). The enemy within appears

¹²⁶ For review, see: Cruickshank and Ali, "Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda," pp. 1-14.

¹²⁷ For review, see: Johnston et al., *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010*.

to be a dominated strategy and thus, undesirable in this iteration. Local covert cells also seem to be central to implementing the strategic approach to expanding.¹²⁸

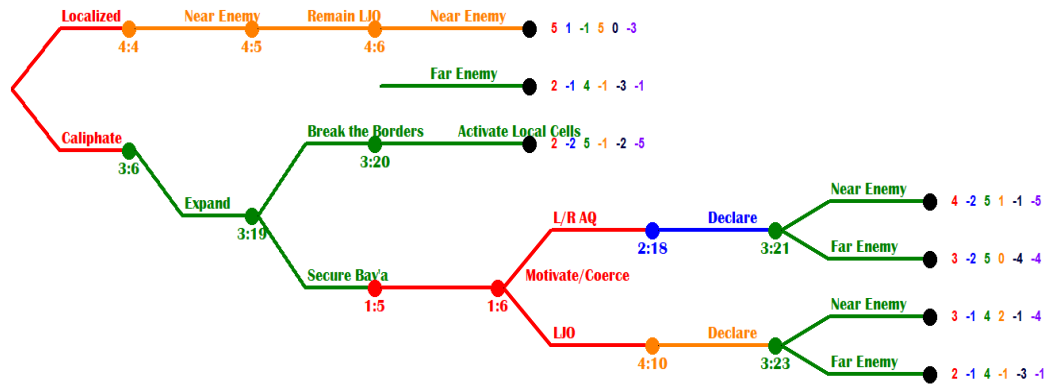


Figure 14. SJM’s strictly dominant strategies: Third level elimination of dominated strategies.

Note: All unreachable strategies are removed in this analysis. Red Lines = SJM; Green Lines = IS; Blue Lines = AQ; and Orange Lines = Local Members of SJM.

Nash equilibrium

Nash equilibrium for the dynamic game is examined using Gambit. The software identified one Nash equilibrium that corresponds to the dominant strategies. For better illustration, the strategic tree was divided into three figures (15, 16, and 17). The assessment shows that the SJM benefits the most from local jihadi organisations - the type without international ambitions and that are not affiliated with AQ or a branch of IS (Figure 16). Compared to other strategic approaches, Localisation scores a probability of 1 and Gradualism and Caliphate both score 0. Localisation strategy entails the prioritisation of attacks against the near enemy and remaining local in the pursuit of implementing such a strategic priority. This strategy provides the highest payoffs to both the SJM and local organisations (see players and payoffs column of Figure 15). If coerced or motivated by IS, local organisations serve the SJM and themselves best if they decline to pledge bay’at to IS and opt to focus on the near enemy while avoiding fighting with IS. In the scenario where a local organisation is forced/motivated to decide between (i) merger with [a] an AQ front organisation or [b] a local/regional affiliate of AQ or (ii) pledge bay’at to IS, the strategy with the highest payoffs is to merge with an AQ’s front organisation and only focus on the near enemy. This strategy provides both local organisations and the SJM with the highest payoff compared to other alternatives under the same scenario.

¹²⁸ Almomhammad and Winter, “From Directorate of Intelligence to Directorate of Everything: The Islamic State’s Emergent Amni-Media Nexus,” p.3.

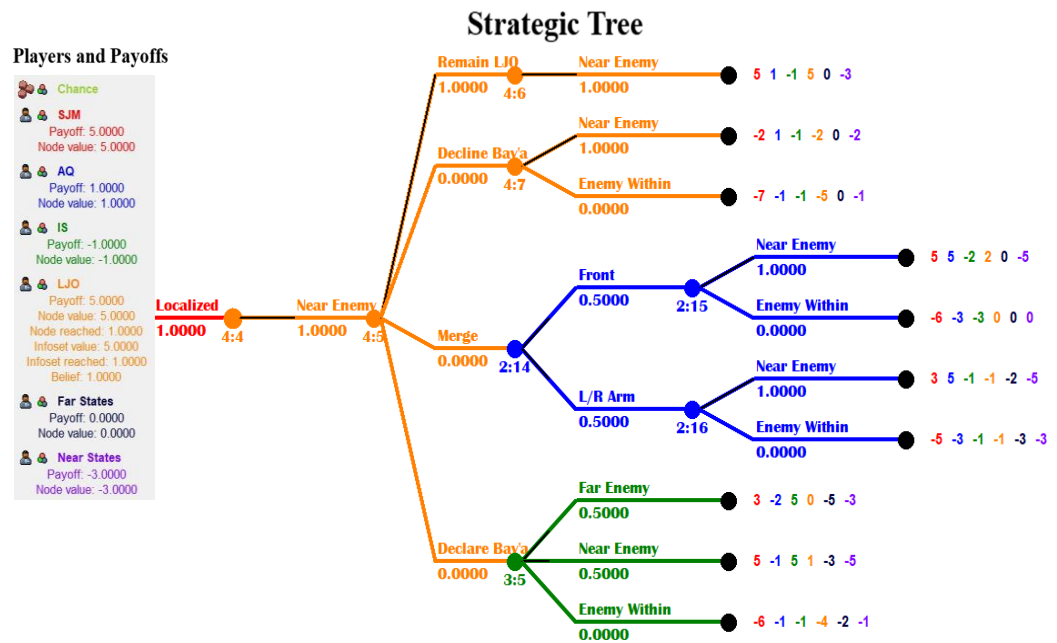


Figure 15. SJM's Nash equilibrium: Localisation.
 Note: Red Lines = SJM; Green Lines = IS; Blue Lines = AQ; Orange Lines = Local Members of SJM; and Lines Highlighted in Black = Nash Equilibrium.

As mentioned earlier, reading a movement through dominant strategies with the highest payoffs is sometimes problematic and does not necessarily depict employed strategies. While Localisations gained a strategic probability of 1 and Gradualism and Caliphate each earned 0, reality dictates that the SJM encompasses local organisations and two global players.¹²⁹ From a rational choice prism and in accordance with the views of the literature, quantitative assessment data from GTD, and the previously outlined dominant strategies (Figure 12), AQ (Figure 16) is shown to select a strategy that focuses on its near enemy with a probability of 1 rather than its far enemy (probability of this strategy is 0).

The ultimate choice under this scenario is for AQ to merge its affiliates (see the players and payoffs column of Figure 16) followed by establishing new local/regional affiliates or expanding the focus of its affiliates from local to regional. Notwithstanding that coordination with local jihadi organisations (non-AQ affiliates) is a dominated strategy compared to the previous more dominant strategies, it remains a strategic option. That said, in focusing on its near enemy, attacking the enemy within (members of the jihadi current) is strategically the most dominated choice and thus, it is shown as the least desirable strategic alternative. This alternative is supported by AQ's earlier restraint from engaging in rhetorical attacks against members of the Jihadi current (i.e. IS).¹³⁰

Moreover, while Gradualism is served by focusing on the near enemy, AQ's less dominant strategy of attacking the far enemy is shown to be of strategic value, especially when the attacks are directed or guided rather than inspired. Connectivity to recruitment and AQ's desired hegemony in the SJM are possible justifications for the strategic presence of attacks against its far enemy in the findings. Towards the end of 2017, IS outbid and outperformed AQ in terms of capacity and strategic efficiency in

¹²⁹ For example, see: Clarke and Moghadam "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," pp. 347-371.

¹³⁰ For example, see: Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences."

attacks against the far enemy. During the same period, AQ, when al-Shabaab was included in the comparison, outbid and outperformed IS in attacking military targets (two central elements of AQ's and IS's near enemy). This may result in assigning a strategic significance of directed or guided attacks against AQ's far enemy.

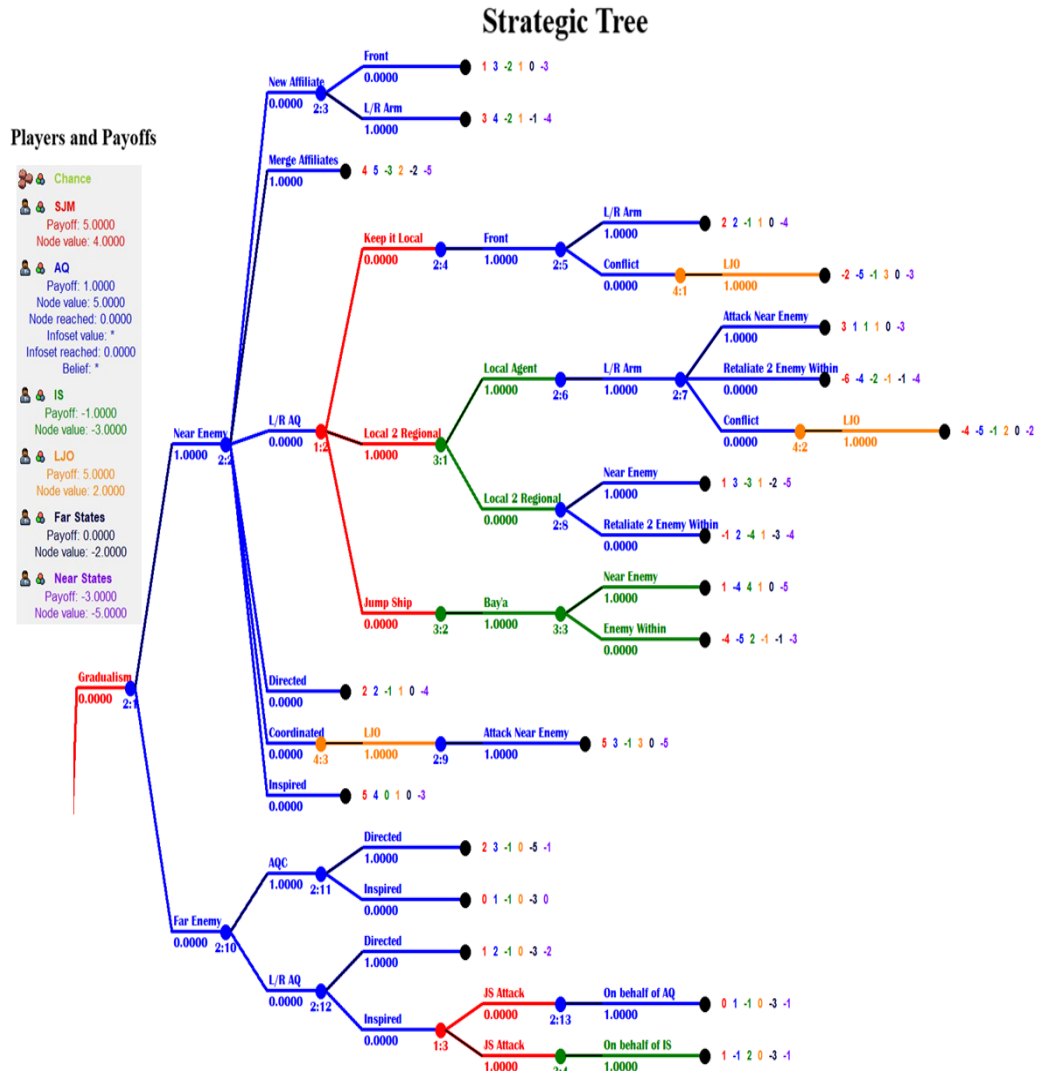


Figure 16. SJM's Nash equilibrium: Gradualism.

Note: Red Lines = SJM; Green Lines = IS; Blue Lines = AQ; Orange Lines = Local Members of SJM; and Lines Highlighted in Black = Nash Equilibrium.

The caliphate, as mentioned earlier, is the second approach with 0 probability for the SJM. That said, IS's proto-state building project scores its highest payoffs when expansion is a strategic option (Figure 17). Consistent with the dominant strategies under this scenario (Figure 12), breaking the borders and receiving bay'at from other members of the jihadi currents are the sub-strategies with the highest payoffs (each alternative received 0.5 probability). As mentioned earlier, the dominant option for breaking the borders appears to be the activation of local sleeper cells. It is outlined that while breaking the borders under the current settings is unlikely, the activation of sleeper cells may serve the organisation's expansion objectives in different ways. As for securing bay'at of members of the jihadi current, the most strategic approach is to motivate or coerce AQ local/regional affiliates to fall in line. This strategic alternative

seems to demand either applying pressure or motivating local jihadi organisations to declare bay'at to IS. In either case, once IS receives such declarations of allegiances, a hybrid approach of attacking the near and far enemy emerges as its most desirable approach. However, the failure to force members of the jihadi current to declare bay'at makes the undesirable option of attacking the enemy within a strategic priority during the expansion phase. To project a strong brand as compared to AQ, directed attacks against the near and far enemy appear to be strategic necessity for IS during years of expansion.

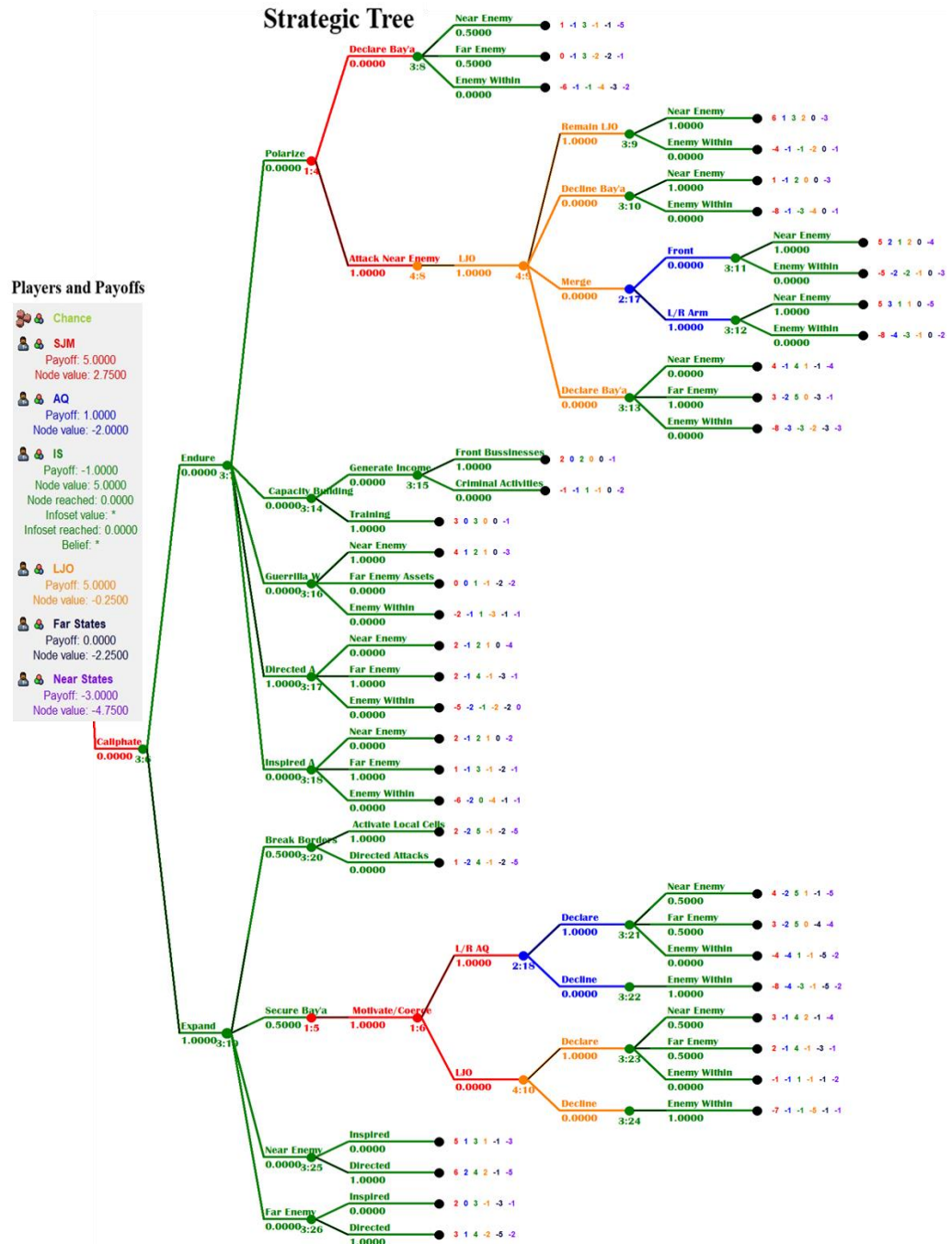


Figure 17. SJM's Nash equilibrium: Caliphate.
 Note: Red Lines = SJM; Green Lines = IS; Blue Lines = AQ; Orange Lines = Local Members of SJM; and Lines Highlighted in Black = Nash Equilibrium.

Furthermore, expansion is not always a strategic option. In the face of mounting pressure endurance has possibly become the most strategic approach for IS. The findings suggest that in such a scenario, directing attacks against the far enemy is the alternative with the highest payoffs. Arguably, in accordance with the quantitative assessment of guided or directed attacks against Western countries, IS may choose this strategy to maintain relevance in the SJM. Attacks against the far enemy, compared to those against the near enemy, is the area where IS outbids and outperforms AQ. The strategic tree also suggests that symbolic attacks that further polarise local communities are a strategic alternative that bring marginalised communities and members of the jihadi current closer to IS (Figure 17). That in turn, is displayed to manifest in higher capacity to inflict damage on near states in years of endurance. This method (polarisation) seems to be a strategic tool that allows IS to keep a certain level of pressure on its near enemy and to a significantly lower degree, its far enemy. Organisational restructuring to allow for more efficient use of guerrilla warfare methods, as a mean of endurance, appears to be strategic alternative for maintaining pressure on local states. Additionally, to assure endurance and relevance, the strategic tree shows that IS engages in capacity building through training and the generation of income. The findings also suggest that IS will capitalise on inspired attacks during the endurance phase to maintain relevance in the SJM.

Conclusion

The results suggest that during IS's rise and initial stages of defeat (by 2016), the terrorist organisation proved to have a comparative advantage in terms of capacity and efficiency in attacking elements of its enemy hierarchy compared to AQ (Figure 9). By the end of 2017, AQ regained its competitive advantage in the SJM in terms of attacks against its near enemy after adding al-Shabaab to the comparison. It is noteworthy that AQ's strategic efficiency was observed across all its examined affiliates (Figure 9). Al-Shabaab appears to be the most adaptive and learning affiliate of AQ in terms attacking the near enemy and enemy within. Nevertheless, IS continues to be a threat to Western countries. It leads the SJM in terms of its strategic capacity and efficiency in attacking its far enemy. IS also seems to be a resilient and adaptive organisation. Even with the massive military pressure to defeat it, the terrorist group managed to increase its efficiency in targeting strategic elements of its near enemy and the enemy within (Figure 9). While IS core displays the highest strategic capacity and efficiency, as opposed to its examined branches, al-Shabaab is the AQ affiliate with the highest strategic capacity and efficiency in attacking elements of the near enemy and enemy within.

That said, the findings do not support the notion that AQ avoided targeting Muslim civilians and members of the jihadi current. Muslim civilians and private property rank second on AQ target's list. Al-Shabaab displayed the lowest level of restraint in attacking civilian targets. These results suggest that while al-Shabaab allowed AQ to gain a comparative advantage in attacking military targets of local governments, this affiliate does not seem to portray AQ as a 'vanguard' of the Muslim population. Thus, although it is the most effective and efficient affiliate, al-Shabaab taints AQ's Gradualist approach.¹³¹ Alarmingly though, both AQ and IS became more efficient in attacking military targets by the end of 2017.

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¹³¹ This shows a wide say-do gap. For a qualitative assessment of AQ rhetoric please see: Hamming, "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences."

Furthermore, the game-theoretic analysis of the strategies of the SJM's players (i.e. AQ, IS, and local organisations) outlines an avenue to map and examine strategies that multiple players have taken and may resort to in the future. The assessment anchored itself on the quantitative analysis of AQ's and IS's strategic capacity, target priority and efficiency, and previous research on strategies of the SJM's member organisations.

On August 13, 2018, just a few days before concluding this paper, IS members were estimated to number between 20,000 and 30,000, according to a United Nations Security Council's report.¹³² The report goes on to suggest that AQ "continues to show resilience" and that Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of AQ, is now "projecting his authority more effectively than he could previously."¹³³ Moreover, the report argues that covert elements of IS will likely endure in Syria and Iraq.¹³⁴ The quantitative analysis of AQ's and IS's strategic priorities and efficiency and the examined mapped strategies of the SJM's players support the reported resilience and adaptability of both organisations. In addition, the current effort outlined the areas wherein both organisations built operational capacities (Figure 9). That said, dominant strategies and the Nash equilibrium of the dynamic strategic game of the SJM's players corroborate the significance of covert cells in achieving IS's expansion objectives.

In addition, the analysis presents Localisation as a dominant strategy that pays the highest dividends to the SJM and local jihadi groups or organisations. This version of leaderless movement was sought out by a former AQ strategist.¹³⁵ It is likely that both global players will continue to compete for the hegemony of the SJM.¹³⁶ To that effect, the elaborated strategies of AQ and IS provide a lens into additional strategic and dynamic alternatives of each global player (AQ and IS). The assessment of dominant strategies and Nash equilibrium suggests that AQ's domestic focus is a dominant strategy with the highest payoff to AQ and the SJM.¹³⁷ However, dominance in the global movement was found to demand some level of active operations against the terrorist organisation's far enemy. This is especially concerning given AQ's increased capacity and resilience.¹³⁸

Furthermore, with IS's strategic focus shifting to enduring, polarisation and organisational restructuring to allow for more effective clandestine operations and the use of guerrilla warfare methods were found to be the dominant strategies with the highest payoff. These strategies were shown to demand more capacity building from IS. However, during this phase (enduring), a hybrid approach of near and far enemy is still present.¹³⁹ IS still outbids and outperforms AQ in terms of terrorist attacks against the

¹³² Security Council, "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations, August 13, 2018, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2018/705>. These figures are based on the assessment of a single member state and thus, should be treated speculatively.

¹³³ Ibid, p.6.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ For review, see: Cruickshank and Ali, "Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda," pp. 1-14.

¹³⁶ For example, see: Drevon, "The Jihadi Social Movement (JSM) Between Factional Hegemonic Drive, National Realities, and Transnational Ambitions," pp. 55-62 and Clarke and Moghadam "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," pp. 347-371.

¹³⁷ SJM gains the highest payoff from localized and leaderless movement. Moreover, the highest payoff to SJM from AQ is resulted from a domestically-focused approach.

¹³⁸ Security Council. "Twenty-Second Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities." *United Nations*, 13 August 2018.

¹³⁹ For a detailed discussion on SJM players' dominant strategies and Nash equilibrium see the section on *SJM Game Theoretic Analysis*.

West. With AQ bouncing back and IS's possible desire to maintain its comparative advantage on the global stage, a scenario in which both players try to outbid and outperform each other on this front should not be dismissed.

That said, the current paper provides a novel empirical approach for inferring, mapping, and assessing strategies of the SJM's member organisations. Nevertheless, the mapped and analysed strategies of the SJM's member organisations are limited by the quantitative assessment of a triple enemy hierarchy and the reviewed studies on the SJM players' strategies. The dynamic game is, therefore, a limited and incomplete assessment of past and possible future strategies. More comprehensive dynamic games require serious interdisciplinary effort to account for diverse strategies and actors at play. It is unlikely that one author or a group of scholars from one academic tradition are capable of accounting for the multiple events, strategies, payoffs, and the nature of the interaction between the various players of the SJM. It is the hope of this author that future and more cooperative interdisciplinary efforts will investigate, improve, and extend this approach in examining the strategies of players of the SJM. Future research may benefit from assigning an active role to the near and far state in the dynamic game, and examining the universe of members in the SJM. Moreover, it could prove less subjective if the strategic map and assumed payoffs are not only anchored on quantitative analysis and past research but are also subject to an agreement between a team of practitioners from diverse counter-terrorism backgrounds. Future research may also benefit from accounting for the views of jihadi strategists in developing the movement's strategic maps rather than evaluate against them as in the case of this study.

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August 2019

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