

# TERRORIST DIVORCE: EXAMINING ALLIANCE BREAK-UPS AND THE AL QAEDA/ISIL SPLIT

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## **Abstract**

Though somewhat counterintuitive given terrorist organizations' clandestine nature, such organizations do engage in strategic alliances and partnerships with one another. A handful of scholars have grappled with terrorist alliances, but a gap in the literature remains when it comes to how these alliances end. This study will examine "terrorist divorce" – the point at which these alliances fall apart – by building a preliminary theoretical discussion and investigating the break-up of al Qaeda Core and The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (formerly al Qaeda in Iraq). The study finds that the level of strategic cohesion, fulfillment of needs, trust, and communication are key to determining whether an alliance partnership will dissolve. Al Qaeda Core and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant were never blessed with strategic cohesion or optimal levels of trust and communication; however, the alliance's demise can be traced to the degradation of each group's ability and willingness to fulfill the other's needs.

## **Introduction**

"[D]on't let your eyes lose sight of the target...it should stand before you always. Otherwise you deviate from the general line through a policy of reaction... Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable – also – are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages. You shouldn't

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be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the shaykh of the slaughterers, etc. They do not express the general view of the admirer and the supporter of the resistance in Iraq, and of you in particular by the favor and blessing of God."

– Ayman al Zawahiri in correspondence with Abu Musab al Zarqawi, 2005

In 2005, senior al-Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri sent al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi a thirteen-page letter – from which the above excerpt is taken – admonishing the Jordanian for engaging in brutal executions of hostages and targeting Iraq's Shia population. While the letter's tone was not as scathing as it could have been given Zawahiri's characteristic flowery and elaborate language, the missive, which was intercepted by Western intelligence, exposed a strategic and tactical fissure between al-Qaeda in Iraq and al-Qaeda's core leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nearly a decade later, this fissure would result in the split between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In tracing the relationship between these two entities, this study will consider four determinants of successful alliances – strategic cohesion, fulfillment of needs, trust, and communication – in order to examine which factor led to al-Qaeda and ISIL's "divorce" in 2014.

While the relationship between Zarqaqi and al-Qaeda Core (AQC) had never been rosy, the two entities were able, for a time, to fulfill one another's needs in Iraq. This cohesion began to crumble, however, after Zarqawi's own goals began to take precedence over that of AQC's. After Zarqawi's death in 2006, Bin Laden managed to gain more control over AQI. However, once Abu Bakr al Baghdadi assumed control of the organization, then the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), in 2010, the same strained dynamics between the leaders reappeared. Over the following four years, al-Qaeda lost bin Laden, and Zawahiri struggled to control the organization's affiliate in Iraq. Finally in 2014, after Baghdadi unilaterally claimed that ISI was to subsume Jabhat al Nusra and create the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Zawahiri officially disavowed the group.

Using the case of the al-Qaeda/ISIL split, this study examines "terrorist divorce" – the point at which terrorist alliances and partnerships fall apart – as a means of filling a hole in the existing terrorist alliance literature. A handful of scholars have conducted significant research on terrorist alliances, however such findings are rarely represented in the broader literature. Though such terrorist alliance research often contains counterterrorism implications discussing weakening such partnerships, few scholars have specifically

examined why and how these partnerships dissolve independent from any external intervention. If researchers and counterterrorism practitioners can examine and correctly assess why and how terrorist alliances might end, counter-alliance operations will become a more effective tool in the counterterrorism toolbox, enabling us to systematically and strategically sabotage terrorist alliances and force a divorce.

This study is divided into five sections: first, I will review the literature on terrorist alliances, and identify that there is a gap when it comes to examining how alliances end. Second, I will delve into the business and organizational literature as well as human divorce literature in order to begin theorizing about terrorist divorce, focusing on four main determinants: strategic cohesion, need fulfillment, trust, and communication. Third, through a heuristic case study using within-case process tracing, I will examine the al-Qaeda/ISIL split in terms of those four determinants. Fourth, I will discuss the findings of this study, and, last, I will conclude with the counterterrorism implications stemming from terrorist divorce, and consider directions for future research.

An important note to consider is the relative dearth of information regarding these groups' and their leaders' intentions, as well as the decisions they make and the communication between them. Given that terrorist organizations are by nature clandestine, such reliable information as may be available about large corporations or individual public figures is conspicuously absent. As will be discussed further in the theoretical section of this study, the scholars in this field face challenges when trying to examine a fuller picture of terrorist alliances. It is thus unsurprising that I faced similar challenges in writing about the breakdown of those alliances. As a result, any such theoretical discussion is preliminary and imperfect, yet provides a helpful starting place for further research on terrorist divorce.

## Literature Review

Terrorism scholar Dr. Tricia Bacon, in her extensive research on terrorist alliance hubs, has found that the conventional wisdom on terrorist alliances falls short of a complete explanation. Scholars and government officials alike often posit that the presence of a shared ideology and a common enemy will cause alliances; however, Bacon argues that, were this the case, the international community would see a preponderance of terrorist alliances, while in reality they are few and far between (Bacon 2014). Using organizational theory, her fundamental argument holds that, rather than ideology, organizational needs cause groups to seek an alliance, and that subsequently, identity features such as shared ideology, determine which



groups would be suitable partners. Bacon defines alliances among terrorist groups to be “relationships of security cooperation between terrorist groups that involve mutual expectations of coordination or consultation in the future.... alliances offer opportunities for deeper and more sustained exchanges, and therefore, can pose a greater threat” (Bacon 2014).

Similar to business scholars Prashant Kale and Harbir Singh’s view on corporate mergers as a paradox, Bacon refers to alliances as “anomalies.” Of the many reasons that groups do not ally with one another, their clandestine and illegal nature remains one of the most important (Bacon 2014). Groups are often wary of the vulnerability necessary to forge what Bacon calls “credible commitment,” and often deem the sacrificing of autonomy for increased security to be an untenable risk (Bacon 2014). Additionally, terrorist groups often hold strong in-group cohesion, wherein engaging in an alliance may alienate its constituency or increase chances of a leak (Bacon 2014).

On the other hand, those groups that are successful at forging alliances – which Bacon terms “alliance hubs” – account for a disproportionate amount of the existing or historical terrorist alliances (Bacon 2014). In her forthcoming book, Bacon explores the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and al-Qaeda as alliance hubs, and explains why groups gravitate to these organizations. Alliances, though an anomaly, occur because they increase groups’ “legitimacy and stature,” help groups accumulate additional resources, capabilities, and knowledge, and become more efficient and effective in their actions (Bacon 2014). Additionally, alliances may help groups withstand losses or counterterrorism pressure, broaden the scope of their actions, and “project themselves as part of a broader movement (Bacon 2014).”

In her book, Bacon explains her typology for partnerships between terrorist groups in terms of the level of interdependence they share with one another (Bacon Forthcoming, 88). According to Bacon, interdependence stems from, “1) how partners treat resources...; 2) the partners’ time horizon for the relationship; 3) the partnering organizations’ degree of autonomy, equality, and independence...; and 4) the breadth and parameters of cooperation” (Bacon Forthcoming, 88). From this measure of interdependence, she outlines four kinds of alliances: pooled, integrated, subordinate, and reciprocal (Bacon Forthcoming, 88). Bacon identifies a fifth relationship – the “transactional relationship” – that happens frequently, yet is not strictly considered an alliance given its quid pro quo nature (Bacon Forthcoming, 90).

A professor of terrorism studies and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, Dr. Daniel Byman expresses similar findings. He too endeavors to explain terrorist alliances through organizational theory, and posits that a group

"seeks affiliates to expand the scope and scale of its operations, gain the benefits of greater local expertise, better spread innovations, and – most important – endow itself and its mission with greater legitimacy" (Byman 2014, 431). Byman defines a terrorist ally to be "a terrorist organization that accepts the leadership of another terrorist organization but remains organizationally distinct..." (Byman 2014, 434). Specifically regarding al-Qaeda, he defines affiliates as "those groups that have taken the al-Qaeda name and/or whose leaders have sworn loyalty to the al-Qaeda core leader who, in turn, has acknowledged that oath" (Byman 2014, 435).

As does Bacon, Byman observes the rarity with which groups ally with one another; given their insularity and clandestine nature, it proves difficult for them to assure one another of their commitment (Byman 2014, 439). Byman also argues that ideology cannot be the main driving force, as like-minded groups frequently remain unaffiliated (Byman 2014, 439). He takes an economic approach to the study of affiliations, explaining that a parent group will ally with a local group in order to specialize and increase efficiency through the laws of comparative advantage (Byman 2014, 441). Both Bacon and Byman cite Stephen Walt and Ely Karmon's work on alliances, wherein they propose that groups – either legitimate organizations such as states and institutions, or terrorist organizations – ally with one another when they feel threatened in order to restore a balance of power (Byman 2014, 438).

Byman argues that the most important factors determining a successful and stable alliance can be boiled down to a low level of preference diversion and appropriate levels of command and control, but that many can be stymied by delegation and integration problems (Byman 2014, 431, 445, 446). As is mentioned in the business and human divorce literature, problems that arise during challenging periods in the alliance may have already existed before the groups merged, and it is only once the groups face difficulties that these issues come to the surface (Byman 2014, 443).

Victor Asal, Hyun Hee Park, Karl Rethemeyer, and Gary Ackerman employ a more quantitative approach to studying terrorist alliance behavior and use theories from political science, social network, and organizational literature (Asal et al. 2015, 1). They place their study of terrorism within the broader subject of "organized non-state violence," yet distinguish their topic of focus by considering terrorism's psychological aspect (Asal et al. 2015, 3–4). Asal et al.'s work focuses on the networked nature of terrorist groups, and – given that most research has dealt only with al-Qaeda as a case study – seeks to examine such networks writ large (Asal et al. 2015, 6).

Within their study, Asal et al. define alliances to be "joint or



complementary action for the same (intermediate) purpose. This action can constitute activity at the rhetorical, material or operational levels” (Asal et al. 2015, 6), thus providing a broader definition than both Bacon and Byman. The authors situate the phenomenon of alliances within rational choice theory, explaining that one of the first scholars of terrorist cooperation deemed alliances possible if and when they are to the groups’ mutual benefit (Asal et al. 2015, 6). Asal et al. echo Bacon’s study of alliance hubs by examining what they call “terrorist syndicates” (Asal et al. 2015, 15), and illustrate a running theme that both Byman and Bacon consider: “Why syndicates sharing ideological similarities and geographical proximity fail to connect and why two separate syndicates can form around common motivational aspects” (Asal et al. 2015, 16), illustrating the failure of ideology to fully explain terrorist alliance behavior.

Dr. Assaf Moghadam of the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point focuses on affiliation concerns within the context of groups pledging bayat to ISIL, explaining that “it is not uncommon for these rhetorical pledges of support to serve as a springboard for more tangible cooperative relationships in the logistical and operational realms. Such inter-organizational collaboration can significantly affect the capabilities, longevity, strategy, and tactics of the cooperating parties” (Moghadam 2015). Moghadam identifies ideological affinity and trust as key determinants for a successful terrorist alliance, and endeavors to develop a typology of cooperation based on the level of “strength of cooperative ties” (Moghadam 2015). Echoing Bacon’s typology of alliances, Moghadam’s delineations are – in descending order of strength – mergers, strategic alliances, tactical cooperation, and transactional cooperation (Moghadam 2015).

The literature on terrorist alliance behavior agrees on several things: first, alliances are rare; second, were conventional wisdom to be true, we should expect to see many more alliances than we do; third, groups engage in alliances when cooperation is deemed mutually beneficial; fourth, groups expect to increase their effectiveness, legitimacy, and skillset when engaging in alliances; fifth, a measure of strength or interdependence is needed in order to distinguish more transactional relationships from lifelong strategic alliances; and sixth, that if we can properly understand the way these alliances arise and operate, we can identify fissures and exacerbate problems as a means of degrading capabilities and increasing counterterrorism effectiveness. The literature also produces several typologies of alliances, which, while they may not be perfect, provide an excellent starting point for further research on a previously understudied phenomenon.

## Theory

Building off of the existing literature on terrorist alliance formation and

behavior, this study's goal is to put forth an introductory theoretical discussion on terrorist divorce. This discussion, however, faces the same challenges that early terrorist alliance scholars faced: how does one theorize about the partnerships of clandestine groups? Scholars like Bacon, Byman, and Asal et al. turned to external subjects such as business and organizational studies to examine alliance theory in general in order to create a foundation for terrorist alliance theory in particular. Thus, when pursuing the logical next step – looking at how alliances end – it is helpful to return to the business literature on corporate demergers and divestiture. I will add a portion of human divorce theory to the mix as a means of expanding the foundation for terrorist divorce theories and including an individual-level analysis of the players involved.

Combining divorce theories from these two fields and examining relationships between companies as well as romantic partners provides a well-rounded theoretical basis for developing a typology of terrorist divorce. The theories operate on different yet complementary levels of analysis, given that organizational theories apply to groups while human divorce theories pertain to a relationship between two individuals. This proves useful for an analysis of terrorist divorce behavior in that, while terrorist organizations are groups and must deal with social and organizational dynamics, they must also contend with larger-than-life personalities of leadership than can greatly affect decision-making. While not a perfect representation, given the scarcity of research on theories of terrorist divorce proper, borrowing theories from these two schools of thought is a good place to start.

### *Models of Demergers and Divorce*

Business scholars Mike Peng and Oded Shenkar use human divorce theory in order to build their theories of corporate divorce. Citing human divorce theory as containing four phases of divorce – initiation, going public, uncoupling, and aftermath – Peng and Shenkar place particular emphasis on the process of dissolution itself, arguing that the outcome of divorce can be determined by how the process is carried out (Peng and Shenkar 2002). In each phase, there exists a cycle of renegotiation, monitoring, and behavior change; according to the authors, the relationship can be saved at each step in this four-phase model (Peng and Shenkar 2002, 94).

A similar theoretical model comes from business scholars Oscar Thomasson and Audrius Janusonis, who propose a tri-stage process: pre-demerger phase, execution phase, and post-demerger phase. The first phase is a preparatory stage before the demerger has been made public, and appropriate structures are being put into place for the demerger to run



smoothly. Communication remains key to ensuring these structures fit everyone's needs (Thomasson and Janusonis 2012). In this phase, "information has a tendency to remain in the hands of few, something which causes uncertainty and confusion in the organization and irrevocably leads to reduced organizational performance" (Thomasson and Janusonis 2012).

During the execution stage, firms may experience a loss of employees, management, and overall talent, while "the cultural integration process puts company culture, image and identity at stake" (Thomasson and Janusonis 2012, 9, 11). Finally, within the post-demergers phase, "[t]he new company has to share future product roadmaps with customers in order to maintain customer confidence and prevent them from turning to rival companies or change their perception of the company... If the managers are not communicating and getting feedback from the customers, [customers] may turn to competitors" (Thomasson and Janusonis 2012, 14). In essence, the company must do all it can to keep constituents happy in the wake of large organizational shifts.

Building off of these models as well as the business and human divorce theory, I posit four determinants of alliance break-ups: the levels of strategic cohesion, need fulfillment, trust, and communication. Each determinant is present within business demergers, human divorce, and terrorist alliance break-ups, and will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. Additionally, the case study examining the al-Qaeda/ISIL split will be evaluated according to these four determinants. The factors can also be broken down into two smaller subcategories, which I have dubbed "conflict instigators" and "conflict managers;" the first contains strategic concerns and tactical needs, and the second, trust and communication. For the most part, strategic mismatch and a lack of fulfillment of needs will create conflict, while the level of communication and preexisting trust within the alliance will determine how well the groups will deal with that conflict. These conflict instigators and conflict managers present an interesting opportunity for further research, as they are only touched on briefly in this study.

### *Strategic Cohesion*

The level of strategic cohesion that two entities share – whether they are two firms, humans, or terrorist organizations – plays a large role in determining how successful an alliance between the two will be. Between firms, this cohesion or mismatch can include short- and long-term goals such as levels of profit, which new markets to enter into, which products to begin or continue producing, and other strategic visions for the future (Thomasson and Janusonis 2012, 5–6). Within a human couple, such concerns include whether or not to get married and/or have children, where to live, and what style of life to lead over the course of their

partnership. Terrorist organizations also rely on this strategic cohesion, and in their case such strategic concerns include matters of ideology, visions for long-term partnership, grand strategy regarding targeting, debates over tactics, etc.

### *Need Fulfillment*

At the outset of an alliance, groups will determine the goals and the needs of each organization. Thomasson and Janusonis lay out several causes of business demerger to include “inability to reach profit goals and financial synergies” (Thomasson and Janusonis 2012, 5–6), given the primarily financial needs and goals of a joint venture. Within a couple, such needs may include one partner’s desire to live in an area pertinent to their career, while the other partner cannot move due to their current job. Within terrorist organizations, organizational needs rank highly on a group’s list of reasons to ally, and can include the desire to learn a new and more effective tactic, or to expand into a new zone of combat (Bacon 2014).

Bacon argues that the primary reason for seeking out an alliance is to fulfill a set of organizational needs (Bacon 2014). Building off of that, she explains that, if an alliance hub appears unable or unwilling to “fulfill other groups’ needs...it will damage the hub’s desirability and stunt individual relationships” (Bacon 2014). She continues on to say that “[p]ropaganda efforts that cast doubt on a hub’s ability to address organizational needs – such as training that did not prepare a partner for an operation or contributed to an operational failure – will also diminish their appeal” (Bacon 2014). Thus, the fulfillment of needs proves to be an important component of alliances, while a lack of fulfillment may lead down a path towards divorce.

### *Trust*

In all three fields of relationship discussed, trust remains key to fostering success within an alliance (Peng and Shenkar 2002, 94; Bacon 2014). According to Kale and Singh, within business mergers, “[t]rust develops through a cyclical process of bargaining, interaction, commitment, and execution between the concerned firms” (Kale and Singh 2009, 50). They also argue that engaging in programming, hierarchy, and feedback helps to coordinate, manage interdependence, and foster trust within an alliance (Kale and Singh 2009, 50). In addition to these metrics, Kale and Singh outline three factors important to building a solid alliance: complementarity, commitment, and compatibility/fit (Kale and Singh 2009, 47).

Among romantic relationships, trust is absolutely crucial. In order to find the three “C’s” that Kale and Singh discuss, one must first establish that



one's potential partner is trustworthy. From the divorce literature, one sees that limited information makes decision-making about a partner more difficult, and that over time – as one learns more information – one may determine that pursuing the relationship will be beneficial or, alternatively, detrimental (Svarer 2003). Terrorist groups face similar problems, yet given their insular and clandestine nature can have an even more difficult time establishing the trustworthiness of a potential partner. Bacon argues that alliances tend to be most prone to collapse during “early, trust-building phase[s]” (Bacon 2014), while Asal et al. claims that “[t]rust is likely to be even more important in terrorist undertakings than in licit ones” (Asal et al. 2015, 10).

### *Communication*

The final crucial component to an alliance is effective communication. Thomasson and Janusonis discuss inadequate communication as being one of the drivers for demerger among corporations (Thomasson and Janusonis 2012), and this is echoed in the divorce literature. For terrorist organizations, maintaining communication is exceedingly difficult and can pose many problems for alliances (Byman 2014, 445, 459, 467). As William McCants discusses in *ISIS Apocalypse*, “[c]landestine communication makes it hard to run a militia from afar” (McCants 2015, 77). Asal et al. posit that various environmental conditions such as co-location may facilitate interaction and communication, thereby increasing the strength of alliances. Thus, when such communication breaks down, one can expect such relationships to degrade significantly.

Byman also highlights the unique communication issues that terrorist alliances face given their clandestine nature. He states:

An affiliate may falsely claim credit for a job, shirk responsibilities, pursue its own preferences, and otherwise act outside of or against the parent organization’s wishes. Such behavior forces the parent organization to spend time, money, and other resources to monitor and control its affiliates... Often the parent organization does not know whether an undesired outcome is due to chance or insufficient resources—legitimate reasons for failure but also common excuses—or due to the affiliate not acting as ordered (Byman 2014, 443).

These problems can become particularly acute when the parent organization lacks monitoring and communication/reporting mechanisms with the local affiliate (Byman 2014, 445).

## Case Study

In order to examine the al-Qaeda/ISIL divorce in terms of these four determinants, it is necessary to consider the groups' history as partners and discuss the nature of their alliance break-up. When considering this alliance, it is helpful to think about al-Qaeda and AQI/ISIL's relationship in terms of two three-year periods: the first is the bin Laden/Zarqawi era from 2003 to 2006, while the second is the Zawahiri/Baghdadi era from 2011-2014. Such a breakdown provides a more focused analysis by concentrating on the periods where the relationship was the most active as well as the most strained.

### *Bin Laden/Zarqawi: 2003-2006*

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's relationship with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda Core (AQC) was fraught from the beginning. Following the United States-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003, the leaders' two larger aims – combating the “near enemy” or the “far enemy” – were conveniently contained within one chaotic warzone (Fishman 2006, 21). Bin Laden used the presence of US troops on the ground to support his claims that the West was at war with all Muslims, supporting his far enemy narrative. This served Zarqawi's purposes as well, as the invasion proved that the Iraqi government was merely a puppet of the United States. Given this convergence of two seemingly disparate – and at times opposing – goals, both bin Laden and Zarqawi deemed a partnership beneficial.

In 2003, would-be fighters flowed into Iraq to prepare for the U.S. invasion (Kirdar 2011, 3). Zarqawi, having become the emir of a coalition of groups in the region, founded his own organization, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (TwJ), and became the de facto leader of the Islamist foreign fighters in Iraq (Kirdar 2011, 3; Michael 2007, 341). After the official end of combat in May 2003, the Iraqi Insurgency emerged in full force (Michael 2007, 341). Zarqawi, as the leader of the foreign fighters within the Sunni insurgency, led between five and ten percent of the fighters, or between 800 and 1,200 men (Michael 2007, 341). In October 2004 – after months of negotiations – Zarqawi pledged allegiance, or bayat, to bin Laden, and renamed his group al-Qaeda in Iraq (Kirdar 2011, 4; Michael 2007, 343; Jenkins 2006, 8; Fishman 2006, 21). Although his group had outstripped al-Qaeda in both resources and publicity (Farrall 2011; Michael 2007, 343), Zarqawi deemed taking the al-Qaeda name advantageous enough to form a partnership (Kirdar 2011, 6, 8).

After the November 2004 battle in Fallujah, Zarqawi's image as a powerful insurgent leader solidified (Michael 2007, 342). At this point, he

introduced two tactics that would become mainstays of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – a group just several iterations away from Zarqawi’s TwJ. The first tactic was a deft use of media; many battles were recorded and released on al-Jazeera as well as on the Internet (Michael 2007, 342; Kirdar 2011, 8). Additionally, Zarqawi employed a press secretary to help him facilitate the posting of his propaganda (Michael 2007, 342). The second, more gruesome tactic was the advent of publicized beheadings of westerners. Nicholas Berg, an American businessman, was the first such victim, and a recording of his beheading was posted on a jihadist website on May 11, 2004 (Michael 2007, 342; Weaver 2006; Kirdar 2011, 4). Additionally, Zarqawi openly targeted Shia civilians with his brutal tactics, losing him massive amounts of public support and even engendering the infamous admonishing letter from Zawahiri in 2005 (Jenkins 2006, 8; Fishman 2006, 23).

This letter, intercepted by Western intelligence and quoted in the introduction of this study, served as a window into al-Qaeda’s relationship with AQI. The letter’s primary themes were Zarqawi’s targeting of Iraq’s Shia population, the brutality with which he executed hostages, and his highlighting of obscure doctrinal differences within Islam (al Zawahiri 2005). Though Zawahiri admitted he saw the situation from afar, he argued these actions taken by Zarqawi were confusing and alienating the ummah or the worldwide community of Muslims – described in the translation as “common folk” (al Zawahiri 2005, 8). Zarqawi was losing public support for AQI’s cause, and giving the al-Qaeda brand a bad name in Iraq.

The following year, Zarqawi was killed by an American drone strike, and was replaced with Abu Omar al Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al Muhajir. During this period, the group was renamed the Islamic State of Iraq, and maintained a lower profile than in previous years, having taken Zawahiri’s advice to scale back its brutality (Warrick 2015, 252–3). This changed after both ISI leaders were killed in an American-led airstrike in 2010, and Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, a former courier for Abu Omar, took their places (Stern and Berger 2015, xvii).

#### *Zawahiri/Baghdadi: 2011–2014*

By the time abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over, ISI was a shell of what it had been under Zarqawi (Warrick 2015, 245–6). According to Washington Post reporter and author Joby Warrick, ISI “had lost its sanctuary and freedom of movement, so essential for communication, training, and resupply... [I]t was selling an ideology that the Muslim world seemed no longer to care for. Five years after Zarqawi’s death, the Islamic State of Iraq had become the thing that terrorist organizations fear even more than their own annihilation. It had become irrelevant” (Warrick

2015, 245–6). As fortune – or misfortune – would have it, the Syrian Civil War proved just the boon the group needed to reassert itself on the world stage (Warrick 2015, 250).

Having been arrested and sent to the American prison Camp Bucca in January 2004, Baghdadi developed first-hand grievances with the Western forces occupying Iraq (Warrick 2015, 255). In 2011, Baghdadi sent Abu Muhammad al Julani across the border into Syria in order to scout out the developing situation and set up a network of contacts (Warrick 2015, 251). Over the next several years, Julani developed an organization called Jabhat al Nusra, or al-Nusra Front, which was sanctioned by the US Treasury Department as the “Syrian arm of al-Qaeda” in December 2012 (Weiss and Hassan 2015, 181).

Despite their roots in the same leadership organization, ISI and al Nusra developed along two different strategic paths. William McCants outlines the conflict, explaining that “[t]he [Islamic] State [of Iraq] wanted to carve out a domain in the Arab hinterland between Syria and Iraq [while] Nusra wanted to embed itself in the Syrian opposition and overthrow the Assad regime” (McCants 2015, 89–90). Over time, Baghdadi determined, with some jealousy, that the foot soldiers that made al Nusra so powerful were more loyal to Julani than to himself; he pressed Julani to make public that the Syrian group was, in fact, a subsidiary of the Islamic State of Iraq (McCants 2015, 90). On April 9 2013, after repeated requests through messages and even a private meeting between the two leaders, Baghdadi, in his frustration, announced the formation of a new group: a caliphate under the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, with himself serving as its caliph. ISIL was to subsume al Nusra in order to become the predominant jihadist organization in Iraq and Syria (McCants 2015, 90–91; Weiss and Hassan 2015, 183–4).

After this surprise announcement, Julani also took to the airwaves and denied Baghdadi’s statement, instead pledging bayat directly to al-Qaeda’s Zawahiri (Weiss and Hassan 2015, 184). After several months of silence, Zawahiri responded and placed the blame – at least publicly – squarely on both groups’ shoulders. The al-Qaeda leader explained that, while ISI was at fault for declaring a caliphate and attempting to subsume al Nusra without any consultation from al-Qaeda Core (AQC), al Nusra was also at fault for showing its hand and openly acknowledging its connection to al-Qaeda (Weiss and Hassan 2015, 184–5; McCants 2015, 92). Zawahiri subsequently ordered the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant to be dissolved. Unsurprisingly, Baghdadi defied Zawahiri’s orders, claiming that his options were to obey his emir, or obey his God; for him, the choice was clear, and the caliphate was to exist



(McCants 2015, 92).

In the wake of the announcement and the schism, a majority of al Nusra's foreign fighters joined ISIL's ranks (Weiss and Hassan 2015, 186). Baghdadi, as a member of Iraq's al-Bu Badri tribe, justified his position as caliph by "claim[ing] to be part of the same ancestral line as Muhammad," a requirement to lead the caliphate (Warrick 2015, 254). In essence, Baghdadi returned to Zarqawi's style of leadership, "embrac[ing] the Jordanian's most grisly excesses," and pursuing a public relations agenda as aggressively as Zarqawi's AQI had (Warrick 2015, 252–3; Weiss and Hassan 2015, 186). In response, Zawahiri followed senior al-Qaeda leader Adam Gadahn's earlier advice (Gadahn 2011), and publicly disavowed ISIL, officially cutting ties with its Iraqi affiliate (Stern and Berger 2015, 180).

### *Strategic Cohesion*

Even from the alliance's earliest iterations, two groups' leaders had different grand strategic goals and aspirations for their jihad, and the biggest differences can be boiled down to two factors: First, the on-going debate between targeting the near enemy and the far enemy, and second, their position on targeting other Muslims, namely the Shia population. On the first point, in his 1996 fatwa, bin Laden laid out his intentions to target Americans, or the far enemy, and cashed in on this promise with the attacks on September 11th, 2001. Bin Laden, while favoring the Sunni population, refrained from targeting the Shia for fear of alienating al-Qaeda's constituency as well as harming recruitment (Kirdar 2011, 4; McCants 2015, 8). Zarqawi, on the other hand, endeavored to fight the so-called apostate regimes of the Middle East, in other words, those that he believed were run by infidels and propped up by the West (Fishman 2007, 21).

Warrick summarizes the two groups' strategic differences well: "Al-Qaeda's more pragmatic thinkers spoke of the caliphate as a distant goal, one that would have to wait until the Middle East's secular regimes could be toppled. But Baghdadi believed the opposite: raise the caliphate's ancient banner, and righteous Muslims would fall into line" (Warrick 2015, 252). Following that theme, terrorism scholars Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger argue that the AQ/ISIL divorce was "about vision," and was "born out of strife and irreconcilable differences" (Stern and Berger 2015, 177–8). ISIL's brutal violence against the very constituency that al-Qaeda believed they should winning over proved a massive thorn in the relationship (Stern and Berger 2015, 177–8). In his 2005 letter, Zawahiri, presumably rhetorically, asked Zarqawi if such violence was "correct" and necessary to achieve AQI and al-Qaeda's goals (al Zawahiri 2005, 8). He writes,

[M]any of your Muslim admirers amongst the common folk are wondering

about your attacks on the Shia. The sharpness of this questioning increases when the attacks are on one of their mosques... My opinion is that this matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue. Indeed, questions will circulate among mujahedeen circles and their opinion makers about the correctness of this conflict with the Shia at this time. Is it something that is unavoidable? Or, is it something can be put off until the force of the mujahed movement in Iraq gets stronger? And if some of the operations were necessary for self-defense, were all of the operations necessary? Or, were there some operations that weren't called for? And is the opening of another front now in addition to the front against the Americans and the government a wise decision? (al Zawahiri 2005, 8).

Such questioning earns Zawahiri the description that some scholars have given him, that of a parent attempting to show his child the right path without explicitly telling him what to do (McCants 2015, 95; Weiss and Hassan 2015, 184). Over the next decade, the group that would become ISIL engaged in and honed these brutal tactics, particularly during the summer of 2014 when the group came to the fore of American concern.

### *Need Fulfillment*

In examining the relationship between Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq and bin Laden's al-Qaeda Core, it is important to recognize that – while each group gained something from the partnership – each group had to compromise as well. In pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda, Zarqawi linked himself to a weaker organization in order to obtain the grandeur of their name for recruitment and funding purposes. While al-Qaeda received a great deal of controversy and disagreement in taking on AQI, bin Laden gained a vigorous organization that kept his group relevant in a key jihadist theater.

By 2003, bin Laden knew that his leadership and, thus, the well oiled hierarchical structure of his organization had been decimated by the United States' invasion of Afghanistan; he struggled to keep al-Qaeda Core relevant, deeming it beneficial to recruit so-called franchises to evoke the image of a strong parent company (Fishman 2007, 21; Kirdar 2011, 6). For his part, Zarqawi sought to be the leader of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq, and knew that the cachet of the "al-Qaeda" name would increase recruitment and catapult him into that role (Fishman 2007, 21). Given these organizational needs on



both sides of the arena, it was clear that the creation of al-Qaeda in Iraq would benefit both parties.

### *Trust*

In 2010, upon hearing through the media – rather than through internal communications – about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's ascension to the head of the Islamic State of Iraq, bin Laden reportedly asked his deputies for information about the new leader. Without having a personal relationship with Baghdadi, bin Laden felt distrustful of this new emir, and sought to ensure that his Iraq affiliate was in good hands (McCants 2015, 78).

In keeping with this theme, Assaf Moghadam of the CTC intimates that the eventual split between the two groups came as a result “of the gradual erosion of trust” (Moghadam 2015). Towards the end of their relationship, it became clear that ISIL could not be depended upon; as Stern and Berger point out, “[w]hile it’s true to say that al-Qaeda saw ISIS as too extreme, it’s more accurate to say that Zawahiri fired ISIS for its public defiance of his wishes and commands,” effectively curtailing the relationship for Baghdadi’s insubordination (Stern and Berger 2015, 180).

### *Communication*

Just a week before Osama bin Laden’s death, he wrote a letter to one of his deputies in which he questioned the nature of AQC’s communication with its Iraq affiliate. Bin laden wrote: “Regarding the communications with the brothers in Iraq, please inform us on its progress and the reason for its scarcity” (bin Laden 2011, 5), indicating that al-Qaeda’s central leadership had not heard from ISI for quite some time. Even assessing the characteristics of the leaders in charge proved difficult, as was apparent in an al-Qaeda missive comparing the leadership styles of Abu Hamza al-Mujahid and Zarqawi (“SOCOM-2012-0000014” 2007, 10).

This breakdown in communication proved a huge obstacle for the two organizations, and was exacerbated due to concerns regarding operational security. Well into 2013, after Baghdadi’s declaration that ISI was to subsume Jabhat al Nusra and bring about a caliphate under the moniker “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,” Zawahiri remained silent, largely – several scholars believe – to ensure his own security (Stern and Berger 2015, 190). When al-Qaeda’s leader did speak, however, he appeared out of touch with the situation (Stern and Berger 2015, 190), showing the detrimental impact that the lack of communication had on the alliance.

### **Findings**

Having examined the background of al-Qaeda and AQI/ISI/ISIL's relationship as well as considered the case in terms of the four determinants – strategic cohesion, need fulfillment, trust, and communication – the question remains, what caused the al-Qaeda/ISIL split? During the first era of the AQC/AQI relationship from 2003-2006, there was a lack of grand strategic cohesion and not a great deal of trust. However, the groups did fulfill one another's needs insofar as al-Qaeda was able to remain relevant by having a presence in one of the most important jihadi theaters, and Zarqawi gained legitimacy through the al-Qaeda brand.

During the second era, however – after the relative lull from 2006-2010 during Abu Omar al Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al Muhajir's tenure – Abu Bakr al Baghdadi emerged as a brutal Zarqawi-esque leader and the nature of the relationship changed. The groups still had little strategic cohesion, even lower levels of trust and communication, and had lost the ability and willingness to fulfill one another's needs.

While Zarqawi did disobey Zawahiri and deviate from al-Qaeda's grand strategy during the course of his leadership, the alliance did – for a time – fulfill the needs that had been significant enough to warrant an alliance in the first place. Thus, I posit that the first era of the alliance was a success, or at least successful enough to determine that it was worth continuing. Trust and communication facilitated this need fulfillment in that AQC could, for the most part, trust Zarqawi to maintain an al-Qaeda presence and not make too many severe mistakes. When he did make such mistakes, in general, al-Qaeda's core leadership was able to communicate with him. Their lack of strategic cohesion, while sometimes simply unhelpful to enabling a relationship, was at other times a major source of conflict, and put strain on the relationship for the entirety of its existence.

The second era, on the other hand, saw a decrease in both trust and communication as counterterrorism pressure remained high, Osama bin Laden was killed, and new leadership took over both organizations. Additionally, ISI's autonomy and subsequent ability to operate independently from AQC allowed it to pursue its own agenda. This agenda was at odds with al-Qaeda's own needs, and the fulfillment that had existed previously finally broke down. AQI and later ISI had already gained the legitimacy, recruitment, and funding that it needed from al-Qaeda core, yet AQC still required a solid and positive brand presence within Iraq. Once Baghdadi reinvigorated Zarqawi's brutal

	Bin Laden/ Zarquawi	Zawahiri/ Baghdadi
Strategic Cohesion	No	No
Need Fulfillment	Yes	No
Trust	More	Less
Communication	More	Less



tactics, the al-Qaeda brand became tarnished and its AQ's needs were no longer being fulfilled.

Thus – given that terrorist organizations will never gain optimal levels of trust and communication and must take what they can get in these categories – need fulfillment appears to be the most important determinant of success within an alliance. This category proved to exhibit the most significant change over the course of the relationship, and, once it was lost, significantly invalidated any reasons for maintaining the alliance. Once Baghadt announced the takeover of Jabhat al Nusra and the creation of the caliphate under the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL served no further purpose and only created more problems for al-Qaeda. Baghadt's outright disobedience of Zawahiri's decrees was the nail in the coffin, and in early 2014, the alliance's fate was sealed.

### **Counterterrorism Implications And Further Research**

Studying the nature of terrorist alliances and alliance break-ups provides counterterrorism practitioners with a greater arsenal for dismantling these organizations. This study advocates for essentially the same counterterrorism measures as the alliance literature does, yet from a different angle. Scholars of terrorist alliances encourage the use of counterterrorism measures that induce a poor alliance, in the hopes that that will result in divorce. However, by studying the way groups split, we can more directly and efficiently disrupt these alliances and degrade alliances' strength.

Byman argues that by using information operations, counterterror measures can “magnify...integration problems and, if done well, can further induce friction, discredit the brand, and otherwise throw sand in the gears” (Byman 2014, 431). Bacon echoes this sentiment, and advocates for drawing attention to allies’ failures and alienation of constituents in order to exacerbate any tension within the alliance (Bacon 2014). Additionally, rather than focusing on the upper echelons of terrorist leadership, she points out that “[c]ounterterrorism efforts should also target figures within alliance hubs who manage, facilitate, and encourage alliances” given that these mid-level operatives are the ones with the most influence over the success or failure of the alliance (Bacon 2014). Bacon explains that counterterror measures need not be reinvented with increased understanding of alliances, however they must be more “focused and enhanced...against hubs as well as [utilize] well-timed interventions” (Bacon 2014).

As this study found that need fulfillment proved to be the most important component keeping the al-Qaeda/ISIL relationship afloat, counterterrorism policies and actions should seek to disrupt this aspect of alliances. In order to do this, as Bacon and Byman discuss, it is incumbent upon counterterrorism practitioners

to disrupt a group's ability or willingness to provide its ally with something it needs. If two organizations are allied primarily so one organization can traffic weapons to the other, the focus of that counter-alliance operation should be shutting down the smuggling routes used to obtain such arms. On the other hand, if a group's primary function is to provide another group safe-haven, that counter-alliance operation would be most effective if it put pressure on the haven-provider so that it becomes untenable to harbor the haven-seeker. As the scholars discuss, this is not a radical new counterterrorism strategy; CT and other security practitioners already seek to disrupt arms smuggling routes and destroy terrorist safe-havens. Rather, focusing on the specific determinants keeping an alliance alive and shifting resources towards that determinant will destroy terrorist alliances in a direct, efficient, and targeted manner.

An additional track for future research involves the two previously mentioned subcategories within the four determinants: conflict instigators – strategic cohesion and need fulfillment – and conflict managers – trust and communication. While outside the scope of this study, future studies should examine the different roles that these two sets of determinants play, and whether those roles change their importance vis-à-vis causes of divorce.

## Conclusion

The case of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant provides unique insight into terrorist divorce and the broader discussion of terrorist alliances. In examining the existing literature on such partnerships, as well as considering several external subjects such as business and organizational studies as well as romantic relationships, I have argued here that four main determinants will contribute to the success or failure of an terrorist alliance. Those determinants are the level of strategic cohesion between the groups; the ability and willingness of the groups to fulfill one another's needs; the level of trust that the groups, and particularly the leaders, have with one another; and the level of communication the groups are able to maintain.

By considering these determinants from a theoretical perspective, as well as using them as the lens through which to assess the case study of the al-Qaeda/ISIL split, we can develop a greater understanding of what keeps these alliances alive and what will prove to be a death sentence. For al-Qaeda and ISIL, the groups' ability and willingness to fulfill one another's needs – previously relatively strong during the bin Laden/Zarqawi era – was decimated by 2014, and the concurrent degradation of trust and communication put the alliance in no position to deal with such a major problem. Thus, the al Nusra



announcement served as the culmination of years of issues with need fulfillment, and the groups dissolved their alliance.

Considering this case, terrorist divorces, and terrorist alliances in general provides security practitioners a better understanding of how these groups, and the partnerships they create, function. Such an understanding is crucial for developing effective and efficient counterterrorism policy and operations. The more we study these issues, the better chance we have for dealing with the complex and persistent threat of terrorism.

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