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Why Jihadis Lose

Fratricidal jihadis fail to learn from their mistakes

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The Curse of Cain: Why Fratricidal Jihadis Fail to Learn from Their Mistakes

By Mohammed Hafez

The rapid and comprehensive demise of the Islamic State is the latest reminder that fratricidal jihadis are destined to lose. Over the last three decades, jihadis have consecutively lost their civil wars in Algeria, Iraq, and Syria because of three strategic errors. They portray their political conflicts as religious wars between Islam and impiety, forcing otherwise neutral parties to choose between repressive autocrats or ardent fanatics. Furthermore, they pursue transformational goals that are too ambitious for other rebel groups with limited political objectives, producing violent ruptures between doctrinaire jihadis and pragmatic Islamists. Lastly, their indiscriminate violence flips their supporters into proponents of law and order, allowing vulnerable regimes to extricate themselves from their legitimacy crises. Worst still, despite clarion warnings from seasoned veterans, jihadis appear incapable of internalizing lessons from their past failures. Their puritanical ideology is a major obstacle to learning and adapting in the crucible of civil wars. These inherent weaknesses offer the international community strategic lessons for fighting future iterations of the Islamic State.

Jihadis keep shooting themselves in the foot. In the past three decades, radical salafis have managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory on three major fronts. During the 1990s, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) saw the Algerian government mired in a legitimacy crisis after a military coup ended an electoral process. Rather than capitalize on the regime's internal vulnerabilities and international isolation, the GIA embarked on a fratricidal war with rival Islamists and alienated its supporters through mass atrocities. It lost the war and took down the entire Islamist project with it.

In the 2000s, al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) and its Sunni nationalist insurgents had the American-led coalition in a bind as it desperately sought to find a way out of a quagmire. Yet, like the GIA, AQI turned its guns on fellow rebels and sought to monopolize power at the expense of unity. After doing so, it was routed by the Sunni communities that had once welcomed it with open arms.

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The Islamic State is the latest jihadi group to fall victim to its own strategic errors. After rising like a phoenix from the ashes in 2013, it failed to learn the lessons of earlier jihads. Rather than building bridges with Syria's Islamist factions, it went its own way by declaring a caliphate and waging war on fellow rebels. Worst still, it glorified its genocidal violence, practically begging the entire world to form a military coalition against it. Today, it has lost all the territory it once held in Iraq and is all but finished in Syria.

These three movements had perfect opportunities to topple their regimes. Yet, in the crucible of civil wars, they turned their guns on fellow rebels—alienating their supporters, fragmenting their ranks, and driving away external sponsors. In fact, they assisted incumbent elites in crisis by handing them the perfect opportunity to divide-and-conquer their movements. Their fratricide sets them apart from their Islamist movements and the societies they seek to transform. As in the ancient parable of Cain, who killed his brother Abel, they are fugitives destined to wander from one conflict arena to another, unable to establish the utopian order to which they aspire. They cannot reap the fruits of their toil because the land in which they plant their roots is soiled with the blood of innocents.

Unheeded Warnings

What explains this self-destructive behavior on the part of jihadis? Why do they not learn from the mistakes of kindred movements? Why did a group like the Islamic State not absorb the lessons from earlier fratricidal Islamists in Algeria and Iraq, but instead repeated their exact mistakes and ultimately suffered their same fate? More puzzlingly, why did they not heed the warnings of veteran jihadis who communicated their concerns directly and clearly?

Take, for example, how al-Qa`ida leaders sought to warn Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq, using the case of Algeria as a cautionary tale. Atiyah Abdul Rahman, senior Libyan operational planner within al-Qa`ida's top leadership (killed in Pakistan by a U.S. drone attack in 2011), sent a letter to al-Zarqawi before he was killed by a U.S. airstrike in 2006 in which he wrote: "Ask me whatever you like about Algeria between 1994 and 1995, when [the Islamist movement] was at the height of its power and capabilities, and was on the verge of taking over the government ... I lived through it myself, and I saw firsthand; no one told me about it ... they [GIA militants] destroyed themselves with their own hands, with their lack of reason, delusions, and neglect and alienation of people through oppression, deviance, and harsh conduct ... their enemy did not defeat them, but rather they defeated themselves."¹

A few years later, Usama bin Ladin, concerned with growing infighting between AQI and Sunni insurgents, sent an audiotaped "Message to Our People in Iraq" in which he urged all the insurgents and tribes to reconcile their differences and acknowledge that "errors" have been made.² He advised his followers to avoid "fanatical loyalty to men" and reminded them that what unites Muslims is their adherence to Islam, not their "belonging to a tribe, homeland,



Image captured from a video produced by “Wilayat Damascus” on June 25, 2015, and entitled “Repent before We Overcome You,” which shows the Islamic State executing Jaysh al-Islam fighters.

or organization.” Yet, the future leaders of the Islamic State, the successors of AQI, practiced exactly what he cautioned against.^a What explains this failure to learn from history, and what are the implications for countering similar movements in the future—other than to stand out of the way as they shoot themselves in the foot again?

Three Fatal Flaws

Fratricidal jihadis like the Islamic State share three characteristics that explain their centrifugal dynamics—and why they are destined to lose. First, they frame their civil conflicts along Manichean themes, reducing the complex nature of adversarial camps into clear categories of us versus them, good versus evil, Islam versus impiety.^b By doing so, they wage wars on many fronts, coalescing their otherwise disparate enemies into a single camp united against them.

Fratricidal jihadis also pursue transformative goals that are too ambitious for other rebels with limited political preferences. Their ideologically doctrinarism sacrifices all forms of political realism, and thus they are suspicious of kindred groups that might sell them out in the name of pragmatism. They prefer to wipe out their rivals rather than compete with them through patient political strategies.

Lastly, fratricidal jihadis’ indiscriminate violence against civilians contributes to a permissive moral code that allows for the

killing of their own brothers-in-arms. Those who willfully and wantonly justify the mass killing of innocent civilians will not find it difficult to turn their daggers on fellow rebels who purportedly violate notions of ideological purity.^c

Underpinning these three deadly sins is an extremely puritanical ideology that is impervious to accommodation with militant factions that share some of their conflict objectives, but do not embrace their political ideals. They cannot even bring themselves to compromise with groups that share their political ideals, but diverge with them on their degree of pragmatism in pursuit of those objectives.^c Several psychological mechanisms can help explain this failure to accommodate alternative political preferences in rebel movements. Puritanical individuals are much more attuned to the presence of ideological differences, which is to say they have a tendency “to perceive greater distance between competing political alternatives” than those that are less doctrinaire.⁴ Additionally, ideologically extreme individuals, regardless of political content, are more prone to “belief superiority” than centrist ones, which in turn is associated with the tendency toward belief rigidity or “non-corruptibility.”⁵ Relatedly, ideologically extreme individuals have been

a According to analysis of the Abbottabad documents captured during the 2011 operation to kill bin Ladin, the latter sought to reconcile jihadi factions with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi with the help of Ansar al-Islam. See Nelly Lahoud, Stuart Caudill, Liam Collins, Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, Don Rassler, and Muhammad al-‘Ubaydi, *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012), p. 26.

b Generalized *takfir*, which entails the broad categorization of people as infidels, is the principal means by which jihadis draw sharp boundaries between ingroups and outgroups. All three movements discussed here were *takfiris*. For a detailed discussion of extreme *takfir* by the Islamic State, see Hassan Hassan, “The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2016, and Cole Bunzel, “Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State,” *Jihadica*, October 3, 2017.

c One of the most notable detractors of puritanical (i.e., jihadi salafi) groups was Abu Musab al-Suri. Al-Suri was an early critic of infantile jihadism, marked by lack of strategic thought or revolutionary theory. He railed against the “inflexible dogmatism and narrow-mindedness” of salafis. See Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 9. Yet, his prolific and lengthy treatise warning against reckless, self-defeating violence that alienates Muslim masses went unheeded. One may fault his fierce independence and lack of anchoring in traditional salafism for contributing to his failure to influence jihadis, but the same cannot be said of other radical authorities who issued clarion warnings similar to al-Suri’s. For example, Abdelmalek Droukdel, the leader of al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb, articulated in writing the strategic errors that should be avoided by the jihadis who captured vast territory in northeast Mali in 2012. Based on his Algerian experience, he warned against the premature establishment of an Islamic state, extreme application of sharia law, and fighting with other factions. See Pascale Combelles Siegel, “AQIM’s Playbook in Mali,” *CTC Sentinel* 6:3 (2013), pp. 9-11.

shown to be more intolerant of divergent political beliefs than those who are ideologically less extreme.⁶ Individuals with extreme beliefs also exhibit a greater preference for certainty than centrist individuals, and high levels of uncertainty are associated with a high sense of threat.⁷ Lastly, ideologically extreme groups are likely to associate with other extremists, leading to ideological encapsulation that shuts out countervailing voices that are necessary to learning and adapting.⁸

This piece highlights three cases of fratricidal jihadis: GIA (1992-1997), AQI (2003-2011), and the Islamic State (2013-2017). All of these groups were well-positioned to make substantial gains against their ruling regimes. At a minimum, they could have avoided the precipitous defeat they suffered at the hands of their adversaries had they not turned their guns on fellow rebels. In each case, their polarizing narratives, transformative goals, and indiscriminate violence directly contributed to tensions with other Islamist groups, which ultimately led to fratricidal bloodletting within their own movements. More perplexingly, they appear to be incapable of learning from their previous experiences.

The Algerian GIA

During the 1990s, in the midst of a civil war against the Algerian military regime, the GIA and the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) fiercely clashed with each other, undermining the unity of their rebel movement and extricating a vulnerable regime from its crisis. The AIS ultimately defected to the state, while the GIA splintered and ceased to exist.

In 1989, Algeria had embarked on the path of political liberalization in the aftermath of mass anti-state riots. A new constitution officially ended the one-party system, opening the door for liberal and Islamist opposition groups to directly challenge the historic monopoly of the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN). Islamists took advantage of this opportunity by forming their own party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). The FIS managed to win 188 out of 430 national assembly seats in the first round of voting in December 1991. It was poised to win an overwhelming majority of seats in the second round of voting set for January 1992, but Algeria's generals intervened to halt the electoral process. Thousands of FIS cadres were rounded up and detained, triggering a violent rebellion.

Several Islamist rebel groups emerged in order to topple the military regime. The two biggest factions were the GIA and AIS. The emergence of the GIA in 1992 marked the ascendancy of the hardline revolutionaries who rejected the electoral path and insisted on a total war to establish an Islamic state. Confronted with the possibility of losing leadership, the FIS put forward the AIS as an alternative to the GIA in July 1994.⁹ The FIS wanted to restore the pre-war equilibrium in which radicals were subordinate to the historic leadership of the Islamist movement. It also rejected GIA's indiscriminate violence and sought to compel the military regime to negotiate a political settlement that would free FIS leaders, reverse the ban on their organization, and return to the pre-coup status quo ante.¹⁰

The GIA and AIS advanced diametrically opposed conflict narratives, strategic objectives, and targeting policies. These divergences were rooted in an ideological divide as to the role of democracy in Islam, the permissibility of Islamists joining secular political systems, and the centrality of violence in building an Islamic state.

From the start of the civil war, the GIA portrayed the Algerian state as a tyrannical apostate regime and its supporters and employ-

ees as equally culpable in perpetuating apostasy. It also denied the possibility of neutrality in the conflict, and treated security forces and public workers as part and parcel of the apostate order.¹¹ The GIA framed the conflict as a total war to transform Algeria's polity, not reintegration into the electoral process because democracy was viewed as heresy, and jihad was the only way to remove secular rulers.¹² It rejected the possibility of negotiations or reconciliation with moderate regime elements that were interested in ending the crisis, and instead raised the mantra of "no dialogue, no ceasefire, no reconciliation, and no security or guarantees with the apostate regime."¹³

In contrast, the AIS insisted that the struggle was between a hawkish faction within the regime that opposed a just political settlement and Islamists who were deprived the fruits of their electoral victories. The AIS did not view the war in terms of apostasy, and rarely averred that all who work with the Algerian state are enemies of the movement. It sought to reintegrate Islamists into the political process and did not insist on the complete transformation of the Algerian state into a theocratic one.¹⁴

The GIA waged a comprehensive campaign to induce regime collapse. Initially, it clashed with security forces and assassinated policemen and military personnel. In 1993, it expanded its targeting to include government officials. Representatives of opposition groups, foreigners, journalists, and intellectuals were next. Beginning in 1995, the GIA's victims were mainly civilians, killed randomly through bombings or deliberately through indiscriminate attacks in villages and at fake check points. It also attacked France for its support of the Algerian regime.¹⁵

In contrast to expansive violence, the AIS limited its attacks to security forces and government officials. The AIS opposed and denounced attacks on intellectuals, foreigners, and anyone who was not directly involved in the persecution of Islamists because such violence discredited the image of the movement and played into the hands of the "eradicationists" within the regime.¹⁶

As a result, the GIA struck back by denouncing its critics, demanding they cease their condemnation of the jihad. Open war between the GIA and AIS began on May 4, 1995, when the former issued a communiqué declaring that AIS leaders had one month to get in touch with the GIA to repent and join its ranks.¹⁷ Shortly after, the GIA issued an explicit threat against eight FIS leaders demand-

d According to Umar Chikhi, one of the original nine founders of the GIA, Abdelhaq Layada—the GIA's first general commander—rejected calls for fighting for a political process. Chikhi states, "Differences started to surface between the political leadership of the FIS and the commander of the Group [GIA] over the strategy that they should adopt. The politicians would suggest using political means to overcome the crisis and regarded armed action as a 'pressure tool' ... but Abdelhaq Layada responded by saying the solution can only be achieved by armed action." See Uthman Tazghart, "Interview with Umar Chikhi, Last Surviving Founding Member of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group," *Al-Majallah*, part 1, January 14, 2001.

e Jamal Zitouni, the fifth GIA leader, shined this mantra into GIA's manifesto *The Guidance of the Lord*. It is a 62-page pamphlet carrying the name Abu Abdel Rahman Amin and dated 27 Rabi'a al-Thani 1416/1995. The quotation is from p. 27.

f Madani Mezraq, AIS' general commander, explained years later that "we fought on the basis of two principles: a return to the legitimate political process and respect for the choice of the Algerian people." Listen to part one of a three-part radio interview conducted by Nouredine Khababa with Madani Mezraq on March 18, 2012, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYOHp2dCBEM>.

ing they cease speaking in the name of the Islamist movement.¹⁵ On June 13, 1995, the GIA issued communiqué #36 in which it permitted “the shedding of the blood of those ‘blood merchants’ inside and outside (Algeria) unless they repent.”¹⁶

The GIA began acting on its threats. There were repeated reports in 1995 of clashes between the GIA and AIS, resulting in the death of approximately 60 militants.¹⁷ When GIA leaders feared that some of the latecomers to their faction were not committed to their salafi worldview and total-war objectives, they began to purge them from the organization. In November 1995, the GIA executed Muhammad Said (a prominent FIS leader, and known preacher, who had joined the GIA in May 1994).¹⁸ These executions were not isolated leadership purges. After a series of warnings and threats, the GIA explicitly declared war on the AIS on January 4, 1996.¹⁹ Later that month, sources close to the FIS Executive Body Abroad accused the GIA of slaying 140 FIS activists, including 40 commanders.¹⁹

By 1996, GIA’s expansive violence against civilians turned public support against the Islamist movement.^h The government took advantage of shifting attitudes by arming pro-government paramilitary militias (officially known as the Groupes de Légitime Défense, commonly referred to as “Patriots”).ⁱ

GIA’s fratricidal violence—against former supporters, rival rebels, and civilian militias—reached stupefying levels in a series of massacres of civilians that began at the end of 1996. At least 76 massacres took place between November 1996 and July 2001, most of which (42) occurred in 1997. Massacres were concentrated in villages around Algiers, Blida and Medea (south of Algiers), Ain Defla (southwest of Algiers), and Relizane (west of Algiers). All these were within the GIA’s areas of operation.²⁰

Ali Benhadjar, the commander of a splinter group calling itself the Islamic League for Preaching and Combat, summarized the fault lines dividing the GIA from his group and the AIS: “We would have preferred political means if our rights had been respected. Our armed struggle was in self-defense. For the GIA, the only true struggle was the armed struggle. Anything else was *haram* [forbidden in Islam].”²¹

By 1997, the Islamist movement was successfully delegitimized in the eyes of many Algerians. Islamists turned their supporters into proponents for law and order—i.e., the military, intelligence, and security services. Faced with a crisis of legitimacy, the AIS defected to the state. It agreed to call for a ceasefire without any substantial concessions from the regime. The civil war effectively came to an end by 1999, but none of the Islamist goals were achieved. Some of the GIA’s fighters populated other radical groups, one of which

evolved into the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which in 2007 rebranded again as al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, a terrorist group that vexes but hardly poses a strategic threat to the Algerian government today.

Al-Qa`ida in Iraq

Less than a decade after the colossal failure of the GIA in Algeria, al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) embarked on a similar path of extremism and strategic errors that led to its near destruction by the late 2000s, largely at the hands of Iraqis who initially welcomed its presence. It did so by triggering a sectarian war that sparked retaliatory violence against ordinary Sunnis it could not defend and by claiming a monopoly over the insurgent movement’s leadership. When confronted with criticism and rejection, it unleashed fratricidal violence against its host communities and fellow Sunni rebels—sealing its fate in the process.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 fostered resistance by nationalists, disenfranchised Baathists, local Islamists, and foreign jihadis. The insurgents in Iraq eventually converged around two political tendencies.²² The majority of insurgent groups were made up of Sunni nationalists with Islamist leanings associated with the Islamic Army in Iraq, Mujahidin Army in Iraq, the 1920 Revolution Brigades, and the Salah al-Din al-Ayubi Brigades. While they harbored Islamist world views, their goal was the reintegration of disenfranchised Sunnis in a future Iraqi regime on equal footing with Shi`a and Kurds. They insisted on a unified Iraq that would share with Sunnis the country’s oil wealth, public employment, ministerial positions, and government patronage. They also demanded that Iraq would remain aligned with the Arab world, and thus distant from Iran’s orbit. Above all, they wanted representation in the security services, which was increasingly dominated by Shi`a parties and militias.

The second dominant faction in the Iraqi insurgency consisted of jihadis associated with AQI and the Ansar al-Sunna Group. This faction represented an extreme form of Islamism that rejected democracy, demonized Shi`a, and aimed to turn Iraq into an Islamic theocracy ruled in accordance with its version of Sunni orthodoxy. Its core cadres were made up of fighters connected with al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian militant with previous connections to jihadis in Afghanistan (but not bin Ladin’s camps). AQI employed expansive violence that targeted coalition occupation forces, Iraq’s economic infrastructure, Iraqi security services, government officials, foreign contractors, Shi`a and Kurdish parties and militias, voters, and Sunnis willing to work with the new order. Its primary strategy, however, was to spark a sectarian war through provocative attacks on Shi`a civilians in markets, mosques, funerals, and religious ceremonies.²³

Both of these factions—Islamist nationalists and jihadis—cooperated based on their shared goal of expelling coalition forces from Iraq and undermining the new Iraqi regime. Their insurgency created a major crisis for the George W. Bush administration, leading to calls for withdrawing American troops and ending the occupation. By 2006, victory was in sight as the United States sought to extricate itself from Iraq.

Yet, ‘victory’ was undermined by AQI’s own strategic errors, which turned Sunni tribes and insurgents against it. AQI made three major mistakes associated with its polarizing conflict narratives, transformative objectives, and indiscriminate violence.

To foster a base of support within the Sunni population, AQI en-

g The GIA sent a two-hour videotaped “confession” of Abdelwahab Lamara and Mahfouz Tajeen (Abu Khalil), both GIA commanders who joined in 1994. In the video, Lamara describes how Said and others sought on several occasions to take over the leadership of the GIA. Both Tajeen and Lamara were executed the following day. The entire taped “confession” is available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kB3xN5_Ntqk.

h Abdallah Anas, one of the few Algerian Afghans to remain on FIS’ Executive Committee after 1992, acknowledged that the GIA’s violence had driven up popular support for Algeria’s General Liamine Zeroual during his successful bid for the presidency in the November 1995 elections. See Camil al-Tawil, “Algerian Islamic Salvation Front: Armed Islamic Group Responsible for Sahraoui’s Assassination,” *Al-Hayat*, December 9, 1995.

i By 1997, there were an estimated 150,000 militiamen around the country, including in Islamist strongholds.

flamed sectarianism by portraying the war in Iraq as a fight against Shiism. Sectarian polarization was intended to present AQI as an indispensable defender of the Sunnis. This strategy culminated in the bombing of the golden-domed Askari shrine in Samarra on February 22, 2006. This well-planned attack on one of the four major Shi'a shrines in Iraq struck at the heart of Shi'a symbols and identity. It provoked retaliatory sectarian killings against Sunni communities in and around Baghdad, as well as other mixed sect cities.²⁴ This was AQI's first major mistake. It had overestimated its ability to protect Sunni communities, many of which bore the brunt of sectarian cleansing at the hands of Shi'a militias. This created an opening for the United States to present itself as the only power capable of protecting Sunnis from Iranian-backed militias and security services, setting the stage for the "Surge" strategy.

The second mistake AQI made was in relation to Iraq's Sunni tribes. AQI alienated the tribes of western Iraq by imposing puritanical fundamentalism on them, undermining tribal hierarchies through their strategic marriages, and infringing on their economic turf.²⁵ As early as 2004, it outlawed music and satellite dishes, and demanded that women in public be covered in black from head to toe.²⁶ AQI also killed tribesmen that took contracts from coalition forces.

These killings gave the occupation forces an opening to reach out to the tribes against a common enemy, which became the basis for the Awakening movement. Awakening Councils were established in nearly all provinces and cities in which AQI operated, with the notable exception of Mosul.

AQI's last major mistake related to its transformative strategy. Sensing an impending victory over the United States, AQI sought to position itself as the sole leader of the insurgent movement. Beginning in 2006, it formed an umbrella organization known as the Mujahidin Shura Council. Later that year, it formed the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and called upon all other groups to join this state. It did not stop there, however. AQI began strong-arming other factions to submit to its leadership (an enormous error that had also been made by the GIA and would be repeated by the Islamic State in Syria less than a decade later). When other rebel groups rejected this call, AQI began clashing with them and killing their commanders. The Islamic Army of Iraq, the 1920 Revolution Brigades, the Mujahidin Army of Iraq, and Ansar al-Sunna have all accused AQI of killing scores of their militants.²⁷

Criticism of the newly formed Islamic state might not have amounted to much had ISI not proceeded with killing several commanders of the insurgent groups who refused to pledge loyalty to the group's leader, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi. In April 2007, the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI), one of the largest Sunni Islamist group, accused AQI of killing 30 of its members. Here is how a spokesman of IAI described the conflict with AQI:

"Al-Qaeda [in Iraq] claims to be a Salafist movement, but we believe it is far from Salafism, which is more moderate and flexible. In al-Qaeda's view, everything is extreme: people are either Muslims or apostates; all women must wear the niqab [a veil that covers both head and body] even though it is impractical at this time and would draw the enemy's attention. Al-Qaeda's people are ignorant of politics and religion, and this ignorance has direct military implications."²⁸

Even closer to AQI was the Ansar al-Sunna group. Both are ji-

hadi salafi organizations whose ideology is a mere carbon copy of the other. Both rejected negotiations with the United States and the Iraqi government, wanted to establish an Islamic emirate, and did not hesitate to kill Shi'a. Moreover, both AQI and Ansar al-Sunna were incubated by the Kurdistan-based group Ansar al-Islam. Yet, this lineage did not prevent AQI's fratricide against Ansar al-Sunna.

Documents discovered by the U.S. military in September 2007 during a raid on a desert camp near Sinjar, close to the Syrian border, reveal the nature of the rift between AQI and the Ansar al-Sunna.^j At least three broad themes emerged from the exchanges in these documents:

- AQI is arrogant and excessive in its maltreatment of other insurgent groups and their civilian base of support. AQI kills or threatens fellow insurgents with death unless they pledge loyalty to its group, and have killed scores of insurgents often for unknown reasons.
- AQI's insistence that all insurgent groups join the Islamic State of Iraq is the root cause of the rupture between AQI and other insurgent factions, especially al-Ansar.
- AQI is increasingly desperate for allies.

AQI alienated groups that were willing to work with it by making a strong claim for leadership. It overestimated its power and ability to compel others to join its front. In doing so, it created enemies out of former allies and turned the Sunni population against it. The U.S. military and the Iraqi government took advantage of AQI's mistakes by reaching out to insurgents and tribes in a new strategy of Sunni engagement intended to drive a wedge between extremist insurgents and their Sunni supporters.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

The fortunes of Iraq's jihadis turned when the tidal wave of Arab uprisings reached Syria in March 2011. By 2013, AQI (now branded as ISI) took advantage of Iraq's sectarian politics, the civil war in Syria, and the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011 to rebuild its ranks and reassert its presence in the region.

However, rather than forge unity with Syrian rebels, the Islamic State split the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra, one of the most powerful rebel groups to emerge from the Syrian conflict.²⁹ It also shocked the world by vividly exposing its genocidal violence against Shi'a and Yazidis. In the height of arrogance, it declared the formation of a caliphate, the Islamic State, and insisted that all rebel groups in Syria pledge loyalty to its self-declared caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It went on to attack fellow rebels of all stripes, driving them out of Syria's oil-rich regions of Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor, and took

j The declassified documents include two letters by AQI's leader Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. One is addressed to two unnamed tribal leaders close to Ansar al-Sunna, and the other to Abu Abdullah al-Shafi'i, the leader of their group. Two documents are by unspecified al-Ansar leaders to AQI-ISI outlining the latter's transgressions toward fellow insurgents and explaining the growing rift between their two factions. One document is an agreement between al-Hajji Abu Sa'adi, a leader of an unknown insurgent group, and Dr. Ismael, representing ISI. (Both names are probably aliases.) The agreement outlines a series of steps to be taken by each side to bring about a cessation of hostilities between the two groups. It is not clear to whom these documents belonged, but at least two of them bear the name of AQI's leader Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. Some are typed in Arabic text while others are handwritten. Some bear the official stamps of known insurgent groups, while others are unbranded. The documents are archived in the Harmony Project, which is run by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

complete control of the city of Raqqa and sought to do the same in Aleppo.³⁰

The Islamic State's strategy appeared to bear fruit in 2014-2015, as it became the preeminent radical Islamist organization since bin Laden's al-Qa`ida. It attracted tens of thousands of foreign fighters from around the globe and reigned over territory the size of Britain.³¹ But like its predecessors in the GIA and AQL, it was only a matter of time before its strategic errors caught up with its fate. As of November 2017, the Islamic State has lost almost all of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria.³²

Like its forerunners, the Islamic State framed the conflict in binary, polarizing terms that left no room for neutrality. As a result, actors in the conflict had to choose sides, either with it or against it. It portrayed all Shi`a and Alawites as mortal enemies, but it did not stop there. The Kurds were equally viewed as a threat to its utopian project, as were secular rebels affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Islamists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and salafis that insisted on maintaining Syria's territorial integrity, such as Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. The most nonsensical on the list of enemies was Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qa`ida-affiliated group whose leaders fought in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's group in Iraq.^k The two organizations were similar in many respects, sharing a jihadi salafist orientation with a strong tint of sectarianism. However, Jabhat al-Nusra deemphasized the goal of remaking the Middle East into an Islamic caliphate and prioritized the toppling of the Assad regime, aligning itself with other Islamists in Syria. In contrast, the Islamic State appeared to care less about the Syrian jihad and more about carving territory for its transformative project. The Islamic State lured away many of Jabhat al-Nusra's fighters, especially its contingents of foreign volunteers, and proceeded to accuse the remaining Jabhat al-Nusra loyalists of splitting the ranks of the jihadi movement. More galling, from the point of view of jihadi pragmatists, the Islamic State began to fight and kill Jabhat al-Nusra commanders and fighters under the pretext of unifying jihadi ranks.

The Islamic State also pursued a transformative political project that did not align with the political preferences of Syria's rebels. Rather than toppling the Syrian regime and forming a state where Syria's diverse communities and political factions could compete for post-conflict spoils, it insisted on carving out a state for Sunnis only, one that violated the territorial integrity of both Syria and Iraq. Whereas other rebels were mainly focused on attacking the regime of Bashar al-Assad and its allies, the Islamic State was preoccupied with sectarian and ethnic cleansing and establishing governing institutions based on anachronistic interpretations of sharia laws.

More damaging to rebel unity was the way the Islamic State behaved toward civilian populations and captured regime forces. Mass atrocities, slavery, and rape were supplemented with crucifixions and beheadings. Burning people alive and drowning them as the camera rolled further tainted the image of Arab Spring revolutionaries and focused the world's attention on the bigger threat

that the Islamic State posed in comparison with the Syrian regime. Just as rebels had to choose between the Islamic State and its rivals, the world was forced to choose between fanatical Islamists and the Syrian dictatorship. (The new U.S. administration has suspended aid to anti-Assad forces.³³)

To be sure, Syria's rebels were never united and their political divisions preceded the rise of the Islamic State.³⁴ Yet, despite their fragmentation, their infighting was largely limited to episodic military skirmishes and political squabbling. The rise of the Islamic State shifted the rebels' focus away in many areas from consolidating power and toppling the regime to protecting themselves from predatory attacks by the Islamic State. This centrifugal dynamic was a repeat of the events that tore asunder the Islamist movements in Algeria and Iraq in the preceding decades, and it led to the same outcome: defeat.

Strategic Implications

The recurring errors of fratricidal jihadis—and their failure to learn from their past mistakes—suggests that their predatory behavior may be hardwired in the genetic code of their movements. Their ideological purity, based on the belief that only their interpretation of the inherited Islamic tradition is legitimate, serves as a double-edged sword. The moral vision of an uncompromisingly puritanical Islamic order simplifies the complexity of political life by offering a clear, organizing narrative of right and wrong, good and evil, permissible and forbidden. This narrative attracts militants from around the world and fosters organizational cohesion by pointing the rank-and-file toward a single, incorruptible goal.

Yet, this Manichean framing also inspires a virulent ideology that demonizes enemies, venerates self-sacrifice, and conjures up illusions of a utopian world. Civil wars are messy and require realism, unsavory alliances with strange bedfellows, and the pursuit of achievable objectives based on the balance of forces. Puritanical jihadis find it exceedingly difficult to balance pragmatic considerations with the fanatical doctrine that brings them to the land of jihad in the first place.³⁵ Their impatience regarding the gradual political and social work necessary to build up a mass base that can sustain a movement in the long haul leads to strategic errors. They rely on coercive extraction to meet the needs of their jihad, becoming a heavy burden on their host communities. They are suspicious of pragmatists that might sell them out, preferring to attack them rather than reach a *modus vivendi* for mutual advantage. Their sense of ideological superiority rationalizes extreme violence against friends and foe alike. Their outrageous tactics inspire fear, but not admiration. When communities have an opportunity to turn their back on these fratricidal extremists, they seize it with a vengeance.

What are the strategic implications of dealing with the next iteration of the Islamic State? There are three lessons for the international community. First, the defeat of violent jihadis usually follows from their own mistakes, not from the strategic prowess of the powers that oppose them. It is important to recognize that Islamists (like communists before them) are ideologically divided despite their shared intellectual heritage and goal of building polities anchored in 'Islamic' values and laws. Rather than lump all Islamists into a single category (something jihadis do to their own detriment), it is important to understand the nuances that divide their movement into fractious camps and how those divisions can shape conflict trajectories.

Second, every time a menacing jihadi group emerges, there is a

^k Jabhat al-Nusra was a spinoff of ISI. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent his military commander Abu Muhammad al-Jolani to establish a fighting group in Syria as the Arab uprising turned into a protracted civil war. Thus, one can lay blame for the split between the two leaders at the feet of the insubordinate al-Jolani. However, both men presumably answered to al-Qa`ida's leader Aymen al-Zawahiri. The latter ruled in favor of maintaining Jabhat al-Nusra as its preferred affiliate in Syria and confined al-Baghdadi's organization to Iraq, a move that was ultimately rejected by the future "caliph."

tendency for analysts to insist that the only way to fight these groups is to engage in an ideological counternarrative that diminishes their appeal. Yet, in all three cases, the key to defeat was not ‘good ideas’ displacing bad ones, but rather capitalizing on the errors of the adversary by funding and arming the rivals they created by their own hands, and supporting those forces with military might. To be sure, these measures have serious human rights implications and do not obviate the need for long-term strategies to rebuild broken polities and create inclusive and effective governing institutions.

Lastly, while the international community may want to celebrate or even encourage jihadis to fight with other Islamist factions, their

fratricide does not come without a price. Fragmented movements are notorious for their mass atrocities against civilians. Divided rebels may not win their civil wars, but they can act as spoilers in conflict-ending negotiations, prolonging conflicts and fostering opportunities for transnational extremists and illicit traffickers. The defeat of the Islamic State has left behind Stalingrad-like destruction in major population centers. Attending to this humanitarian disaster is an urgent priority. Otherwise, a new breed of extremists will capitalize on mass grievances and failed governance to constitute an untainted version of the Islamic State. **CTC**

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