

From Ideology to Impact: A Comparative Study of Al-Qaeda and ISIS Threats to Iraqi Social Peace

Raed Kareem Abdullah* - Thi-Qar Governorate, Iraq.
Sity Daud - University Kebangsaan, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

Received: 01/12/2023

Accepted: 02/03/2024

Abstract

This research engages in a comparative analysis of the two most dangerous jihadist terrorist organizations in Iraq: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). The central hypothesis suggests that ISIS poses a more significant risk to social harmony in Iraq than Al-Qaeda. The primary goal of this study is to assess and compare the distinct impact of these prominent terrorist groups on social peace in the Iraqi context. By examining their respective ideologies, strategies, and targeted demographics, this research aims to shed light on the varying levels of threat they pose to communal cohesion and regional security. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative methodology was employed, utilizing secondary sources to investigate the threats that Al-Qaeda and ISIS pose to social peace in Iraq. The findings of this study provide compelling evidence supporting the claim that ISIS (Daesh) presents a significantly greater threat to social peace in Iraq compared to the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda.

Keywords: Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Social Peace.

*E-mail: raedkareem77.ukm@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Throughout history, terrorism has been recognized as a political phenomenon, yet it has lacked sufficient definition, understanding, and exploration of its underlying reasons and driving factors. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a significant increase in the frequency and severity of terrorist acts, posing a substantial threat to global security and stability (Hassan,2021).During a period when al-Qaeda held a prominent position on the global stage as the most perilous jihadi group since the 1980s and had a significant impact on the international landscape following the events of September 11, 2001, the world's focus gradually shifted to a newly emerged organization in 2003, referred to as the "Islamic State" (ISIS) (Thabit,2016). The escalating trend of terrorism is a significant cause for concern both nationally and internationally, posing a major obstacle to global peace and security. A 2006 Global Market Institute (GMI) Poll, involving 8,001 respondents from G8 countries, emphasized the predominant fear of terrorism as the primary issue (Onuoha,2013). This underscores the imperative for comprehensive research and collaborative efforts to comprehend and tackle this complex problem, ensuring a safer world. Among various terrorist organizations, Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda have emerged as prominent extremist groups with transnational and global aspirations, especially in their pursuit of a global jihad agenda (Munir and Shafiq, 2016). The impact of terrorist organizations on social peace and stability has been a topic of serious interest and scholarly research in recent decades. Among emerging extremist groups, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) have played a significant role in shaping the global landscape of terrorism. Their activities in Iraq, in particular, have had a profound impact on the social fabric of the country and overall stability. Although these two groups share commonalities in terms of origins and political/ideological orientations, they also exhibit notable differences and misunderstandings. The rise of ISIS was primarily influenced by a split between the central Al-Qaeda and its branch in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi from Jordan. Importantly, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al-Qaeda, openly denounced the extremist activities of ISIS (Gomes and Mikhael,2018). Despite numerous studies on the impact of terrorist groups in Iraq, there is a significant research gap regarding the disparities in the impact of ISIS and Al-Qaeda on social peace in the country. While both organizations share

similarities in terms of terrorist elements and ideologies, they exhibit distinct differences in their effects on social peace in Iraq and in strategies to confront extremist ideology in society. It can be asserted that the influence of ISIS is substantial, leading to an intensification of anarchy in the entire region of Iraq. The resulting instability has caused fear not only in the Middle East region but also globally (Alipouryani and et al,2015).

The group known as the Islamic State poses a significant threat, not only to Iraq and Syria but also to the broader region, including the United States and its global coalition partners. An agile and lethal adversary, the Islamic State emerged seemingly out of nowhere in June 2014, capturing Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city. However, today's Islamic State is a direct descendant of the group previously confronted by Iraq, the United States, and their allies, first as al-Qaida in Iraq and later as the Islamic State of Iraq(Mossallanejad, 2016). Given its strategic significance in geopolitics, geo-economics, and strategy, Iraq's geographical space possesses values and potentials that draw neighboring, regional, and extra-regional powers(Abdi,2015).

Through the information presented, the research question emerges: why did the terrorist organization ISIS pose a greater threat to social peace in Iraq compared to the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda? This paper seeks to explore and compare the impact of ISIS and Al-Qaeda on social peace in Iraq. It contends that the rise of ISIS has engendered significant issues in Iraq, jeopardizing societal peace by strengthening its capabilities to amass forces, acquire resources, and occupy large territories in the country. Addressing this research gap allows for a deeper understanding of the influences and differences in the impact of each organization on civil peace in Iraq. This knowledge, in turn, can inform efforts and policies aimed at combating terrorism, promoting stability, and fostering civil peace in the region.

2. Material and Methods

To achieve the study's outlined objectives, a qualitative approach was adopted, utilizing secondary sources to explore the threats posed by Al Qaeda and ISIS to social peace in Iraq. Data collection involved sourcing information from various secondary outlets, including books, prior research studies, and analytical works. These resources, spanning from the emergence of terrorism in Iraq in 2003 following the American occupation to the present day, cover the rise of major terrorist organizations like Al

Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS). Thematic analysis served as the methodology, allowing for the effective organization of data. Following the thematic content analysis approach, the researcher identified recurring topics, refining and, in some cases, establishing new themes aligned with the research objectives (Taylor,1998). Several of these themes had already surfaced during the literature review conducted for this study.

3. Conceptual Framework

Over the past few years, there has been a notable escalation in the dangers and perils posed by terrorism to worldwide harmony, prompting the need for a thorough examination and extensive scrutiny of prominent terrorist groups. Among these groups are Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS), both of which influence the societal peace within Iraq. Nevertheless, before delving into their influence, it is imperative to establish clear definitions of essential terms and concepts.

3-1. The Concept of Terrorism

Various treaties have proposed definitions of terrorism tailored to specific contexts and purposes. The initial endeavor to establish a comprehensive definition of terrorism in international law occurred in 1937 through the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism by the League of Nations. According to Article 1 of the Convention, terrorism refers to "criminal acts targeting a state or intended to induce a state of fear in the minds of specific individuals, a group of individuals, or the general public." However, the treaty failed to be enacted, which diminishes its significance as a source within the realm of international law (Gasser,2002). As per the definition provided by the United Nations (2004), terrorism encompasses the utilization of violence and the explicit or implicit use of violence to accomplish political or religious objectives, with a focus on civilians and individuals who are not involved in the conflict (UN Security Council, 2004). In this regard, certain nations adopt a broad definition of terrorism that encompasses a wide range of violent activities, while others adopt a more narrow definition to safeguard the principles of due process and the rule of law (Bekele,2021). The Arab Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism provides a prime example of the expansive understanding of terrorism. According to this convention, terrorism is defined as any act or threat of violence, regardless of its motives or objectives, that is carried out

to further an individual or collective criminal agenda. Its purpose is to spread panic among the population, induce fear by causing harm, endangering lives, liberty, or security, inflicting damage on the environment, and public or private infrastructure, unlawfully occupying or seizing them, and undermining national resources(League of Arab States, 1998).

Terrorism can be defined as the utilization of unlawful force and violence by non-state actors, to achieve political, economic, religious, or social objectives through instilling fear, exerting coercion, or promoting intimidation (Mahmud,2020). Defining terrorism comprehensively within the framework of international law has been a challenging task due to its contentious nature and deeply rooted ideological dimensions. Moreover, the formulation of agreeable definitions through treaty laws has been hindered by their tendency to focus on specific aspects of terrorism. Nonetheless, there is a consensus within international law regarding the overall nature of terrorism(Bekele, 2021).

3-2.The Concept of Social Peace

the concept of social peace, which denotes the state of equilibrium and social stability within a specific society. It delves into the multifaceted nature of social peace by analyzing its constituent elements, such as peaceful coexistence, social justice, social solidarity, and the protection of human rights. By understanding the dynamics and components of social peace, policymakers and scholars can develop strategies and interventions to foster and sustain harmonious social relations within diverse societies(Boulding,1988). In societies plagued by terrorism, the guarantee of human safety and security remains incomplete. As a result, citizens of such countries persistently experience a state of fear and anxiety, constantly worrying about the potential loss of their lives, homes, and loved ones due to frequent occurrences of violent incidents. Peace, whether it is liberal or not, is frequently perceived as an ideal state, a goal that is sometimes seen as restricted, yet potentially attainable. It is commonly assumed to be universal and self-evident, often not warranting in-depth discussion. However, it is crucial to not only comprehend the underlying causes and circumstances surrounding conflict and peace but also acknowledge that peace is not a static concept. It is contingent upon specific temporal and spatial contexts,

as well as the involvement of individuals or groups representing diverse perspectives(Richmond,2007).

3-3.Concept of Extremism

The current international political system is heavily focused on combating extremism, specifically terrorism and insurgencies. Extremism refers to the pursuit of power by social movements that have political agendas conflicting with existing state authorities. It involves curtailing individual freedoms in the name of collective goals, including the mass murder of dissenting individuals(Tuttle,2016). For instance, commonly agreed-upon definitions of important terms are lacking. Based on the works of Maskaliūnaitė (2015), Schmid (2012), and other authors, Extremism refers to expressing or engaging in opposition towards fundamental societal values, including democracy, equality, liberty, the rule of law, and tolerance for diverse faiths and beliefs. Radicalization is the progression whereby an individual adopts beliefs that rationalize the use of violence to instigate social and/or political transformations(Lösel and Bliesener,2021).

It is not possible to completely prevent serious crimes, although recent data from the University of Maryland's extensive global terrorism database (available at <https://gtd.terrorismdata.com/files/gtd-1970-2019-4/>) indicates that terrorist attacks in the Western world constitute a relatively small portion and have even been decreasing. Most frequent and highly destructive attacks take place in nations plagued by wars, civil conflicts, religious disputes, and overall animosity towards other cultures and political entities. Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Nigeria, Mali, Indonesia, Bali, Yemen, and the Philippines serve as examples of such countries(Lösel and Bliesener, 2021).

3-3-1.Case 1: Historical Background and Evolution of Al-Qaeda

The Soviet Union's presence in Afghanistan led to resistance movements, inspiring Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abdullah Azzam to form al-Qaeda in 1988, initially to support the Afghan resistance. After the Soviet withdrawal, al-Qaeda expanded its focus to global Muslim issues. Bin Laden's hostility toward the U.S. grew with the American military presence in Saudi Arabia after the Kuwait invasion in 1990. This led to his exile, first in Sudan from 1991 to 1992 (Gomes and Mikhael,2018). Bin Laden collaborated with the Sudanese government to create an operational base, with his finances supporting infrastructure projects while the

government provided training camps. Tensions arose as his actions drew attention, and Gulf monarchies pressured Sudan to expel him. In 1996, due to international sanctions, Sudan formally requested bin Laden and his associates to leave (Byman,2015). In 1998, Professor Bernard Lewis, a Middle Eastern affairs expert, suggested that Al-Qaeda aimed to force the U.S. out of the Middle East. Some analysts linked Al-Qaeda's terrorism in the U.S. to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict initially. However, bin Laden shifted focus to Afghanistan and Chechnya, altering the organization's activities. Al-Qaeda affiliates and allies benefited from their association through financial support, training, and combat experience, enabling network growth and regional impact. Abu Mus'ab az-Zarqawi considered the founder of "al-Qaeda in Iraq" since 2004, played a legendary role in the Iraqi insurgency, with his influence evident in ISIS. His quote in the ISIS magazine, *Dabiq*, emphasizes the ongoing intensity of their efforts (Kaválek,2015). During his formative years, az-Zarqawi dropped out of high school and was frequently involved in drunken altercations. However, in 1989, he went to Afghanistan after completing courses at a madrasa in Jordan. This journey proved pivotal, as he established valuable connections during his time in Afghanistan. In 1992, he returned to Jordan and joined a terrorist cell, collaborating with his spiritual mentor, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a radical cleric who wielded significant influence and whose association with az-Zarqawi began during their time together in Afghanistan. Both az-Zarqawi and al-Maqdisi were apprehended by Jordanian intelligence in March 1994, marking an important turning point in their trajectories. According to Weaver, az-Zarqawi's imprisonment was a formative experience, shaping his character to become more resolute, ruthless, and focused in his pursuits. This period can be likened to an educational institution, wherein Az-Zarqawi honed his extremist ideologies and operational strategies. After his release in 1999, az-Zarqawi returned to Afghanistan, where he assumed leadership of a nascent training camp in Herat, which received financial support from al-Qaeda. The group under his command, known as "at-Tawhid wa al-Jihad," consisted of approximately 300 militants. In response to the invasion of Afghanistan in December 2001, his group relocated to Iran, seeking refuge. Eventually, they moved to Baghdad and later settled in the northern region of Iraq, specifically in the province of Sulaymaniyah, which is predominantly Kurdish (Kaválek,2015).

3-3-1-1.A-The Ideology of AL-Qaeda

Al Qaeda (the base) provides the most remarkable contemporary example of a terrorist organization that was organized as a network before 11 September. Al Qaeda had a core of planners and close associates of Osama bin Laden and groups from individual countries that cooperated with this central group (Lutz and Lutz, 2013). Al-Qaeda employs a moderate strategy compared to extremists, emphasizing the concept of Takfir, and cautiously labeling nonbelievers. This approach is evident in a joint statement supported by key figures like Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Qaeda claims American actions constitute a declaration of war against Islam (Kadivar, 2020). The concept of takfir, which involves labeling individuals or groups as non-believers, has been influenced by the teachings of prominent Islamic scholars like Ibn Tamiya, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and Qutb. Al-Qaeda adopts a rigid and limited interpretation of Islam, aiming to revive what it perceives as the glorious era of Islam during the seventh century. The organization strongly opposes any faction that does not align with the Salafi-jihadi ideology or holds anti-Shia sentiments. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Al-Qaeda's central focus has been predominantly directed toward confronting and engaging in hostilities against Western powers (Kadivar, 2020). Al-Qaeda associates itself with the Jihadi-Salafist movement, commonly known as jihadism, within the realm of Islamic political thought. While sharing a similar ideological basis with other groups, Al-Qaeda sets itself apart through its distinctive strategic approach, which prioritizes targeting the United States as a pivotal step toward establishing an Islamic state in the Middle East. Osama Bin Laden, the leader of the organization, consistently emphasized the objective of reinstating the caliphate. Concurrently, a network of autonomous scholars emerged, contributing intellectual substance to the evolving jihadi movement. Influential figures like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi from Jordan and Palestine, as well as Abu Basir al-Tartusi from Syria, played vital roles in shaping the movement's ideology. Initially drawing inspiration from Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood, these scholars gradually distanced themselves from Qutb and embraced a more Salafi orientation. Their focus on the more militant aspects of Salafism laid the groundwork for the development of Jihadi-Salafism (Bunzel, 2015b). In contrast to Al Qaeda's belief system, AQI (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) exhibited a distinct ideology and activities that can be attributed to Zarqawism, a term used to describe the particular stringent

interpretation of Salafi-Jihadism introduced by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi (Kamolnick,2017).

3-3-1-2.B-Objectives

The group encountered significant challenges due to the presence of Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, which was founded by Zarqawi. Zarqawi's criminal background and extremist views on takfir led to considerable friction and distrust when he first met bin Laden in Afghanistan in 1999. During his time in Afghanistan, Zarqawi studied under Sheikh Abu Muhammed al Maqdisi, a proponent of Salafism, who propagated the belief that any government not adhering strictly to Shariah should be considered an infidel regime that must be violently opposed. When Zarqawi transitioned to Iraq, he brought this rigid religious interpretation with him, thereby influencing AQI's ideology(Kirdar,2011). In 2006, the progress of establishing the long-anticipated state by al-Qaeda in Iraq was steadily advancing. On January 15, the group led by Zarqawi established the Mujahidin Shura Council, which served as a unifying platform bringing together al-Qaeda in Iraq with five other jihadi organizations operating within the region(Bunzel,2015b). AQI (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) initially had four main goals, as follows: 1. expel the Americans, 2. establish an Islamic emirate to fill the power vacuum created by the departure of the Americans, 3. extend the jihad to neighboring secular countries, and 4. engage in a conflict with Israel. Zarqawi played a crucial role in shaping these goals, focusing on targeting American and coalition forces to hinder the transition process in Iraq. This involved attacking the police and disrupting the rebuilding efforts by targeting contractors and aid workers(Matini,2022).

3-3-2.Case 2: Historical Background and Evolution of Islamic State in Iraq & Syria (ISIS)

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (Daesh), or simply Islamic State (IS), is a Wahhabi/Salafi jihadist extremist militant group. Predominantly composed of Sunni Arabs from Iraq and Syria, it has controlled territories with a population of around 10 million people in Iraq and Syria as of March 2015, additionally, through local groups, it holds sway over smaller areas in Libya, Nigeria, and Afghanistan, the organization also operates or has affiliates in various parts of the world, including North Africa and South Asia(Mossallanejad,2016).

The origins of ISIS are closely connected to AQI (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) and various factions of the Iraqi Insurgency. ISI (Islamic State of Iraq) emerged when insurgents in Iraq came together to form the Mujahideen Shura Council following the death of Zarqawi. This happened before the Surge, which took place in 2007 (Rayburn and Sobchak, 2019). The extreme ideology of ISI led to the adoption of exceedingly violent strategies aimed at harming innocent civilians. Particularly, the group focused a considerable amount of its violence on the Shia communities. By 2010, under the guidance of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, ISI witnessed a notable decrease in its leadership ranks and overall power (Stern and Berger, 2016). In April 2013, al-Baghdadi surprised many by announcing the merger of ISI and al-Nusra Front, creating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (also known as ISIS or Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham). However, the leaders of al-Nusra and AQ, Al Jawlani and Ayman al-Zawahiri respectively, rejected the merger. This rejection prompted Baghdadi to establish his military presence in Syria. From 2013 to 2014, ISIS achieved success in capturing the al-Raqqa province in Syria. With these accomplishments, ISIS sought to reclaim its former dominance in Iraq. On June 29, 2014, the first day of Ramadan, ISIS declared itself a caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assuming the role of a caliph, urging all Muslims to pledge their allegiance to him (Warrick, 2015). The territorial dominance of ISIS facilitates the training of new leaders and fighters. As early as 2008, the organization was predominantly Iraqi, with well-established underground support networks. It consistently employed a strategy of infiltration, assassination, and intimidation before achieving full control of the region. The organization managed to sustain underground networks even in liberated areas (Mossallanejad, 2016).

3-3-2-1.A- Ideology of ISIS

ISIS shares numerous beliefs with AQI, as both adhere to the ideology of Jihadi Salafism (Bunzel, 2015). At first glance, the ideology of Salafi jihadism embraced by ISIS may appear like that of AQ, as both emphasize the inseparable connection between state and religion and advocate for governance based on strict interpretations of Sharia law. However, upon closer examination, significant distinctions arise between the two groups regarding Aqidah (creed) and Manhaj (methodology). The primary disagreement between AQ and ISIS centers around ISIS's excessive use of takfir (ex-communication), differing perspectives on establishing the

caliphate, and the employment of End-Times narratives. Despite Zarqawi eventually pledging allegiance to Osama Bin Laden, fundamental disparities persisted, leading to a definitive split between ISIS and Al Qaeda (Jasko and et al, 2021). ISIS ideology asserts that Islam needs to undergo internal purification, and those who deviate from their authorized interpretation of Islam should be considered apostates and face the possibility of execution. Notably, ISIS categorizes Shiites as heretics, condemning their religious practices like self-flagellation, while disavowing their connection to the Qur'an or any Prophetic tradition. Consequently, ISIS labels Shiites as apostates (Jasko and et al, 2021). The causes of ISIS gained religious legitimacy through the involvement of religious prophecies, which also contributed to its attractiveness among young Muslims. A considerable number of foreign fighters who joined ISIS were influenced by prophecies that portrayed a decisive conflict in Syria, symbolizing the impending arrival of Yaumul Qiyamah or the end of time (McCants, 2015). ISIS is actively involved in captivating propaganda and assimilating ideology to bolster its recruitment efforts. The group heavily depends on disseminating videos and images online as a propaganda tool, to garner support and attract new members. The accessibility of personal and global communication platforms on the Internet greatly facilitates the dissemination of propaganda and the internalization of ISIS's ideology. This widespread connectivity enables the deliberate sharing of graphic images as a deliberate choice. Furthermore, recruiters make use of theatrically released propaganda films that employ techniques commonly seen in Hollywood productions, including special effects, to portray ISIS terrorists as heroic figures and present their struggle as real-life events (Rahmanto and et al, 2020). Undoubtedly, Iraq will continue grappling with disunity, utilizing sectarianism as a political tool. The Iraqi society comprises Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish communities, and leaders from each group have employed identity politics to secure votes. After over 80 years since the establishment of modern Iraq, a semblance of nationalism has surfaced among the Arab population. However, a unifying national narrative is lacking, allowing sectarian tendencies to persist (Heydari Bani Modares and Ezzati, 2023).

3-3-2-2.B- Objectives of ISIS

ISIS has the objective of establishing a global Islamic Caliphate. Terrorists employ five tactics to achieve their goal of creating an Islamic state: da'wah (proselytizing), tarbiyah (education and upbringing), amar-ma'ruf nahy-

munkar (enjoining good and forbidding evil), hijrah (migration), and jihad (holy war)(Karnavian,2015). One of ISIS's objectives is to extend its operations to neighboring countries in the Middle East and seize additional territories. As a result, during the extensive immigration occurring in the region, some ISIS fighters clandestinely infiltrate neighboring countries by disguising themselves as refugees. Through tactics, the organization aims to establish its presence in these countries, orchestrate attacks, and further radicalize individuals through its ideology and interpretation of Islam(Suror and Guido,2017). Furthermore, as part of its strategy to achieve global dominance, ISIS has established or declared control over territories, referred to as Wilayats, in approximately seventeen countries. These countries encompass Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Somalia, Tunisia, and Yemen. It is important to recognize that terrorists are not ethereal entities; they reside within the general population of various countries worldwide. ISIS, as a relatively new form of terrorism within the global network of terrorist organizations, carries out its nefarious activities in countries it specifically targets. This is made feasible by the fact that they often benefit from a certain degree of operational freedom and support from these host nations. Consequently, these groups can launch attacks, target their desired objectives, retreat, and feel accommodated within the territories they operate from(Suror and Guido,2017). ISIS seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate in the claimed territories, spanning the entire Middle East, and appoint a caliph for all Muslims in the region. This is evident in their presentation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the caliph for Muslims(Tajik and et al,2016). In the Arab-Islamic region, where takfiris and sectarian terrorism prevail, the emergence of ISIS in the Eastern Islamic world suggests the potential establishment of a new front in the ongoing religious and sectarian conflict. According to ISIS, participating in religious conflicts is deemed the sole means to purify the world(Tajik and et al,2016).

4.The Impact of Al-Qaeda and ISIS on Social Peace in Iraq

Iraq is internationally acknowledged as one of the most unstable areas worldwide, marked by widespread insecurity and instability. The country's future appears highly uncertain, with a bleak outlook on the horizon. People who share a common religion, culture, and language and live in a specific place, including Yazidis, Iraqis, Christians, and Shia Muslims, all have the freedom to associate with others and express themselves,(Suror and

Guido,2017). For ISIS, Muslims are confined to Sunni Muslims who accept and adhere to their ideology. Consequently, Sunni and non-Sunni Muslims are considered infidels. The act of takfir, declaring someone an unbeliever, has become a tool used by ISIS to undermine its adversaries, including Shiites and other Islamist factions. The ethnic cleansing carried out by ISIS against non-Muslims constitutes a grave crime and exemplifies its terrorist actions, aiming to foster divisions within Iraq and create a terrorist stronghold in the occupied territories of the country(Suror and Guido,2017). ISIS is not the first Salafi-jihadi group to adopt the takfiri ideology. Al Qaeda, another Salafi-jihadi organization, also employed takfir to divide the world into categories of belief and unbelief (kufr). However, Al Qaeda focused primarily on confronting Western forces, while ISIS turned its focus toward sectarian activities specifically aimed at Shiites. As a result, despite sharing a common ideology, their practical objectives diverge (Kadivar,2020). Additionally, AQ considers Shi'a Muslims to be apostates. Al-Zawahiri (2005), for instance, describes Shi'a as followers of a "religious school characterized by exaggeration and falsehood." However, he explicitly opposes any acts of violence against ordinary Shi'a individuals, their places of worship, or the mausoleums of their Imams. He views the killing of Shi'a as excessively extreme and believes that engaging in conflict with them serves to divert the mujahideen's focus away from the Americans, allowing the Americans to maintain control from afar(Al-Zawahiri,2005). The takfiri approach, passed down from Al-Zarqawi, primarily focused on singling out Shi'a Muslims. In line with their military operations, Daesh's media has specifically identified Shi'a Muslims, who represent the second-largest sect within Islam, as their main target. The group has pursued sectarian objectives in its actions against Shi'a Muslims. Despite the historical, ideological, and political factors that have historically influenced the relationship between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, these distinctions have been eclipsed within the context of Daesh's activities(Appleby,2008). The rapid and forceful advancement of the terrorist group called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 sparked a violent civil war in Iraq. This war intensified the already fragile condition of the country, leading to substantial instability. Consequently, around two million people remain displaced within Iraq(GCT,2021). In its pursuit of a Sunni fundamentalist ideology, ISIS has deliberately targeted ethnic and religious minority

communities. The Yazidi community serves as a stark example of the devastating consequences inflicted upon these groups by the terrorist organization (Kaya,2019). Based on Benotman and Blake's findings in 2013, it seems that Al-Qaeda has undergone a strategic adjustment influenced by a range of factors. One noteworthy factor is their experience in Iraq, where Al-Qaeda aims to restore its popularity among local populations. To achieve this, they have chosen to steer clear of the violent confrontations carried out by the Islamic State in Iraq. These brutal actions resulted in a substantial decline in public support for Al-Qaeda. Consequently, the integration between the two organizations compelled Al-Qaeda to modify its strategy. As a result, their new approach prioritizes military targets while minimizing engagement with civilian ones. Furthermore, Al-Qaeda has toned down its hostile rhetoric directed towards other religious sects. In an effort to improve its tarnished image, Al-Qaeda has turned to Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, seeking to rebuild its reputation, which had suffered negative perceptions among a significant portion of the Arab and Islamic public opinion (Benotman and Blake,2013). Both organizations' strategic directions are based on Salafi-jihadi ideologies, seeking to attract fighters and supporters by employing religious appeals in the face of their adversaries. A thorough examination of these groups' written, audio, and visual materials reveals their shared approach to recruiting and mobilizing individuals. This strategy relies heavily on referencing Quranic verses, the Prophet's hadiths, and the opinions of religious scholars to emphasize the significance of jihad, the establishment of an Islamic caliphate, and the inevitable attainment of victory. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to fulfill "God's desire" for the establishment of an "Islamic Caliphate" state (Benotman and Blake,2013). Both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) have different approaches to achieving their strategic goals. Al-Qaeda, through its 2014 document "General Guidelines for Jihadist Action," acknowledges the significance of the jihad mechanism but emphasizes its limited use against Western and Jewish interests worldwide (considered distant enemies). The document also promotes spreading awareness of the Islamic system and advises against military confrontations with other Islamic regimes or factions, primarily Shia, unless necessary. It further recognizes the possibility of peaceful coexistence with religious minorities, such as Christians in Islamic countries, without

pursuing regional expansionist objectives (Thabit,2016).In contrast, ISIS implements its strategic objectives by adopting a brutal military policy that targets both Western interests and engages in sectarian violence without distinguishing between distant enemies (like the United States and its allies) and near enemies (local rulers, Shias, and non-Muslim minorities in Iraq and Syria). The primary aim is to cleanse controlled territories from hostile forces and groups, paving the way for their integration into the Caliphate states. This violent approach is evident in the widespread individual and mass executions carried out against Shia communities in Iraq, opposition groups like the Bunmar tribes in northern Iraq, and the persecution of the Yazidi minority in Mount Sinjar, Iraq, as well as the provinces of Raqqa and Aleppo in Syria (Thabit,2016).

Below is Table (1) which represents the most important points of difference in the mechanism for implementing the strategic directions between Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Table (1): Difference in the Mechanism for Implementing the Strategic Directions between Al Qaeda and ISIS.

ISIS	Al-Qaeda
Engaging in jihad against the "Far Enemy" (the United States and its allies) and the "Near Enemy" (local rulers, Shia, and non-Muslim minorities).	Engaging in jihad against Western and Jewish interests globally (Far Enemy).
Enforcing awareness of Islamic rule using force	Promoting awareness of Islamic rule through persuasion
Dominance over jihadist groups	Collaboration with jihadist groups
Utilizing sophisticated media propaganda	Utilizing traditional media propaganda
Self-financing relying on various illicit sources	Non-self-financing relying on donations

(Source: Thaibt,2016)

Multiple sources confirm that ISIS and its affiliated armed groups systematically and intentionally targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure, aiming to inflict harm and casualties, they also conducted selective assassinations and abductions, which included leaders from communities, politics, and religion, as well as government employees, educators, journalists, and healthcare workers. ISIS imposed policies in their controlled

territories that violated the basic rights of civilians, the victims comprised Sunni Muslims who refused to pledge loyalty to ISIS, members of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), government personnel, individuals associated with the government, prisoners from Shia and other communities, internally displaced individuals fleeing the conflict, and various ethnic and religious groups, these calculated attacks resulted in significant casualties, demonstrating a systematic and deliberate approach, the assaults on diverse ethnic and religious communities seemed intended to suppress or permanently eliminate them from ISIS-controlled areas (UNHRO,2015). According to (Thaibt,2016). The Islamic State organization poses a greater threat compared to Al-Qaeda, while Al-Qaeda is seen as a temporary and limited threat primarily affecting Western countries, the Islamic State organization represents an ongoing ideological and military danger to the security and sovereignty of all countries globally, regardless of their Western or Islamic nature. This is particularly significant for countries in the Middle East and North Africa, as they are at the forefront of the organization's declared caliphate and expansion efforts. The United States plays a vital role, along with regional powers, in opposing the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in ongoing sectarian conflicts. Within this context, enduring sectarian political confrontations, rooted in Sunni fundamentalism challenging Shiite groups aligned with the Islamic Republic of Iran, have significantly influenced the political dynamics of Iraq. Despite this, alliances have developed between Shiite and Sunni nationalist factions in Iraq, resulting in the triumph of nationalists in the 2010 elections. However, the fragility of this alliance has become apparent due to the Arab Spring and conflicts between Syria and Iraq since 2011, all unfolding against the backdrop of the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq (Heydari Bani Modares and Ezzati,2023).

The rise of ISIS has added a new dimension to terrorism, increasing the potential for widespread violence. It is recognized as a unique threat impacting the region, the population, and the nature of the state. The unrestrained nature of terrorism, as seen with ISIS, has led to extensive repercussions, making it a security concern even for countries far beyond its geographical reach. The emergence of ISIS has brought significant changes to the Middle East, with global implications. The organization's birth and growth are closely linked to peripheral and exploited states, especially in the

Middle East. Analyzing it through Waltzian theory and Taylor's deterrence policy, ISIS can be seen as a violent attempt to establish a "just defense" and justify its geopolitical responses in three realms: land and borders, population and nation, and government and political systems, particularly among Sunni Muslims and those with extremist Sunni tendencies (Dara and Khaki,2017).

The total number of civilian casualties reached 210,380 victims over 20 years. The peak of documented civilian deaths in Iraq occurred in 2006, with 29,526 victims, while the lowest level was recorded in 2022, with 740 victims, according to the "Iraq War Victims Organization" (AlMajalla, 2023). Figure (1) represents statistics on the number of civilians killed in Iraq because of terrorism.

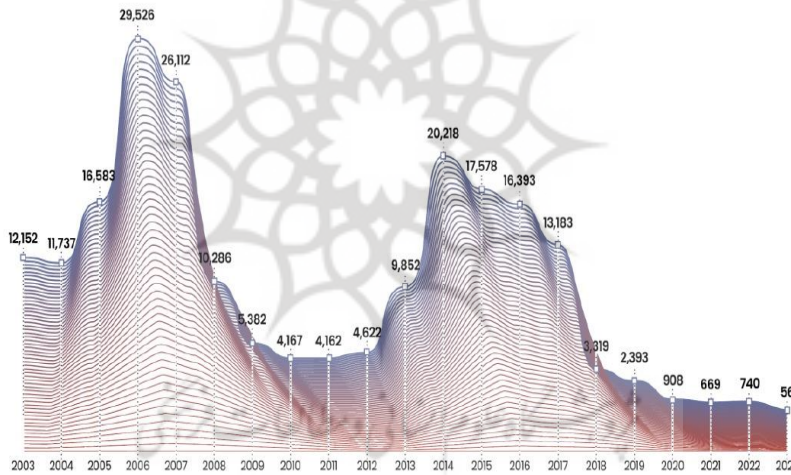


Figure (1): The Number of Civilians Killed in Iraq because of Terrorism from (2003 to 2023)

(Source: Iraq War Victims Organization)

5. Conclusion

The study conducted a comprehensive analysis and concluded that despite sharing Salafi and jihadist ideologies, there exist notable distinctions between the impacts of Al-Qaeda and ISIS on social peace in Iraq. Al-Qaeda primarily directed its attacks towards the distant enemy, symbolized by the United States and its allies, refraining from directly targeting other religious or ethnic groups. In contrast, ISIS demonstrated a broader scope of

targets, including Americans, their allies, diverse religious groups, ethnic minorities, and individuals with dissenting opinions or ideologies. The evidence of ISIS's crimes against the Yazidis, Shiites, and others underscored the significant threat it posed to communal peace and security in Iraq. Moreover, the study shed light on ISIS's strategic rejection of the modern nation-state concept and its ambitious goal of abolishing such entities in favor of a religious state, namely the Islamic Caliphate. This ideology elucidates the rationale behind their cross-border operations between Iraq and Syria, destabilization of local governments, the establishment of an Islamic state in controlled territories, attraction of supporters from various nations to settle in the Caliphate, and expansion of influence through engagements with adversaries, irrespective of their religious affiliations. Thus, the findings of the study substantiate the notion that the threat posed by ISIS is significantly greater to social peace in Iraq when compared to the threat posed by the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda.

6.Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge UKM funding from UKM TAP K006263 for this journal article.

پښتونستان د علومو او انساني مطالعاتو مرکز
پښتونستان د علومو او انساني مطالعاتو مرکز

References

1. Abdi, A; Shirzad, S. (2015). The role of geographical spaces in the competition of powers; Case Study: Iraq. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 12 (43), 54-84. **[In Persian]**.
2. AlMajalla. (2023). The dead since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 until 2023. [https://en.majalla.com/?_gl=1*1mlkeak*_gcl_au*MTgyMzA2MDkzNC4xNzA3NDk4Njc2\[10 Feb 2024\]](https://en.majalla.com/?_gl=1*1mlkeak*_gcl_au*MTgyMzA2MDkzNC4xNzA3NDk4Njc2[10 Feb 2024]).
3. Al-Zawahiri, A. (2005). Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi. https://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_english.pdf.
4. Appleby, R.S. (2008). The Sunni-Shi'ite division within Islam. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sunni-Shiite-Division-Within-Islam-The-1388487> Aqidah Wa Manhaj Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiyah Fi Al-Takfir. (2015). <https://justpaste.it/r3eo>.
5. Bekele, H.K. (2021). Problem of Defining Terrorism under International Law: Definition by the Appeal Chamber of Special Tribunal for Lebanon as a Solution to the Problem. *Beijing Law Review*, 12(02), 619–630. <https://doi.org/10.4236/blr.2021.122033>.
6. Benotman, N; Blake, R. (2013). Jabhat al-Nusra: a strategic briefing. The Quilliam Foundation. Retrieved from: <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wpcontent/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf>.
7. Boulding, E. (1988). The Concept of Social Peace. *The Journal of Peace Research*, 25(4), 339-347.
8. Bunzel, C. (2015a). From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State,” *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*. (Brookings Institute, March), 7.
9. Bunzel, C. (2015b). From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State. *Analysis Paper*, 19, 48. <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state-bunzel/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf?la=en>.
10. Gasser, H.P. (2002). Acts of Terror, “Terrorism” and International Humanitarian Law. *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge/International Review of the Red Cross*, 84, 552.<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1560775500090362> Githens-Mazer.
11. Global Conflict Tracker. (2021). Political instability in Iraq. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/political-instability-iraq>.

12. Heydari Bani Modares, Z; Ezzati, E. (2023). the results of regime change in Iraq; The formation and continuation of geopolitical crises. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 34–61.
13. Jasko, K; Kruglanski, A.W; Hassan, A.S.R.B; Gunaratna, R. (2021). ISIS: Its History, Ideology, and Psychology. In *Handbook of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Lives* (S. 1089–1113). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32626-5_30.
14. Kadivar, J. (2020). Exploring Takfir, Its Origins and Contemporary Use: The Case of Takfiri Approach in Daesh’s Media. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 7(3), 259–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798920921706>.
15. Kamolnick, P. (2017). *The Al-Qaeda Organization and The Islamic State Organization: History, Doctrine, and U.S. Policy to Degrade and Defeat Terrorism Conducted in the Name of Sunni Islam*. Edited by James G. Pierce. Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College.
16. Karnavian, M.T. (2015). *Explaining Islamist Insurgencies: The Case of al-Jamaah al-Islamiyah and the Radicalisation of the Poso Conflict, 2000-2007*. London: Imperial College Press.
17. Kaya, Z. (2019). *Iraq’s Yazidis and ISIS: the causes and consequences of sexual violence in conflict*. LSE Middle East Centre, London, UK. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/102617>.
18. Kirdar, M.J. (2011). “Al Qaeda in Iraq.” AQAM Futures Project Case Study Series. Washington DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies.,
19. League of Arab States. (1998). *Arab Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism*. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3de5e4984.html>.
20. Lösel, F; Bliesener, T. (2021). Extremism, Radicalization and Terrorism: Editorial. *Monatsschrift für Kriminologie und Strafrechtsreform*, 104(3), 179–183. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mks-2021-0134>.
21. Lutz, B; Lutz, J. (2013). terrorism. In *Contemporary security studies* (S. 274). Oxford University Press. United Kingdom.
22. Matini, A.Y. (2022). *An Organizational Analysis of Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria*. faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.
23. McCants, W. (2015). *The ISIS apocalypse: The history, strategy, and doomsday vision of the Islamic State*. St. Martin’s Press.
24. Mossallanejad, A. (2016). The rise of ISIS and the future of Iraq’s security. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 11(40), 1–31.
25. Rahmanto, D.N; Meliala, A.E; Lolo, F.A. (2020). Ideology deconstruction of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) returnees in Indonesia. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.18326/IJIMS.V10I2.381-408>.

26. Rayburn, J.D; Sobchak., F.K. (2019). The U.S. Army in the Iraq War: Volume 2, Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011. The Strategic Studies Institute & US Army War College, 504–507.
27. Richmond, O.P. (2007). Critical research agendas for peace: The missing link in the study of international relations. *Alternatives*, 32(2), 247–276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540703200205>.
28. Stern, J; Berger, J.M. (2016). *Isis: The State of Terror*. . First ECCO paperbacked. New York: Ecco Press, an imprint of HarperCollins, 21.
29. Suror, P.S; Guido, B. (2017). ISIS in Iraq: The Impact on National, Regional and Global Peace and Security. *Saudi J. Humanities Soc. Sci.*<http://scholarsmepub.com/sjhss>, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.21276/sjhss.2017.2.1.2>.
30. Tajik, H; Frozan, Y; Alishahi, A. (2016). Investigating the reasons for the presence of the Takfiri terrorist group ISIS in Afghanistan based on William Bullitt’s domino theory. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 13(1), 173–195.
31. Thabit, K. (2016). The strategic directions of the „Al Qaeda“ and „Islamic State“ organizations: A comparative study. *Al Manara*. Volume 22, Number 3 v.
32. Tuttle, J. (2016). *Turning to Constructivism and Psychology: The Need for Innovative Responses to Extremism*. Carnegie Mellon University Dietrich, nstitute for Politics and Strategy.
33. UN Security Council, S.C.R. (2004). 1566 Concerning Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorism], 8 October 2004, S/RES/1566 (2004). <https://www.refworld.org/docid/42c39b6d4.html> UN.
34. UNHRO. (2015). Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq: 1 May - 31 October 2015. Unhro, October.
35. Warrick, J. (2015). *Black flags: The rise of ISIS*. Doubleday.

COPYRIGHTS

©2023 by the authors. Published by the Iranian Association of Geopolitics. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

