

AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA

**THE COMPETITION FOR
JIHADIST HEGEMONY
IN AFGHANISTAN**

FINAL DEGREE PROJECT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Jan García Casanova

Tutor: Alessandro Demurtas

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This work analyzes the competition for the jihadist hegemony in Afghanistan between the two predominant jihadist terrorist organizations, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), following the withdrawal of the American troops in 2021. In 2014, the jihadist scenario, which was historically led by Al Qaeda, ceased to be unipolar, starting a new jihadist bipolar era with a competition for the hegemony between Al Qaeda and the new and ambitious ISIS. Their competition in Afghanistan is of relevance since, according to the theoretical perspective of the Sociology of Power, the elites compete for the differential accumulation of power (Feliu *et al.*, 2018). Once the predominant elite ruling in Afghanistan disappeared, that is the American troops' withdrawal, the terrorist organizations are no longer persecuted and have a new opportunity to act with impunity. Thus, the competition between Al Qaeda and ISIS in Afghanistan is a struggle of elites trying to have more power than the other. This research aims to analyze the resources of Al Qaeda and ISIS to determine their positions in Afghanistan, as according to the Sociology of Power, one of the five main elements to consider in the analysis is the resources at disposal. From that, this investigation takes the hypothesis ISIS is the dominant terrorist organization in Afghanistan due to the general decline experienced by Al Qaeda.

The methodology of this project is based on the investigation of reports detailing both terrorist organizations' resources carried out by the organization Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED, 2022), and annual reports of the Analytical Support and Surveillance of Sanctions Team established by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2004. These reports refer to ISIS, Al Qaeda, and their associated individuals, groups, companies, and entities. The most relevant document used in this research was the report of the Analytical Support and Surveillance Team in 2022, the S/2022/83 (UNSC, 2022). Once the resources are analyzed and the hypothesis is tested, an intelligence analysis will be drafted, applying the analysis techniques established by the US Intelligence Community Directive 203 (ICD 203). The purpose of ICD 203 is to establish a universal set of standards and analytical language within the Intelligence Community that guides analysts to deliver credible, and quality products. ICD 203 establishes a common language for the likelihood of events, such as almost no chance, roughly even chance, very likely, and almost certainly (ODNI, 2015). This analysis is aimed to detail the possible scenarios and the probability of threats to the security of Afghanistan and the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) due to the Al Qaeda and ISIS competition.

Within the resources analysis, it has been observed that the tangible resources of both groups to dominate jihadism in Afghanistan are very similar. However, there is an intangible resource that will make Al Qaeda more powerful in Afghanistan: its relationship with the current Taliban government. Although the Afghan Taliban agreed under the 2020 Doha peace deal with the US not to allow Al Qaeda to operate in areas under their control, the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan has resulted in greater freedom for Al Qaeda members. For instance, Amin Muhammad ul-Haq Saam Khan, the former Osama Bin Laden (OBL) security coordinator, was able to return to Afghanistan at the end of August 2021 (UNSC, 2022). Al Qaeda will very likely dominate the jihadist movement in Afghanistan due to the return of the Taliban to the country. Afghanistan's fragility will very likely be beneficial for Al Qaeda to raise its power in the country. With the Taliban's support, Al Qaeda will likely increase the exploitation of Afghan resources, such as oil, gas, minerals, and taxes, to finance its terrorist actions. Such resources will very likely increase Al Qaeda's chances of developing terrorist attacks, almost certainly endangering Afghan citizens' security. ISIS will very likely increase its terrorist activity in Afghanistan to destabilize the Taliban rule and Al Qaeda, with attacks in big cities such as Kabul. ISIS will very likely continue to be the predominant group in other MENA countries such as those in the Sahel but will almost certainly struggle to dominate the jihadist

movement in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda and ISIS will very likely increase targeting European countries to show other world powers their jihadist dominance. Thus, the competition for jihadist hegemony in Afghanistan will very likely have consequences abroad, endangering global security due to the violence of their attacks.

In conclusion, the hypothesis presented is not corroborated: ISIS is not the predominant terrorist organization in Afghanistan due to the decline experienced by Al Qaeda for years. Al Qaeda will dominate jihadism in Afghanistan due to its relationship with the Afghan Taliban government. The counterterrorism measures will unlikely be efficient to reach a ceasefire between ISIS and Al Qaeda since the structural causes of the jihadist terrorism rise will not be solved.

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