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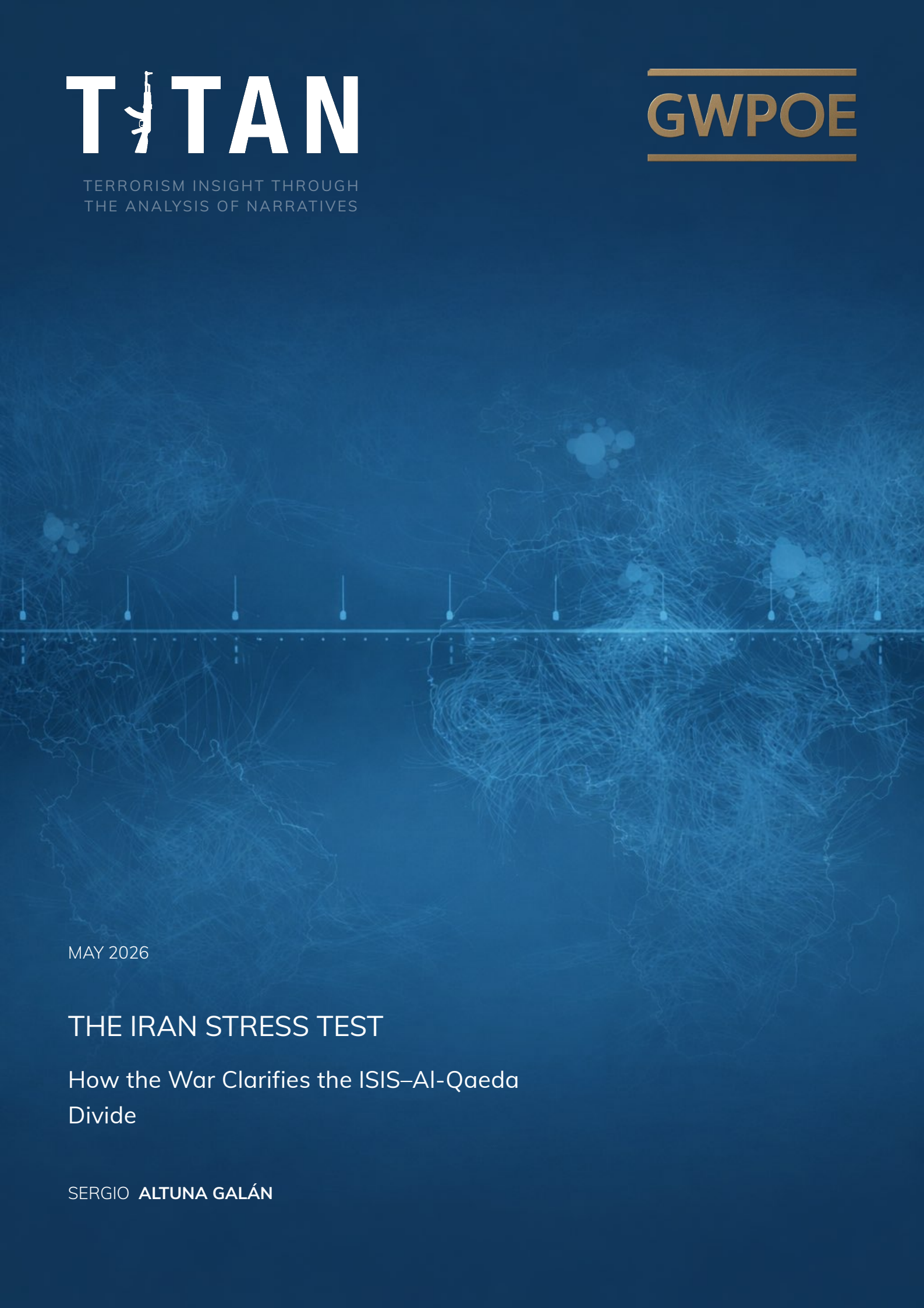

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THE IRAN STRESS TEST

How the War Clarifies the ISIS–Al-Qaeda Divide

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Introduction

The recent escalation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran has reconfigured the regional landscape and opened an analytical window into the communicative behavior of global jihadist actors. This moment functions as a stress test: it compels these organizations to signal their positions toward a central and structurally problematic actor under conditions of heightened visibility.

The aim of this article is to analyze how the two main exponents of global jihadism—Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ)—have responded since the onset of the crisis. The analysis is based on a corpus of primary source materials produced by both organizations' central media apparatuses,[1] supplemented where relevant by outputs from affiliated branches. To anchor the analysis, the article draws on a baseline from the TITAN corpus (2020–2025), covering the audiovisual production of both organizations.[2] This baseline provides a reference point to track continuity, intensification, and constraint in how each actor frames the Shi'i question and situates Iran within its broader ideological architecture.

The article treats these outputs as indicators of intra-jihadist positioning. It examines how each organization frames Iran, characterizes the conflict, and situates other relevant actors, while also identifying implicit and explicit signaling directed at rival jihadist audiences. The focus is placed on patterns of emphasis, omission, and narrative prioritization as a way to capture how each actor navigates the current environment, competes for legitimacy, and projects its ideological stance within the broader jihadist field.

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1 The sample analyzed includes all official publications released by the central media apparatuses of both organizations—*Muʾassasat al-Saḥāb lil-Intāj al-Iʿlāmī* (al-Qaeda) and *Muʾassasat al-Furqān lil-Intāj al-Iʿlāmī* (Islamic State)—from February 2026 onward. This temporal threshold is deliberately selected as an analytical baseline, corresponding to the initial phase of escalation preceding the outbreak of open hostilities, with the aim of capturing potential shifts, nuances, or recalibrations in narrative framing as tensions intensified. In addition, the analysis incorporates the weekly editorials of the Islamic State newsletter *al-Nabā'* over the same period, as these texts function as authoritative vehicles for articulating the organization's doctrinal line and editorial positioning with a high degree of ideological coherence. Outputs from affiliated branches of both organizations are also considered where they provide relevant insight or contrast with centrally produced materials.

2 Altuna, Sergio. "*Sectarian Priorities; The Shia and Iran in Jihadist Propaganda* (2020–2025)." The Program on Extremism, The George Washington University, April 20, 2026. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sectarian-priorities

Iran as a Structural Fault Line in Global Jihadism

Iran occupies a singular position within the global jihadist ecosystem, resisting straightforward categorization. Unlike other adversaries typically invoked in jihadist discourse, Iran combines several features that render it structurally problematic for Sunni militant organizations: it is a state actor with regional projection capabilities; it operates through an extensive network of non-state proxies;[3] and it embodies a doctrinal rival in the form of Twelver Shiism. This combination places Iran at the intersection of theology and geopolitics, complicating how Sunni Islamist actors engage it.

From a doctrinal standpoint, anti-Shi'i polemics have long been embedded in Salafi-jihadist thought, often framed through the lens of deviation, apostasy, and betrayal. As noted by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in his early writings during the Iraq insurgency, the Shi'a were characterized as an existential internal threat whose influence was considered more insidious than that of external enemies.[4] This framing, later institutionalized within the discourse of the Islamic State, established a hierarchy of enmity in which Shi'i actors—and by extension Iran—occupied a central position, constituting a core component of the group's ideological identity.[5]

Operational reality complicates this doctrinal clarity. Iran's footprint across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen embeds it directly in the same theaters where jihadist groups operate. This creates a layered adversarial relationship: Iran is simultaneously a theological rival, a military opponent, and a political actor capable of shaping the battlefield indirectly. Over the last two decades, jihadist groups have had to navigate both direct confrontation with Iranian-backed forces and the broader strategic environment those forces sustain.

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[3] The term "non-state proxies" can be defined as a constellation of Iran-aligned non-state violent actors and partner organizations, also referred to as the "*Axis of Resistance*." This loose network includes groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, various Iraqi Shi'i militias (e.g., Kata'ib Hezbollah), the Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) in Yemen, and Palestinian factions such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. While heterogeneous in structure and local agendas, these actors broadly converge in opposing U.S. and Israeli influence in the region and in advancing Iran's strategic depth through proxy and asymmetric warfare.

[4] Nibras, Kazimi. "*Zarqawi's Anti-Shi'a Legacy: Original or Borrowed?*" Current Trends in Islamist Ideology, 4 (2006), November 1, 2006. https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/zarqawi-s-anti-shi-a-legacy-original-or-borrowed

[5] Bunzel, Cole. "*From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*." The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper no. 19, March 2015, pp. 16-17.

This structural tension has generated divergent responses within the jihadist field. The Islamic State has adopted an uncompromising and explicitly confrontational stance toward Iran and Shi'i actors, while al-Qaeda has approached the issue with greater strategic caution. This divergence has been a recurrent source of criticism within the jihadist milieu, often framed as strategic compromise.

The current escalation between the United States, Israel, and Iran brings this divergence into sharper focus. For jihadist organizations, the conflict extends beyond a simple opposition between Islam and external enemies. It concentrates state confrontation, proxy warfare, and sectarian tension into a single episode where ambiguity is harder to sustain. The crisis forces prioritization, exposing underlying hierarchies that are usually less visible. It also increases the analytical value of silence, emphasis, and framing choices.

This is why the present crisis functions as a stress test. It does not introduce new ideological variables so much as it forces existing ones into the open and under pressure. The sections that follow examine how the Islamic State and al-Qaeda navigate this environment, focusing on how each frames Iran and what those choices reveal about positioning, priorities and intra-jihadist competition.

ISIS: Doctrine as Legitimacy

The Islamic State's response to the current crisis is best understood as doctrinal activation. Iran and the broader Shi'i axis do not need to be incorporated as new variables requiring reinterpretation; they are positioned as confirmation of an already established hierarchy of enmity. In this sense, ISIS does not adjust its existing framework, it just applies it in response to events.

This is immediately visible in the group's editorial output. Of the nine issues of ISIS' weekly newsletter, *al-Nabā'*, published between late February and late April 2026,[6] eight explicitly address Iran, the Shi'i axis, or related sectarian dynamics, often as a central organizing theme. This concentration reflects a deliberate effort to structure interpretation for its audience during a period of volatility.

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6 The sample includes all issues of *al-Nabā'* published between late February and late April 2026 (issues 536-544), providing a continuous weekly record of the Islamic State's editorial positioning during the initial phase of the crisis.

Across these editorials, Shi'ism is consistently framed as a primary doctrinal threat, often positioned above external enemies such as the United States and Israel. In its editorial from issue 537 the organization states that "*the danger of the Rāfiḍah*[7] *upon the Muslims is more severe and more enduring than that of the original disbelievers*."[8] This formulation reiterates a long-standing ISIS position: the internal enemy, defined in sectarian terms, constitutes a more immediate danger than external adversaries.[9]

Iran, in turn, is systematically framed as the central node of this deviation. The editorials repeatedly collapse the distinction between state behavior and theological identity, presenting Iran as both the sponsor and embodiment of Shi'i apostasy. In doing so, ISIS frames the broader conflict as a manifestation of divine justice operating through competing camps. This is made explicit through the invocation of classical concepts such as *tadāfuʿ*, [10] whereby "*God sets the wrongdoers against one another as punishment for them and relief for the believers.*"[11] The aim is to render the conflict doctrinally understandable, reducing strategic ambiguity by embedding it within a familiar theological approach.

In subsequent issues of *al-Nabāʾ* this logic is quickly translated into guidance and operationalized. After establishing that neither camp in the conflict is worthy of support, ISIS shifts toward behavioral guidance, emphasizing the continuity of jihad irrespective of shifting geopolitical alignments. In issue 539 the editorial urges that "*the seasons of jihad do not end with Ramaḍān, nor are they confined to it*,"[12] explicitly linking the framework to action. Shortly after, the organization reinforces its epistemological boundary, insisting that

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7 The term *rāfiḍa* (plural *rāfiḍīn* or *rawāfiḍ*) is used by jihadist actors as a derogatory label for Shia Muslims. Historically, it refers to those perceived to reject the rightful succession of Abu Bakr after the Prophet Muhammad. In contemporary jihadist discourse, however, it functions primarily as a sectarian marker, denoting theological deviation and, by extension, a legitimate target of ideological condemnation or violence.

8 *Al-Nabāʾ* #537, March 5, 2026, page 3.

9 Altuna, Sergio. "*Who is the Real Enemy Now? (Re)-Assessing the Near–Far Enemy Dichotomy in Global Jihadist Propaganda*." The Program on Extremism, The George Washington University. February 16, 2026. https://extremism.gwu.edu/who-real-enemy-now

10 The concept of *tadāfuʿ* (lit. "mutual repulsion" or "counterbalancing") derives from Qur'anic formulations (e.g., Q. 2:251; 22:40) and refers to the idea that God sets opposing forces against one another as a means of maintaining balance, punishing wrongdoing, and ultimately protecting the community of believers. Within jihadist discourse, the concept is frequently mobilized to interpret conflicts between adversaries as divinely ordained processes that serve a broader theological purpose.

11 *Al-Nabāʾ* #538, March 12, 2026, page 3.

12 *Al-Nabāʾ* #539, March 19, 2026, page 3.

"*loyalty and disavowal are not taken from political analysis, but from the Qur'an and the Sunna*."[13] Together, these statements illustrate a clear structured progression: define, delimit, instruct.

The audio message delivered by the organization's spokesman, Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari, shortly before the outbreak of open hostilities, confirms that this framework predates the crisis. In discussing Syria, he describes the removal of Iranian influence as a shift between forms of deviation, warning against replacing one "*ṭāghūt*"[14] with another. More broadly, he reiterates the centrality of doctrinal boundaries over political configurations: "*the conflict is between tawḥīd and shirk, not between policies or alliances*."[15] Timing here shows that the crisis does not generate a new reading; it activated an existing one.

This coherence extends beyond the central apparatus. Outputs from other provinces, such at Khorasan (ISKP), reproduce similar doctrinal arguments in parallel linguistic and regional contexts. Following reports of Ali Khamenei's death, ISKP materials deploy the same concept of *tadāfuʿ*, drawing on overlapping Qur'anic references and classical authorities to frame the event as divine retribution.[16] Whether this convergence reflects direct coordination or diffusion through a shared doctrinal repertoire is difficult to establish empirically; what is clear is the consistency of the interpretive template across contexts.

The effect extends beyond internal coherence to external positioning. By maintaining a rigid hierarchy of enmity and consistently foregrounding Iran, ISIS asserts interpretive authority over the conflict and, by extension, over the jihadist field. It does not adjust its framework; it imposes it. Events are filtered through a fixed doctrinal lens and presented as confirmation of pre-existing truths. This combination of consistency, repetition, and prescriptive clarity strengthens its claim to define both the enemy and the terms of the war, reinforcing its position in the competition for legitimacy.

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13 *Al-Nabāʾ* #540, March 26, 2026, page 3.

14 The term *ṭāghūt* refers in Islamic jurisprudence and theology to any entity that transgresses its proper bounds by claiming or being accorded authority that belongs to God alone. In Salafi-jihadist usage, it is commonly applied to rulers, political systems, or institutions deemed illegitimate for governing by man-made laws rather than divine revelation, and by extension to those who support or uphold such systems.

15 "قد تبين الرشد من الغي", Muʾassasat al-Furqān lil-Intāj al-Iʿlāmī, February 2026.

16 "A congratulatory message regarding the assassination of the late Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei," Muʾassasat al-ʿAzāʾim al-Iʿlāmiyya, March 7, 2026.

Al-Qaeda: Managing Silence

In contrast to the Islamic State's dense and iterative treatment of Iran and the Shi'i axis, al-Qaeda's response is limited in both volume and thematic engagement. Across the period under review, there are no dedicated statements, nor indirect doctrinal engagements with Iran, from al-Qaeda Central or its main affiliates (AQAP, AQIS, AQIM, al-Shabaab, etc.). Instead, the organization continues to foreground Palestine, the West, and other long-term mobilization narratives, effectively avoiding mentioning Iran in any of its propaganda materials.

This selectivity is analytically significant. Unlike ISIS, which places Iran at the center of its interpretive framework, al-Qaeda effectively sidesteps the issue. This omission is not neutral, but a form of calibrated ambiguity shaped by constraint. Direct confrontation with Iran—especially in explicit sectarian or theological terms—entails strategic costs that the organization appears unwilling to incur in the current context.

This posture is not new. It reflects a recurring point of contention since part of its leadership relocated to Iran. Segments of the Salafi-jihadist milieu have long criticized al-Qaeda's reluctance to confront Iran, often framing it as tacit non-aggression. Over time, this has hardened into a durable perception—one that is actively leveraged by other actors—that al-Qaeda's position reflects strategic accommodation rather than doctrinal consistency.

The current crisis sharpens this vulnerability. Silence, in the current setting, acquires communicative weight. By not articulating a stance on Iran, al-Qaeda cedes interpretive space to actors willing to define the conflict in more categorical terms. This asymmetry becomes particularly pronounced when juxtaposed with ISIS's sustained effort to structure the crisis through a sectarian and theological lens.

At the level of central output, this pattern is clearly observable. The only statement issued by al-Qaeda Central during the period under study, in late January 2026, as tensions began to escalate, reiterates a familiar "Zionist-Crusader campaign" framework, calling for mobilization against U.S. and allied forces in the region and invoking historical precedents of defensive jihad.[17] The text situates the unfolding crisis within a long-standing narrative

[17] "فاعتبروا يا أولى الأبصار" Muʾassasat al-Saḥāb lil-Intāj al-Iʿlāmī, January 2026.

of Western aggression against the Muslim world, emphasizing preemption, unity, and armed resistance. Notably, however, it makes no reference to Iran or to the Shi'i axis, despite their centrality in the emerging conflict. This omission preserves a pre-existing prioritization schema while bypassing one of the defining variables of the current environment.[18]

Affiliated materials reinforce this pattern of selective engagement. AQAP's recent outputs continue to prioritize long-term ecosystem-building and external operations, while English-language products such as Inspire maintain their focus on lone-actor mobilization in Western contexts. Similarly, AQIS frames state violence and military responsibility through a legal-religious lens without embedding these dynamics within a broader confrontation involving Iran. Across these cases, the pattern is consistent: the crisis is acknowledged indirectly through its secondary effects, yet its most central and disruptive elements remain unaddressed.

A brief look at peripheral and non-official actors further illustrates the lack of narrative consolidation. While al-Qaeda's formal apparatus avoids direct engagement with Iran, some affiliated or sympathetic media ecosystems do address the issue—albeit in ways that underscore fragmentation. On 4 March 2026, the Cyber Jihad Movement (CJM), a pro–al-Qaeda hacktivist collective, announced its "entry" into the Iranian-American war and explicitly declared coordination with pro-Iranian hacker groups targeting U.S. and Israeli infrastructure. This instance of opportunistic, cross-ideological alignment suggests a level of tactical convergence that sits uneasily with al-Qaeda's otherwise cautious doctrinal posture.[19]

A similar lack of coherence is visible in material attributed to Ajnad Bayt al-Maqdis—an emergent actor whose first known output takes the form of a *bay'a*[20] to al-Qaeda. The group's messaging adopts familiar "Zionist-Crusader campaign" tropes while gesturing toward the broader conflict environment, yet it does so without a stable framing of Iran. Questions remain regarding

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18 As of 30 April, al-Qaeda had not issued any official statement on the matter.

19 Alexe, Daria. "*Al-Qaeda's Cyber Jihad Movement: Plugging into Iran's Wartime Hacktivist Ecosystem.*" Global Network on Extremism & Technology Insights. March 23, 2026. https://gnet-research.org/2026/03/23/al-qaedas-cyber-jihad-movement-plugging-into-irans-wartime-hacktivist-ecosystem/

20 The concept of *bay'a* refers to a formal oath of allegiance pledged to a leader or authority, historically rooted in early Islamic political practice. In jihadist contexts, it denotes a binding commitment of loyalty to a group or its leader, often used to signal affiliation, legitimize authority, and incorporate individuals or factions into a broader organizational structure.

both the authenticity and the organizational status of the group, given inconsistencies in its claims, overlaps with attacks carried by other actors, and the absence of formal recognition by al-Qaeda's central leadership.[21] Whether understood as an embryonic affiliate, a media façade, or a case of misattribution, its output reflects a low level of narrative discipline and contributes to a wider picture of interpretive fragmentation across the network's periphery.

Al-Qaeda's posture can therefore be understood as one of strategic ambiguity under constraint. The organization continues to communicate and mobilize, but within a narrowed thematic bandwidth that avoids dealing with what remains the central geopolitical fault line in the Middle East. This preserves short-term flexibility while ceding narrative initiative, exposing a structural vulnerability that becomes visible when contrasted with ISIS's more assertive positioning.

Baseline Comparison: Structural Continuities

A comparison with the TITAN baseline (2020–2025) shows strong continuity in both organizations' discursive patterns, while making pre-existing fault lines more visible.[22]

Al-Qaeda's current response reflects a pattern of continuity under constraint. As in the baseline period, Iran is not integrated into its hierarchy of enmity, and sectarian confrontation remains deprioritized relative to the broader framing of Western aggression. What changes here is the cost of this position: in a context where Iran has become a central and unavoidable actor, the persistence of this ambiguity becomes more visible—and more consequential. This pattern is consistent with the baseline data, where references to Shia actors accounted for just 0.32% of coded enemy mentions in al-Qaeda's corpus, with only marginal references to Iran. The same structural tension persists, now under higher exposure and with greater reputational weight.

By contrast, the Islamic State exhibits a pattern of continuity with intensification. The central elements identified in the baseline—particularly the prioritization

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21 Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad. "*A New al-Qaeda Affiliate in Iraq and Syria?*" Middle East Forum, March 4, 2026. https://www.meforum.org/mef-online/a-new-al-qaeda-affiliate-in-iraq-and-syria

22 For further context see: Op. Cit. Altuna, Sergio. "*Sectarian Priorities; The Shia and Iran in Jihadist Propaganda (2020–2025).*"

of the Shi'i threat and the positioning of Iran as a core axis of deviation—remain intact. The shift in the current cycle lies in salience and structural centrality. As reflected in the editorial sequence of *al-Nabā'*, Iran and the Shi'i axis move from a prominent component of ISIS's propaganda to the dominant organizing frame. This aligns with baseline findings, where Shia-related references already accounted for 22.55% of enemy categories in ISIS propaganda and appeared across the vast majority of outputs—indicating that the current surge represents an escalation in visibility and frequency, not a substantive shift.

Reading the Signals: Positioning Under Pressure

It can be argued that the current crisis functions as a stress test for intra-jihadist dynamics, forcing actors to signal their positions under conditions of heightened visibility. The result is a structured competition over legitimacy, authority, and audience alignment, with Iran operating as a fault line through which these tensions become visible and operationally consequential.

For the Islamic State, communication in this context serves multiple audiences simultaneously. At the internal level, the sustained emphasis on Shi'i deviation and the centrality of Iran reinforces doctrinal cohesion among supporters, reaffirming a hierarchy of enmity with little room for ambiguity. Externally, the same messaging serves a positioning function. By consistently foregrounding Iran, ISIS positions itself as the only actor willing to articulate a doctrinally binding line, implicitly placing al-Qaeda outside of it, and claiming the authority to police the boundaries of acceptable jihadist *minhaj*.[23] As one editorial puts it, "*whoever fails to declare disavowal from the polytheists has failed in the foundation of the religion*".[24]

This line hardens in subsequent editorials. Mobilization calls issued within the broader jihadist milieu that omit Iran are framed as evidence of methodological deviation and described as "*confusion in the scales of enmity and loyalty*."[25] Elsewhere in the same editorial sequence, ISIS goes further, criticizing those who "*redirect the Umma's enmity away from the apostate enemies toward*

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[23] The term *Minhaj* can be translated as "methodology" or "approach." Within Salafi-jihadist discourse it denotes the correct way of implementing doctrine in practice, including priorities, targeting, and strategic conduct.

[24] Op. Cit. *Al-Nabā'*#538.

[25] *Al-Nabā'*#541, April 2, 2026, page 3.

secondary fronts."[26] The critique is framed in doctrinal terms, recasting strategic disagreement into theological failure. The intended effect is to increase the reputational cost of ambiguity and force alignment with ISIS's hierarchy of threats.

Significantly, although it is clearly targeted, al-Qaeda is not explicitly named. Instead, ISIS relies on indirect referential language—formulations such as "*those who claim jihad*," or "*groups that have deviated from the methodology*," to signal without specifying. This is deliberate as it enables ISIS to universalize its critique, transforming what is effectively an intra-jihadist dispute into a test of orthodoxy.

Al-Qaeda's communicative posture follows a different logic, but it is no less strategic. Its relative silence on Iran, coupled with the persistence of a "Zionist-Crusader" framing, suggests an effort to maintain audience breadth and avoid sectarian escalation that could limit coalition space. The absence of explicit reference to Iran in al-Qaeda's messaging is actively incorporated into ISIS's narrative as evidence of inconsistency.

At the same time, al-Qaeda's messaging continues to align with a broader strategic horizon. Emphasis on Western intervention, territorial defense, and long-term mobilization positions the conflict beyond sectarian binaries and appeals to audiences less invested in intra-Muslim confrontation. The January 2026 statement, with its call to confront a "*campaign to occupy the entire region*"[27] and its emphasis on preemptive jihad, reflects this orientation. Yet the absence of Iran from this framework creates a structural gap between discourse and conflict dynamics.

The current conflict, therefore, does more than expose differences; it reshapes the terms of competition. Iran becomes a sorting mechanism through which actors are evaluated, forcing clearer signaling and reducing the space for ambiguity. ISIS leverages this dynamic to reinforce its model of doctrinal maximalism, where legitimacy derives from clarity, rigidity, and theological alignment. Al-Qaeda, by contrast, sustains a model of strategic pragmatism, prioritizing long-term positioning, even at the cost of short-term reputational vulnerability.

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[26] *Al-Nabāʾ* #541, April 9, 2026, page 3.

[27] Op. Cit. "فاعتبروا يا أولى الأبصار" Muʾassasat al-Saḥāb lil-Intāj al-Iʿlāmī.

Conclusion

The war around Iran can be read as a stress test for the rivalry between ISIS and al-Qaeda, as it forces both organizations to operate under conditions where ambiguity is harder to sustain. Iran works here as a sorting mechanism: it forces both organizations to position themselves in relation to a question they cannot easily evade, and in doing so it narrows the space for tactical vagueness that sometimes buffers jihadist messaging. What emerges here is a more explicit competition over hierarchy, legitimacy, and interpretive authority.

This is where the deeper divide becomes clearer. ISIS turns a doctrinal preference into a rule of legitimacy: its treatment of Iran shows how *minhaj* is absorbed into *ʿaqīda*,[28] and how doctrinal clarity becomes the basis for authority. Al-Qaeda keeps doctrine and strategy formally distinct, but under current conditions that separation comes with increasing reputational costs. ISIS strengthens its position by tightening the boundaries of enmity and making them more rigid and more visible. Al-Qaeda preserves flexibility, yet that flexibility increasingly reads less like strategic prudence than like avoidance. What is ultimately at stake in this context is who has the authority to define what counts as legitimate jihad in a regional environment that is becoming more openly sectarian.

The implications are already visible. The jihadist field is becoming more polarized and calibrated ambiguity is losing structural space. Future episodes of this kind are likely to reinforce the same dynamic, as they consistently reward actors able to translate doctrinal certainty into communicative authority. Sectarianism now operates as an uneven yet structuring force across the jihadist ecosystem reinforcing clarity for some actors while exposing constraint for others. For al-Qaeda, this leaves a narrowing set of options: adjust to a context where Iran can no longer be sidelined or absorb a gradual loss of influence within the broader jihadist landscape.

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28 *ʿAqīda* refers to the core creed or doctrinal system of belief in Islam, encompassing the fundamental theological principles that define orthodoxy. In Salafi-jihadist thought, it defines the uncompromising set of doctrinal certainties that govern questions of belief, unbelief, and legitimate authority.

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