
*Research Notes***Learning in a Double Loop: The Strategic Transformation of Al-Qaeda**

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Abstract

Like any type of organization, terrorist groups learn from their own experiences as well as those of others. These processes of organizational learning have, however, been poorly understood so far, especially regarding deep strategic changes. In this Research Note, we apply a concept developed to understand learning of business organizations to recent transformations of jihadist groups. The question we want to shed light on using this approach is whether, and in which ways, terrorist groups are able to question not only their immediate modus operandi, but also the fundamental assumptions their struggle is built on. More specifically, we focus the inquiry on the development of the Al-Qaeda network. Despite its acknowledged penchant for learning, the ability of the jihadists to transform on a deeper level has often been denied. We seek to reassess these claims from the perspective of a double-loop learning approach by tracing the strategic evolution of Al-Qaeda and its eventual breakaway faction, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Keywords: Organizational learning, terrorist transformation, strategic change, jihadism, Al-Qaeda, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

Introduction

Departing from earlier assertions that terrorist organizations are generally conservative and averse to experimentation and change,[1] there is a growing literature dealing with the capacity of militant actors for flexibility, learning and innovative behavior.[2] However, a large part of this research focuses narrowly on tactical advances, or what Singh has termed “bomb and bullet” innovations.[3] We argue that it is equally, if not even more, important to study learning processes that are directed at more profound transformations of the fundamental approaches of groups. Distinguishing this level from tactical and organizational learning, Crenshaw described such strategic innovation as “shifts that change the fundamental pattern of terrorist challenges to political authority.”[4] Unfortunately, these processes have so far been mostly neglected in the literature.

Not only do many researchers focus too narrowly on tactical learning, but studies in the field also often suffer from the fact that their central concept is generally undertheorized in favour of case descriptions or typological contributions, and fail to rigorously link back to the extensive literature on learning developed in other fields. [5] Learning—especially that of organizations—is a notoriously difficult concept in any case and the literature has especially struggled with capturing its cognitive dimension and delineating it from related concepts like innovation.[6] Going beyond narrow definitions linking learning explicitly to material improvements, Singh understands it “as the ability of terrorist groups to change their structures, operations, and/or goals over time.”[7] One of the rare attempts to systematically study such transformations from an organizational learning perspective was done by the RAND Corporation.[8] However, as those RAND researchers were primarily concerned with using this knowledge for counterterrorism purposes, the authors focused largely on how learning capabilities influenced the capacities of groups for violence, and less on strategic deliberations or the dynamics of interpretation processes within organizations themselves.

We attempt to address these shortcomings by drawing on a well-established theoretical concept developed outside the context of political violence, namely the organizational learning approach created by Argyris and Schön.[9] This perspective offers a coherent and well-established, yet flexible, conceptual framework for understanding organizational learning, which has also been extensively applied and tested in practice.[10] It

integrates both cognition and action as parts of the learning process and is explicitly focused on the forms of higher-level learning that underlie strategic adjustments and fundamental changes.[11] The authors call such transformations “double-loop learning”, which “occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization’s underlying norms, policies, and objectives.”[12] As these underlying norms and objectives define the course of action that a group pursues, looking at whether and how modifications of these come about offers important insights into the dynamics of militant campaigns. Crucially, as this approach was originally developed for understanding as well as improving learning processes, it is especially suited for an analysis of learning from the point of view of violent organizations themselves. This allows to better capture the internal reasonings and reflections that determine whether and how a group is able to engage in transformational learning.

Specifically, we apply the concept to a study of the Al-Qaeda network, investigating whether, and in which ways, it was able to question not only its immediate modus operandi, but also the basic assumptions its struggle is built on. Jihadist groups have often been described as particular ‘hard cases’ in this regard. For example, Hafez argues that jihadists “appear to be incapable of internalizing lessons from past failures.”[13] Likewise, McCabe denies these groups the ability to learn on a deeper level, contending that “at the strategic level they are so badly misinformed as to be almost delusional.”[14] He notes specifically that necessary reforms “would likely be difficult for al Qaeda.”[15] In this text, we seek to reassess these claims from the perspective of a double-loop learning approach by tracing the strategic evolution of Al-Qaeda and its eventual breakaway faction, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

The Concept of Double-Loop Learning

Argyris and Schön start with the assumption that “all deliberate action ha[s] a cognitive basis, that it reflect[s] norms, strategies, and assumptions or models of the world.”[16] These mental models work as frames of reference that determine expectations about cause-and-effect relationships between actions and outcomes. Argyris and Schön call these “theories of action”, which include “strategies of action, the values that govern the choice of strategies and the assumptions on which they are based.”[17] In these models, values—or “governing variables”—set performance parameters that actors strive to achieve through their strategies of action.[18] Argyris and Schön differentiate between “espoused theory”, which is advanced to explicitly explain and justify behaviour, and “theory-in-use”, which guides actual behaviour.[19] They assume that organizations also have theories of action that inform their behaviour. In fact, they argue that given the constant turnover of actual members, it “is this theory-in-use, an apparently abstract thing, which is most distinctively real about the [organization].”[20] The theory-in-use of the organization is constructed by individual members in a constant collaborative process and embodied in shared descriptions of the organization, such as policy guidelines or standard operating procedures, but also in tacit knowledge, such as informal lines of communication. Organizational learning, in this sense, is an intentional change in the organizational theory-in-use, traceable through such descriptions as well as the observable patterns of organizational action.[21]

According to Argyris and Schön, learning becomes necessary when there is what they call an “error”—a mismatch between the intended outcomes of strategies of action and the actual results. Consequently, they define successful learning in a narrow sense as the “detection and correction of error,” i.e., changes in the organizational approach that bring outcomes more in line with expectations.[22] This happens through continuous processes of self-reflective organizational inquiry. Based on the elements of theories-of-action, Argyris and Schön distinguish two types of learning: In *single-loop* learning systems, the detection and correction of error connects the outcome in a single loop only to strategies of action, whereas the governing variables remain unchanged. In *double-loop* learning systems, a double feedback loop “connects the detection of error not only to strategies and assumptions for effective performance, but to the very norms which *define* effective performance.”[23] Hence, double-loop learning modifies the governing variables’ *underlying* objectives.

Single-loop learning to increase the effectiveness of actions is the dominant response to error and is ingrained in routine procedures in any organization. However, especially in changing environments, single-loop learning may actually lead to long-term ineffectiveness, as well as to a reduced capacity for double-loop learning. This is

the case because, when organizations initiate a process of change in order to correct errors without addressing existing norms, a conflict in the norms themselves can emerge. This results in the paradoxical situation where an increase in effectiveness in relation to one goal can lead to a decrease in effectiveness in relation to another. Due to the fact that in single-loop learning systems the governing variables are not questioned, conflicting requirements remain hidden and even may become undiscussable in organizations. This can lead to dilemma situations that Argyris and Schön term “double binds”: If members expose these contradictions, they question norms that are ingrained in everyday operations.[24] If they do not expose an error, they perpetuate a process that inhibits organizational learning. For example, while organizations often officially encourage their members to report mistakes, members often refrain from doing so for fear of being punished as the harbinger of bad news.

In contrast, in double-loop learning systems, people acknowledge when there is a mismatch between intention and outcome, share awareness of organizational dilemmas, engage such conflicts through inquiry and decrease double binds.[25] In this second learning loop, the focus shifts from learning *how to better accomplish tasks* within a given frame of reference to learning *what to do* by questioning the frame of reference itself. In other words, while single-loop learning focuses on improving what an organization already does, or “doing the things right,” double-loop learning is concerned with what organizations ought to do, or “doing the right things.”[26] It has to be noted in this regard that such learnings may not necessarily be right in a moral sense. Argyris and Schön emphasize that their description of the mechanisms of organizational learning is neutral and that “any particular example of it may prove to be [...] downright evil.”[27]

Due to organizational inertia and a tendency to become defensive when confronted with failure, organizations have a tendency to produce learning systems that inhibit the sort of learning that would question their governing variables.[28] Argyris and Schön suggest that in order to double-loop learn, leaders first have to recognize the conflict between incompatible requirements. They must become aware that they cannot correct the error by doing better what they already know how to do, but by engaging in deep organizational inquiry. In this process the focus has to shift from learning concerned with improvement in the performance of tasks to inquiry through which an organization explores the values and criteria that define what improved performance *means*. This is often inherently conflictual; in fact, as Argyris and Schön remark, “it is often impossible, in the real-world context of organizational life, to find inquiry cleanly separated from the uses of power.”[29] Such inquiry necessitates a capacity for self-criticism, open reflection and tolerance for personal risk in order to overcome double binds and “mak[e] the undiscussable and its undiscussability discussable.”[30]

While organizations should strive to develop cultures conducive to double-loop inquiries, Argyris and Schön concede that these systems are empirically rare and an ideal type that can only be approximated.[31] In reality, it is also difficult to speak of an organization having one single learning system. Theories-in-use are systemic structures composed of many interconnected parts on different levels of the organization. These can be more particular and local or more general and global, more fundamental to the structure or more peripheral. Hierarchies of norms, strategies and assumptions are also not always clear-cut. In reality, therefore, it is more useful to speak of organizational learning as *more or less* double loop, with learning being not dichotomous but a “continuous concept of depth of learning.”[32] The more organizations inquire into governing variables that are fundamental to their theory of action, the more they approach double-loop learning.

Double-Loop Learning in the Al-Qaeda Network

Given the difficulties described above, terrorist groups should have a particularly hard time establishing double-loop learning systems.[33] Militant groups usually operate in the underground and face an existential security situation, creating a situation of “causal ambiguity” in which it is difficult to link events back to action and strategies.[34] Moreover, closed collectives tend to establish a strong sense of “groupthink” and a “tendency toward self-censorship and consensus building,” which is detrimental to deep organizational inquiry.[35] The latter tendency is also aggravated by the often rigid ideologies these groups follow, presumably making jihadi organizations like Al-Qaeda particularly reluctant to question their guiding norms and assumptions.

However, as traditional research has underestimated the ability of terrorist groups to learn in general, the literature might still underestimate their capability for deeper inquiry and learning. In the following, we trace the strategic trajectory of Al-Qaeda to demonstrate that applying the conceptual framework of Argyris and Schön reveals that jihadists were indeed capable of profound organizational change and learning, which ultimately even lead to the split of the Syrian branch of the organization.

From Strategic Revolution to Double Binds

At the end of the 1990s, Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri initiated a revolution in jihadist thinking by setting the focus on what they termed the “far enemy” of the United States and the West.[36] Al-Qaeda built this new cohesive theory-of-action on the notion that struggles so far had failed mainly because of the support given to local regimes by the United States. Based on the idea that the downfall of the Soviet Union was the result of its defeat in Afghanistan, which the jihadists claimed as their success, they drew the lesson that America could likewise be forced to withdraw from Muslim countries.[37] From this, Al-Qaeda derived a clear set of governing variables: (1) strike against Western and especially American targets; (2) establish safe havens in Muslim countries; (3) gain the support of the Muslim masses; (4) be the vanguard and leader of the united jihadi movement.[38] Crucially, these building blocks formed the cornerstones of Al-Qaeda’s jihad both in espoused theory and theory-in-use in the latter half of the 1990s and throughout the 2000s. The 9/11 attacks can be seen as a clear example of single-loop learning: by escalating the level of violence and directly striking the U.S. homeland, Al-Qaeda innovated their actions within their given framework—doing ‘better’ what they already knew how to do, addressing the problem that earlier attacks had not compelled America to change its policies.

However, this approach largely failed. Although Al-Qaeda proved to be more resilient than observers expected at the time, the changes the organization underwent in the decade following 9/11 can still be described as single-loop learning: “Unprepared to change their doctrine, they had to adjust their strategy.”[39] The main innovation keeping the movement alive was organizational in nature and involved the de-centralization and franchising of the once strictly hierarchical group. This devolution of powers, however, in effect diluted the far enemy strategy, as groups with local roots were focused first and foremost on their local insurgencies.[40] In the terms of Argyris and Schön, this created conflicting requirements for affiliate commanders, as they were encouraged by the leadership to focus their attention on Western targets, while their main interests remained regional. Merely adapting the organizational structure did not resolve the deeper problems that single-loop learning cannot address, and contributed to the undiscussability of governing variables, as Bin Laden was as yet unprepared to admit strategic mistakes. To continue the fight under existing norms perpetuated the inherent contradictions in the governing variables: provoking international intervention made it much harder, if not impossible, to establish territorial safe havens; moreover, the violence and strict interpretation of Sharia—especially exhibited by its most active affiliate, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)—reduced Al-Qaeda’s appeal to the majority of Muslim populations.[41] The leadership was aware of these problems; crucially, however, they voiced these concerns only in private communications. As Al-Zawahiri famously noted in a letter from July 2005 to AQI leader Musab al-Zarqawi, “this subject is complicated and detailed. I have brought it up here so as not to address the general public on something they do not know.” [42] The franchising strategy had also created conflicting requirements for the leadership: in order to minimize damage to the organization’s brand, public rebukes of affiliates’ tactics would have been necessary—however, this would have exposed not only the leadership’s lack of authority but also discord in the jihadist movement.[43] In the words of Argyris and Schön, this represented a typical double bind.

Engaging in Deep Organizational Inquiry

Consequently, at the beginning of this decade Al-Qaeda seemed to be on the back foot.[44] However, most experts agree that the organization has weathered the storms remarkably well.[45] We argue that this is largely due to the fact that the Al-Qaeda leadership, after the failures of the 2000s, finally started a process of deeper organizational inquiry. In 2010 Bin Laden announced a “new phase of assessing Jihad activities,” inviting the reader to “brainstorm” and improve upon his ideas.[46] He expressed the “need [for] an advisory reading, with

constructive criticism to our entire policy and publications,” followed by soliciting feedback about the agreed-upon reforms from “the leaders of the regions”; by emphasizing the “importance of secrecy in all of that,” Bin Laden made clear that this was an internal investigation, testifying that this was a serious engagement with Al-Qaeda’s principles and not merely a propaganda effort.[47] Bin Laden’s primary concern was with the inability of Al-Qaeda to generate mass support.[48] Additionally, he acknowledged the weakness of the movement, and warned against attacks when “the power of the brothers is not ready.”[49]

The inquiry into its governing variables became even more profound after the death of Bin Laden at the time of the Arab Spring, which, contrary to many Western analysts who interpreted it as the nail in the coffin for Al-Qaeda, leadership member Atiyatullah al-Libi called a “historic opportunity.”[50] It precipitated a local turn that married a more conciliatory approach towards ordinary Muslims and independent armed actors with a renewed focus on anti-regime insurgency. Instead of trying to impose its version of Islam immediately, affiliates were advised to be more lenient; instead of trying to take control of insurgencies and sideline other groups, operatives were to integrate into the local scene, establishing relationships and playing down global connections. For example, when Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and their local allies took control of northern Mali in 2012, Al-Qaeda’s general manager Nasir al-Wuhayshi advised AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel to take a gradual approach, arguing that “you can’t beat people for drinking alcohol when they don’t even know the basics of how to pray.”[51] Crucially, these efforts were supported by another turn away from earlier practices: Instead of relaying advice only in private, which had proved ineffectual in Iraq, the leadership published explicit guidelines as part of a deliberate “rebranding campaign.”[52] The *General Guidelines for Jihad* instruct jihadis not only to “refrain from harming Muslims,” but to “generally avoid fighting those who have not raised arms against us.”[53] Instead of enforcing its understanding of Sharia law, the focus should be on “spreading awareness amongst the general public.”[54] In stark contrast to earlier work where Al-Zawahiri strongly justified the killing of civilians,[55] the 2017 *Code of Conduct* of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) explicitly instructs jihadis to refrain from “attacking even those targets that are permissible in Shari’ah, but [are] not beneficial for the jihadi movement.”[56]

These documents were also designed to draw a clear distinction to the extremism of the Islamic State (ISIS), which Al-Qaeda openly criticized, thereby demonstrating its willingness to sacrifice the norm of maintaining the unity of the jihadi movement, while making clear its claim to authority. These contrasting approaches can in fact be seen as different lessons drawn from the experiences in the decade before: while Al-Qaeda focused on regaining public trust and influence in local insurgencies through moderation and tactical cooperation, the direct successor of AQI tried to preempt another “Sunni Awakening” by eliminating any potential rival to its power and ideological interpretation as early as possible. From a learning perspective, therefore, while Al-Qaeda’s trajectory can be seen as moving towards double-loop learning, ISIS’s represents a form of single-loop learning, in which the group strove to remain on top by means of an even more brutal application of its tactics in Iraq. Al-Qaeda has largely been consistent in its approach, even claiming the moral high ground when it reemphasized its vow to exclude “places of worship” and avoid civilian targets in its call for revenge after the Christchurch attack.[57] Interestingly, this puts the spotlight on another de facto revision of a core norm: while ISIS staged and inspired spectacular terrorist attacks around the world, Al-Qaeda de facto all but abandoned its targeting of the West, relegating fiery attacks on the US and its allies essentially to espoused theory.[58]

Overall, Evans was right when he predicted Al-Qaeda’s turn toward “a more Maoist attitude.”[59] Al-Qaeda has exhibited a remarkable ability to question its strategic approach and set new priorities in its governing variables in the last decade. The split from what would become ISIS can be interpreted as a logical consequence of this learning process, which ISIS was not following. In contrast, the split that later occurred between Al-Qaeda and its Syrian branch was in a sense precipitated by the unwillingness of the former to go further in its questioning of norms.[60]

A Step Too Far: From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham

The group that today is known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham started out as a small expeditionary force sent to Syria 2011 by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), then still aligned with Al-Qaeda. Led by Abu Muhammad Al-Jolani, this new group, established under the name Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), from the beginning charted a course that was somewhat independent of its nominal Iraqi superiors. It eschewed the latter's brutal tactics and ideological rigidity in favour of presenting a more cooperative image. Ultimately, JN's insubordinations led to the split in the global jihadi movement, when ISI attempted to bring it under its direct control in 2013, but was rebuffed by Al-Jolani and Al-Zawahiri himself.[61] Although temporarily eclipsed by the military successes of ISIS and its subsequent declaration of the Caliphate in mid-2014, "a relatively more restrained Al-Qaeda [...] largely doubled down on its approach," with JN exemplifying the modified governing variables.[62] Having weathered the shock of ISIS's expansion, the group's strategy was characterized by an emphasis on "localism, gradualism, and controlled pragmatism." [63] In order to appeal to a local audience, more extreme Salafi-jihadist norms were sidelined in favour of creating a reputation as an indispensable ally of the Syrian revolution. In order to avoid attacks by Western and Russian airpower, JN even took the unprecedented step of declaring its intention "not to use al-Sham as a base to launch attacks on the West or Europe," thereby bringing espoused theory into line with actual theory-in-use.[64]

However, it became increasingly clear that these steps were not enough to secure the group's long-term objectives. Neither did the announcement placate the US or the intervening Russia, nor were rebel factions convinced that they could trust JN. In the Syrian arena, the continued incompatibility between Al-Qaeda's governing variables of localism and a still-espoused global agenda created double binds for local commanders. The allegiance to Al-Qaeda and its reputation was the main obstacle for other Syrian groups in establishing a unified front with JN.[65] In an attempt to break this impasse, Al-Jolani—in an unprecedented move for an Al-Qaeda affiliate [66]—rebranded JN 2016 as the more inclusive Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS), declaring that it would no longer have any affiliation with an "external entity." [67] This decision was accompanied by extensive internal debates of organizational inquiry, which included senior Al-Qaeda figures.[68] Nevertheless, the move proved to be more controversial than initially thought.[69] Not only did large groups of loyalists defect, but as it turned out, Al-Zawahiri did not agree with the rebranding, calling it an "act of disobedience" and demanding its reversal.[70] This controversy points to an incomplete organizational inquiry—existing double binds were only ostensibly solved and central elements remained undiscussable, so that the parties emerged with different impressions of what the change was about. From the perspective of a unified Al-Qaeda, this essentially amounted to a failure of an attempt to double-loop learn.

From the perspective of JFS, however, it marked the starting point of its independent existence. Al-Jolani insisted on the break, as he realized that in order to adapt to the increasingly difficult environment of the conflict, he had to prioritize among conflicting norms in order to create a more durable, unified jihadi military front. Initially, however, this hope was disappointed, as other rebel factions remained wary of JFS. Tensions escalated into open fighting, while at the same time pressure increased with the military intervention of Turkey, forcing JFS to go further in its pragmatism. Although unable to secure a broad Sunni alliance under its hegemony, in January 2017 it announced a merger with smaller Islamist groups and rebranded again as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.[71] Al-Zawahiri again strongly criticized the apparent strategy of decoupling the Syrian jihad from the global struggle, announcing that "the jihad in ash Sham is a jihad of the entire Muslim Ummah, [...] not a jihad of the people of Syria," as well as accusing HTS of "seek[ing] not to be hostile to America" and "planning to evade the pledges of bayat." [72] Although HTS attempted to refute these accusations—sometimes rather half-heartedly—it seems clear that the group went further in its pragmatic re-evaluation of the governing variables that emerged from Al-Qaeda's learning process than the central leadership was prepared to do.

This becomes especially apparent in light of how HTS has dealt with the increased role that Turkey has played in the Syrian conflict since 2017. While Al-Qaeda sees Erdogan as not much better than the Arab apostate regimes,[73] HTS officials argued that "different opinions existed on [...] the legitimacy of Turkey's President Erdogan and relationships with foreign governments." [74] In late 2017 HTS even accepted a Turkish military presence in Idlib, the last opposition stronghold, and the establishment of a demilitarized zone, indirectly

also submitting to the Astana negotiations, a format universally rejected by jihadists.[75] The ensuing furious criticism by Al-Qaeda-aligned ideologues forced HTS to engage in further inquiry.[76] In a subtle, but within the rigid framework of Salafi-jihadism relatively far-reaching, reinterpretation of core norms, HTS claims that it does not violate the ban on cooperation with apostate regimes when certain minimal conditions are met. [77] In a pragmatic recognition of power realities on the ground, HTS media official Muhammad Nazzal argued: “No one says that the Turks’ entrance to these points is some desirable interest; rather, it’s the lesser of two evils.”[78] With this, HTS effectively subscribed to a logic of ends justifying the means, potentially open to further compromises, implying a focus on wartime strategy above methodological purity. In the terms of Argyris and Schön, these changes seem clearly indicative of a form of double-loop learning, reacting to mismatches between the original approach and realities on the battlefield.

Given that there is no imminent military solution to the Syrian conflict, the organizational learning of HTS could potentially evolve the group even farther into a kind of “Neo-Qaeda”,[79] transitioning into a quasi-recognized political actor “akin to Hamas in Gaza or Hezbollah in Lebanon.”[80] While it would retain most of its hard-line religious beliefs, the norms underlying its political strategies would have to be more flexible. This does not mean that its actions would be any less violent—in fact, despite its moderation, HTS has aggressively asserted itself as the dominant player in Idlib. From a double-loop learning perspective, however, the group has clearly shown a willingness to inquire into its founding norms, confronting the realities of its situation and correcting the “errors” of mixing global and national jihad or remaining ideologically pure in the face of overwhelming opposition.

Conclusion

In this Research Note, we attempted to enhance the understanding of the learning of terrorist groups beyond the tactical and organizational levels usually focused on in the literature. We did so by drawing on a theoretical approach to organizational learning developed outside of the context of political violence. Changes to fundamental strategic approaches and underlying norms are generally seen as difficult for militant actors, and especially for jihadist organizations. In 2010 McCabe outlined five elemental changes that a future jihadist group would have to undertake compared to the then state of Al-Qaeda in order to become successful: adopting a more limited agenda of defensive jihad, stopping attacks overseas, concentrating on military and security targets, avoiding conflicts with other Muslims, and minimizing Muslim civilian casualties.[81]

As this Research Note has demonstrated, Al-Qaeda in fact fulfilled or approximated all of these elements. In a process of organizational inquiry, the organization revised its strategy and prioritized a more local, less brutal and ostensibly conciliatory approach over its global agenda and claim to superiority. Of course, as Stenersen remarks, strategic flexibility “does not mean: ‘anything goes.’”[82] This became apparent in the conflict between the Al-Qaeda leadership and its Syrian affiliate, which was prepared to inquire even more in its governing norms, essentially rejecting global terrorism and pragmatically concentrating on its national setting. With the open entry of Turkey into the Syrian arena, the group now rebranded as HTS went even further, explicitly reinterpreting key aspects of its Salafi-jihadi credentials in order to be able to negotiate with the supposedly apostate power.

Whether the described changes qualify as double-loop learning is ultimately a question of interpretation. As Argyris and Schön have stated, in reality there is no dichotomy of learning but a continuum, and organizations consistently and fully committed to double-loop learning systems are essentially an ideal type. Clearly, Al-Qaeda is far from changing its core Salafi-jihadi convictions and some of its modifications can be seen as essentially representing strategic adjustments, generally in line with the spirit of most of its original governing variables. However, as Argyris and Schön note, changing strategies can in effect be almost as important as changing norms, when those strategies are “fundamental to the [organization’s] theory of action.”[83] As the evolution of HTS shows, what start out as modifications of strategies due to external pressure may entail more fundamental changes of norms down the line.[84]

The approach by Argyris and Schön helps to understand the learning process of terrorist groups as a process in which incompatible requirements and double binds are tackled in organizational inquiries and solved by prioritizing objectives in theories-in-use. More research is necessary to situate this framework squarely in the existing theories on learning in terrorist organizations. In order to learn more about the conditions that facilitate or inhibit organizational learning, future research should therefore explore the ways in which the internal and external conditions of organizations affect the capacity for such inquiry, and how the lessons of double-loop learning are implemented. Moreover, double-loop learning does not necessarily have to be correlated with moderation. Radicalization can also be seen as a process of revising one's norms, for example when so far non-violent protestors conclude, in the face of repression, that their pacifist governing variables is inhibiting rather than precipitating change. Applying this framework to such cases could therefore also yield important insights.

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Notes

[1] Brian M. Jenkins, "Defense against Terrorism," *Political Science Quarterly* 101, 5 (1986): 773.; J. B. Bell, "Revolutionary Dynamics: The Inherent Inefficiency of the Underground," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 2, 2 (1990): 193–211.; Bruce Hoffman, "Terrorist Targeting: Tactics, Trends, and Potentialities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5, 2 (2007): pp. 12–29.

[2] See e.g. Brian A. Jackson, John C. Baker, Kim Cragin, John Parachini, Horacio R. Trujillo, and Peter Chalk, *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 2: Case Studies of Organizational Learning in Five Terrorist Groups* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005).; James J. F. Forest (Ed.), *Teaching Terror: Strategic and Tactical Learning in the Terrorist World* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).; Adam Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation: Technology, Tactics and Global Trends* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2007).; Assaf Moghadam: "How Al Qaeda Innovates," *Security Studies* 22, 3 (2013): pp. 466–497.; Paul Gill, John Horgan, Samuel T. Hunter, and Lily D. Cushenbery, "Malevolent Creativity in Terrorist Organizations," *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 47, 2 (2013): pp. 125–151.; Magnus Ranstorp and Magnus Normark, *Understanding Terrorism Innovation and Learning: Al-Qaeda and beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2015).; Paul Gill, "Tactical Innovation and the Provisional Irish Republican Army," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, 7 (2016): pp. 573–85; Gary Ackerman, "'Designing Danger': Complex Engineering by Violent Non-State Actors: Introduction to the Special Issue," *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, 1 (2016): pp. 1–11; Carolin Görzig, "Terrorist Learning in Context – the Case of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, 4 (2019): pp. 629–648.

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[4] Martha Crenshaw, "Innovation: Decision Points in the Trajectory of Terrorism"; in: *Terrorist Innovations in Weapons of Mass Effect: Preconditions, Causes, and Predictive Indicators*, edited by Maria J. Rasmussen and Mohammed M. Hafez (Washington, D.C. 2010): pp. 35–50, at p. 36.

[5] Mohammed M. Hafez and Maria J. Rasmussen, "Innovation in WMD Terrorism: A Guide for Workshop Participants," In *Terrorist Innovations in Weapons of Mass Effect: Preconditions, Causes, and Predictive Indicators*, edited by Maria J. Rasmussen and Mohammed M. Hafez (Washington, D.C. 2010), pp. 27–34, at p. 29; Louise Kettle and Andrew Mumford, "Terrorist Learning: A New Analytical Framework," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, 7 (2017), p. 2.

[6] For learning on the part of organizations and states in general, see Bo Hedberg, "How organizations learn and unlearn"; in:

Handbook of Organizational Design: Remodeling Organizations and their Environments, edited by Paul C. Nystrom and William H. Starbuck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 3–27.; Philip E. Tetlock, “Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy: In Search of an Elusive Concept”; in: *Learning in U.S. and Soviet foreign policy*, edited by George W. Breslauer and Philip E. Tetlock (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 20–61.; Jack Levy, “Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield,” *International Organization* 48, 2 (1994): pp. 279–312.; D. Miller, “A Preliminary Typology of Organizational Learning: Synthesizing the Literature,” *Journal of Management* 22, 3 (1996): pp. 485–505.; Mark Easterby-Smith, Mary Crossan, and Davide Nicolini, “Organizational Learning: Debates Past, Present And Future,” *Journal of Management Studies* 37, 6 (2000): pp. 783–796. For conceptual discussions of learning on the part of terrorist actors in particular, see Brian A. Jackson, John C. Baker, Kim Cragin, John Parachini, Horacio R. Trujillo, and Peter Chalk, *Aptitude for Destruction. Volume 1: Organizational Learning in Terrorist Groups and Its Implications for Combating Terrorism* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2005).; Kettle and Mumford, “Terrorist Learning.”

[7] R. Singh, “Preliminary Typology,” pp. 626–627.

[8] Jackson et al, “Aptitude for Destruction Vol 1,” p. 10.

[9] Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1978).; Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Methods, and Practice* (Reading: Addison Wesley, 1996).; Mohamed Chatti, Matthias Jarke, and Ulrik Schroeder, “Double-Loop Learning,” *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*, edited by Norbert M. Seel (Boston, MA: Springer, 2012), pp. 1035–1037. This approach has been employed before to study a radical group in Carolin Görzig, “Deradicalization through Double-Loop Learning? How the Egyptian Gamaa Islamiya Renounced Violence,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2019); URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1680193>.

[10] Matthias Finger and José M. Asún, *Adult Education at the Crossroads: Learning Our Way Out. Global Perspectives on Adult Education and Training* (London: Zed Books, 2001), p. 45.; Viviane M.J. Robinson, “Descriptive and Normative Research on Organizational Learning: Locating the Contribution of Argyris and Schön,” *International Journal of Educational Management* 15, 2 (2001): pp. 58–67. Argyris and Schön draw their empirical examples largely from the world of business, and Argyris in particular has been engaged in interventions attempting to improve the organizational learning of companies. Although there are of course important differences between private-sector companies and violent non-state actors, as Jackson et al. remark “terrorist groups are organizations” (Jackson et al., “Aptitude for Destruction Vol 1,” p. 9). Analogies between business organizations and violent actors have also been drawn in Ray Takeyh and Nikolas Gvosdev, “Do Terrorist Networks Need a Home?” *The Washington Quarterly* 25, 3 (2010): pp. 97–108, and in Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[11] Anders Örténblad, “Learning, Double-Loop,” *International Encyclopedia of Organization Studies*, edited by Stewart Clegg and James R. Bailey (Thousand Oaks CAL: SAGE, 2008), pp. 805–806.

[12] Argyris and Schön, “Organizational Learning,” pp. 2–3.

[13] Mohammed M. Hafez, “Fratricidal Jihadists: Why Islamists Keep Losing their Civil Wars,” *Middle East Policy* 25, 2 (2018): pp. 86–99.

[14] Thomas R. McCabe, “The Strategic Failures of al Qaeda,” *Parameters* 40, 1 (2010): pp. 60–71, at p. 60.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

[16] Argyris and Schön, “Organizational Learning,” p. 10.

[17] Argyris and Schön, “Organizational Learning II,” p. 13.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 92; Argyris and Schön are somewhat ambiguous with their terminology, speaking of “values”, “norms”, “policies” “objectives” or “governing variables” largely interchangeably.

[19] Argyris and Schön, “Organizational Learning,” p. 11.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 2. This is arguably a somewhat limited interpretation of learning compared to other definitions. For a brief overview, see M. Leann Brown and Michael Kenny, “Organizational Learning: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations,” *Organizational Learning in the Global Context*, edited by M. Leann Brown, Michael Kenney and Michael Zarkin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 1–21, at pp. 3–5. We contend, however, that the explicit focus of this conceptualization on actual change and (subjective) improvement allows us to better capture and trace processes that organizations themselves consider as learning.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

- [25] Ibid., pp. 312–313.
- [26] Chatti, Jarke, and Schroeder, “Double-Loop Learning,” p. 1035.
- [27] Argyris and Schön, “Organizational Learning II,” p. 20.
- [28] Argyris and Schön, “Organizational Learning,” pp. 3–4.
- [29] Argyris and Schön, “Organizational Learning,” p. 24.
- [30] Chris Argyris, “Making the Undiscussable and Its Undiscussability Discussable.” *Public Administration Review* 40, 3 (1980): pp. 205–213.
- [31] Argyris and Schön, “Organizational Learning II,” p. 111–112.
- [32] Argyris and Schön, “Organizational Learning,” p. 26.
- [33] Görzig, “Terrorist Learning in Context,” p. 7.
- [34] Jackson et al., “Aptitude for Destruction Vol 1,” pp. 58–59.
- [35] Gordon H. McCormick, “Terrorist Decision Making,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 6, 1 (2003): pp. 473–507, at pp. 488–489.
- [36] Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- [37] This view was seemingly validated when the U.S. left Somalia after the killing of 18 soldiers, leading Bin Laden to the misguided assumption that American power was a mere “paper tiger” - Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 51.
- [38] In his *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*, Ayman Al-Zawahiri set out the goals of the movement in no unclear terms: (1) “[M]ove the battle to the enemy’s ground”; (2) “Armies achieve victory only when the infantry takes hold of land. Likewise, the mujahid Islamic movement will not triumph against the world coalition unless it possesses a fundamentalist base in the heart of the Islamic world”; (3) “[M]ust come closer to the masses [...] The Muslim nation will not participate [in jihad] unless the slogans of the Mujahideen are understood by the masses”; (4) “Loyalty to the leadership and the acknowledgement of its precedence and merit represents a duty that must be emphasized and a value that must be consolidated”; “need for a scientific, struggling, and rational leadership that could guide the nation.” Ayman Al-Zawahiri *Knights under the Prophet's Banner* (London: Asharq al-Awsat, 2001), pp. 60–63; URL: <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/1507027/2001-12-02-knights-under-the-prophets-banner-en.pdf>.
- [39] Michael W. S. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's strategy: The Deep Battle against America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 57.
- [40] Mendelsohn, “The al-Qaeda Franchise,” pp. 67–68.
- [41] Brian Fishman, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside Al-Qa`ida in Iraq* (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2009); URL: <https://ctc.usma.edu/dysfunction-and-decline-lessons-learned-from-inside-al-qaida-in-iraq/>.
- [42] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, “Letter to al-Zarqawi” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2005); URL: https://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_english.pdf_p.8.
- [43] Tricia Bacon, and Elizabeth G. Arsenault 2017. “Al Qaeda and the Islamic State’s Break: Strategic Strife or Lackluster Leadership?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, 3 (2019), pp. 229–263.
- [44] A sentiment seemingly shared even by the influential jihadist ideologies Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada.- Shiv Malik, Mustafa Khalili, Spencer Ackerman, and Ali Younis, “How Isis Crippled al-Qaida: The Inside Story of the Coup that Has Brought the World’s Most Feared Terrorist Network to the Brink of Collapse,” *The Guardian*, June 10, 2015: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/10/how-isis-crippled-al-qaida>. It has since been suggested that their interviews were a deliberate ruse to divert attention from Al-Qaeda. See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, “How al-Qaeda Survived the Islamic State Challenge,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 21 (2017): pp. 50–68, at p. 58; URL: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/files/publications/20170331CurrentTrends21.pdf>.
- [45] Colin P. Clarke and Assaf Moghadam, “Mapping Today’s Jihadi Landscape and Threat,” *Orbis* 62, 3 (2018): pp. 347–371, at pp. 349–350; Bruce Hoffman, “Al-Qaeda’s Resurrection” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018); URL: <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>.
- [46] Osama Bin Laden, “Letter to `Atiyya,” *Abbotabad Document SOCOM-2012-0000019*, 2010, p. 3; URL: <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/SOCOM-2012-0000019-Trans.pdf>.
- [47] Ibid., p. 15.

[48] Undoubtedly under the impression of the experiences in Iraq: “Amongst the mistakes made were the killing of some, the Muslims did not understand the justification behind allowing their killing [leading] to the loss of the Muslims sympathetic approach towards the Mujahidin” (ibid., p. 4).

[49] Ibid., pp. 5–6.

[50] Atiyatullah al-Libi, “The People’s Revolt... the Fall of the Corrupt Arab Regime... the Demolishment of the Idol of Stability... and the New Beginning,” *The Global Media Islamic Front*, 2011; URL: <http://gtrp.haverford.edu/statement/ATI20110216/>.

[51] Bill Roggio, “Wuhayshi Imparted Lessons of AQAP Operations in Yemen to AQIM,” *The Long War Journal*, August 12, 2013; URL: https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/08/wuhayshi_imparts_les.php.

[52] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, “Extreme Makeover, Jihadist Edition: Al-Qaeda’s Rebranding Campaign,” *War on the Rocks*, September 3, 2015; URL: <https://warontherocks.com/2015/09/extreme-makeover-jihadist-edition-al-qaedas-rebranding-campaign/>.

[53] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, “General Guidelines for Jihad,” *As-Sahab Media*, September 2013, p. 5; URL: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf>.

[54] Ibid., p. 3; The document is indicative of its genesis – in some parts, it still shows the old preferences, emphasizing that “[militarily], focus should be maintained on constantly weakening the head of international disbelief” while “entering into an armed clash with the local regimes” should be avoided (ibid., pp. 3–4). Because at the time of its publication the reality on the ground had already shifted to insurgent warfare, this necessitates some awkward balancing acts, where al-Zawahiri lists exceptions to the latter rule to accommodate essentially all countries in which jihadist groups were already fighting (ibid., p. 2) and maintains that “focusing on the head of disbelief (America) does not conflict with the right of the Muslim masses to wage jihad [...] against those who oppress them” (ibid.). Events on the ground also demonstrated that strategic revisions need time to be implemented: although AQIM’s emir Droukdel relayed the advice to take a gradual approach to the local commanders, many of them nevertheless implemented a harsh form of Sharia, alienating the population and paving the way for the French counteroffensive. As Gartenstein-Ross and Barr remark, “uneven implementation often undercut Al-Qaeda’s early rebranding efforts”; Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, “Extreme Makeover.”

[55] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, *The Exoneration: A Treatise on the Exoneration of the Nation of the Pen and Sword of the Denigrating Charge of Being Irresolute and Weak*, (2008); URL: <https://fas.org/irp/dni/osc/exoneration.pdf>. In this angry reaction to the criticisms of his former mentor, Sayid Imam Abdel-Aziz Al-Sharif, he argued, based on a selective reading of Hadiths, that “women and young boys, that is, those who may not be killed separately, may be killed if they are mixed with others,” drawing an analogy to the historic use of catapults, which were permitted to use “even if young boys, women, old people, and monks are killed along with the others because it is permitted to attack them collectively” (ibid., p. 39). He explicitly applied this logic also to Muslims “if they mix with others and one cannot avoid killing them along with the others” (ibid., p. 41).

[56] Al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent, “Code of Conduct,” *As-Sahab Media Subcontinent*, June 2017, p. 2; URL: https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/al-qacc84_idah-in-the-indian-subcontinent-22code-of-conduct22-en.pdf.

[57] Al-Qaeda General Command, “Let Our Mothers Trust Is If We Do Not Win the Blood of the Worshipers,” *As-Sahab Media*, March 23, 2019; URL: <https://jihadology.net/2019/03/23/new-statement-from-al-qaidahs-general-command-let-our-mothers-trust-is-if-we-do-not-win-the-blood-of-the-worshippers/>. The full passage reads: “Target the crusader fighters in their bases and places of gathering, not in their churches and places of worship. And avoid targeting who God and his messenger ask you to not target them. Based on [...] our noble morals of war.”

[58] Tore R. Hamming, “Jihadi Competition and Political Preference,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, 6 (2017): pp. 63–88; Hassan Hassan, “Sunni Jihad Is Going Local: Future Extremists Will Focus Not on Exporting Violence to the West, but on Building Influence in Their Own Communities,” *The Atlantic*, February 15, 2019; URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/sunni-jihad-turns-away-transnational-terrorism/582745/>. Undoubtedly, this was to a large degree the result of the ascension of al-Zawahiri to Al-Qaeda’s number one, as the Egyptian had a long-standing preference for fighting the near enemy; see Sajjan Gohel, “Deciphering Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda’s Strategic and Ideological Imperatives,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, 1 (2017): pp. 54–67; Michael Scheuer, “The Zawahiri Era,” *The National Interest* 115 (2011): pp. 18–26. However, this is not unusual in learning processes, where “it is often impossible, in the real-world context of organizational life, to find inquiry cleanly separated from the uses of power” (Argyris and Schön, “Organizational Learning,” op. cit., p. 24).

[59] Ryan Evans, “From Iraq to Yemen: Al-Qaeda’s Shifting Strategies,” *CTC Sentinel* 3, 10 (2010): pp. 11–14, at p. 14.

[60] Charles Lister, “The Syria Effect: Al-Qaeda Fractures” (Hudson Institute, 2019): <https://www.hudson.org/research/15533-the-syria-effect-al-qaeda-fractures>.

[61] John Turner, “Strategic Differences: Al-Qaeda’s Split with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, 2 (2015): pp. 208–25.

[62] Hassan, “Two Houses Divided,” p. 5.

- [63] Charles Lister, “The Dawn of Mass Jihad: Success in Syria Fuels al-Qa’ida’s Evolution,” *CTC Sentinel* 9, 9 (2016): pp. 13–20, at p. 15.
- [64] The Guardian, “Syria Not a Launching Pad for Attacks on West Says al-Nusra Chief in TV Interview,” May 28, 2015; URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/28/syria-not-a-launching-pad-for-attacks-on-west-says-al-nusra-chief-in-tv-interview>.
- [65] Sam Heller, “The Strategic Logic of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, 6 (2017): pp. 140–53, at p. 141.
- [66] Jerome Drevon, “Renouncing al-Qaeda and the Prospect for Engagement” (Middle East Institute, 2019); URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/renouncing-al-qaeda-and-prospects-engagement>.
- [67] Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani, “New Video Message from Jabhat Fatah al-Shām’s Abū Muḥammad al-Jawlāni: ‘Announcing Its Formation,’” *Jihadology*, July 28, 2016; URL: <https://jihadology.net/2016/07/28/new-video-message-from-jabhat-fatah-fata%E1%B8%A5-al-shams-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-jawlani-announcing-its-formation/>.
- [68] Charles Lister, “How al-Qa’ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story,” *CTC Sentinel* 11, 1 (2018): pp. 1–9, at pp. 2–3.
- [69] Including most Western terrorism analysts, who generally concluded that the split was largely an exercise in public relations; Daniel Byman, “What’s in a Name? The New Jabhat al-Nusra and the Future of Al Qaeda,” *Lawfare*, October 24, 2016; URL: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/whats-name-new-jabhat-al-nusra-and-future-al-qaeda>.
- [70] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (I),” *Jihad Intel*, December 6, 2017; URL: <https://jihadintel.meforum.org/210/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary>.
- [71] Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda and Allies Announce ‘New Entity’ in Syria,” *The Long War Journal*, January 28, 2017; URL: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/al-qaeda-and-allies-announce-new-entity-in-syria.php>.
- [72] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, “Let Us Fight Them As A Solid Structure,” *As-Sahab Media*, December 2017: <https://kyleorton1991.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/ayman-al-zawahiri-2017-11-28-so-let-us-fight-them-as-a-solid-cemented-structure.pdf>; He had made similar points in an earlier video communique, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, “Shaam Will Submit to None except Allah,” *As-Sahab Media*, April 2017; URL: <https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/pda/2017/04/dr-ayman-al-zcca3awacc84hirc84-22al-shacc84m-will-submit-to-none-except-god22.pdf>.
- [73] Lister, “The Syria Effect.”
- [74] Abu Abdullah Al-Shami, “Comments Sincerely Advising Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi,” February 10, 2017; URL: <https://justpaste.it/13ied>. [Translation from Lister, *How al-Qa’ida Lost Control*, p. 6].
- [75] Akil Hussein, “Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham’s Deal With Turkey Further Alienates It From Other Jihadists” *Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, November 2017; URL: <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/hayat-tahrir-al-shams-deal-with-turkey-further-alienates-it-from-other-jihadists>. In fact, according to local sources, “the Turkish move into Idlib was the result of an intensive negotiation process between HTS and Turkey. The talks had been initiated by HTS, at the request of its leader Jolani, whose delegates had mentioned to Russia during separate face-to-face bilateral negotiations that HTS was interested in a negotiated agreement to prevent a new conflict in Idlib”; Charles Lister, “Turkey’s Idlib Incursion and the HTS Question: Understanding the Long Game in Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, October 31, 2017; URL: <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/turkeys-idlib-incursion-and-the-hts-question-understanding-the-long-game-in-syria/>.
- [76] E.g. Adnan Hadid, “The Fig Leaf Has Fallen,” May 13, 2018; URL: https://www.memri.org/reports/following-hts-decision-grant-turkey-military-presence-idlib-al-qaeda-supporters-accuse-it#_edn4; see also: Cole Bunzel, “Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi,” *Jihadica*, March 29, 2017; URL: <http://www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad>; Bailey Ulbricht, *Justifying Relations with an Apostate During a Jihad: A Salafi-Jihadist Group’s Relations with Turkey in Syria* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2019); URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/justifying-relations-apostate-during-jihad-salafi-jihadist-groups-relations-turkey>.
- [77] Abu al-Fatah Al-Farghali, “On Deployment of Turkish Military Observation Points in the Northwest of Syria,” May 2018; URL: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/06/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-relationship-with-turkey>.
- [78] Telegram Post by Muhammad Nazzal, October 13, 2017; URL: <https://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2017/10/15/tahrir-al-sham-official-on-turkeys-intervention-to-implement-astana-thats-not-the-reality/>.
- [79] Mona Alami, “Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham is Evolving into a ‘Neo-Qaeda,’” *Atlantic Council*, June 9, 2017; URL: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriacouncil/hay-at-tahrir-al-sham-is-evolving-into-a-neo-qaeda>.
- [80] Kyle Orton, “The Best Bad Outcome for Idlib,” *Ahval*, December 8, 2018; URL: <https://ahvalnews.com/syrian-war/best-bad-outcome-idlib>; Lister, “The Syria Effect.”

[81] McCabe, “The Strategic Failures,” p. 69.

[82] Anne Stenersen, “Thirty Years After its Foundation – Where is al-Qaida Going?” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, 6 (2017): pp. 5–16, at p. 13.

[83] Argyris and Schön, “Organizational Learning,” pp. 25–26.

[84] For example, in a long process of pragmatic self-reflection, the Egyptian Gamaa Islamiya transformed from a jihadist terrorist group into a political party. - Paul Kamolnick, “The Egyptian Islamic Group’s Critique of Al-Qaeda’s Interpretation of Jihad,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, 5 (2013): 93–106; Görzig, “Deradicalization through Double-Loop Learning?”