

Pledging Allegiance to ISIS: Who Benefits Most?

Written by Mark N. Katz

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MARK N. KATZ, DEC 17 2014

The Sinai Peninsula-based Egyptian jihadist group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM) announced last month that it has pledged allegiance to ISIS. This is just the latest instance of a local jihadist group joining what appears to be the ever-expanding ISIS-led network. But while hardly a welcome development, there are circumstances surrounding ABM's pledge of allegiance that raise questions as to the significance and the sustainability of this new alliance as well as similar ones.

According to *The Guardian*, a senior ABM representative traveled to ISIS-controlled territory in Syria during the summer and pledged allegiance to ISIS then, but this was initially kept secret for fear that "the news would alienate large parts of the local population" in Sinai. And when one faction within the group did openly declare ABM's allegiance to ISIS in early November, another initially denied it. What this shows is that affiliation with ISIS risks alienating not just the general population in Sinai, but jihadists within ABM's own ranks.

Despite this, of course, ABM went ahead and swore allegiance to ISIS. What apparently motivated this move was not just ideological affinity, but the need for military training. *The Guardian's* source indicated that ISIS will train ABM members in Syria.

ABM and ISIS, then, basically made a trade: ABM swore allegiance to ISIS in exchange for ISIS providing training in Syria to ABM. Jihadist groups elsewhere swearing loyalty to ISIS may also be getting similar training and support from it.

If this is true, then it is ABM and similar jihadist groups that appear to be getting the better of their bargains with ISIS. This is because ABM and similar movements are receiving something substantial (training) in exchange for a promise of loyalty that is basically unenforceable. For so long as ISIS is fighting more immediate opponents in Syria and Iraq (including the Assad regime and its Hezbollah allies, various Syrian opposition movements, the Baghdad government, the Kurdish peshmerga, and their external supporters), ISIS is not in a position to expand its control to the Sinai Peninsula and elsewhere, or impose its will on ABM and other jihadist movements. And knowing that their promises of loyalty to ISIS cannot be enforced may explain some of the willingness of ABM and similar jihadist groups to make such promises in exchange for immediate material benefits.

This may also explain why local jihadist groups tended to swear allegiance to Al Qaeda Central in previous years, but to ISIS now. When Al Qaeda was in a position to give support to local jihadist groups in the past, they (including ISIS's predecessor in Iraq) swore allegiance to it. Now that Al Qaeda Central has been greatly weakened and a more powerful rival – in the form of ISIS, which feels strong enough to dispense with Al Qaeda's leadership – has emerged, it makes more sense for local jihadist movements seeking external support to swear loyalty to ISIS, since it can give them more support than Al Qaeda.

Of course, not all local jihadist movements are pledging allegiance to ISIS. One of the most important, the Yemeni-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), criticized ISIS in November 2014 when the latter claimed Yemen as part of the caliphate that ISIS aspires to rule. Powerful in its own right, AQAP's continued declaration of loyalty to the now weakened Al Qaeda Central is more an indication that AQAP plans to remain independent from – and perhaps a rival to – ISIS. Interestingly, AQAP's smaller rival in Yemen, Al Mujahadin in the Arabian Peninsula, has

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declared allegiance to ISIS – perhaps in the hope of obtaining support from ISIS to strengthen itself vis-à-vis AQAP.

For all those threatened by them, it is not good that there are so many powerful jihadist groups operating in so many countries. It is better, though, that those jihadist movements are divided and expending some of their energy on fighting each other than that they are united and focusing all their efforts on their moderate Muslim, Western, and other opponents. Further, just because these groups say that they are united (through some pledging of allegiance to others), this does not necessarily mean that they really are.

Rivalries among jihadists are real. Thus, even when jihadist movements expand their influence, their rivalries among one another – both actual and potential – will serve to limit their ability to further expand, solidify, or even maintain the territories they control. These divisions among the jihadists also allow for the possibility for others to exploit them – but this can only be done if Western and other governments do not fall prey to a “worst case analysis” mentality that assumes that one’s various adversaries are and will remain closely allied with one another.

Even if Western and other governments are unwilling or unable to exploit differences among jihadist groups, these are still likely to occur – especially if ISIS becomes strong enough that other movements grow to fear that it may actually acquire the ability to enforce their pledges of allegiance to it. Rivalries among jihadist movements will not bring about their downfall, but they will prevent the unified, worldwide jihadist movement that first Al Qaeda and now ISIS has sought to build.

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