



RESEARCH PAPER

## BETWEEN TWO CAMPS:

READING INTO ISIS DISCOURSE ON THE US-ISRAELI WAR ON IRAN

15-4-2026

## Summary

This paper provides a systematic analysis of the Islamic State's (ISIS) discourse on the US-Israeli war on Iran, through analyzing its official articles published in Al-Naba magazine, specifically issues (536) and (537), released during the peak of military escalation in early 2026.

The study demonstrates that ISIS adopts a rigid doctrinal position that rejects alignment with either side of the conflict, establishing full equivalence in its religious judgment between Iran on the one hand and the United States and Israel on the other. This stance is not a temporary political choice, but rather stems from the core of the doctrine of “al-wala’ wa al-bara’” (loyalty and disavowal), whereby siding with either of the warring camps – whether Iranian or US-Israeli – is considered a doctrinal deviation that undermines the fundamentals of the faith. The organization asserts that the “true Muslim” is one who disavows and opposes both sides simultaneously, without recourse to political pragmatism or temporary convergence of interests.

ISIS reframes the war within an overarching religious paradigm, grounded in the concept of “sunnat al-tadafu’” (the divine law of mutual contention). Within this framework, the war is portrayed as merely another episode in a divinely ordained series of conflicts among disbelievers, fulfilling God’s will in setting them against one another – both as a mercy for believers and as a form of divine stratagem and gradual entrapment for disbelievers. This framing serves several interrelated functions. First, it neutralizes the political event, transforming it from an international conflict subject to human analysis into a divine ordinance beyond human causality. Second, it provides a predetermined interpretation of any outcome the war may yield, whereby the victory of any party is construed as a manifestation of divine deception leading it toward eventual ruin. Third, it negates any responsibility or role for believers in the conflict, presenting them as beneficiaries of its outcomes rather than active participants.

The paper further highlights that ISIS instrumentalizes the war as a mechanism of purification and sorting within the Muslim community, portraying it as a divine process for exposing true loyalties and restructuring ranks, ultimately leading to a stark binary division between a “camp of faith” and a “camp of disbelief,” thereby eliminating any space for neutrality or intermediate positions.

Moreover, the study reveals a clear reordering of priorities within ISIS discourse, as it accords precedence to confronting the “near enemy,” represented by Iran and Shiite groups, considering their threat at this stage to be greater than that of the “far enemy” (the United States and Israel), on the grounds of their perceived capacity – within ISIS’s narrative – to infiltrate and sow discord under the guise of resistance.

The paper also shows that the organization does not merely define its stance toward the war, but explicitly calls for exploiting the chaos generated by it to reactivate its jihadist project, through decentralized operations and the mobilization of individual cells, reflecting its adaptation to a post-territorial phase following the loss of territorial control.

In the context of undermining rivals, ISIS devotes considerable attention to criticizing Al-Qaeda, accusing it of succumbing to Rafidite polarization and aligning with the Iranian axis, and arguing that its position on the war reveals methodological deviation and double standards in relation to the established principles of jihad. The organization further links Al-Qaeda’s discourse to that of the Muslim Brotherhood, portraying both as models of political pragmatism that, from its perspective, lead to the dilution of doctrine.

The paper concludes that ISIS’s discourse on the US-Israeli war on Iran constitutes a comprehensive model of contemporary extremist jihadist rhetoric at a moment of major regional transformation. It is characterized by the rejection of alignment and the excommunication of all parties,

the religious reframing of the conflict, the instrumental use of the war to reorder ranks and delegitimize opponents, and the exploitation of chaos as a mobilizational and strategic opportunity to sustain the jihadist project despite shifting political and territorial realities.

Between two camps: Reading into ISIS discourse on the US-Israeli war on Iran

This paper seeks to provide a systematic analysis of the discourse of ISIS regarding the US-Israeli war on Iran, through a content analysis of its official media output, with particular emphasis on articles published in Al-Naba magazine during the peak of military escalation between Washington-Tel Aviv and Tehran. The paper focuses on two consecutive issues: No. (536), issued on 26 February 2026 under the title “Rafidite Polarization of the Mujahideen,” and No. (537), issued on 5 March 2026 under the title “Infighting Among the Infidels.”

These issues are of considerable significance, being not merely a commentary on a transient regional development, but rather a coherent ideological framework through which the organization seeks to frame the war, define its position within it, and recalibrate its hierarchy of adversaries and ideological priorities. The articles further reveal how

jihadist organizations instrumentalize major international conflicts to reproduce their discourse and to pursue internal struggles with competing jihadist currents.

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The Middle East has witnessed a rapid escalation that culminated in the outbreak of the US–Israeli war on Iran in early 2026, within the context of a series of successive regional tensions that began with the United States’ withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement during President Donald Trump’s first term in 2018. These tensions intensified following Operation “Al-Aqsa Flood” in October 2023 and the subsequent Israeli wars on Gaza and Lebanon, ultimately leading to the direct confrontation between Israel and Iran in the “Twelve-Day War” in June 2025. By the beginning of 2026, the conflict had shifted from a proxy war to an open military confrontation between the United States and Israel on one side and Iran on the other, thereby reshaping the regional balance of power and ushering in a new phase of instability and direct competition.

Amid these transformations, jihadist organizations found themselves confronting a highly complex ideological equation. On the one hand, hostility toward Iran—regarded by these groups as representing what they term the “Rafidites”—constitutes a central pillar of their ideological discourse. On the other hand, hostility toward the United States and Israel, viewed as the leader of the “Crusader-Jewish camp,” occupies the apex of their hierarchy of enemies. The outbreak of war between these adversaries generated a sharp ideological dilemma within jihadist discourse, reflected in the tension between a logic of political pragmatism—grounded in the notion of a common enemy and temporary convergence of interests—and a rigid doctrinal stance that rejects alignment with either side, excommunicates both, and regards them as equally hostile camps vis-à-vis Islam.

This dilemma has become an axis of differentiation and contestation between two principal currents within the global jihadist landscape. The first is represented by Al-Qaeda, which is portrayed in the discourse of its traditional rival, ISIS, as inclined toward a form of implicit alignment with Iran, or at least toward overlooking its policies, under the pretext of prioritizing the confrontation with the “greater enemy,” namely the United States. In contrast, the second current is represented by ISIS, which adopts a more hardline position, categorically rejecting any alliance or convergence with Shiite actors and portraying them as a doctrinal and strategic threat that, in certain contexts, exceeds that posed by Jews and Christians.

This paper examines this position through an analysis of the principal articles addressing the US–Israeli war on Iran in issues 536 and 537 of Al-Naba, the official publication of ISIS.

Design & Art Direction

**Monem Aboutaleb**

# First:

## The Discursive Structure of ISIS in Interpreting the US-Israeli War on Iran

The discourse of jihadist organizations represents a distinct form of politico-religious rhetoric, characterized by the fusion of religious, political, and military dimensions, and grounded in a closed interpretive reading of reality and regional transformations. Within this framework, events are not understood as the product of shifting interests or evolving geopolitical calculations; rather, they are subsumed within a comprehensive conflict narrative presented as an extension of an enduring struggle between the camp of faith and the camp of disbelief. The study of ISIS discourse is of particular importance, as it offers a clear model of this kind of jihadist rhetoric. The following are the core elements of this discourse:

- **Division of the world into two camps:** ISIS discourse is predicated on a binary division of the world, separating the camp of faith and monotheism from that of disbelief and polytheism, without acknowledging any gray areas or intermediate positions. The concept of neutrality is effectively eliminated and redefined as doctrinal hesitation or methodological deviation. Central concepts such as tawhid (monotheism), al-wala' wa al-bara' (loyalty and disavowal), and takfir (excommunication) are employed as mechanisms to regulate behavior and delineate boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, thereby transforming one's stance toward events into a test of faith rather than a political choice open to differences.
- **Religious framing of political conflicts:** Wars and regional transformations are reinterpreted outside their conventional political and geopolitical contexts. Conflict is not presented as the outcome of power balances or competing interests, but as a manifestation of divine will and universal laws governing the course of history. Through this transformation, events are removed from an analytical framework

open to debate and instead integrated into a closed doctrinal narrative structured around the binary of faith and disbelief.

In the context of the US–Israeli war on Iran, ISIS discourse entirely disregards any political or strategic analysis of the causes of the war or its potential trajectories. Instead, the conflict is incorporated into an overarching religious framework and interpreted as an expression of “sunnat al-tadafu” (the divine law of mutual contention), whereby God sets disbelievers against one another as both a mercy for believers and a stratagem against disbelievers.

Within this framework, the war is not read as a humanitarian tragedy or a threat to regional stability, but rather presented as a divine blessing that contributes to the mutual exhaustion and attrition of the warring adversaries. Losses or defeats incurred by any party are interpreted as manifestations of divine stratagem and gradual entrapment leading toward destruction, thereby endowing the discourse with a high degree of resilience against scrutiny regarding inaccurate predictions or unforeseen outcomes.

At the same time, the war is assigned an internal function that extends beyond its immediate actors, as it is portrayed as a mechanism of sorting and purification within both the broader Muslim sphere and the jihadist arena in particular. According to this conception, the conflict reveals true loyalties and separates those who adhere to the correct doctrinal position—grounded in the rejection of alignment—from those who side with one of the disbelieving camps for political or pragmatic reasons.

This religious reading ultimately integrates the US–Israeli war on Iran into a fixed interpretive model that remains unchanged regardless of shifting contexts. The war is not treated as an exceptional event requiring independent analysis, but as another episode in a recurring narrative that is reproduced with each major crisis.

- Central religious concepts in ISIS discourse: ISIS relies, in its interpretation of wars and regional conflicts, on a set of core religious concepts that function as a fixed framework for understanding reality and determining positions. Foremost among these is “sunnat al-tadafu” (the divine law of mutual contention), which the organization presents as a governing divine principle regulating relations among rival powers, whereby

certain adversaries are set against others without any direct role for believers in the conflict. Within this framework, wars between major or regional powers are not regarded as absolute evils, but rather as divine instruments for weakening and exhausting adversaries.

In addition, the discourse draws on the concept of “trial and purification” (al-ibtila’ wa al-tamhis), through which major crises are interpreted as mechanisms for revealing true positions and sorting ranks, both within Muslim societies and among jihadist currents themselves. In this context, war serves not only as a test of the strength of the warring parties, but also as a measure of the steadfastness of positions and the authenticity of affiliation, and is used to judge those who align with one side of the conflict for political or sectarian reasons.

The organization further employs the concept of “God’s stratagem against the disbelievers” (makr Allah bi al-kafirin), which enables the reinterpretation of any battlefield development—whether advancement or setback—as part of a broader divine plan ultimately leading to the destruction of the contending parties. This concept performs a critical function in insulating the discourse from criticism, as it strips political and military outcomes of their immediate significance and recasts them as evidence confirming the organization’s doctrinal vision.

These concepts are integrated within the overarching binary of faith and disbelief, which constitutes the backbone of the discourse. Through this binary, the political complexity of conflict is eliminated, and its actors are reduced to opposing camps, leaving no space for neutrality or pragmatic positioning. Accordingly, war ceases to be a political event subject to evaluation in terms of interests or outcomes, and instead becomes another episode in an ongoing religious struggle, consistently interpreted through the same conceptual framework.

- **Self-framing as the defender of the “true creed”:** ISIS presents itself as the ultimate guardian of correct doctrine and the vanguard of believers in an age of deviation. This image is not merely propagandistic, but forms part of a broader strategy to reconstruct the organization’s history and identity through a heroic narrative that frames affiliation with it as a marker

of doctrinal purity, while casting competing currents as embodying deviation and dilution.

To this end, the organization selectively invokes historical moments that highlight its positions as instances of distinctiveness, precedence, and defiance of the majority. For example, it portrays the “Iraqi jihad” and the excommunication of the Rafidites as a paradigmatic case demonstrating the correctness of its methodology and the purity of its doctrine, abstracting from broader contexts or internal disputes in order to depict itself as the sole actor willing to adopt the “correct” stance.

- Criticizing competing Islamic currents: ISIS portrays rival Islamic movements as having lapsed into political pragmatism at the expense of doctrinal constants. This critique is framed primarily as a doctrinal indictment rather than a mere political disagreement, thereby reinforcing the organization’s claim to exclusive ownership of the “correct” methodology while stripping its opponents of religious legitimacy.

Al-Qaeda occupies a central place in this critique as the primary jihadist rival. ISIS discourse accuses it of succumbing to what it terms “Rafidite polarization,” particularly since the so-called “Zahedan phase,” portraying its leadership as having come under Iranian patronage and as engaging with it as a functional instrument within the so-called “axis of resistance.”

The Muslim Brotherhood, for its part, is depicted in ISIS discourse as a model of full-fledged pragmatic deviation, accused of promoting a narrative that presents Iran and its axis as the last line of defense for the Muslim nation. Within ISIS’s framing, this discourse is reinterpreted as a form of political normalization with doctrinal adversaries under appealing slogans that, in essence, mask a relinquishment of the principles of tawhid and al-wala’ wa al-bara’.

In light of the above, ISIS’s position on the US-Israeli war on Iran can be distilled into four interrelated levels that collectively constitute the structure of its discourse. The first level is interpretive, whereby the war is reframed as a divine, rather than political, event through concepts such as “mutual contention among disbelievers,” “God’s stratagem against the disbelievers,” and “purification and sorting.” The second level concerns the construction of

the enemy, as the discourse equates the Iranian axis with the US-Israeli axis in terms of disbelief, while prioritizing the former as the more immediate threat due to its perceived capacity for infiltration and sedition.

The third level pertains to criticizing competing Islamic currents, particularly Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood. The fourth level centers on the mobilizational and strategic dimension, through calls to exploit the war as an opportunity to reactivate the jihadist project and to encourage fighters and individual cells to capitalize on the temporary state of disorder.

# Second:

## The Overall Position on the War

ISIS adopts a clear position regarding the ongoing war between Iran on one side and the United States and Israel on the other, grounded in the absolute rejection of alignment with either party and the equal excommunication of both. This stance is not merely a temporary political choice; rather, for the organization, it constitutes a doctrinal position rooted in the core tenet of “al-wala’ wa al-bara” (loyalty and disavowal). According to this view, the “true Muslim” is one who disavows and opposes both warring camps, inclining toward neither.

The organization does not merely define what it considers the correct position, but establishes a complete equivalence between those who align with the Rafidites and those who align with Jews and Crusaders, regarding both as equally deviant. This equivalence in excommunication underpins the discourse’s capacity to criticize other Islamic currents that have expressed sympathy with Iran under the banner of resisting the American project. As explicitly stated in ISIS discourse: “As for the Muslim, his position is firm and well known: he does not incline to either side, but rather excommunicates both camps, opposes them, and disavows them,” further asserting that “both have invalid justifications, and both are equal in judgment.”

# Third:

## The Interpretive Framework of the War (Sunnat al-Tadafu')

ISIS does not approach the US–Israeli war on Iran as an ordinary political event governed by the logic of interests and international power balances. Instead, it reframes the conflict within a doctrinal and cosmological mold rooted in the concept of “sunnat al-tadafu” (the divine law of mutual contention). Within this framework, the war is presented as merely another episode in a series of conflicts ordained by God among disbelievers, fulfilling His will in setting them against one another. As articulated in ISIS discourse:

“The war currently raging between the Iranian axis and the American–Jewish axis, along with its outcomes and the losses incurred by its طرف, all fall within the context of the divine law of mutual contention ordained by the All-Wise, the All-Aware—both as a mercy and relief for believers, and as a stratagem and gradual entrapment for disbelievers.”

This interpretive framework performs several interrelated functions within the discourse. First, it neutralizes the political event, transforming it from an international conflict open to analysis into a divine ordinance beyond human laws. Second, it provides a preemptive explanation for any outcome the war may produce; whether one side advances or retreats, the result is interpreted in advance as part of God’s stratagem against disbelievers and their gradual destruction. Third, this reading removes from believers any responsibility or direct role in the conflict, presenting them as beneficiaries of the outcomes of mutual contention rather than active participants, thereby shifting them from potential political actors to observers awaiting the fulfillment of a predetermined divine order.

The discourse reinforces this framing by invoking the Qur’anic verse: {“And thus do We set some of the wrongdoers over others because of what they used to earn”} (Qur’an 6:129), alongside interpretations by classical

exegetes such as al-Tabari and al-Qurtubi—“We set some wrongdoers over others”—and Ibn Kathir’s interpretation: “Were it not that He repels some people by means of others... the earth would be corrupted.” These references are employed to affirm the notion of setting one group of wrongdoers against another as a divine mechanism for restraining corruption and exposing evil.

In this way, the war is transformed from an exceptional political event into further evidence invoked to validate the organization’s doctrinal reading, and is continually repurposed to reinforce a closed and self-insulating discursive structure resistant to revision or scrutiny.

# Fourth:

## The Divine Function of War (Reordering the Ranks of Muslims)

ISIS views the primary function of this war—alongside, in its perspective, the destruction of disbelievers—as the reordering of ranks within the Muslim community. In its reading, the war performs a divine role of “purification and sorting” (al-tamhis wa al-gharbala), exposing true positions and distinguishing believers from hypocrites, the wavering, and the misled. The organization presents this role as an inevitable outcome of the ongoing process of mutual contention, whereby ambiguity can no longer be sustained and concealment behind slogans or political justifications becomes untenable. As expressed in its discourse:

“Among the benefits of this mutual contention between these two disbelieving enemies is the increased differentiation and sorting within the ranks of the people of the qibla, so that those who perish do so upon clear evidence.”

What ISIS refers to as “increased differentiation” thus signifies, within this framework, the exposure of loyalties and alignments within Muslim ranks, revealing clearly those who side with the “Rafidites” and those who align with Jews and Crusaders, while stripping away the justifications previously used to obscure such positions. This process culminates in a final outcome presented as both inevitable and predetermined: the division of the nation into two opposing camps with no third alternative—“a camp of faith with no disbelief, and a camp of disbelief with no faith.”

# Fifth:

## The Priority of Confronting the “Near Enemy”

In its analysis of the war, ISIS advances a clear reordering of priorities in identifying the most dangerous adversary at the current stage. Contrary to traditional jihadist discourse, which long emphasized confronting the “far enemy”—represented by the United States and Israel—before the “near enemy,” ISIS reverses this order arguing that the threat posed by the Rafidites now takes precedence over that posed by Jews. The discourse justifies this shift as follows:

“The eradication of the Rafidites and the breaking of their power holds greater benefit for Muslims at this stage than the eradication of the accursed Jews, for a clear reason: the nation is, to some extent, safeguarded against the temptation of the Jews, but it is not safeguarded against the temptation of the Rafidites and the deception of their axis.”

This justification reflects a logic grounded in the nature of “fitna” (temptation or sedition) and the degree to which the Muslim community is susceptible to it. Jews are portrayed as an overt and recognizable enemy, whose hostility is widely acknowledged, whereas the Rafidites are framed as a more insidious threat due to the subtlety and influence of their perceived appeal. According to this narrative, segments of the Muslim community are susceptible to being misled by their axis, sympathizing with its figures, and supporting it under the banner of resisting the American project. Consequently, confronting the “near enemy,” within this perspective, becomes a more urgent priority than confronting the “far enemy.”

# Sixth:

## Exploiting Chaos in Service of the Jihadist Project

ISIS does not confine itself to interpreting and framing the war; it proceeds to articulate a clear operational strategy for exploiting it in service of its jihadist project. The disorder generated by the war—whether escalating or subsiding—is, in its view, a historic opportunity that must be seized to strengthen and revive jihad. As stated in its discourse:

“On the ground, it is incumbent upon the monotheists to make serious and conscious efforts to exploit these major transformations in support of jihad, to nourish it, and to renew its lifeblood,” adding that “this temporary chaos—whether it subsides or intensifies—will have enduring and far-reaching consequences, and seizing it reflects prudence and insight.”

This strategy is not limited to centralized, organized operations; it also encompasses decentralized and individual action. The organization addresses fighters within its provinces as well as independent operatives across different locations, including so-called “lone wolves,” with a unified call to capitalize on these major transformations. This approach reflects ISIS’s adaptation to the post-territorial phase following its loss of territorial control, while maintaining its capacity to mobilize adherents and direct them toward exploiting the security and political vacuums created by regional wars.

# Seventh:

## Iranian Attacks on the Gulf and the Pretexts for Normalization with Israel

ISIS does not overlook Iranian attacks on the Gulf states; rather, it offers a distinct political reading of these developments. As stated in its discourse:

“Politically, the Iranian step of striking the Gulf statelets paves the way for completing the ‘pretexts for overt normalization’ with the Jews—not only at the level of rulers, but also at the level of segments of the populations.”

According to this interpretation, Iran’s attacks on Gulf states serve to generate and reinforce justifications for overt normalization with Israel, extending beyond governmental elites to broader societal segments. In this framing, such attacks are seen as pushing Gulf populations toward sympathy with Israel as a perceived protector, thereby creating new rationales for normalization that were previously absent.

Within this perspective, the war does not serve a single party, but rather reshapes alliances in indirect ways. Accordingly, ISIS warns against alignment with either side, arguing that such alignment would deepen divisions and ultimately lead to the emergence of “two camps” with no third alternative.

In this context, the organization cautions against rallying under any of the banners raised by the parties to the conflict. As expressed in its discourse:

“We warn Muslims against the emergence of pre-Islamic banners that each party seeks to project onto the arena in order to absorb blows on its behalf—this one under the banner of toppling the Iranian regime, and that one under the banner of confronting the Crusader campaign.”

**This warning is grounded in a clear principle:**

“Repelling the Crusader campaign cannot be undertaken under Rafidite banners, and resisting the evil of the Rafidites cannot be undertaken under Crusader banners.”

This principle effectively forecloses any form of political pragmatism that would justify alignment with one side on the basis of converging interests, asserting instead that siding with Iran—even under the شعار of resisting the United States—constitutes alignment with what ISIS regards as a false doctrine, rather than a temporary tactical maneuver.

# Eighth:

## Criticism of Al-Qaeda's Position on the US-Israeli War on Iran

ISIS discourse approaches Al-Qaeda not as an ordinary competitor within the jihadist arena, but as a methodological adversary that has committed a longstanding deviation, namely submission to Iranian influence. As articulated in its discourse:

“In his recent address, Shaykh Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari shed light on an old deviation within the jihadist arenas, and among the most striking points was his discussion of the jihadists falling ‘under Rafidite theorization and polarization,’ rather than the reverse.”

This framing elevates the disagreement from the organizational level to the doctrinal level. The issue is thus no longer a matter of differing priorities or tactics, but rather a dispute over the very foundations of methodology and the sincerity of adherence to the doctrine of *al-wala' wa al-bara'*. From this perspective, Al-Qaeda is no longer regarded as a faithful guardian of jihad, as it portrays itself, but rather as having become part of the Iranian-led “axis of resistance.”

Through these critiques, ISIS seeks to undermine Al-Qaeda's legitimacy within the jihadist field, portraying it as an organization that has deviated from the correct path. ISIS discourse addresses Al-Qaeda's position on the war in a detailed manner, as follows:

- Invocation of historical events to frame the criticism: ISIS grounds its criticism of Al-Qaeda in a selective historical reconstruction of what it considers a pivotal phase, namely the period following the fall of the Taliban in 2001. During this time, Al-Qaeda leaders and members relocated to border areas between Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—particularly the city of Zahedan. ISIS portrays this phase as the beginning of Iranian ideological influence and polarization of Al-

Qaeda, arguing that Iran exploited the organization's state of siege and constraint and opened its territory to absorb it within its regional axis. As expressed in its discourse:

“We recall the period following the fall of the Taliban after the American invasion, when many of Al-Qaeda's leaders and families relocated toward the border triangle between Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—especially in (Zahedan). There began the phase of Iranian theorization and polarization of Al-Qaeda.”

- Classification of Al-Qaeda followers' positions: ISIS discourse advances a tripartite classification of Al-Qaeda supporters in response to criticisms directed at their organization, articulated as follows:

“Al-Qaeda's followers split into factions and groups: one faction denied it entirely, thereby denying a long chapter of their leaders' history; another turned a blind eye to it; and a third proceeded to justify and legitimize this alignment, invoking the same discourse adopted by Muslim Brotherhood platforms at the height of the war on Gaza.”

This classification serves several interrelated discursive functions. It accuses the denialist faction of repudiating the historical record of its own leadership, portrays the faction that ignores the issue as deliberately overlooking evident facts, and links the justificatory faction to the Muslim Brotherhood, whose discourse is presented in jihadist literature as the most emblematic form of doctrinal deviation and political pragmatism. In doing so, ISIS seeks to delegitimize their arguments by portraying them as mere reiterations of what it frames as a doctrinally compromised Brotherhood narrative.

- Al-Qaeda's justifications for alignment with Iran: ISIS discourse seeks to deconstruct the justifications advanced by Al-Qaeda to legitimize its alleged alignment with Iran, portraying them as attempts to mislead its followers through arguments it considers weak and internally inconsistent. This critique can be traced along two principal lines:

The first concerns the justification of alignment as a means of protecting Afghanistan from American threat. This argument is presented as an effort

to confer legitimacy on alignment with Iran by invoking the defense of the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” ISIS cites this justification as follows:

“In a belittling of its followers’ intellect, Al-Qaeda attempted to justify its Iranian alignment by inserting Afghanistan into the context, claiming that America ‘has its eyes fixed on Khorasan and the Emirate!’—that very Emirate which the Crusaders handed over to the Taliban under the wings of American aircraft, just as they had previously granted rule upon the back of American tanks.”

ISIS employs this argument to advance a dual critique: it challenges not only Al-Qaeda’s justification but also implicitly criticizes the Taliban—Al-Qaeda’s traditional ally—by portraying references to the protection of the Afghan Emirate as a mere pretext, on the grounds that, within ISIS’s framing, that Emirate itself emerged through arrangements facilitated by the United States.

The second line of critique targets Al-Qaeda’s comparison between American justifications for its earlier campaign in Afghanistan and its more recent campaign against Iran. ISIS interprets this comparison as a form of normalization with the logic of American discourse rather than a rejection of it. From ISIS’s perspective, Al-Qaeda has come to adopt a language that analyzes and compares American justifications instead of categorically rejecting them. As reflected in the article:

“The ‘general leadership’ also sought, with considerable effort, to justify its alignment behind Iran by drawing a comparison between the American justifications for the campaign in Afghanistan in the past and the campaign against Iran in the present.”

- Analysis of Al-Qaeda’s statement on the war: ISIS discourse devotes particular attention to analyzing Al-Qaeda’s most recent statement issued at the height of US–Iranian tensions, presenting it as conclusive evidence of what it describes as the organization’s double standards. As cited in ISIS discourse:

“Al-Qaeda’s latest statement, issued at the peak of US–Iranian tensions and coinciding with statements by other arms of the ‘axis of resistance,’ promoted the view that these American deployments ‘are not intended

to fight a specific state,' that these 'events concern everyone and every Muslim,' that 'all are targeted,' and that 'the legally mandated position is the obligation to fight.'”

According to ISIS, Al-Qaeda’s assertion that American mobilization does not target a specific state and that “all are targeted,” thereby making “fighting obligatory,” stands in stark contrast to its position during what ISIS describes as the “raging Crusader campaign” against the territories of the “Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham.” At that time, ISIS argues, Al-Qaeda did not exhibit comparable mobilization; rather, its rhetoric was characterized by hostility and incitement against ISIS fighters at the very peak of the campaign against them.

From ISIS’s perspective, this contradiction reveals that threats were not deemed significant by Al-Qaeda when directed at its jihadist rivals (namely ISIS), but became significant only when they approached Iran. In this sense, ISIS portrays Al-Qaeda’s current mobilization not as a defense of Islam or Muslims, but as a defense of its alleged Iranian ally. As expressed in the discourse:

“That global campaign was not, in Al-Qaeda’s view, ‘targeting all’ nor did it ‘necessitate fighting.’ Nor did that fierce campaign ‘concern Al-Qaeda’—yet today it ‘concerns it’ when the fire has drawn near to the Iranian vessel and it stands on the brink of sinking.”

ISIS further characterizes Al-Qaeda’s position as part of a recurring pattern reflecting what it portrays as a methodological inconsistency, marked by shifting between alliances and alignments without a persistent doctrine. It draws a parallel with Al-Qaeda’s position toward the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, arguing that the organization initially supported its rule—symbolized by near endorsement of the “Rabaa” emblem following Mohamed Morsi’s rise to power—only to later reverse its position and criticize it after its downfall. As articulated in ISIS discourse:

“Al-Qaeda is addicted to shifting between axes and alignments; it nearly raised the ‘Rabaa’ sign when Morsi came to power and the bitter harvest seemed sweet. But when the Brotherhood’s ship sank, Al-Qaeda’s ‘wise men’ returned to criticizing them in the very same extended media series that had begun with rapprochement.”

## **ISIS asserts that Al-Qaeda will replicate this pattern in its position toward Iran:**

“Today, some of them seek refuge in Iran as a political alignment justified by arguments whose invalidity—both legally and in reality—has been exposed at every stage. Tomorrow, when the Iranian ship sinks, Al-Qaeda will return to insulting and condemning Iran. It will continue to jump from one vessel to another until it, too, is overtaken by drowning.”

- Al-Qaeda’s attempt to appeal to Gulf states: ISIS discourse also identifies what it views as a notable shift in Al-Qaeda’s language, interpreting it as evidence of a deeper ideological transformation and an increasing turn toward pragmatism. Whereas Al-Qaeda previously described Gulf and Arab rulers as “tyrants” (tawaghit), ISIS argues that it now addresses them as “the wise within decision-making circles,” urging them to act with prudence and rationality in governing and defending their countries. As cited in the discourse:

“More than that, Al-Qaeda addresses those it terms ‘the wise within decision-making circles,’ calling on them to exercise wisdom and rationality in safeguarding and defending the country and its people—yet we are unaware that the term ‘tyrants’ has undergone a new derivation in Al-Qaeda’s lexicon to become ‘the wise within decision-making circles.’”

ISIS interprets this linguistic shift not merely as a change in terminology, but as a reformulation of concepts that reflects an implicit readiness for rapprochement or cooperation with these regimes. Its analysis does not stop at the level of explicit language, but extends to what it terms *lisan al-hal*—that is, the implicit and unspoken meanings embedded within the discourse. From this perspective, ISIS reads Al-Qaeda’s rhetoric as carrying a tone of reproach toward Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. It suggests that Al-Qaeda portrays its past military activities as having constituted a “shield” from which certain states benefited in confronting their adversaries. As expressed in ISIS discourse:

“Al-Qaeda claimed that its fighting over past decades ‘constituted a solid shield... from which major states of the Mashriq benefited in competing with the sole superpower.’ It also denounced the ‘designation of peaceful groups as terrorist’ and the ‘overthrow’ of what it termed ‘governments affiliated with Islamic action,’ thereby reproaching Saudi Arabia and its

counterparts in a crude ‘pragmatic’ discourse, whose underlying message is: rapprochement with Islamist groups could have served as a shield for you against current threats, just as we once served as a shield for certain states against others.”

This reading highlights ISIS’s reliance on analyzing *lisan al-hal*—the implicit rather than the explicit—to argue that Al-Qaeda is, in effect, offering an unspoken bargain to Gulf states: that it could serve as a functional instrument against their adversaries. In this framing, Al-Qaeda is no longer engaging with these regimes as “tyrants” to be excommunicated and fought, but rather addressing them in a language of reproach and regret over a missed opportunity. For ISIS, this represents a fundamental reversal of Al-Qaeda’s founding discourse, which was predicated on rejecting engagement with such regimes and denouncing them as illegitimate.

# Ninth:

## Iranian (Rafidite) Polarization of Jihadists

Within ISIS discourse, the concept of Rafidite polarization of jihadists is presented as one of the most dangerous consequences of the US-Israeli war on Iran—not as a secondary byproduct of the conflict, but as a central component of a broader Iranian strategy aimed, from ISIS’s perspective, at penetrating the Sunni jihadist environment and redirecting its loyalties and affiliations. In this view, the war has not only opened a military front between two disbelieving camps, but has also triggered a parallel struggle at the level of consciousness and allegiance within jihadist ranks.

### **As articulated in ISIS discourse:**

“By Rafidite polarization here, we do not mean doctrinal polarization through Shi’ization. Iran has not imposed Shi’ism on its Sunni proxies and pawns; it does not seek to turn them into Rafidite mass, but rather into functional instruments standing with it against the ‘sole superpower,’ as described in Al-Qaeda’s latest statement.”

ISIS frames this polarization as an attempt to redefine the enemy, led by Iran through a discourse centered on resisting the American-Zionist project. In its view, this process results in the erosion of doctrinal and ideological distinctions between Sunnis and Shiites, and encourages certain jihadist groups to justify rapprochement with Iran. The organization argues that the principal danger does not lie in direct military coordination, but in a gradual shift from outright hostility to political justification—thereby transforming temporary convergence of interests into a broader alignment that undermines the doctrine of *al-wala’ wa al-bara’*.

In contrast, ISIS presents itself as upholding the “correct” and uncompromising position, rejecting alignment with either side of the

conflict and excommunicating both camps. At the same time, it assigns particular priority to confronting Iranian polarization, which it regards as a more immediate threat than US-Israeli hostility at this stage. While the “temptation” posed by Crusaders and Jews is depicted as overt and widely recognized, the Iranian project is framed as a subtler, internal form of rift—one that operates through the language of resistance and support for Palestine to gradually erode doctrinal constants.

# Tenth:

## Conclusion and Final Findings

Based on the analysis of ISIS discourse in Al-Naba magazine (issues 536 and 537), a set of key conclusions can be drawn that encapsulate the organization's position on the US-Israeli war on Iran, as well as the mechanisms through which this position is constructed and its doctrinal and political foundations:

- **Position on the war:** ISIS adopts a clear stance grounded in the rejection of alignment with either side of the conflict, while establishing full equivalence between Iran and the United States and Israel in its religious judgment (thus excommunicating all parties equally). This position is not merely a temporary political choice; rather, it reflects a religious commitment rooted in the core doctrine of *al-wala' wa al-bara'*, whereby siding with either of the competing camps—whether Iranian or US-Israeli—is considered a deviation that undermines the foundations of the faith.
- **Framing the war within a religious paradigm:** ISIS does not treat the US-Israeli war on Iran as a political event governed by the logic of interests and international balances of power. Instead, it reframes the conflict within a religious framework grounded in the concept of *sunnat al-tadafu'* (the divine law of mutual contention). The war is thus interpreted as one episode in a series of conflicts ordained by God among disbelievers. This religious framing serves to provide a predetermined explanation for any possible outcome—whereby the victory of any party is interpreted as part of “God’s stratagem” against disbelievers—and to negate any responsibility or role for believers, who are presented merely as beneficiaries of the outcomes of this contention.
- **War as a mechanism for reordering ranks within the Muslim community:** ISIS views the primary function of the war—alongside, in

its perspective, the destruction of disbelievers—as the reordering of ranks within the Muslim community and the exposure of hypocrites. The war is thus framed as a divine mechanism of sorting that distinguishes the “pure” from the “impure,” ultimately leading to a binary division of the community into two clearly defined camps with no third alternative: “a camp of faith with no disbelief, and a camp of disbelief with no faith.” This rigid binary eliminates any possibility of gray areas and renders neutrality or hesitation ideologically untenable.

- **Priority of confronting the “near enemy”:** ISIS advances a reconfiguration of priorities within the jihadist arena, reversing the traditional emphasis on confronting the “far enemy” before the “near enemy.” It argues that the threat posed by the Rafidites (Shiites) currently surpasses that posed by Jews, on the grounds that the Muslim community is relatively aware of and guarded against the latter, but remains vulnerable to the former’s influence, particularly through the rhetoric associated with the “axis of resistance.” This, in ISIS’s view, makes confronting the “near enemy” a more urgent priority than confronting the “far enemy.”
- **Instrumentalization of the war for mobilization and strategy:** The discourse moves beyond interpretation and framing to explicitly call for exploiting the chaos generated by the war to revive and sustain the jihadist project. This includes an emphasis on decentralized action and the activation of individual operatives (lone wolves), reflecting the organization’s adaptation to diminished territorial control while maintaining its mobilizational capacity.
- **Delegitimizing rival jihadist actors:** The study shows that ISIS’s criticism of Al-Qaeda is not merely tactical but methodological. Al-Qaeda is reframed as an organization that has long been subject to Iranian influence, with its historical trajectory, rhetoric, and current statements invoked to highlight alleged double standards and to undermine its legitimacy among supporters and sympathizers.

In conclusion, ISIS discourse on the US-Israeli war on Iran constitutes a comprehensive model of contemporary extremist jihadist rhetoric in the context of major regional transformations. It is characterized by a coherent

structure that combines the rejection of alignment with any party to the conflict and the excommunication of all sides, while simultaneously instrumentalizing the war as a mobilizational tool to reorder ranks and exploit chaos in service of sustaining its jihadist project, influence, and ideological continuity.