MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Al-Qaeda vs ISIS: Competitive Extremism and Turf Wars

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Summary

AQ and ISIS have sought to use violent extremism, propaganda, and terrorism to overthrow the liberal capitalist international order and Westphalian nation-states. While the wider Muslim community has rejected their violent extremist propaganda, they have made inroads into those regions rife with perpetual wars or instability.

Introduction

Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda (AQ) originated from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, while ISIS—Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)—grew under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. There are various affiliates of both AQ and ISIS, including but not limited to the Afghan Taliban and Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), respectively. The status quo of their turf wars is influenced by their capabilities, public opinion, degree of competition, and government reactions.

The Fragmented Salafi Jihadist Movement

Despite adhering to the same ideology, AQ and ISIS have been at odds, publicly, for nearly two decades. Some of the fundamental reasons for these fissures are highlighted below:

Al-Zarqawi's Ethnically-targeted Attacks

Notably, although Bin Laden repeatedly emphasised refraining from ethnic cleansing to then- AQI's leadership, his broader agenda of maintaining unity among various jihadist factions assumed precedence. As per reports, he privately chided AQ while ensuring the Al-Qaeda Core (AQC) maintained public support for the renegade elements. However, in 2014, the relationship between the AQC and AQI broke down.

The primary factors that caused this were AQI's refusal to heed the former's guidance on leadership's selection and decision to rebrand as ISI, Shia Muslims' indiscriminate killing in Iraq, and mosques' destruction. For example, the Askariyah Shrine, i.e., the Golden Mosque (Samarra), bore the brunt of ISIS' savagery in 2006.[1] Ayman al-Zawahiri (who became AQ's Chief in 2011), in a lengthy letter to al-Zarqawi in early 2000s, warned that AQI's indiscriminate slaughter of Shias would repulse the Ummah because the media domain is where the battle of jihad was underway.[2]

Far Enemy vs Near Enemy

AQ also focused on attacking the far enemy, i.e., the Western countries (Zionist-Crusader alliance) and the allegedly apostate-puppet regimes in West Asia. At the same time, AQI sought to target the near enemies, including Christians, Kurds, and Yazidis. Nonetheless, Shia Muslims were its primary enemies, considered apostates and traitors to Islam. AQI considered it a public good and religious obligation to

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[1] Michael Crowley, **"How the Fate of One Holy Site Could Plunge Iraq Back into Civil War"**, *Time Magazine*, 26 June 2014.
[2] **"Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi"**, Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point.

purge them. Shias were considered to be a greater enemy than the Americans or Jews. The non-conformists were treated as second-class citizens or purged. That holds for its affiliates even today. AQI gradually assumed the brand ISI in 2006 after Americans killed al-Zarqawi. Abu Omar al-Baghdadi assumed the group's leadership, followed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

HTS' Allegiance: AQC or ISI?

With the outbreak of the Syrian War, al-Qaeda hoped to embed itself and co-opt the opposition against President Bashar al-Assad by propping up a localised network to command broader public support. Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), was deployed by al-Baghdadi to Syria for this purpose. It was previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Nusra Front, and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.

However, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was threatened by al-Joulani's successes and announced that ISI had expanded to Syria through al-Nusra Front to prevent his lieutenant from going rogue. Al-Joulani swiftly rejected that proclamation and declared that his allegiance lay with al-Zawahiri. Subsequently, AQC's directive for al-Baghdadi to re-centre his focus on Iraq was rebuked, paving the way for severance of ties.

HTS has emerged as Idlib's most influential jihadist actor, neutralising or marginalising its competitors, and attempted to adopt a more pragmatic approach while reducing its violent behaviour.[3] However, despite disassociating from al-Qaeda in 2016, scepticism remains about how far it has shed its loyalty towards AQC and its violent extremist tendencies.

Al-Qaeda: Ideology and Current Trends

AQ has derived inspiration from Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, who advocated for transnational jihad.[4] This organisation has positioned itself as a reactionary, anti-Western, and anti-imperialist movement aimed at expelling foreign or occupying forces (despite their presence at the behest of the state leadership) from all Muslim lands. The US was perceived to be the basis for all challenges plaguing Muslim lands.[5] Over time, violence's strategic use has become central to its long-term strategy.

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[3] Kareem Fahim, **"Former al-Qaeda Affiliate in Syria Seeks to Soften its Brand"**, *The Washington Post*, 2 January 2022.

[4] Andrew McGregor, **"Jihad and the Rifle Alone: 'Abdullah' Azzam and the Islamist Revolution"**, *Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2003.

[5] Daniel L. Byman, **"Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different Goals, Different Targets"**, Brookings, 29 April 2015.

AQ adopted a contradictory viewpoint regarding civilian killings. While it argued against ethnic cleansing and takfiri (ex-communication of Muslims that legitimises their killing), the civilians residing in Western countries are considered legitimate targets for electing leaders that have chosen to target Muslim-dominated territories. It also appears to have a pan-Islamist worldview, positioning itself as more inclusive vis-à-vis ISIS, often partnering with non-Salafist groups, including Hanafi Deobandis like the Taliban.

Moreover, it has given its affiliates—formal and informal—considerable autonomy in implementing their localised interpretations of Islamic governance. Their successes have proven critical for its ideological sustenance in various theatres, mainly post-2001. Unlike ISIS, its vision of a caliphate is vague and considers establishing a state counterproductive and premature due to the absence of popular support. Nonetheless, it has supported affiliates who have pursued this project independently.

AQC and its affiliates have suffered rapid leadership losses, with at least four losses in the past two years. Furthermore, while the ideological doctrine proposed by it has survived through its affiliates and inspired other militant jihadist groups, it has failed to achieve its transnational objectives. Additionally, Al-Zawahiri's has left behind a dysfunctional organisation without clarity about what Saif Al-Adel's leadership would mean for the outfit or global security. There is also great speculation on whether he is based in Iran or Afghanistan.

At the same time, its affiliates have intensified their efforts to pursue their narrow, localised agendas instead of attacking the far enemy or pursuing a pan-Islamist jihad. This had occurred in the absence of a hands-on leader, even when al-Zawahiri was alive. Nevertheless, it has tried to reclaim its position in the militant jihadist through its recent tirade against ISIS. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, an AQ affiliate, recently released a message calling on supporters to eliminate ISIS fighters and achieve martyrdom. Furthermore, it has declared prioritising the fight against the rival organisation vis-à-vis the infidels and the US.[6]

ISIS: Ideology and Current Trends

ISIS has two ideologues primarily—Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (who spoke about overthrowing the apostate West Asian regimes)[7] and Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir (who cultivated the anti-Shia rhetoric and ethnic cleaning of other non-Muslim and non-

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[6] **"The New Message from al-Qaeda's North Africa Branch, AQIM, is one of the Strongest, Clearest and…"**, Mina al-Lami, Twitter, 20 April 2023, 4:12 p.m.

[7] Aida Arosoaie, **"Doctrinal Differences between ISIS and Al Qaeda: An Account of Ideologues"**, *Counter Terrorist Threats and Analyses*, Vol. 7, No. 7, August 2015, pp. 31–37.

Sunni communities)[8]. Notably, regardless of its doctrinal differences with Bin Laden, it considers itself his legitimate heir, unlike al-Zawahiri. ISIS followers celebrated al-Zawahiri's death in 2022 on Telegram channels calling him wicked and an enemy of God.[9]

It denounces nationalism or Westphalian nation-states. Destabilisation of modern states and expansion of territory to form a caliphate (through a five-step process) is concurrent with its jihadist ambition. While al-Qaeda has displayed ambivalence and ambiguity towards establishing a caliphate, ISIS has underlined various steps required to attain this goal. To establish its Khalifah or caliphate (the end goal of its jihad), it has coercively implemented its version of Salafi jihadist ideals, frequently using events disseminated through depiction on its social media handles and publications, such as rape, mass executions, torture, and public beheadings. Furthermore, it has extensively targeted civilians, historically significant sites such as Abu al-Hassan al-Jazari, aka Ibn al-Athir's tomb (a renowned historian and Hadith expert) in Mosul, crowded markets, places of worship, and civilian infrastructure.

It has used these violent methods to ensure fear and submission among communities and assert control over territories. This group, during its heyday, had a centralised structure, disallowing its wilayats or provinces autonomy to conduct affairs as deemed appropriate. Furthermore, it adheres to prophetic methodology's application, i.e., implementing Prophet Mohammed's teachings as delineated by him, leaving no room for interpretation. This terrorist organisation has positioned itself as uncompromising on ideology. It has rebuked supporting or negotiating with non-conforming entities, for example, al-Qaeda's outreach to Coptic Christians drew much ire.

It projects itself as ideologically superior in a battle between Puritanism vs Populism,[10] upholding the pure Salafi creed, instead of co-opting local movements and amassing broad public acceptance. Additionally, it has exploited the extremist Salafi Sunnis' sentiments regarding sectarianism and ethnic cleansing. Notably, the more hardliner a terrorist group is, the more seriously it is taken by others within the militant jihadist circles, and it has a direct impact on their fighters' psyche, motivating them further. ISIS appears to have pursued this strategy, making AQ look comparatively moderate in its approach. At the same time, it has capitalised on AQ's

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[8] Charlie Winter and Abdullah K. al-Saud, **"The Obscure Theologian Who Shaped ISIS"**, The Atlantic, 4 December 2016.

[9] Guillermo Calderón López, **"Islamic State Sympathizers Mock Zawahiri's Death"**, *Militant Wire*, 8 August 2022.

[10] Mohammed Hafez, **"The Crisis Within Jihadism: The Islamic State's Puritanism vs. al-Qa'ida's Populism"**, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13, No. 9, September 2020, pp. 40–48.

weakened command and control structures by providing alternative and coherent leadership to the firebrand Salafi jihadists.

In addition, it has advanced an apocalyptic eschatological belief, using terms like Dabiq for its online magazine. As per Islamic eschatology, Imam Mahdi will lead a battle in its caliphate, one of the places being Dabiq (Syria), against crusaders. In this, Muslims will emerge victorious against crusaders, before conquering Constantinople.[11] This has been central to its propaganda aimed at a global audience.

Finally, exploiting social media to glorify barbarity and mobilising like-minded individuals became central to its long-term strategy. Social media's and encrypted chat forums' such as Twitter, Element, and Briar's prolific use reflected the stark contrast between the first and second generation of jihadists, i.e., AQ and ISIS, respectively. AQ, to this day, has limited its propaganda activities to jihadist forums and websites, considering the era to which the leadership belongs.

As for recent trends, continuous counter-terror on-ground operations or drone strikes have resulted in rapid leadership losses, with four leaders being eliminated within 18 months. Turkey recently neutralised its most recent caliph, Abu Hussein al-Qurayshi, and no new leader has been announced. Furthermore, the leadership has become increasingly obscure, with limited engagement with its supporters since its defeat four years ago. There is a broad consensus that ISIS' attacks and publications produced by the core or its affiliates have significantly reduced.

Turf Wars: Affiliates Battling for Supremacy

Territorial and ideological differences between AQ and ISIS factions have played out in various territories. The following sections will mainly focus on the conflict between Afghan Taliban and ISKP.

Syria and Iraq

Syria and Iraq have emerged as key hotspots for the jihadist turf wars, where ISIS has waged low-level deadly insurgencies. For example, the Al-Hol Camp and Ghwayran Prison in Syria have become central to its sustenance, targeting detained women and children. These areas have proved fertile grounds for re-enforcing violent extremist ideology. Simultaneously, it has attacked the state and the US-backed SDF forces.

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[11] Adil Rasheed, **"Terrorist Groups (Al Qaeda and ISIS) and Counter Terrorism"**, Lok Sabha Secretariat, September 2022.

At the same time, COVID-19 allowed the re-organisation of ISIS in Iraq and the porous borders between Iraqi Kurdistan and the rest of the country have re-invigorated arms trafficking. Tribal leaders, crowded markets, electricity transmission towers, the Peshmerga, state security officials, and PMF forces have been targeted.

In the face of the Syrian government's inability to guarantee security and welfare services to Idlib's (Syria) residents, HTS has emerged as a proto-state, providing healthcare services, security, and day-to-day administration. Its ability to push back against more extremist elements like ISIS and adopt a more comparative approach has allegedly created sufficient room for cooperation with state actors such as Turkey, despite being designated as a terrorist organisation.

Africa

Al-Shabaab and ISWAP have stepped in to fill the vacuum of providing individuals residing in areas under their control with essential services, for example, immunisation drives for adults and children, security, and day-to-day governance. They have also delivered swift justice as per Sharia, unlike the various African governments riddled with ethno-tribal factionalism and corruption, unable to alleviate a substantial portion of their citizens out of poverty.

Af-Pak

ISKP has sought to position itself as a more inclusive alternative organisation vis-à-vis the Pashtun-dominated and Hanafi Deobandi supremacist Taliban,[12] an ally of the Crusaders,[13] to bolster its ranks. In addition, it has raised doubts concerning the Taliban's religious and governing legitimacy as a jihadist movement, accusing it of raising a Mullah Bradley (an Americanised term) as former President Ghani's replacement and of being ISI's puppets and poaching fighters long associated with the Taliban. For example, ETIM members have allegedly grown disillusioned with the Taliban due to the latter's growing closeness with China and defected to ISKP.

At the same time, it has projected itself as Salafis' and ethnic minorities like Tajiks and Uzbeks' protector, who have faced arbitrary arrests, seizure of livestock and property, killings, and torture. For example, Makhdum Alem, an Uzbek commander in the Taliban, was arrested on allegedly kidnapping charges despite having convinced locals in the Faryab Province to support the Taliban leading up to August

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[12] Lucas Webber and Riccardo Valle, **"Islamic State in Afghanistan Looks to Recruit Regional Tajiks, Inflict Violence Against Tajikistan"**, *The Diplomat*, 29 April 2022.

[13] Davit Beradze, **"Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) – Threats to the Regional Security Environment and Challenges for the Taliban"**, *Free University Journal of Asian Studies*, No. 4, 29 December 2022.

2021.[14] Moreover, hundreds of bodies of prominent Salafi clerics and ordinary civilians are often found floating in canals or rivers, for example, in Nangarhar.[15] This has aided the ISKP propaganda. Notably, Nangarhar has emerged as ISKP's key bastion.

In addition, there are reports that former regime loyalists have joined ISKP because they lack organisational structure to defeat the Taliban and have become victims of the Taliban's counter-insurgency operations used as a ruse to neutralise those associated with the Ghani administration. Furthermore, ISKP has carried out targeted attacks, mainly suicide bombings, to kill leaders such as Rahimullah Haqqani (Senior Taliban cleric).

Within these complex dynamics, the Haqqanis' role as ISKP's enemies and collaborators in equal measure requires greater introspection. Shahab al-Muhajir, ISKP's Emir, before the fall of Kabul, reportedly capitalised on his contacts within influential families to procure weaponry and security licenses, sanctioned jailbreaks[16] and worked as an elite security guard for the former Vice-President.[17]

Women have also been extensively used in recruitment, propaganda, and deployed to battlefields, unlike the Taliban, having completely marginalised them. However, like the Afghan regime, it has cracked down on its enemies, including Salafi scholars with a favourable attitude towards the interim government, like Abdul Hamid Rahmati (2022).

The leadership has also assured the previously surrendered fighters of amnesty should they pledge allegiance again to bolster its depleted ranks. The power struggle involving the Taliban and the counter-terror operations carried out by the US and the previous regime's forces had reduced its numbers considerably. Reportedly, today, ISKP has a presence in all 34 provinces (as per the UN's Special Envoy to Afghanistan), and stages constant attacks on schools, exam centres, hospitals, mosques, and gurudwaras to undermine the Taliban's claim of being in control. Report also note of in-fighting between ISKP members and of plummeting

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[14] Bruce Pannier, **"Northern Afghanistan and the New Threat to Central Asia"**, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 13 May 2022.

[15] Abubakar Siddiqui, **"Senior Clerics Caught in the Crossfire of the Taliban's Intensifying War with IS-K"**, Radio Free Europe/Radio Free Liberty, 24 August 2022.

[16] Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed and Andrew Mines, **"The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan"**, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 15, No. 1, January 2022, pp. 33–45.

[17] **"Sanaullah Ghafari, AKA Shahab al-Muhajir, is ISIS-K's Current Overall Emir. He was Appointed by the ISIS"**, State Dept CT Bureau, Twitter, 23 November 2021, 3:16 a.m.

membership and battlefield losses.[18] Its Deputy Emir, Umer alias Dr Khalid, was neutralised by the Taliban during a raid conducted in May 2023.

The Taliban, as indicated above, has demonstrated heavy-handed counter-insurgency operations targeted against ISKP and ethnic minorities, further destabilising the Afghan society. It has also used Al-Mersaad to disseminate anti-ISIS propaganda. For example, one of its recent publications has decried that ISIS members do not represent Islam because they "kill innocent people, children, women, and old people", "ISIS has been rejected and refuted by the Muslim scholars of the world", and carries out "sexual harassment, forced marriages, and torture and oppression of women".[19]

Finally, it has attempted to engage with the international community (including China, Russia, and Iran) to assuage them of disallowing Afghanistan to be used as a launchpad for terror activities and gain diplomatic recognition. The Afghans' overall support through resolving socio-economic and health concerns is imperative if the Taliban intends to garner public support and wage a long-term counter-response to ISKP.

India: Key Concerns and Challenges

ISIS/ISKP (an emerging threat) and AQ (a persistent threat) continue to concern national security, despite none of them having claimed any significant attacks in India. Firstly, ISIS has recently announced the creation of two new modules beyond the three—ISJK, ISHP, and ISIS Deccan—that already existed.[20] One of them is focused on Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. The other is responsible for Kerala, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. Notably, South India has gradually become a prominent base for radicalisation and terror activities.

The outfit relies on multilingual propaganda disseminated in English, Malayalam, Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu to mobilise support in India and polarise the society. ISKP, in its recent issue of Voice of Khorasan magazine, claimed responsibility for the botched Coimbatore and Mangaluru blasts (October and November 2022, respectively).[21] In addition, this publication sheds light on its links with the

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[18] **"Shaikh Aminullah Peshawari, Top Salafi Scholar of Afg-Pak region and Teacher of Many ISKP Members and…"**, Ibn Sufyan, Twitter, 2 May 2023, 3:20 p.m; **"Pro-ISKP Media 'Hamat Al Tawheed' (Protectors of Tawheed) Released a Video called 'Peshawari, Affected by Hypocrisy"**, Ibn Sufyan, Twitter, 27 April 2023,

[19] **"Taliban Posts this Without Irony of their Own Past Actions"**, Aaron Y. Zelin, Twitter, 3 May 2023, 4:37 a.m.

[20] Rakesh K. Singh, **"ISIS's India Focus: Forms 2 Sub-groups"**, *The Pioneer*, 27 March 2023.

[21] Adil Rasheed and Poorna Ghosh, **"The Metastasising ISKP Menace for India"**, Commentary, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 5 April 2023.

proscribed Popular Front of India (PFI). It revealed that PFI members had fought alongside it previously and called on the cadres to join its ranks. Interestingly, a nexus between ISI, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and ISKP has emerged,[22] focused on the Af-Pak region. A fractured Pakistan could find it to its advantage to exploit that nexus against India to unite its citizens amid ongoing crises.

Indian representatives have flagged terrorism threats emanating from Afghanistan as a concerning trend across various formats. The presence of al-Zawahiri and possibly al-Adel in the country legitimises these threat perceptions. Furthermore, on the one hand, while a vital AQ affiliate in Bangladesh, Ansarullah Bangla Team has set up bases in Barpeta (Assam), radicalising impressionable youth through indoctrination in Madrassas and participating in terror financing. Several members have been arrested for espousing violent extremist ideologies in Madrassas. On the other hand, the People's Anti-Fascist Front (a Jaish-e-Mohammed or JeM front organisation) carried out a deadly attack on an army truck in Poonch (J&K), killing five officers. JeM is an ally of AQ.

Beyond the stringent UAPA and Anti Money Laundering legislation, increased coordination between agencies and political leadership, and enhanced cooperation with like-minded countries, there are other measures underway to make India's counter-responses more effective:

a) The central government has banned using 14 mobile applications, including Briar and Element, which terrorists have used to communicate with their Pakistan-based handlers. This has also been used to communicate with ISIS leaders previously.

b) NATGRID is due to launch 360 degrees of real-time surveillance of entities and individuals in two phases to enhance the collective fight against terrorism.

c) Tamil Nadu government recently announced the formation of an anti-terror squad within the state police's intelligence wing, involving over 380 personnel, with its expenditure totalling more than Rs 57 crores.

Key Assessments

It remains unsurprising that Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and large swathes of the African continent have confronted security challenges emanating from potential domino effects. Failed, failing, or unstable countries or communities lack effective

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[22] **"ISKP Creation of Pak Intelligence Agency to Shed Responsibility of Afghan Crisis: Think tank"**, *ANI News*, 28 August 2021.

leadership and stable governance institutions. Furthermore, the security and political vacuum created in these situations offers sufficient vantage to non-state actors, including terrorists, to orchestrate a hostile takeover of an area ranging from a city and specific pockets within a country to carving out centres of power across countries. This is precisely what ISIS and al-Qaeda have achieved in several parts globally, directly or through their affiliates. Despite the reduction in their overall activities, attacks, and leadership losses, these terrorist groups have left behind a violent jihadist legacy inspiring organisational and individual acts of violence globally.

As far as India is concerned, security agencies have effectively contained the threat from terrorism. Additionally, Indian Muslims have largely been critical of terrorist groups' propaganda efforts to polarise the country, thwarting any efforts to entrench themselves within the multicultural and inclusive community. For example, less than 100 travelled to Syria to fight for ISIS.[23]

Conclusion

The ISIS and AQ have proven resilient due to their ideological gravitational pull. The magnitude of the attacks have decreased after the weakening of central command leadership. India must continue to engage with Afghanistan to avoid any security challenges from spilling into its territory. The in-fighting between jihadist groups, as indicated by their turf wars, is a positive trend due to the domino effect it could have in diluting the scale and impact of transnational jihad. Nonetheless, in such moments, terrorist organisations can carry out large-scale attacks to retain their relevance in the militant jihadist fold to try to avoid fading into obscurity.

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[23] Adil Rasheed, **"Why Fewer Indians Have Joined ISIS"**, Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 31 August 2020.

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