

### From the LJ to the TTP

Today, the LJ is still involved in terrorist attacks in Pakistan. Little is known about the group's current activities, and it is not completely clear how the two factions of the LJ—the Basra group and the Qari Hayye group—have evolved. Both factions likely still exist, although different leaders are in charge. The Basra group, for example, is now part of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and contributes to its jihadist operations. LJ operatives probably help facilitate the TTP's terrorist acts in Punjab Province, where the LT/SSP has an established base.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, a similar paradigm is now occurring with the TTP. The Pakistani government blames the TTP for nearly every terrorist attack in Pakistan, some of which likely had little to do with the organization. Yet just like the LJ, it is easy to scapegoat the TTP rather than reveal the true extent of jihadist violence in Pakistan and the many groups and actors involved.

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## The Failure of Salafi-Jihadi Insurgent Movements in the Levant

By Bilal Y. Saab

IT IS REMARKABLE THAT the Levant, a sub-region plagued by internal and external crisis conditions that are generally conducive to terrorism and political violence, has been free from any insurgent<sup>1</sup> Islamist group with verifiable material ties to al-Qa`ida's central leadership.<sup>2</sup> The two ambitious attempts by Arab Salafi-jihadis to create insurgent forces in the Levant occurred in Lebanon in May-September 2007 when Fatah al-Islam<sup>3</sup> violently emerged in the northern part of the country, and on August 15, 2009 in Gaza when Jund Ansar Allah<sup>4</sup> declared war on Hamas. These two attempts sought to radically change the existing socio-political orders in Lebanon and Gaza through the use of religiously-inspired insurgent violence. Both attempts failed, however. Although al-Qa`ida has been tied to

terrorist plots in the Levant, it does not appear responsible or interested in the few Islamist insurgent movements that have arisen in the region.<sup>5</sup>

This article assesses why the Levant has been a less attractive place for global Salafi-jihadis and a more challenging environment for them to mobilize and conduct operations. It attributes these failures to the existence of well-established mainstream Islamic movements in the Levant that see the violent and extreme Salafi-jihadis as a threat to their interests; the distinct historical and socio-political circumstances in the Levant that make it less hospitable to Salafi-jihadi ideology; the relative success of the region's security and intelligence services to prevent the Salafi-jihadi threat from inflating; the subduing effect of Iran's dominant influence in the Levant; and finally the lack of material support from al-Qa`ida's central leadership to Salafi-jihadi insurgent groups in the region.

### Al-Qa`ida's Lack of Allies in the Levant

Other than Jund al-Sham<sup>6</sup> and Fatah al-Islam (and the now crushed Jund Ansar Allah), al-Qa`ida does not have allies in the Levant that could effectively help project its influence and ideology into the region and to serve its various strategic objectives.<sup>7</sup>

Jund al-Sham's lack of organizational coherence, discipline, and fighting capabilities make it an unreliable partner for al-Qa`ida in the Levant.<sup>8</sup> Far from

1 The emphasis on the word "insurgent" is deliberate and used to differentiate from the word "terrorist." While there are a number of analytical and practical differences between an insurgent group (or insurgencies) and a terrorist group (or cell), this article only focuses on four: one, insurgent groups enjoy a certain level of support from a segment of society, whereas terrorist groups usually work alone and do not need indigenous support; two, insurgent groups are usually bigger and better armed than terrorist groups; three, insurgent groups work overtly, whereas terrorist groups operate most effectively in a clandestine fashion; four, insurgent groups find it essential to seize territory for the realization of their revolutionary objectives, while terrorist groups generally do not.

2 Very few comprehensive studies have been written on al-Qa`ida's presence and influence in the Levant. For a commendable paper on the subject, see Hassan Mneimneh, *The Jihadist International: Al-Qa`ida's Advance in the Levant* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, April 8, 2009).

3 Fatah al-Islam is a militant Sunni Islamist group that is inspired by al-Qa`ida's ideology. Its members are mostly Arabs from various Middle Eastern countries. It emerged in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon in November 2006. Its goals are unclear but include the establishment of an Islamic state in northern Lebanon.

4 Jund Ansar Allah was founded in southern Gaza in November 2008 as an armed Sunni Islamist group with strong Salafi-jihadi credentials. Its goals include the establishment of an Islamic state in Gaza.

5 No hard evidence on direct material ties between these two groups and al-Qa`ida's central leadership has ever emerged, even though they appear to share the same ideological agenda.

6 Jund al-Sham is a title claimed by several Sunni Islamic extremist entities, all or none of which may be connected. These entities mostly operate in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, and their goals include the establishment of an Islamic caliphate throughout the Levant.

7 For instance, without the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan or the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat in Algeria, al-Qa`ida would have found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to expand and operate in South Asia or the Maghreb. More examples where al-Qa`ida relied on local support to expand its influence and pursue its goals in various regions around the world include al-Shabab in Somalia, al-Qa`ida in Iraq, and the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines.

8 There are three groups—Hizb al-Tahrir, Jaysh al-Islam, and Jaysh al-Umma—in the Palestinian Territories that claim to be inspired by al-Qa`ida's ideology, but they

<sup>22</sup> Hassan Abbas, "Defining the Punjabi Taliban Network," *CTC Sentinel* 2:4 (2009).

being an al-Qa`ida “franchise” in the Levant, Jund al-Sham is a title claimed by several Sunni Islamic extremist entities, all or none of which may be connected. More like a movement, Jund al-Sham, whose alleged link to the late al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi stems from reports that he had arranged training for the group’s fighters at al-Qa`ida camps in Afghanistan, has a presence in Lebanon’s Palestinian refugee camps

### “Al-Qa`ida’s ideology does not have a strong popular following or support base in most of the Levant.”

and in Syria (possibly in Jordan too).<sup>9</sup> Jund al-Sham members have been described by terrorism analysts and Arab counterterrorism officials as jihadist freelancers who are only tied together by ideology and a desire to violently defend a radical Islamic order. Many Islamic fighters tied to Jund al-Sham in Lebanon merged with Fatah al-Islam during its rise and fall, while the rest went into hiding and took refuge in the Palestinian camp of Ain al-Hilwah.<sup>10</sup> Lebanese press reports indicate that one of the leaders of Jund al-Sham in Lebanon, Shaykh Wissam Tahbish, was arrested on August 19, 2009 by the Lebanese army as he was trying to

have no direct ties to the terrorist organization and are too small and weak to be reliable partners. For more on Fatah al-Islam and the story of its rise and fall, see Bilal Y. Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, “Fatah al Islam: How an Ambitious Jihadist Enterprise Went Awry,” The Brookings Institution and the Swedish National Defence College, November 28, 2007. For more on al-Qa`ida in Lebanon, please see Bilal Y. Saab, “Al-Qa`ida’s Presence and Influence in Lebanon,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:12 (2008).

<sup>9</sup> For more on Jund al-Sham in Syria, see Chris Zambelis, “Violence in Syria Points to Radical Islamic Unrest,” *Terrorism Focus* 3:23 (2006). On Jund al-Sham’s alleged presence in Jordan, see Alon Ben-David, “Jordanian Indictment Reveals Operations of Jund al Sham’s Terror Network,” Jane’s Information Group, June 16, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> To learn more about the support Fatah al-Islam received from Jund al-Sham, please consult Bilal Y. Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, “Fatah al Islam: How an Ambitious Jihadist Enterprise Went Awry,” The Brookings Institution and the Swedish National Defence College, November 28, 2007.

enter Ain al-Hilwah.<sup>11</sup> In Syria, Jund al-Sham has been accused of perpetrating a number of terrorist operations in the country and of facilitating the stream of Islamic fighters that reportedly make their way to Iraq through Syrian territory.<sup>12</sup>

Fatah al-Islam’s crushing defeat and ultimate transformation from a centralized insurgent group to a loose network of underground terrorist cells after the Nahr al-Bared battle with the Lebanese army in the summer of 2007 makes it an unreliable partner for al-Qa`ida.

Meanwhile, Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri could not relish the news of the birth of Jund Ansar Allah in Rafah in the Gaza Strip. As soon as the group’s leader Shaykh Abdel Latif Moussa publicly declared an Islamic emirate in Gaza, Hamas forces, who have been officially in charge of the Strip since the June 2007 coup against the Palestinian Authority, confronted the newly-born Salafi-jihadi group and killed 22 of its members in a day-long gun and artillery battle.<sup>13</sup> Hamas has repeatedly fought al-Qa`ida-inspired entities in its bid to impose its influence and role over Palestinian society.

In Lebanon, mainstream Sunni Islamist groups such as Jama`a al-Islamiyya, Harkat al-Tawhid al-Islami, and Jabhat al-Amal Islami do not support al-Qa`ida and its *takfiri* ideology.<sup>14</sup> Even

<sup>11</sup> “Army Arrests Leading Jund al-Sham Member,” Naharnet.com, August 19, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Qa`ida’s Syrian network is thought to have suffered a setback as the United States implemented a counterinsurgency program in Iraq in 2007 and executed a covert operation in Syria in 2008, which targeted and killed a senior member of al-Qa`ida’s facilitation network. An estimated 120 foreign fighters a month are thought to have entered Iraq from Syria at its peak in 2007. This number is now estimated to be in the single digits, but there is concern that the Syrian network is being rejuvenated. For more on Islamic fighters making their way to Iraq through Syrian territory, see Karen DeYoung, “Terrorist Traffic Via Syria Again Inching Up,” *Washington Post*, May 11, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Erin Cunningham, “Growing Threat to Hamas: Gazans Who Think it has Sold Out,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 17, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> For profiles of these groups, see Bilal Y. Saab and Magnus Ranstorp, “Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30:10 (2007).

the Salafist groups in the north, who can be regarded as ideologically closer to al-Qa`ida than other Islamic groups, have no ties to al-Qa`ida and are largely non-militant and involved in preaching activities. These Islamic entities and others such as the Lebanese Shi`a group Hizb Allah have made it more difficult for al-Qa`ida to mobilize and create a solid base in Lebanon.

In Syria, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the biggest and most important Sunni Islamist group in the country that is opposed to al-Qa`ida’s extremism, is seen by many Syrians as a safety valve against al-Qa`ida’s attempts to establish an insurgent presence in their country.<sup>15</sup> In Jordan, the Salafists and Jabhat al-Amal Islami (Jordan’s Muslim Brotherhood) are peaceful and denounce al-Qa`ida. In the Levant, Islamic politics, like all politics, are local and are rarely connected to the global Salafi-jihadi movement.

#### Al-Qa`ida’s Ideology: Few Followers in the Levant

Al-Qa`ida’s ideology does not have a strong popular following or support base in most of the Levant. This is in part because of the region’s long history of communal (Christian-Muslim and Sunni-Shi`a) co-existence and rejection of *takfiriyya* (labeling a Muslim an infidel), which is a basic tenet of al-Qa`ida’s ideology.<sup>16</sup>

In Syria, while society has lately become more Islamic—as evidenced by the increased number of veiled women, skyrocketing mosque-construction, a thriving religious literature market, significant growth in Islamic charity organizations and rising attendance at informal home Qur’an classes—increasing religiosity in the country has not translated into a rise in *takfiri* ideology or Islamic militancy.<sup>17</sup> In

<sup>15</sup> The group, however, is banned by the Syrian regime. The only Islamist party that is able to publicly operate inside Syria today is Hizb al-Tahrir, and it is largely moderate and non-violent.

<sup>16</sup> Another possible reason is the enduring spiritual and cultural influence by the secular colonizing powers—the Ottoman Empire in the past, and more recently France and the United Kingdom—over the Levant.

<sup>17</sup> For example, sermons delivered in Syrian mosques have largely been moderate in tone and substance. No frequent use of *takfiri* language or sign of widespread advocacy for militant Islam has been reported in any Syrian

Lebanon, despite years of sectarian and religious conflict most recently marked by Sunni-Shi'a tensions in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War and several internal political crises, al-Qa`ida's ideology has not found a home. In the summer of 2007, the Lebanese were shocked by the images of the Lebanese army fighting Fatah al-Islam near Tripoli. Perhaps the strongest evidence of the lack of popularity of al-Qa`ida's ideology within Lebanese Sunni Muslim society was the unwillingness of all Lebanese Sunni Islamist groups to heed Fatah al-Islam's appeal and calls for help throughout its battle with the Lebanese army. Even the relatively more radical Asbat al-Ansar, the Qarun group, the Arqoub group, and the Majdal Anjar group remained fairly silent and distanced themselves from the battle.<sup>18</sup>

In Jordan, the majority of the civilian population considers al-Qa`ida a terrorist organization, as opposed to a "legitimate resistance organization," according to a study published by the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies.<sup>19</sup> The increasingly negative perception of al-Qa`ida by Jordanians and other Arab societies alike speaks to one of al-Qa`ida's biggest weaknesses: its use of violence against innocent civilians in pursuit of its goals. In recent years, there have been mass demonstrations in Jordan against al-Qa`ida following terrorist attacks such as the November 9, 2005 Amman hotel bombings. Even Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a leading Jordanian militant ideologue, censured al-Qa`ida for its acts of indiscriminate violence.<sup>20</sup>

mosques, at least those located in Damascus.

18 For profiles of these groups, please see Saab and Ransborg, "Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism."

19 Alia Shukri Hamzeh, "Majority of Jordanians View al-Qa`ida as Terrorist Group," *Jordan Times*, January 5, 2005.

20 Al-Maqdisi's criticism of AQI's conduct in Iraq was articulated in several articles and in an interview with al-Jazeera. See Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, "Al-Zarqawi; munasaha wa munasara: amal wa alam," *Minbar al-Tawhid wa'l-Jihad*, August 2004. For more details, see Anouar Boukhars, "The Challenge of Terrorism and Religious Extremism in Jordan," *Strategic Insights* 5:4 (2006); Nibras Kazimi, "A Virulent Ideology in Mutation: Zarqawi Upstages Maqdisi," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 2 (2005).

**Successful Hard Measures Against al-Qa`ida** Security and intelligence forces in the Levant have used hard measures reasonably well to combat the threat of al-Qa`ida-inspired tactics. In Lebanon, these services and the army have been able to crush two Salafi-jihadi insurgencies during the past nine years and break a number of terrorist cells across the country. This is a result of an offensive plan that has been recently coordinated with the Internal Security Forces (ISF).<sup>21</sup>

In Syria, the regime's notorious intelligence services have been able to ensure security and stability in the country.<sup>22</sup> For now, the Syrian government has largely relied on brute force to crush any al-Qa`ida-linked terrorist threat. The regime, however, seems to be investing in a longer term strategy by promoting moderate Islamic voices through regime-friendly clerics such as the moderate Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddine Hassoun and figures such as Mohammed Habash, the director of the Islamic Studies Center and grandson-in-law of the long serving mufti of Damascus, Ahmad Kaftaro.

In Jordan, its Western-trained intelligence services and special operations unit (known as the Knights of Truth) are one of the most disciplined and effective in the region. Jordanian security forces foiled two Salafi-jihadi attacks in 2003, eight in 2004 and 10 in 2005.<sup>23</sup>

21 For more on the Lebanese military intelligence services' efforts at combating al-Qa`ida-like entities in Lebanon, see Saab, "Al-Qa`ida's Presence and Influence in Lebanon."

22 Several al-Qa`ida-style failed terrorist operations have been carried out in Syria since the outbreak of the 2003 Iraq War. The most prominent took place in April 2004, when armed assailants raided an abandoned UN building in the residential Mezzeh neighborhood of Damascus, killing a policeman and a bystander. In July 2005, a group of terrorists were apprehended after a shooting on Mount Qassioun, which overlooks the Syrian capital. Earlier that summer, Syrian authorities announced that they had arrested one man and killed another who had been planning an attack in Damascus on behalf of Jund al-Sham, an al-Qa`ida-affiliated group. In June 2006, Syrian security clashed with al-Qa`ida-linked terrorists who, according to the Syrian Ministry of Information, were planning to execute terrorist operations in Umayyad Square and other important civilian and military spots in the country. The Syrian police managed to kill four militants, wound two and arrest four.

23 Personal interview, senior member of Jordan's spe-

cial operations unit, August 21, 2009. There have been recent suspicions by the Jordanian intelligence services that Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami was forming a militant faction. The group denies the accusations and insists it is only interested in peaceful political activism.

#### Iran's Influence over the Levant

Iran's overall influence in the Levant is significant and dominant in some areas such as Lebanon (through Hizb Allah) and the Palestinian Territories (through Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad). This hampers al-Qa`ida's ability to mobilize in that region. Given the adversarial and often hostile

**"The relative decline of al-Qa`ida in Iraq following the success of the U.S. counterinsurgency effort has presumably started a decentralization process for the group."**

relationship between Iran and al-Qa`ida (al-Qa`ida considers the Iranian regime as "apostate" and Shi'a Muslims in general as *rawafidh*, or "traitors"), the latter actively works on preventing the former from expanding in its own sphere of influence.<sup>24</sup> This effort usually takes the form of projection of Shi'a values and norms onto the Levant (a process that started with the Islamic revolution) and financial and technical assistance to allies in their fight against al-Qa`ida.

24 There is no consensus among terrorism analysts over the nature of the relationship (or lack thereof) between al-Qa`ida and Iran. Some argue that the two often cooperate for the purpose of defeating common enemies (in this case the United States), while others claim that religious, political and even strategic considerations prevent the two from forming any serious partnerships.

### Al-Qa`ida Unclear About the Levant

In their statements and writings, al-Qa`ida's senior leaders have often called for the destruction of Israel and the liberation of Jerusalem. Rarely, however, have Bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri, or other senior leaders addressed in detail the value of the Levant from either an operational or strategic perspective.<sup>25</sup> There are, however, some cases where Salafi-jihadi ideologues mentioned the Levant when highlighting al-Qa`ida's "global strategy." For example, Muhammad Ibrahim Makkawi, allegedly one of al-Qa`ida's "strategic brains," wrote a document entitled "al-Qaeda's Strategy to the Year 2020," which indicated that al-Qa`ida has a master plan to pursue a long-term jihad campaign of five distinct phases to rid the *umma* (global Islamic nation) of all forms of oppression.<sup>26</sup> The strategy's third stage features the Levant where al-Qa`ida would militarily engage the United States in a long war of attrition.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the now-detained Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, who some have labeled "the architect of the new al-Qa`ida" after the September 11, 2001 attacks, sharply disagreed with Bin Ladin and attached more significance to the Levant than the al-Qa`ida chief or his deputy.<sup>28</sup> In his lectures, al-Suri placed enormous emphasis on the strategic impact of striking Jewish, American, and Western interests in the heart of the Arab world: the Arab Peninsula and the Levant. According to one analyst who has closely studied al-Suri,

in his mind, the "new Crusader imperialism" aimed to take control of the oil resources and the holy places, both of which were

strategically located precisely in that region. Any attack here would damage the Crusaders many times more than attacks elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi is also suspected of having a strategic plan that included the Levant. His organization, for example, perpetrated terrorist attacks in Amman in 2005 and sent many fighters to Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon in an effort to expand in the Levant and destabilize the "apostate" regimes there.<sup>30</sup> Finally, an allegedly leading jihadist ideologue, known as "the Spearhead of the Mujahidin," claims that al-Qa`ida is already well established in the Levant and is focused on fighting Israel.<sup>31</sup>

These notable cases notwithstanding, there is no evidence that al-Qa`ida's chief leader or his deputy have devoted any substantial resources to the Levant. This leads one to assume that this sub-region, while important spiritually to al-Qa`ida's leaders because of Jerusalem, is not currently as strategically or operationally critical as other regions in the Middle East or South Asia.

### Conclusion

While Levantine societies have had success and luck in battling overt Salafi-jihadi insurgencies and preventing them from developing in their region, they have had to face challenges in a much more demanding category: combating the threat of underground terrorist cells, which seem to be proliferating in the Levant. The relative decline of al-Qa`ida in Iraq following the success of the U.S. counterinsurgency effort has presumably started a decentralization process for the group. Many of its members have fled Iraq to neighboring countries such as Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. In these countries, they have worked on creating terrorist cells to attack Western targets and Israel.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, material links between Salafi-jihadi cells and al-Qa`ida's central leadership have been reported in Lebanon. For example, in June 2009 a cell of four people (one Kuwaiti, one Syrian, one Lebanese, and one Tajik) with verifiable ties to al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan was apprehended by the Lebanese military intelligence services.<sup>33</sup> In July 2007, 10 men allegedly linked to al-Qa`ida were arrested and accused of using a billboard advertising agency as cover to spy on the UN peacekeeping force and the Lebanese army in preparation for an attack.<sup>34</sup>

This worrying trend sheds light on the nature of al-Qa`ida's strategy toward the Levant. Instead of helping to create overt insurgent movements in that region, al-Qa`ida is likely focusing on embedding terrorist sleeper cells that are in charge, with the help of the franchise in Iraq, of planning and conducting terrorist operations against Western and Israeli targets.

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<sup>25</sup> It is worth recalling that during and after the battle of Nahr al-Bared in Lebanon in the summer of 2007, Ayman al-Zawahiri was severely criticized online by al-Qa`ida sympathizers for not publicly supporting Fatah al-Islam in its fight against the Lebanese army. Even Bin Ladin did not issue a statement praising Fatah al-Islam by name.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Ulph, "Al-Qaeda's Strategy Until 2020," *Terrorism Focus* 2:6 (2005). It is not clear at what stage al-Qa`ida considers itself in today.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> For more on al-Suri's life and influence, see Paul Cruickshank and Mohamad Hage Ali, "Abu Musab al-Suri: Architect of the New Al-Qa`ida," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30:1 (2007).

<sup>29</sup> Brynjar Lia, "Dissidents in al-Qaida: Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's Critique of bin Ladin and the Salafi Jihadi Current," Lecture at Princeton University, December 3, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> See Saab and Ranstorp, "Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism."

<sup>31</sup> Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Al-Qaeda Ideologue Describes Alleged Spread of Al-Qaeda in the Levant," *Terrorism Monitor* 7:7 (2009).

<sup>32</sup> For example, al-Qa`ida cells have attacked UNIFIL (more specifically its Spanish contingent in June 2007)

and claimed rocket attacks from southern Lebanon against Israel. See Patrick Galey, "Al-Qaeda Claims Rocket Attacks Against Israel," *Daily Star* [Beirut], July 27, 2009; Yaakoz Katz, "Al-Qaeda Suspected in Attack that Killed 5 UN Troops," *Jerusalem Post*, June 25, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Hassan Oleik, "Al Iddi'a ala Mawkoufin min al-Qa`ida Mourtabitin bi Afghanistan," *al-Akhhbar*, June 30, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> "Lebanon: Ad Agency Served as Cover for Terror Plot, Reports Say," *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 2009.