

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



# CTCSENTINEL

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## SPECIAL ISSUE: THE AL-QA`IDA THREAT 14 YEARS LATER



FEATURE COMMENTARY

## Fourteen Years and Counting

Despite a reduction of the threat from the original al-Qa`ida,  
concerns are growing about affiliates **MICHAEL MORELL**

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

**Nick  
Rasmussen**

Director, NCTC

# Contents

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## FEATURE COMMENTARY

---

- 1 Fourteen Years and Counting: The Evolving Terrorist Threat**  
MICHAEL MORELL
- 

## INTERVIEW

---

- 5 A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Nick Rasmussen, Director, NCTC**  
PAUL CRUICKSHANK
- 

## ANALYSIS

---

- 9 Assessing Al-Qa`ida Central's Resilience**  
BARBARA SUDE
- 

- 13 Al-Qa`ida Plays a Long Game in Syria**  
CHARLES LISTER
- 

- 19 AQAP: A Resurgent Threat**  
KATHERINE ZIMMERMAN
- 

## PROFILE

---

- 24 From Khorasan to the Levant:  
A Profile of Sanafi al-Nasr**  
KÉVIN JACKSON
- 

### FROM THE EDITOR

This special issue of the *CTC Sentinel* focuses on the evolution of the al-Qa`ida threat 14 years after 9/11. "With all the media focus on ISIL, what's sometimes lost is that we still view al-Qa`ida and the various al-Qa`ida affiliates and nodes as being a principal counterterrorism priority," Nick Rasmussen, the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, stresses in our interview. Much of the concern relates to strengthening al-Qa`ida affiliates in Yemen and in Syria that Katherine Zimmerman and Charles Lister focus on respectively. In our cover story, Michael Morell, the former deputy director of the CIA and a senior fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center, warns that the Yemeni al-Qa`ida affiliate "poses an even greater threat to the U.S. homeland than does the Islamic State, at least for now." This issue also features an examination of al-Qa`ida's resilience in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region by former CIA analyst Barbara Sude and a profile by Kévin Jackson of Sanafi al-Nasr, a veteran Saudi al-Qa`ida operative now believed to be with the "Khorasan group" in Syria and "whose ideological and personal animus toward the United States may influence the degree to which al-Qa`ida elements plot international terrorism from Syrian soil."

This issue also features the first major redesign of the *CTC Sentinel* since the Combating Terrorism Center launched the publication eight years ago. We are looking to further enhance the reader's experience both in print and online in the months ahead and to make it even more of a must-read for anyone interested in these crucial subjects.

**Paul Cruickshank, Editor in Chief**

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# Fourteen Years and Counting: The Evolving Terrorist Threat

By Michael Morell

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**Fourteen years after 9/11, there has been a reduction of the threat from the original al-Qa`ida organization, but there is growing concern about al-Qa`ida's affiliates in Yemen and Syria. The threat posed by the Islamic State to the West is wide-ranging and it is safe to say Islamic extremism is likely to be with us for generations. There has been a reduction in the threat of large, spectacular attacks, but a sharp rise in the threat of small-scale attacks. The United States must maintain pressure on terrorist groups to stop them from bouncing back, but let other countries take the lead when they have the capabilities.**

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**F**ourteen years ago this month, the United States suffered the single worst attack in its history. In just over an hour, 19 terrorists took control of four airliners, crashed three of them into buildings and one into a field, killing nearly 3,000 people. Two weeks later, the United States was at war both with the group responsible—Usama bin Ladin's terrorist organization, al-Qa`ida—and with the government of Afghanistan, which had harbored al-Qa`ida.

This war continues today, against the remnants of Bin Ladin's original group in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and against a variety of similarly motivated extremist groups elsewhere in the world. So, where are we after 14 years? The key questions are: What is the threat we face as a nation today? How is the threat developing? And, what should we do about it?

It is important to start with an overarching point. In the post-9/11 fight against these terrorists, the United States has scored a great victory, but so have the extremists. Our great victory has been the severe degradation of the al-Qa`ida senior leadership in South Asia—the group responsible for 9/11. The United States—along with Afghan and Pakistani partners—has achieved this through aggressive counterterrorism operations.

Al-Qa`ida's great victory has been the spread of its ideology across a large geographic area. It runs from northern Nigeria into the Sahel, primarily in northern Mali, and across North Africa from Morocco through Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya to Egypt. It also includes parts of East Africa, primarily in Somalia but also in Ken-

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*Michael Morell is the former Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency and is now a senior fellow with the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. This article is adapted from a chapter in his book, published by Twelve, The Great War of Our Time: The CIA's Fight Against Terrorism from al-Qa`ida to ISIS.*

ya, and stretches across the Gulf of Aden into Yemen and up to Iraq and Syria. Al-Qa`ida, of course, remains active in South Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh), and in some parts of Southeast Asia. All told, some 20 countries now have terrorist groups within their borders espousing the jihadist ideology.

This spread began because of Bin Ladin's successes in East Africa, Yemen, and the United States (the embassy bombings in 1998, the USS Cole bombing in 2000, and the 9/11 attacks). These al-Qa`ida victories created a following for Bin Ladin. He became a role model. The spread was given a boost by the operatives who fled South Asia after 9/11 and by Muslim opposition to the Western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan—just as Bin Ladin had hoped. But the spread of al-Qa`ida's ideology has been given perhaps its most significant lift by the Arab Spring, which created safe havens where the movement could operate and which provided the franchises with much-needed recruits, money, and weapons.

These two victories have significantly altered the threat landscape. The change is characterized by a reduction of the threat from the original al-Qa`ida organization, but a significant expansion of the threat from emerging groups. There has also been a reduction in the threat of large, spectacular attacks, but a skyrocketing rise in the threat of small-scale attacks. This is playing out: 2014 was the most lethal year for global terrorism in the 45 years that such data has been compiled.<sup>1</sup>

This is the threat from a broad perspective. What about the threat from specific groups?

## The Islamic State

The Islamic State—an organization that for 10 years was commonly known as al-Qa`ida in Iraq—has grown faster than any terrorist group I can remember. The threat it poses to the West is as wide-ranging as any we have seen.

The Islamic State poses three terrorist threats to the United States (although, its most significant threat is not terrorism but rather the threat it poses to the stability of the entire Middle East). First, the Islamic State's success on the battlefield and its Madison Avenue-quality messaging is attracting young men and women to join its cause. At least 25,000 foreign nationals from roughly 100 countries have traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight. Most have joined the Islamic State. These foreign nationals are getting experience on the battlefield, and they are becoming increasingly radicalized.

There is a particular subset of these fighters that the West should worry about. Some 5,000 individuals have traveled to Syria and Iraq from Western Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States. They all have easy access to the U.S. homeland.

There are two possibilities to worry about—that these fighters leave the Middle East and either conduct an attack on their own or do so at the direction of the Islamic State leadership. The former has already happened in Europe but not yet in the United States, though it will. In spring 2014, a young Frenchman, Mehdi Nem-

mouche, who had fought in Syria, returned to Europe and shot four people at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels.

The latter—an Islamic State-directed attack—has not yet occurred either, but it will. Today, such an attack would be relatively unsophisticated and small scale, but over time the Islamic State's capability to conduct a more complex attack will grow. This is what long-term safe haven in Iraq and Syria would give the Islamic State, and it is exactly what the group is aiming for.

Second, the Islamic State is building a following among other extremist groups around the world—at a more rapid pace than al-Qa`ida ever enjoyed. This has now occurred in 10 countries, including Algeria, Libya, Nigeria, Egypt, Yemen, and Afghanistan. More will follow. This makes these groups even more dangerous because they will increasingly target the Islamic State's enemies (including the United States), and they will increasingly adopt the Islamic State's brutality.

We saw the targeting of Westerners play out in early 2015 when an Islamic State-associated group in Libya killed an American in an attack on a hotel in Tripoli frequented by diplomats and international businessmen.<sup>a</sup> We saw the new brutality of these groups again just a few weeks later when another Islamic State-affiliated group in Libya beheaded 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians.

It is even possible that we could see one or more of these Islamic State-associated groups take over significant territory in the countries in which they operate. In fact, this is already starting to occur: in March 2015, the Islamic State took control of the important Libyan port city of Sirte.

And, third, the Islamic State's message is radicalizing young men and women in the United States who have never traveled to Syria or Iraq but who want to commit an attack to demonstrate their solidarity with the Islamic State. At least two such attacks have already occurred in the United States—an individual with sympathies for the Islamic State attacked two New York City police officers with a hatchet and two Islamic State-inspired individuals attacked an anti-Islamic gathering near Dallas, Texas. Both attacks were unsuccessful, but we can expect more. Dozens of other Americans have been arrested for plotting attacks in the United States on behalf of the Islamic State.

### Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

Al-Qa`ida in Yemen—the group most tightly aligned to the al-Qa`ida leadership in Pakistan—poses an even greater threat to the U.S. homeland than does the Islamic State, at least for now. The last three attempted attacks by an al-Qa`ida group against the United States—attempts to bring down airliners in 2009, 2010, and 2012—were all AQAP plots. Two of these came close to being great successes for al-Qa`ida.

One AQAP senior leader is more dangerous than the rest—Ibrahim al-Asiri, a Saudi by birth and AQAP's chief bomb-maker. Al-Asiri is the mastermind behind new explosive devices designed to evade security checks. He is smart and creative, and he is training a new generation of AQAP bomb-makers. Al-Asiri may well be the most dangerous terrorist alive today. He is a master at his craft.

Al-Asiri built a rectum bomb and recruited his younger brother Abdullah to use it in an attempt to assassinate Saudi Arabia's most

## “One AQAP senior leader is more dangerous than the rest—Ibrahim al-Asiri, a Saudi by birth and AQAP's chief bomb-maker.”

senior security official, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, the country's minister of the interior and now crown prince. Abdullah pretended to be a repentant terrorist, and in a meeting with Prince Muhammad designed to symbolize the sincerity of his change of heart, he detonated the device. The two were sitting shoulder to shoulder when Abdullah hit a button on a cell phone, detonating the explosives. Abdullah was killed instantly—pieces of him were scattered all over the room, including the ceiling—but Prince Muhammad, sitting just inches away, survived with only minor injuries.

Al-Asiri's bombs were also used in the three attempted attacks against the United States mentioned earlier. Al-Asiri was the mastermind behind Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's underwear bomb, which nearly brought down an airliner flying from Amsterdam to Detroit in 2009. Al-Asiri also built a bomb hidden in a printer cartridge that was nearly impossible to detect. The goal was to bring down multiple cargo planes flying to the United States in 2010. The printer cartridge bomb could not be detected by either traditional airport scanners or dogs trained to locate explosives. He also built a non-metallic suicide vest, again designed to bring down airliners, and he has experimented with surgically implanting explosive devices inside people.

AQAP's capabilities were on full display in Paris in January 2015 when two brothers attacked the offices of the satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* over its lampooning of the Prophet Muhammad. The assault on *Charlie Hebdo* was the largest terrorist attack in France since 1961 and claimed the lives of 12 people. It was methodical and demonstrated planning, organization, and precision. The brothers, who had initially escaped the scene, were found two days later, 20 miles northeast of Paris but took hostages before they were finally gunned down by police after a nine-hour standoff. At the same time the siege was underway, a third individual conducted a sympathy attack, taking and killing four hostages at a kosher market in Paris, before the police killed him as well.

One of the brothers involved in the *Charlie Hebdo* attack had traveled to Yemen in 2011, where he attended a terrorist training camp run by AQAP. He met with a leading operative of the group, an American named Anwar al-Awlaki, who was intent on conducting attacks in the United States and Western Europe. During the operation in Paris, the brothers announced their allegiance to AQAP, and subsequently AQAP claimed to have directed the brothers to attack *Charlie Hebdo* and to have provided them with funding. If AQAP's claims are true, this would represent its first successful attack in the West and the largest al-Qa`ida attack in Western Europe since the London bombings 10 years earlier.

And despite losing some senior operatives to U.S. counterterrorism operations in the last few months, the group has grown in strength as a result of the Yemeni civil war. The number of fighters is now greater than ever, it is holding territory again, and it has more money and heavy weapons than ever. AQAP remains extremely dangerous.

<sup>a</sup> Islamic State-associated groups may have been behind two attacks this year against Westerners in Tunisia—one in March against a museum in Tunis and a second in June on a beach in Sousse.



*A U.S. Marine trains Ugandan soldiers for the fight against al-Shabab.*

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

### Al-Qa`ida Senior Leadership (AQSL)

Where does the threat to the U.S. homeland from the al-Qa`ida Senior Leadership stand today? Al-Qa`ida in Pakistan still has the ability to carry out attacks in the United States, but only small-scale attacks—a singular event that might kill 100 people or fewer. I do not want to understate such an attack, but al-Qa`ida in Pakistan no longer has the ability to conduct a 9/11-style event.

It had that capability twice—in the period just before 9/11 and from 2006 to 2010. It was first taken from the group after the 9/11 attacks by the U.S. paramilitary and military intervention in Afghanistan and by Pakistan's decision to work with the CIA against al-Qa`ida. It was taken from the group a second time by the aggressive counterterrorism operations begun by President George W. Bush in August 2008 and continued by President Barack Obama.

But just because AQSL does not have that capability today does not mean it will not get it back someday. Indeed, it may even be likely given trends in Afghanistan. Even in a best-case outcome for Afghanistan after the withdrawal of U.S. forces, in which the government controls Kabul and most cities, the Taliban will control swaths of Afghan territory in the south and east. (The worst-case scenario is that the Taliban will be knocking on the door of Kabul within 18 months of the departure of U.S. forces.)

The al-Qa`ida leadership in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), if not defeated by them, will find safe haven with the Taliban. Some members will stay in Pakistan, but many will move back into Afghanistan. And if the United States cannot or chooses not to contest al-Qa`ida there, the group will rebound, it will resurge, and it will eventually again pose a 9/11-style threat to the homeland. And, as in Yemen, there is one particular terrorist in South Asia who is the focus of concern—Farouq al-Qahtani.

The al-Qa`ida leadership in Pakistan sent al-Qahtani to Afghanistan as a backstop so al-Qa`ida could regroup if it lost its sanctuary in Pakistan. Al-Qahtani took his men to one of the most inhospitable

areas on the planet—Afghanistan's Kunar and Nuristan Provinces, where steep mountains and narrow river valleys make movement extremely difficult. There, al-Qahtani has developed a following among the Taliban and the locals, and his al-Qa`ida branch has grown as more operatives have joined his group.

Al-Qahtani, a Qatari by birth, is a counterterrorism expert's worst nightmare. He is smart and operationally sophisticated. He is also a charismatic leader. He is one of the few al-Qa`ida leaders who might have what it takes to replace Bin Ladin.

### The Khorasan Group

The Islamic State is not the only terrorist group in Syria. The first jihadi group there to rise against President Bashar al-Assad was Jabhat al-Nusra. While the Islamic State grew out of the old al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI), Jabhat al-Nusra was formed from an older organization of Syrian extremists who had helped to facilitate the movement of foreign fighters into Iraq, via Syria, during the initial rise of AQI at the time of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Unlike the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra is fully in the camp of AQSL. Jabhat al-Nusra is an official affiliate of al-Qa`ida, and it accepts guidance from Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qa`ida's leader since Bin Ladin's death in 2011.

Early in the fight against Assad, al-Zawahiri sent a group of his own operatives from Pakistan to Syria. Al-Zawahiri had two objectives for the group: one was to assist Jabhat al-Nusra in its fight against Assad and the second was to use Syria as a base of operations for attacks against the West, including against the United States. This group of operatives from Pakistan is called the Khorasan Group. Like AQAP and AQSL, the Khorasan Group has the capability to conduct successful attacks in the United States. And, as with the Islamic State, the greater the safe haven Jabhat al-Nusra has in Syria, the more potent their capabilities against the West will become over time.

There is a long list of other jihadi groups, largely in Africa but also more broadly, that pose a local threat to U.S. interests and our allies. These groups regularly conduct attacks—three of the best known are the September 2012 attacks in Benghazi against our diplomatic facility, an attack in September 2013 in Nairobi, Kenya involving the al-Qa`ida-affiliated group al-Shabab that targeted an upscale mall, and the January 2013 strike at In Amenas, Algeria, which involved terrorists from Mali taking hostages at a natural gas facility in the eastern part of the country operated by British Petroleum and Norway's Statoil. In these three attacks, terrorists killed more than 100 people, including seven Americans. The risk to Americans living and traveling in certain parts of the world is significant.

### Dealing with the Menace

So, how do we deal with the problem of terrorism and how do we end this menace? The most important concept that policymakers—and the American public—must accept is that if we are to keep the homeland and Americans overseas safe, we must maintain pressure on terrorist groups who have both the desire and capability to attack us. The history is clear—when the pressure is on, their capabilities degrade. When the pressure is removed, they bounce back.

But that is not the same thing as saying the United States must be the sole actor in putting that pressure on al-Qa`ida. Quite the contrary: it is best if other countries take the lead when they have the necessary capabilities, and that we act only when there is no other option. Not only does this make sense from the perspective of not playing into al-Qa`ida's narrative about the United States, but it also has the best chance of being accepted, long term, by the American people.

What does this mean in practice? First, the U.S. intelligence community and military must—along with our allies—expend the resources and effort to build the intelligence, security, military, and rule-of-law capabilities of the frontline states in the fight against al-Qa`ida—particularly those that are historically weak and those destabilized by the Arab Spring. This is a long-term effort, but it has to be systematic, it has to be sustained, and it has to be funded.

Second, having the capabilities is not enough—a willingness by the frontline states to use them against extremist groups is also required. And here American diplomacy must take the lead. The U.S. Department of State needs to be active in convincing countries to fight terrorism within their borders. Additionally, the president, and his or her senior national security team, must actively support this diplomacy.

Third, we need to have global partners willing to take action outside their own borders when necessary—so that we are not the only country doing so. That's another job for our country's diplomats, including our top diplomat, the president.

This is what France did in Mali in January 2013.

The French government, growing increasingly concerned about the threat from al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), took action. AQIM, reinforced with thousands of weapons from Libya, had taken advantage of a security vacuum in the north of Mali caused by the political crisis there. As a result, AQIM was able to seize control of a large swath of territory approximately the size of Texas, imposing sharia law and opening training camps for jihadis of all

**“The history is clear—when the pressure is on [terrorist groups] their capabilities degrade. When the pressure is removed, they bounce back.”**

types. Understanding that France would be AQIM's number-one target, the French responded, putting thousands of troops on the ground and going toe-to-toe with the enemy, killing hundreds of terrorists, driving the rest of them back into the mountains, and denying them a vitally important safe haven. The French are to be commended for this action. It is a model for what we need other allies to do when necessary.

Fourth, the United States needs to act when no one else is able. Whether the action is air strikes by manned or unmanned assets, action from special operations forces on the ground either alone or in close support of others, or even the use of conventional military forces, the United States needs to be willing and able to act.

All of the above is necessary, but it is not enough to win the war over the long term, as more and more terrorists are created every day. To win the war over the longer term, we and our allies must address the issues that create terrorists in the first place. We must address the disease as well as the symptoms. We must undermine the jihadist appeal to young Muslims. We must discredit the terrorists' narrative that hatred and violence are the only mechanisms for dealing with the modern world. This effort requires engaging in and winning the war of ideas. But it also requires minimizing the number of disenchanted young Muslims through economic and social development. Counter-radicalization is a two-part effort.

Counter-radicalization has not been a major focus of the United States since 9/11, but action on this front in the long term will be just as important as action on the intelligence, law enforcement, and military fronts. There have been steps in this direction, but more needs to be done. Developing the policies to get at the root causes of why young men and some women join terrorist groups has never really gotten off the ground.

It is not unreasonable to ask why we have not yet attacked the problem at its roots. The answer is twofold. First, the priority will always be on those individuals who are trying to attack us. That will always take precedence over the longer-term issues. And, second, the issues involved in counter-radicalization are numerous and complex, and require a number of countries to take the right steps. The issues involve good governance, anti-corruption, economic development, social service provision but particularly education, religious tolerance, and a host of other factors. Most important, for every al-Qa`ida narrative there must be a counter-narrative delivered loudly and widely—largely by governments in countries where young people are radicalized and by Islamic scholars and clerics.

Such programs will take years to bear fruit. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that Islamic extremism is likely to be with us for generations. We are likely to look back at the last 14 years as only the opening salvo in what will be a very long war. **CTC**

### Citation

# A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Nick Rasmussen, Director, NCTC

By Paul Cruickshank

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**Nicholas Rasmussen was sworn in as Director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) in December 2014. He previously served as Deputy Director since June 2012, after returning from the NSC where he served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counterterrorism from October 2007. Mr. Rasmussen previously served at NCTC from 2004–2007 in senior policy and planning positions. From 2001 to 2004 he served on the NSC as Director for Regional Affairs in the Office of Combating Terrorism.**

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**CTC:** Fourteen years after 9/11, what is the terrorist threat the United States now faces?

**Rasmussen:** When you look at the potential for a catastrophic mass casualty attack of the sort that al-Qa`ida carried out against our country at the time of 9/11, clearly we've had great success at substantially reducing the chances of that kind of attack recurring. We've done that not only with aggressive CT action against core al-Qa`ida in South Asia and around the world but also through an array of defenses we've erected as a country. The counterterrorism and homeland security infrastructure that exists gives us much greater defense, disruption, and mitigation capabilities that we did not have at the time of 9/11. And that's something that is very, very important and something worth keeping in perspective when you think about the sense of threat we feel as a country. That said, the array of extremist terrorist actors around the globe is broader, wider, and deeper than it has been at any time since 9/11. And the threat landscape is more unpredictable. So I think it's fair to say that we face more threats, coming at us from more places, involving more individuals than we have at any time since 9/11. It's also worth remembering that the scale of the capabilities of these extremist actors does not rise to the level that core al-Qa`ida had at its disposal at the time of 9/11.

**CTC:** As you sit here at the NCTC, what threat trends and changes in the strategic and operational environments are most concerning to you?

**Rasmussen:** I would highlight two trends in the threat environment that give us the greatest concern. First is the increasing ability of terrorist actors to communicate with each other outside our reach. The difficulty in collecting precise intelligence on terrorist intentions and the status of particular terrorist plots is increasing over time. There are several reasons for this: exposure of the techniques we use to collect intelligence; disclosures of classified information that have given terrorist groups a better understanding of how we collect intelligence; and terrorist groups' innovative and agile use of new means of communicating, including ways which they understand are beyond our ability to collect. FBI Director James Comey has spoken of the challenges that we face with end-to-end

encryption.

Second, while we've seen a decrease in the frequency of large-scale, complex, even multi-year plotting efforts, we've seen an increase in much more ubiquitous, more rapidly evolving threat or plot vectors that emerge simply by an individual being encouraged to take action and then quickly gathering the resources needed and moving into an operational phase. This is something I would tie very much to the modus operandi of ISIL-inspired (Editor's Note: also known as the Islamic State or ISIS) terrorists. The "flash to bang" ratio in plotting of this sort is much quicker and allows for much less time for traditional law enforcement and intelligence tools to disrupt or mitigate potential plots. ISIL has figured this out. Individuals connected to ISIL have understood that by motivating actors in their own locations to take action against Western countries and targets, they can achieve the kind of effect they want politically. In terms of propaganda and recruitment, they can generate further support for their movement without carrying out catastrophic, mass-casualty attacks. And that's an innovation in the terrorist playbook that poses a great challenge.

**CTC:** There has been a large rise in the volume of jihadi social media. How do you adapt to cope with this new environment and keep track of it?

**Rasmussen:** Well, first and foremost, we're devoting a great deal more effort to analyzing and assessing what we call PAI, publicly available information, that potential terrorist actors may be putting out that is available to anybody who has the capability to monitor social media. That is a paradigm shift for many in the Intelligence Community. I can remember previous instances in which we've looked at particular terrorism incidents or events in which we have focused almost exclusively on clandestinely collected intelligence, either signals or human intelligence collected by one of our Intelligence Community partners. That is no longer the primary way of doing business as we think about plots. There will always be a critically important role for traditional intelligence, but we need greater capability to monitor huge volumes of social media information and to make sense of that information in real time so that we can enable the operational agencies—here in the homeland, that would be FBI, and overseas, CIA and DoD—to turn it into actionable intelligence. I would not argue that we are anywhere close to being as adept and agile yet at that task as we need to be. Just the sheer volume of threat information that we see every day in social media communications suggests that we need to increase our capacity to make better use of this information.

**CTC:** And it's difficult to tell who's just sounding off and who's a true threat.

**Rasmussen:** Exactly. Carrying out mitigating and disruption activity involves resources, and you cannot throw resources at every social media claim, tweet, or utterance you see. But at the same time, you have to quickly determine whether there is capability behind the

words. One of the things we're challenging our analysts to do is to try to move more quickly to the phase where we've identified a specific individual and then we can make an assessment about that individual's capabilities that will help law enforcement and intelligence agencies prioritize their resources to monitor and disrupt those threats.

**CTC:** But the concern is if they're going dark to some degree, then you don't see the whole picture.

**Rasmussen:** Yes, and you've identified the very same set of problems we've identified as an Intelligence Community. We're deep in the process of confronting that very challenging problem now. I wish we had better solutions to that problem of going dark than we currently do.

**CTC:** This special issue of the *CTC Sentinel* focuses on the evolution of the al-Qa`ida threat. How do you view the current threat from al-Qa`ida and its affiliates?

**Rasmussen:** With all the media focus on ISIL, what's sometimes lost is that we still view al-Qa`ida and the various al-Qa`ida affiliates and nodes as being a principal counterterrorism priority. I'm reluctant to tier the priorities in a way that would in any way downgrade al-Qa`ida in favor of greater focus on ISIL. That's sometimes lost a little bit in the public conversation right now. When we are looking at the set of threats that we face as a nation, al-Qa`ida threats still figure very, very prominently in that analysis.

Starting in South Asia we've clearly achieved a tremendous degree of impact in degrading core al-Qa`ida's ability to carry out significant, large-scale attacks aimed at the West. The steady attrition of al-Qa`ida senior leaders has put more and more pressure on the few that remain, and yet we believe we have both constrained their effectiveness but also constrained their ability to recruit, train, and deploy operatives from their safe haven in South Asia. None of that means that the threat picture from South Asia from the core al-Qa`ida resident in the tribal areas of Pakistan or in eastern Afghanistan has been eliminated entirely.

Now, as you try to assess what may happen a few years down the road as the U.S. military and intelligence footprint in South Asia becomes smaller as a part of the drawdown in Afghanistan, as intelligence professionals we're left trying to understand what level of risk we may face over time that al-Qa`ida may regenerate, find renewed safe haven, or be able to restore lost capability. It's my view that we will retain sufficient capability to be able to place sufficient pressure on that core al-Qa`ida network so that that won't happen. We will, as an Intelligence Community, be very much on the alert for signs that that capability is being restored, and I think we would have adequate ability to warn against that should we find ourselves trending in that direction. All that said, I'm still not ready to declare core al-Qa`ida as having been defeated in the classical sense of the word where the capability has been removed.

Al-Qa`ida will remain a threat as long as they have the potential to regenerate capability. The other interesting feature of the South Asia landscape with al-Qa`ida is the increasing competition between extremist actors within South Asia itself, between and among the Taliban, ISIL's branch in South Asia, and al-Qa`ida. So that's an additional factor that we're still trying to understand. On the one hand, you look at any conflict among your terrorist adversaries as being potentially a good thing as it distracts them from their core mission of plotting attacks against Western targets. On the



NCTC Director Nick Rasmussen

NCTC

other hand, it introduces a degree of uncertainty into the terrorism landscape that raises questions that I don't think we have answers to yet. It's something that we're going to be watching very closely.

Turning to al-Qa`ida affiliates, with al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the ongoing conflict in Yemen, and the lack of robust U.S. presence in the country, significantly complicates our ability to carry out counterterrorism operations inside Yemen. When we don't have the same intelligence, military, and diplomatic footprint in a country that we traditionally have had, we are disadvantaged. That said, I think in recent months we've still been able to achieve some degree of success in disrupting significant AQAP targets. I think we would all feel much better, however, if we were able to achieve a resolution to the political conflict in Yemen. With a fully functioning Yemeni state we could, once again, count on being able to have traditional liaison relationships to train, advise, and assist activities on the ground under DoD direction aimed at empowering our partners inside Yemen. All of that is a much more difficult and challenging enterprise right now. I think we're all hoping over the coming months that there'll be some move towards a restoration of the status quo ante in Yemen, at least politically, so that we can get back to a more stable counterterrorism platform there.

**CTC:** Is there consensus that AQAP is growing in strength?

**Rasmussen:** There's no doubt that AQAP has taken advantage of the political turmoil and the conflict going on in Yemen between Yemeni government forces and Huthi forces. There's no doubt that AQAP has taken advantage of that and feels less pressure in large areas of Yemen than it felt at an earlier stage. That said, AQAP is an active participant in the fight on the ground in Yemen, and that is shaping AQAP's domestic strategy as they try to engage on the ground against what they feel are enemy forces inside Yemen. However, AQAP in the past has effectively planned external operations during times of internal conflict. So even if the larger AQAP group of terrorists is heavily engaged in a conventional military conflict on the ground in Yemen, we still worry very much about that small set of actors who are focused on external operations.

**CTC:** Including Ibrahim al-Asiri and aviation targets?

**Rasmussen:** Yes.



**CTC:** And what is the concern about the Syrian al-Qa`ida affiliates?

**Rasmussen:** In Syria, we've been worried for some time now about the group of al-Qa`ida veterans who have taken up refuge in Syria. They brought to the conflict in Syria a set of skills, contacts, capabilities, and experience that could cause problems for us in a number of ways. First, it would advance the efforts of extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra inside Syria and advantage Jabhat al-Nusra in the conflict. We remain concerned that this set of actors had a particular interest, over time, in developing the capability to carry out external operations either aimed at Western Europe or potentially U.S. targets as well. This ultimately led to the U.S. decision to carry out military action inside Syria aimed specifically at degrading and disrupting the external operations capability of the so-called Khorasan group. We have had some success in mitigating and disrupting the external ambitions of those particular al-Qa`ida-linked individuals operating in Syria. But I wouldn't by any means argue that the job is complete on that front. We continue to be concerned and to watch, along with our partners, for signs that plotting is advancing.

**CTC:** Are there indications Khorasan is providing specifically tailored bomb-making training to Western extremists—like al-Qa`ida did previously in the tribal areas of Pakistan—so they can be sent back for attacks in the West?

**Rasmussen:** Without getting into the specifics of intelligence, what I would say is we know that among this Khorasan set of actors there are individuals with specific terrorism-related skills that cause us great concern. I wouldn't want to necessarily compare it to the kind of plotting that was emerging out of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) or emerging out of Yemen under AQAP's auspices other than to say that again, we are very careful to monitor particular individuals who we know have particular skills and their ability to pass and share these skills with other actors.

**CTC:** What is the assessment of the relationship between the Khorasan group and Jabhat al-Nusra?

**Rasmussen:** It's a complicated story. What you have are actors who are playing multiple roles in the environment in which they find themselves. In many cases we believe these individuals that we are identifying as the Khorasan group play a role alongside or as part of Jabhat al-Nusra in carrying out action inside Syria to advance the goals of the opposition in Syria against the Assad regime and against ISIL. At the same time, this is a self-selected group of individuals who also have designs beyond the Levant, beyond Iraq and Syria, and so in a sense I look at them as being individuals capable of playing a multitasking role of having more than one agenda, and of having the sufficient capability to work along multiple lines of efforts. Membership in these particular organizations is not always a clean, distinct, or definable proposition; we are often left to assess how the leadership of these various groups actually interacts. Again, as I talked about earlier with respect to Yemen, we continue to be significantly disadvantaged. In Syria, we are not physically present on the ground and not able to collect the kind of intelligence that we have typically collected in places where we've had a much larger physical presence. That makes the challenge of putting the pieces together on the threat emanating from Syria all the more difficult.

**CTC:** Switching to the threat from the Islamic State, the group has a lot of territory and a lot of resources and money so there must

be concern about what it could achieve if its leadership prioritized launching attacks against the West. Belgian officials tell me they believe the leadership of the group had a significant hand in the terrorist plot thwarted in Verviers, Belgium, in January. What is the concern about Islamic State—"directed" plots against the West, with the leadership sending recruits back?

**Rasmussen:** Your question suggests a framework that we have used for a number of years now. On one hand, there are plots directed or guided by a leadership cadre of an organized, coherent terrorist organization. And on the other hand, you have plotting or attack activity that is inspired or motivated by terrorist organizations. The suggestion is that those are two polar opposites. We're increasingly reaching the conclusion in the Intelligence Community, at least at NCTC, that that is much more of a fluid picture than one that is characterized by polar opposites. The distinction between a plotting activity that is motivated or inspired on one end or directed or guided at the other end is blurry; so we are a bit more careful than we used to be in making such distinctions.

There is no doubt that ISIL views itself as being in conflict with the West. It is reasonable to judge that over time they will look to carry out attacks against Western targets beyond those available to them in the Levant region. The very factors you describe in your question—access to resources, both personnel and monetary resources; control of territory, which allows for the creation of a safe haven—those are the ingredients that we traditionally look at as being critical to the development of an external operations capability. We are very concerned and focused on ISIL's trajectory in this regard. That said, at this stage, we do not have clear signs that ISIL has chosen to prioritize this line of effort over and above other endeavors that they are deeply engaged in—winning the war on the ground in Syria and Iraq, which remains, we believe, a top priority for the ISIL leadership; advancing their effort to establish provinces of the caliphate in various locations outside of the Levant region.

I would describe, as much as anything else, a "watching brief" that we are maintaining on ISIL's external operations capability and more specifically to their interest in carrying out larger-scale homeland attacks. Certain individuals associated with ISIL have successfully demonstrated that they can achieve some level of effect with lower-level attacks carried out by individuals motivated or inspired by ISIL, people without a great deal of resources, people without a great deal of training, and so some of the political effect that ISIL seeks to achieve might be achievable in their eyes by means other than an effort to carry out a large-scale, catastrophic, external attack.

Again, I'm sure they've gone to school somewhat on the experience of al-Qa`ida. They know the inherent difficulty in trying to develop, organize, and ultimately execute complex plots that may take many months to organize and implement, and they understand that our collection and disruption capabilities are still very formidable. They may have reached the conclusion that it is not worth the candle at this point in their organizational history. But I don't, for a minute, set aside concern over the potential for a large-scale threat posed by ISIL aimed at the homeland.

**CTC:** And how did that plot disrupted in Belgium in January play into the analysis here on the ISIL threat?

**Rasmussen:** The discussion you had with Belgian officials very much mirrors what I learned from our Belgian colleagues regarding their concern about the links back to ISIL leadership inside

Iraq and Syria. And that, of course, was something that we had not seen with previous ISIL-branded attacks that took place in the West. Prior to that, what we saw were instances in which individuals claimed they were doing something on behalf of ISIL and they may have had some linkage to an ISIL individual at some point in their own personal communications. But it would not have been accurate to say that ISIL had played an organizing or guiding role in pushing that attack. The Belgium experience put into play the idea that there may be an external operations agenda that ISIL leadership is interested in advancing. All of that highlights how much more we need to learn about ISIL's organizational trajectory and strategic direction.

**CTC:** The NCTC has been credited with significantly improving U.S. coordination between counterterrorism agencies. You were there when it was founded in 2004 and, in your second tour, are now the director. What for you are the key contributions NCTC has made in making the United States safer?

**Rasmussen:** I'm extremely proud of NCTC's role and mission as a part of the counterterrorism community. What we've talked about is our effort to become a center of gravity for the nation's counterterrorism enterprise. And I firmly believe we have achieved that kind of place within our community. And I say that largely from an information and analysis perspective, certainly not from an operational perspective. Our partners across the CT community clearly have the operational lead—DoD, the CIA, the FBI.

But I think NCTC has grown to occupy a critically important role as the hub of an information and analysis architecture that serves the counterterrorism enterprise all across the country, not just at the federal level but with state, local, and tribal partners as well. The kind of challenges we faced in the period before 9/11 and certainly immediately after 9/11 in terms of sharing information, putting information into forms where it could be disseminated quickly and shared with our partners who need it the most to carry out counterterrorism responses—I think a lot of those obstacles have been removed.

What was revolutionary at the time is now established and commonplace. I cannot remember the last time we had a significant disagreement within the Intelligence Community about an information-sharing issue or a collecting agency holding back on intelligence that they collected. That simply doesn't happen anymore.

Beyond that, NCTC is playing an increasingly important role in engaging with state, local, and tribal law enforcement and government authorities all across the country to understand the threat of homegrown violent extremism and to develop appropriate responses to those threats. Increasingly, NCTC is partnering with the Justice Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and the FBI in an effort to bring as much information as possible to communities about extremism, the homegrown violent extremist threat, the process of radicalization, indicators that an individual may be moving towards violence, and potential opportunities to disrupt individuals before they reach the stage of being terrorist actors. We're much more involved in that conversation than we were a few years ago. It's an appropriate role for NCTC to play and it's one I'm very proud of.

**CTC:** And that's one of the ways you've been adapting to this change in the operating environment with the volume and the speed of social media; it's getting more engaged with the community, sending

staffers to meetings in the community.

**Rasmussen:** Exactly. As a counterterrorism community, we've realized that it's not the most likely outcome that an FBI agent or an intelligence officer working in Washington will be the first person to identify a developing homeland plot or threat. What is far more likely is that the threat will be identified by a member of the local community, a member of local law enforcement, a member of local government, or simply a peer, family member, or friend of an individual who has become a homegrown violent extremist. They are, in a sense, the first-line responders in our effort to deal with the homegrown violent extremist problem. Our responsibility at the federal level is to empower that set of actors with as much information as we possibly can. I would argue that, as a counterterrorism community, we're making great progress in this area, but there is a need for us to scale up our efforts; the work that we're doing in 10 cities, we should be doing in 50 cities. We are trying, over time, to increase the level of resources we devote to this effort.

Currently, I don't think that anyone would argue that federal and local agencies are adequately resourced to deal with the homegrown violent extremist threat that we face all across the country. The effort here at NCTC is focused on providing the analytic underpinning that supports our engagement with local communities, but also having officers and analysts actually go around the country and engage in conversations, in briefings, in constructive discussions about not only the problem as we see it, but what are possible off-ramps, what are possible disruption opportunities before something reaches the point where a law enforcement outcome is the only outcome.

**CTC:** One of the things the CT community has struggled with is measuring effectiveness in this fight. How can we develop measurable and useful metrics to assess the effectiveness of our CT efforts? What metrics are most useful to you in determining whether the United States' CT actions are having the desired impact on the adversary and on our security more broadly?

**Rasmussen:** There's no doubt that metrics are a challenge for counterterrorism professionals. Plots disrupted, arrests made, terrorists removed from the battlefield are all raw metrics that aren't particularly useful in assessing where you are in terms of your broad trajectory over time in trying to degrade a particular terrorist organization. In another sense, we only have one true metric and that is zero tolerance for attacks that cause loss of life.

It is difficult for us to apply a crisp, precise metric to the business of degrading a group like al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. There are periods when we have a good feel for how much we've done to degrade an organization's capability or how much we've constrained their ability to carry out their more ambitious external operations of the sort that we've seen in the past. But I would look at that more as a sine wave, as something that ebbs and flows over time.

I don't spend a great deal of time trying to identify specific numerical metrics. The strategic documents that we all operate under as part of the U.S. government speak to desired end states. And those desired end states can be looked at pretty subjectively sometimes. I think we contribute with our analysis to that collective U.S. government picture of how we're doing in our effort against al-Qa`ida, in our effort against ISIL. But from a narrow Intelligence Community perspective, I don't feel that there's a ready, tailor-made set of metrics that applies to the very important work we're doing.

**CTC**

# Assessing Al-Qa`ida Central's Resilience

By Barbara Sude

**Al-Qa`ida "Central" in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region is not yet dead, although its reclusiveness in the face of losses since late 2014 complicates assessment of its remaining strength and capabilities, particularly the leadership structure under Ayman al-Zawahiri. The group still benefits from local protectors, but its ability to recruit is unclear and its media operations pale before those of the Islamic State. Affiliates still acknowledge al-Zawahiri as their emir, and the group could regain some ground by exploiting security gaps in Afghanistan, expanding the operations of its Indian Subcontinent affiliate, or relying on the remaining operational capabilities of its Middle East and Africa affiliates.**

Claims of al-Qa`ida "Central's" demise have grown louder over the past year. So many of its senior officials have been killed that it is more difficult than ever to keep track of who is left. The emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, made no public "appearances," even in audio recordings, from the fall of 2014 until his audio pledge of allegiance to the Taliban's Mullah Akhtar Mansour in August.<sup>1</sup> His statements have appeared increasingly out of touch with current developments, and al-Qa`ida's media arm al-Sahab in the past year has mainly been releasing words of wisdom from dead leaders. On the world front, the group still commands affiliates, but their leaders too have suffered losses and, at the very least, they appear to compete poorly for adherents with the self-styled Islamic State, which holds territory and has a much more prominent media presence. Within South Asia, tribal and militant groups that assisted al-Qa`ida also have faced at least some setbacks that call into question the longevity of its safe haven.

Nonetheless, there is a danger in writing off the group too soon just because they lack the large footprint and momentum of the Islamic State. Al-Qa`ida leaders in South Asia understandably have been especially reclusive given the number of personnel losses attributed to strikes by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) since 2009 and Usama bin Ladin's 2011 demise despite his extensive security measures. This makes assessing the organization's current strength and capabilities very difficult.

Just five years ago the author's assessment of al-Qa`ida Central looked as follows.

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**Leadership and organization:** With Bin Ladin still a recognized decision-maker at the top of the structure, albeit somewhat remote, strong subordinates managed the day-to-day operations: not only al-Zawahiri, but general managers such as Mustafa Abu al-Yazid or, later, `Atiyah `abd-al-Rahman, as the documents later acquired from Bin Ladin's safe house demonstrate.<sup>2</sup>

**Safe haven:** Despite counterterrorism operations, al-Qa`ida leaders found a home in Pakistan within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and had developed links, including family ties, with local militant groups and tribal leaders based there and in other parts of Pakistan, as well as with the Taliban and its allies in Afghanistan. Al-Qa`ida also retained fighters in Afghanistan.

**Recruitment and training:** At least into late 2009, al-Qa`ida was drawing Western and other recruits and could offer some training in the FATA, even without large facilities. Precise numbers were unclear, however.

**Media presence:** Al-Sahab produced more than 50 media items during both 2008 and 2009, including videos of al-Zawahiri and audio recordings from Bin Ladin and disseminated them widely via jihadi sites on the internet.

**Strategic focus:** While Bin Ladin was alive, the United States remained a key target,<sup>3</sup> including the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, but local issues, such as thwarting Pakistani government actions against the militants, were still important.

**Global operational reach:** Al-Qa`ida developed and strengthened relations with its affiliate groups such as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and it laid the groundwork for bringing in al-Shabab. Relations with the Islamic State of Iraq were thorny. Al-Qa`ida attempted terrorist operations targeting Americans at home, such as the underwear bomber and Najibullah Zazi cases.<sup>4</sup>

## Senior Leadership

Today, al-Qa`ida Central is weaker on most of these points. Leadership losses are the most striking. Al-Zawahiri has survived so far, but he has rapidly been losing key lieutenants, not only to reported kinetic strikes, but also to action by the Pakistan Army. Among the major casualties in South Asia since late 2014 are: experienced operative Adnan el-Shukrijumah; Pakistan media specialist and head of al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) Ahmed Farouq; American propagandist Adam Gadahn; and, in July, Khalil al-Sudani, described by U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter as the chief of al-Qa`ida's suicide bombing and explosives operations.<sup>5</sup> Al-Qa`ida Central's fallback outside the region, al-Zawahiri's designated deputy Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the AQAP leader, was killed in June. It is difficult to judge the size and abilities of a leadership circle that must maintain a low profile, however, and lower-ranking experienced personnel could step up. Former senior CIA officials Michael Morell and Bill Harlow expressed concern in their recent book *The Great War of Our Time* about Farouq al-Qahtani (aka

al-Qatari), a competent al-Qa`ida military commander in Afghanistan with the added role, as they assess it, of finding a new sanctuary for the group.<sup>6</sup> [See also “Fourteen Years and Counting” by Michael Morell in this issue, p. 1]

The organizational diagram for al-Qa`ida Central is virtually impossible to fill in given the sudden personnel changes. Al-Qa`ida affiliates still recognize al-Zawahiri as the overall leader, so far rejecting the overtures of the Islamic State. Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Mohammed al-Julani in May told an Al Jazeera interviewer that his group still received orders from al-Zawahiri, including orders to focus on anti-regime operations and not to use Syria “as a launching pad,” to attack the West.<sup>7</sup> Qasim al-Raymi, the new chief of AQAP, in early July publicly announced his allegiance on behalf of both himself and his group.<sup>8</sup> His predecessor al-Wuhayshi had been the general deputy of al-Qa`ida, and had been considered the heir apparent if al-Zawahiri were to die. It is by no means clear whether the deputy’s job was the same as the general manager’s position—essentially chief operating officer—and whether al-Raymi would assume that position now or someone else, perhaps someone still in South Asia. Al-Zawahiri has been silent on this matter. Press reports in the past couple of years on the possible return to Pakistan from Iranian custody of former senior al-Qa`ida leaders, notably Sayf al-`Adl, once the group’s security chief, are unconfirmed and appear unlikely, based on a court statement by his associate Sulayman Abu Ghayth.<sup>9</sup> In any case, they have been out of the loop for more than a decade.

In August, al-Sahab released an audio statement by Bin Ladin’s son Hamza.<sup>10</sup> Al-Zawahiri introduces the young man, who is about 26,<sup>11</sup> as following in his father’s footsteps, suggesting that al-Zawahiri is grooming Hamza for a prominent position. Hamza, in turn, acknowledges al-Zawahiri as the emir of al-Qa`ida and renews his allegiance to Mullah Omar. The latter point and a reference to al-Wuhayshi as leader of AQAP suggest the recording was made before mid-June 2015. The recording does not say where Hamza is located, but documents taken from Bin Ladin’s safe house in Abbottabad show that as of late 2010 he expected Hamza to come to Pakistan<sup>12</sup> or, in any case, to become a key spokesman for the cause.<sup>13</sup> Consistent with his father’s positions, Hamza stresses the imperative of attacking the United States. While praising jihadi fighters generally, notably those in the Middle East, he urges all Muslims to take any opportunity to bring the battle to “America, the Jews, and the West,” but does not say whether al-Qa`ida itself is planning attacks.

### Safe Haven

Notwithstanding these possible candidates for leadership succession, al-Qa`ida’s standard safe havens seem riskier now given the recent attrition. Nonetheless, media reports regarding the locations of UAV strikes and counterterrorist operations in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region suggest that al-Qa`ida leaders believe they can count on local protectors, trust in the rugged terrain, or lack alternatives. They are always prepared to move from site to site but have resided in essentially the same area for more than a decade—North and South Waziristan and parts of eastern Afghanistan—although counterterrorism operations appear to be increasingly encroaching on this territory.

In June 2014, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb, an offensive to root out militants in North Waziristan with both ground and air operations, which overran towns such as Mir

## “If Farouq al-Qahtani or his Afghan allies have indeed been paving the way in Afghanistan, it is not out of the question that al-Qa`ida could find a new sanctuary.”

Ali that had long harbored al-Qa`ida and its sympathizers. In the Mir Ali area alone, the army targeted the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Haqqani network and told media outlets that it had killed 1,200 militants and captured 200 tons of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and ordnance.<sup>14</sup> The operation included parts of South Waziristan, where an army raid killed Shukrijumah.<sup>15</sup> Whereas some earlier Pakistani operations had fizzled out in peace deals, a terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar in mid-December 2014 spurred continued operations well into 2015. The military operations have been paralleled by other counterterrorism operations in the Shawal Valley that joins North and South Waziristan. A spokesman for AQIS claimed that counterterrorism operations in the region into mid-2015 killed approximately 50 members of its organization and a similar number of their local supporters, including the TTP, although the claim has not been independently verified.<sup>16</sup>

If Pakistan becomes untenable as a safe haven for al-Qa`ida, and if Farouq al-Qahtani or his Afghan allies have indeed been paving the way in Afghanistan, it is not out of the question that al-Qa`ida could find a new sanctuary in the eastern part of the country, although they would not be free from aerial attacks, moving might be risky, and they may face competition from the Islamic State’s Wilayat Khorasan. The withdrawal of U.S. forces has created major gaps that Afghan forces have been unable to fill, and which they are unlikely to cover sufficiently in the future given their numbers, the terrain, and the constant presence of the Taliban and its associates.

Fabrizio Foschini recently assessed the area for the Afghan Analysts Network and found that pro-government militias and Afghan Local Police (ALP) in Nuristan, for example, could switch sides, particularly with the ALP there containing a heavy concentration of Salafis.<sup>17</sup> The Waygal district of the Pech Valley still hosts foreign militants associated with al-Qa`ida—al-Qahtani may have been there until earlier this year. In Paktia Province, specifically the Zurmat district, which was an al-Qa`ida fallback position after the 2001 attacks, there is still a strong Taliban presence, and a village on the road to Paktika has been hosting unspecified foreign fighters and their families who relocated from North Waziristan.<sup>18</sup> Khalil al-Sudani reportedly was killed in Paktia near Bermal, a traditional crossing point into Pakistan for al-Qa`ida.<sup>19</sup> Nangarhar, the site of Bin Ladin’s Tora Bora complex, might be less hospitable for al-Qa`ida now, however, given increased support there for the Islamic State in recent months.<sup>20</sup>

### Recruitment and Training

Information on al-Qa`ida recruitment and training in South Asia is currently sparse. Counterterrorism operations are likely to have proved discouraging for recruits other than those associated with AQIS. In the past decade, the group was able to simplify the types of facilities it required for training compared to the period before



A village in Nuristan, Afghanistan, typical of the area in which Farouq al-Qahtani may be working

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2001. In addition, al-Qa`ida recruits now may be able to take advantage of training in the FATA with TTP or with Afghan groups such as the Haqqani network, although relations with the TTP have been strained since al-Qa`ida started to oppose attacks on Muslim civilians by TTP in Bin Ladin's last years.<sup>21</sup> According to a Pakistani police official, an AQIS militant injured in a raid in Punjab in June 2015 trained at an al-Qa`ida "camp in Afghanistan for five months," suggesting the training occurred more recently than 2001.<sup>22</sup>

### Media

Al-Sahab, al-Qa`ida's media network, is still functioning, or at least appears to be in 2015, but lacks the frequency and splash of the Islamic State's apparatus and may be suffering from the loss of Adam Gadahn. *Resurgence*, an English-language magazine focused on AQIS, appeared for the first time in October 2014 with articles of concern to South Asians in addition to the usual jihadi ideology.<sup>23</sup> Its production values are similar to those of the Islamic State magazine *Dabiq*. The June 2015 issue, however, was almost entirely given over to an interview with Gadahn, by then publicly acknowledged as dead. Other al-Sahab releases also have been commentary from the grave—including from `Atiyah, Abu Yahya al-Libi, and Bin Ladin.

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**“Al-Qa`ida...was late to develop a new strategy responding to changes in the Middle East.”**

New thinking from al-Zawahiri has been lacking. Affiliates may be trying to take up some of the slack. Jabhat al-Nusra in July released a publication called *Al Risalah* (billed as a “Magazine by the Mujahideen of Shaam”). Another well-produced effort, it focuses on the illegitimacy of the Islamic State.

### Strategic Focus

A major problem for al-Qa`ida's messaging and its ability to compete for recruits with the Islamic State is that it was late to develop a new strategy responding to changes in the Middle East, and appears to lack focus generally. Its confusion may have affected its plans for operations against U.S. interests. Bin Ladin's position on some issues began to shift in the year or so before his death in 2011, even more so as the Arab Spring exploded. But his group, perhaps because of his death, failed to develop an operational plan for the region, and al-Zawahiri appeared to have been blindsided by the emerging independence of the Islamic State in Iraq.

Both Bin Ladin and al-Zawahiri were excited about the developments in the Middle East and anxious to play a major role, but succeeded mainly in getting the Islamic State in Iraq to act first. Bin Ladin's emphasis on striking the United States, while still a goal, has become muddled, at least from the perspective of al-Qa`ida Central. This raises questions about al-Qa`ida's current priorities for both the Middle East and the United States and the role of its Middle East affiliates in anti-U.S. operations. Was the Khorasan Group sent to Syria to operate more freely in planning attacks against the United States or is it working as part of Jabhat al-Nusra, whose leader says it has been ordered not to launch anti-U.S. operations from Syria? To what extent has al-Qa`ida in Pakistan lost personnel to the Middle East fight, perhaps weakening it for future terrorist operations?

## Operational Reach

Al-Qa`ida, at least nominally, has a wide reach and some operational capabilities through affiliates, and is a continuing, albeit diminished threat for now. Although it lost Iraq, it gained a Syrian affiliate and has retained Yemen, and North and East Africa. AQAP claimed responsibility for attacks earlier this year in France, but it too is distracted by both the Islamic State (which claims a presence in Yemen) and the local fight against the Huthis in Yemen. The creation of AQIS, which tried unsuccessfully to capture a Pakistani naval vessel in September 2014, may represent an attempt to build up whatever strengths al-Qa`ida retains as a South Asia-based organization, increasingly tied to the region through family and operational relationships. The group has proved a thorn in the side of security forces in several locations in Pakistan, and may be expanding its territory—Bangladeshi security forces arrest-

ed operatives in July for possibly planning an attack on Id al-Fitr, an important Muslim holiday.<sup>24</sup> In East Africa, a new group called al-Muhajiroun—perhaps a propaganda arm of al-Shabab—recently emerged. Its media output appears sympathetic to al-Qa`ida, and it has focused on recruiting in Uganda and Tanzania.<sup>25</sup>

Fourteen years after its attacks in the United States, al-Qa`ida Central is seriously weakened, but not yet dead. It has become enough a part of the fabric of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region that it is able to maintain fighters in Afghanistan and has spawned a South Asian affiliate. More importantly, al-Zawahiri still is recognized as the head of the larger organization that remains engaged in battles in the Middle East and Africa. That may not be enough to draw scores of foreign fighters as the Islamic State does, but it is sufficient to conduct lethal terrorist operations against the West. **CTC**

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# Al-Qa`ida Plays a Long Game in Syria

By Charles Lister

**Since its public emergence in Syria in January 2012, the al-Qa`ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra has consistently sought to balance its transnational jihadist ideology and objectives with pragmatic efforts to integrate and embed itself within revolutionary dynamics. Maintaining this delicate balance has not been easy, but having succeeded to date, Jabhat al-Nusra is currently one of the most powerful and influential armed actors in Syria. Ultimately, however, the group is a wolf in sheep's clothing. It aims to establish durable roots in an unstable environment from which al-Qa`ida's transnational ambitions may one day be launched.**

**A**l-Qa`ida's role in Syria has evolved considerably since its humble beginnings as a wing of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in mid-to-late 2011. Formally established by seven prominent Islamists in October 2011 after four months of secret meetings,<sup>1</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra did not publicly emerge until January 23, 2012.<sup>2</sup>

In its first six months of publicly acknowledged operations, Jabhat al-Nusra was deeply unpopular within Syria's rapidly expanding insurgency. Although it had not admitted its links to the ISI or al-Qa`ida, its rhetoric, imagery, and tactics made its international jihadist links clear. A revolutionary opposition, still clinging to nationalist ideals, feared what appeared to be ISI-like terrorist cells emerging within its midst.

By fall 2012, however, Jabhat al-Nusra had evolved from a terrorist organization into an expanding insurgent movement. Its forces had begun integrating into the broader armed opposition, especially in Syria's largest city, Aleppo. By December 11, 2012, when the U.S. government designated it an alias of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, and a terrorist organization,<sup>3</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra was operating as a fully fledged, de facto opposition actor, albeit on an extreme end of the ideological spectrum.

Two-and-a-half years later, aided in particular by the protracted Syrian conflict and the brutal rise of the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra is one of the most powerful armed groups in Syria. Its consistent balancing of ideologically driven jihadist objectives with local sensitivities and revolutionary ideals has placed Jabhat

al-Nusra in an advantageous position. Rarely will any Syrian opposition group commit genuinely to both denouncing the role of Jabhat al-Nusra in the conflict and permanently ceasing battlefield cooperation with it.<sup>4</sup>

Jabhat al-Nusra remains an al-Qa`ida affiliate, however, and it has occasionally displayed the fundamentalist behavior one would ordinarily expect. From sectarian killings<sup>5</sup> to harsh legal restrictions and executions,<sup>6</sup> the true and extremist nature of Jabhat al-Nusra has periodically been revealed.

Throughout its existence, Jabhat al-Nusra and its leader, Abu Mohammed al-Julani, have generally maintained the group's jihadist credibility while making its stance within the complex conflict as accommodating as possible. In so doing, al-Qa`ida has played a strategic long game in Syria, which has allowed it to establish a new stronghold on Israel's border and in sight of Europe.

## Social Roots and Integration

The key to al-Qa`ida's longevity in Syria has been its integration into the broader armed opposition and its establishment of durable roots in liberated communities.

Militarily, Jabhat al-Nusra has sought to maintain pragmatic alliances with many armed groups, most of which have no interest in international jihad. While public acknowledgment of relations with the most moderate Syrian rebel factions has steadily declined, their forces nonetheless coordinate either within theater-specific operations rooms or indirectly through more Syria-focused Islamist groups. This sustains the group's revolutionary legitimacy, but Jabhat al-Nusra has also sought to underline its jihadist credibility by nurturing bonds with factions that incorporate a more extremist transnational outlook. Since fighting with the Islamic State started in early 2014, these alliances have centered on movements with some level of implicit fealty to al-Qa`ida.<sup>a</sup>

These two poles of operational collaboration have been held together by Jabhat al-Nusra's investment in relationships with conservative Syrian Islamist factions such as Ahrar al-Sham. This particular alliance has formed the existential glue for al-Qa`ida and its place within the broader Syrian conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Jabhat al-Nusra's role within the Jaish al-Fateh coalition in Idlib is an effective example of this dynamic. Formed in late March 2015 after three months of negotiations, Jaish al-Fateh contains six other groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, which all strictly limit their objectives to Syria, explicitly reject links to international jihad, and represent the broader Syrian Islamist portion of the insurgency.<sup>b</sup> For Jabhat al-Nusra, membership has ensured it coordinates officially

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a Groups such as Jaish al-Muhajireen wal Ansar, Jund al-Aqsa, Harakat Sham al-Islam, and Junud al-Sham.

b The six other groups are Ahrar al-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaysh al-Sunna, Ajnad al-Sham, and Faylaq al-Sham.

with local Syrian Islamists; unofficially with moderate nationalist and often Western-backed factions outside the coalition; and also directly with smaller, transnationally minded jihadist units.<sup>c</sup>

After four years in Syria, the role of Jabhat al-Nusra in the Jaish al-Fateh coalition represents the apogee of al-Qa`ida's willingness to accommodate Syria's revolutionary dynamics. Sizeable components devoted to civil, political, and judicial matters, plus a less-talked-about humanitarian relief wing, make Jaish al-Fateh more than a military operations room or yet another temporary alliance.

Previously, Jabhat al-Nusra had pointedly refused to join such broader opposition bodies, so why the apparent change in policy? The Jaish al-Fateh concept remains limited to specific provincial theaters and is focused on defeating the regime and introducing an alternative model of civil governance. Geographical limitations allow Jabhat al-Nusra to selectively choose to join bodies where its interests are best served by doing so, Idlib being a case in point, as it is the group's principal stronghold.

### Syria as a "Safe Base"

In September 2013, al-Qa`ida's al-Sahab Media published Ayman al-Zawahiri's "General Guidelines for Jihad."<sup>8</sup> In line with his long-held belief that acquiring allies through pragmatic moderation was the most viable path toward sparking mass revolution,<sup>9</sup> al-Zawahiri's document focused on affiliate self-discipline and restraint. Al-Qa`ida factions were advised to "focus on spreading awareness among the general public" and more broadly to invest in "*maslahah* (securing interests) and *mafsadah* (averting harm)." Fighters were ordered to refrain from fighting those "who have not raised arms against us" and to cease attacking targets where Muslim civilians may be harmed. Perhaps most surprisingly and clearly differentiating it from the Islamic State, al-Qa`ida units were to "avoid fighting the deviant sects" (Shia, Alawites, Ismailis, Ahmadis, and Sufis) and to "avoid meddling with Christian, Sikh and Hindu communities... [as] we are keen to live with them in a peaceful manner."

These bold declarations reflected changing conditions and al-Qa`ida needed to demonstrate some adaptation. The Islamic State was seeking to escalate its brutality in Iraq and (from April 2013) Syria in order to exacerbate existing revolutions and to encourage new ones, but al-Qa`ida sought to grow durable roots within already unstable environments. Al-Zawahiri's guidelines made it clear that al-Qa`ida's "struggle is a long one, and jihad is in need of safe bases."<sup>10</sup>

The publication of al-Qa`ida's guidelines came as the central leadership was increasingly isolated from its international affiliates. Meanwhile, Jabhat al-Nusra was flourishing and was already implementing much of al-Zawahiri's directives. However, despite Jabhat al-Nusra's apparent pragmatism, it remained a self-identified al-Qa`ida affiliate and its transnational vision still existed, at least within its leadership, its foreign fighter contingent, and some of its Syrian rank and file. Moreover, amid the restraint, the guidelines were explicit that "all Mujahid brothers must consider targeting the interests of the Western Zionist Crusader alliance in any part of the world as their foremost duty."<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, Jabhat al-Nusra was effectively implementing

c These include the largely Uzbek Al-Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad, the primarily Uighur Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), and the Chechen-led Junud al-Sham.

al-Qa`ida's long-game strategy with the objective of gradually developing a safe base in Syria. This required the delicate balancing of pragmatic short-term interests with a sustained focus on long-term jihadist objectives. And with the jihadi goal fundamentally contradicting the ideals of the Syrian revolution, achieving it slowly and tactfully was critically important. Ultimately, it has taken Jabhat al-Nusra four years to build its power and develop as a preeminent actor in Syria's conflict.

The true extent of al-Qa`ida's ambitions in Syria, however, was made publicly clear with the leak of an audio recording on July 11, 2014. In it al-Julani is heard declaring that "the time has come... for us to establish an Islamic Emirate in al-Sham...without compromise, complacency, equivocation, or circumvention."<sup>12 13</sup> The speech caused concern across the Syrian opposition, many members of which had consistently maintained that they had no issue with Jabhat al-Nusra so long as it did not impose foreign objectives. An Islamic emirate represented just that.

Twenty-four hours later, Jabhat al-Nusra released a statement admitting:

*"We in Jabhat al-Nusra strive to establish an Islamic emirate...[but] we have not yet announced the establishment of an emirate. When the time comes, and the sincere mujahideen and the pious scholars agree with our stance, we will announce this emirate, by the will of Allah."*<sup>14</sup>

Coming amid the fallout from the Islamic State's declaration of a caliphate, the July 11 audio recording looked to have been purposefully released.<sup>d</sup> To preserve its jihadist credibility, al-Qa`ida had been forced to show its hand in Syria and hope that years of relationship building could redeem it. Fortunately for Jabhat al-Nusra, the urgency of the fight against the Assad regime and the Islamic State, and its delicate half step back ensured it remained an accepted player for the time being.

Nonetheless, Jabhat al-Nusra's long-term intentions had been revealed, and when U.S. aircraft in September 2014 targeted al-Qa`ida fighters purportedly plotting external attacks from Syria,<sup>15</sup> al-Qa`ida's long game was also exposed.

### Syria as Launching Pad

Beginning in early 2013, experienced al-Qa`ida figures began traveling to Syria in what appeared to be a centrally directed move by the core leadership. There were rumors al-Zawahiri had ordered an evacuation.<sup>16</sup> Early arrivals included two Saudi nationals: Abdulrahman Mohammed al-Jahani, a former member of al-Qa`ida's Shura Council who came from Pakistan,<sup>17</sup> and Abdelmohsen Abdullah al-Sharikh, who had been al-Qa`ida's operational chief in Iran.<sup>18</sup> Later arrivals included former Algerian army officer and al-Qa`ida veteran Said Arif who escaped from France in October 2013,<sup>19</sup> and Kuwaiti former Iran chief Mohsen al-

d A month later, still seeking to repair its reputation and regain the trust it had worked to build, Jabhat al-Nusra released a video in which Abu Firas al-Suri explained further: "Jabhat al-Nusra did not announce an emirate in the meaning of an independent emirate, or the meaning of a state, or any meaning close to that. We mean the emirate should be established by consulting those who have an Islamist affiliation, whether from the jihadi factions, or the leaders of the country, or the people of influence, and of course, the scholars inside and outside the country." Video, "Sheikh Abu Firas al-Suri: In Reality," Al-Manara al-Bayda, August 8, 2014.





In this image from a jihadi video, a tank operated by Jabhat al-Nusra fires on a target in northern Syria.

JABHAT AL-NUSRA

Fadhli. Other prominent members included Abu Yusuf al-Turki,<sup>20</sup> Abu Layth al-Yemeni,<sup>21</sup> and the French citizen David Drugeon.<sup>22</sup>

The first major benefit of these arrivals was the consolidation of operational relations with Lebanon-based, al-Qa`ida-linked Kataib Abdullah Azzam. Al-Sharikh (better known as Sanafi al-Nasr—See Kevin Jackson, “From Khorasan to the Levant: A Profile of Sanafi al-Nasr” in this issue, p. 24) was close to Kataib Abdullah Azzam’s former leader Saleh al-Qaraawi and then-leader Majid bin Mohammed al-Majid and was instrumental in forming the bonds that led to Jabhat al-Nusra’s bombings—some coordinated with Kataib Abdullah Azzam—in Lebanon in early 2014.<sup>23</sup> However, in addition to moving Jabhat al-Nusra closer in character to al-Qa`ida, the real strategic significance was the low-level initiation of planning for external attacks, some allegedly in concert with expert bomb-makers based in Yemen. The first public recognition of this came in early July 2014, when security at airports with direct service to the United States was tightened due to “cred-

ible threats.”<sup>24</sup> It was not until September 13, 2014, however, that U.S. officials publicly started using the term “Khorasan Group.”<sup>25</sup> Although some well-connected Syrian Islamists had spoken about a secretive “Wolves” unit,<sup>26</sup> little was known about the cell led by al-Fadhli. Seven days later, U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper publicly declared that “Khorasan may pose as much of a danger as the Islamic State,”<sup>27</sup> and on September 23, U.S. missiles were launched.

At least 50 Jabhat al-Nusra militants were reported killed when the first U.S. missiles struck targets in northern Syria. Days later, Abu Firas al-Suri and al-Julani issued veiled threats of potential retaliation if strikes continued, with al-Julani stating:

*“This is what will take the battle to the heart of your land...Muslims will not watch while their sons are bombed. Your leaders will not be the only ones who would pay the price of the war. You will pay the heaviest price.”*<sup>28</sup>

Jabhat al-Nusra had so successfully embedded itself into the Syrian opposition and shown itself so dedicated to defeating the Assad regime that the U.S. strikes were immediately perceived by many Syrians as counter-revolutionary. Moreover, vetted Free Syrian Army groups soon questioned the value of being seen as U.S.-aligned.<sup>29</sup> Integration had served its purpose as a protective blanket from the consequences of Jabhat al-Nusra’s long-term transnational ambitions.

A secret letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Julani in early 2015

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**“U.S. strikes were immediately perceived by many Syrians as counter-revolutionary.”**

purportedly contained an instruction to cease foreign plotting.<sup>30</sup> Although al-Julani himself appeared to confirm this during his two-part interview with Al Jazeera Arabic (on May 27 and June 3), U.S. airstrikes have continued to target the Khorasan Group in parts of northern Idlib and Aleppo. Most prominently, al-Fadhli was killed in one such strike on July 8.

### Internal Change

While maintaining its prominent role in a seemingly intractable and brutal civil war, Jabhat al-Nusra has undergone a process of internal reorientation. Since mid-2014, the group has struggled to define its identity amid changing circumstances. The Islamic State's rise posed an existential challenge to al-Qa`ida, which prompted a shift in Jabhat al-Nusra's top leadership, with the more pragmatic Maysar Ali Musa Abdullah al-Juburi (Abu Mariya al-Qahtani) being replaced by Jordanian hardliner Dr. Sami al-Oraydi. Other prominent al-Qa`ida veterans, such as Abu Hammam al-Suri and Abu Firas al-Suri, were given a public spotlight, while more secretive figures previously active in Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan began emerging from the shadows. Jabhat al-Nusra's attention shifted to centers such as Idlib and to some extent Aleppo, where it began countering and defeating rebel groups supported by the United States.<sup>e</sup>

While this shift toward a more aggressive posture may have benefited Jabhat al-Nusra's immediate interests, it began to erode the broader trust its previous pragmatism had earned. Internal dissent emerged, including among mid-level Syrian commanders and two founding members, Abu Mariya al-Qahtani and Saleh al-Hamawi.

The arrival of al-Zawahiri's secret letter in early 2015 appeared to lay the issue to rest, at least temporarily. It ordered the group to cease plotting attacks against the West; to better integrate with the revolution and its people; to coordinate more broadly with opposition factions; and to work toward a Sharia-based judicial structure.<sup>31</sup> Shortly thereafter, Jaish al-Fateh was formed and Jabhat al-Nusra's belligerence declined significantly.

Only recently has this balance again shifted back toward jihadist fundamentalism. Jabhat al-Nusra's re-moderation in early 2015 appears to have engendered significant divisions within the group's senior leadership. Perhaps Jabhat al-Nusra's sustained success in Syria has also contributed toward a proliferation in opinions and a divergence in strategic outlooks. Similarly, the addition of an external threat—in the form of continued U.S. strikes—will have emboldened those with stronger transnational ambitions.

While some of those labeled as Khorasan operatives abided by al-Zawahiri's instructions in early 2015 and re-integrated into Jabhat al-Nusra's Syria-focused insurgent structure, others have isolated themselves and allegedly continue plotting semi-independently. It is feasible that some established links to members of other northern Syria-based jihadist factions, such as Jund al-Aqsa. At some point after his arrival, Said Arif left Jabhat al-Nusra to become Jund al-Aqsa's military chief, but was reportedly killed in

**“While this shift toward a more aggressive posture may have benefited Jabhat al-Nusra's immediate interests, it began to erode the broader trust its previous pragmatism had earned.”**

an alleged U.S. airstrike on May 20.<sup>32 f</sup>

Internal dissent within Jabhat al-Nusra—some of it public—has also increased. After months of opposition to Jabhat al-Nusra's posture toward other rebels, Saleh al-Hamawi was finally expelled in mid-July.<sup>33</sup> With Abu Mariya al-Qahtani isolated, several other moderate dissenters are reportedly clinging on at the ideological periphery, while reports of expulsions and defections continue to emerge.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, Jabhat al-Nusra has begun to identify more overtly with al-Qa`ida. While Jabhat al-Nusra fighters have been seen carrying flags emblazoned with *Tanzim Qa`idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Sham* (al-Qa`ida organization in the Levant) for nearly two years, the overt adoption of such identification is now the norm. In late June 2015, the group also released “The Heirs of Glory,” a high-quality, 43-minute documentary featuring footage of the 9/11 attacks and threats made by Bin Ladin.<sup>34</sup>

Al-Julani's Al Jazeera interviews also underlined that despite the internal discussion about the group's continued affiliation with al-Qa`ida, the true decision-makers within the senior leadership remained entirely committed to al-Zawahiri and his transnational movement. Although one aspect of this commitment was to abide by al-Zawahiri's early 2015 instruction to “not use Syria as a base for attacks against the West,” al-Julani made clear that al-Qa`ida was likely plotting such operations from elsewhere.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, in an interview with U.S. convert and freelance journalist Bilal Abdul Kareem in August 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra chief spokesman Abu Firas al-Suri—a confidante of Bin Ladin since 1983—left nothing to the imagination regarding his group's strategic outlook: “Our goals are not limited to Syria, but our current battle is.”<sup>36</sup>

### Shifting Dynamics

As with most asymmetric conflicts, the dynamics of the Syrian insurgency are continually changing and since late 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra's principal enabler, Ahrar al-Sham, has been moderating its ideological and political outlook. Initially launched by its founding leader Hassan Abboud, this moderation has seen the group publish a Revolutionary Covenant on May 17, 2014, which pointedly excluded any desire for an “Islamic State.” More recently, Ahrar al-Sham called for dialogue with the United States in July 2015 editorials in the *Washington Post*<sup>37</sup> and the *Daily Telegraph*<sup>38</sup> and

e Principally, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and Harakat Hazm in October–November 2014 and March 2015, respectively.

f Jund al-Aqsa has a complicated history, having originally been formed out of Jabhat al-Nusra in early 2013. Its founder, Mohammed Yusuf al-Athamna (better known as Abu Abdelaziz al-Qatari) had planned with al-Julani to use the group to provide strategic depth and reserves for foreign fighters when it had become clear that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi intended to expand

his authority in Syria. Bolstered by veteran al-Qa`ida figures Jund al-Aqsa remained loyal to al-Julani and al-Qa`ida Central, but the Islamic State's bold and assertive ideology penetrated portions of its ranks and the group has since been viewed with some level of suspicion in northern Syria.

g For example, a Jabhat al-Nusra administrative order issued in Hama governorate on July 15, 2015 expelled 25 members for several reasons, including refusing to fight the Islamic State.

has begun a limited engagement with several European states.<sup>39</sup>

While such developments may have minimally affected Ahrar al-Sham's relationship with Jabhat al-Nusra, recent developments have revealed potentially substantial differences between the two. After working together successfully to capture Idlib in late March, the civil administration project that Jaish al-Fateh had hoped to establish, and which Jabhat al-Nusra had been persuaded to support, had failed to develop.

Jabhat al-Nusra has therefore periodically begun imposing its will locally, including by pressing Druze communities to convert to Islam, to send their sons to Jabhat al-Nusra training camps, and for their men to give up personal weapons as fealty to the group.<sup>40</sup> The killing of 23 Druze in the Idlib village of Qalb Loza in mid-June and several other incidents throughout June and early July sparked a series of anti-Jabhat al-Nusra demonstrations in Idlib in early July. Small units of Jabhat al-Nusra foreign fighters even attacked facilities belonging to the Ahrar al-Sham-dominated "Sharia Authority" in the towns of Khan Sheikhoun, Kafr Sajna, and Kafr Nubl on July 8 in an apparent show of force.<sup>41</sup>

With tensions bubbling away in Idlib and with Ahrar al-Sham reaching out to the West, the arrival of U.S.-trained New Syrian Force fighters in northern Aleppo saw Jabhat al-Nusra demonstrate its more hard-line tendencies. Although it went unreported, Jabhat al-Nusra aggressively confronted the initial batch of 54 soldiers almost as soon as they arrived in Syria on July 14,<sup>42</sup> underlining its hostility to anyone suspected of supporting U.S. interests. Two weeks later, Jabhat al-Nusra kidnapped their leader and attacked the base of their broader unit, Division 30, drawing U.S. airstrikes.

By this point, Turkey had already opened Incirlik Airbase for U.S. operations against the Islamic State and had begun its own limited airstrikes as part of efforts to establish a safe zone in northern Aleppo. Following a series of meetings convened by the Turkish intelligence agency on July 27 and July 28 that brought together the leaders of more than a dozen Syrian opposition groups active in Aleppo, rumors swirled that a Turkish-backed zone free of Islamic State, and possibly, Syrian regime airstrikes was in the works.<sup>43</sup>

Having been excluded from such plans and meetings, Jabhat al-Nusra entered into talks on August 4, 2015 with Ahrar al-Sham and several representatives of the Aleppo-based coalition Al-Jabhat al-Shamiya. According to three sources linked to the meeting, Jabhat al-Nusra's representatives made it clear that they opposed a Turkey-backed project in northern Aleppo and threatened to resume plotting attacks against Western targets should Turkey's project include anti-al-Qa`ida objectives. Notwithstanding such threats—"this is normal Nusra behavior," said one source and "they wouldn't do such a stupid thing," said another<sup>44</sup>—all other groups in the room wholeheartedly supported Ankara.<sup>45</sup> After a day of talks, the Istanbul-headquartered Syrian Islamic Council—close to many mainstream Syrian Islamic factions—announced the legality of cooperating with Turkey's safe zone. The following day, Jabhat al-Nusra withdrew from its positions in northern Aleppo and an August 9 statement made clear that it could not be part of a project it saw as serving "Turkey's national security."<sup>46</sup>

To underline the significance of Jabhat al-Nusra's strategic isolation on this issue, its most valuable Syrian ally, Ahrar al-Sham, declared on August 11 its support for Ankara's plans and its utmost admiration for Turkey's "ethical and humanitarian position" in Syria and further stated that Turkey was "the most important ally of the Syrian revolution."<sup>47</sup>

## **"[Jabhat al-Nusra] threatened to resume plotting attacks against Western targets should Turkey's project include anti-al-Qa`ida objectives."**

By mid-August, these shifting dynamics had shaken the foundations of the once relatively stable factional relationships across northern Syria. Faced with such change, Jabhat al-Nusra was revealing its fundamentalist core.

Ahrar al-Sham's broader internal political evolution and outreach to the West, however, had upset some of its leaders. Although its editorials reflected four months of internal deliberation, Ahrar al-Sham's religious leadership—headed by a Kurd, Abu Mohammed al-Sadeq—opposed some aspects of the group's overt alignment with nationalist projects. A debate ensued between leaders during a series of meetings in northern Syria and southern Turkey in mid-August. According to several sources involved in the discussions, the leaders discussed the possibility of replacing the group's "first row" of leaders with "more highly qualified and experienced" (in other words more moderate) figures, in line with the end of Hashem al-Sheikh's 12-month term as leader on September 10, 2015.<sup>48</sup>

With its most powerful and indispensable ally seemingly aligning itself with increasingly divergent ideological and strategic positions—at least at a leadership level—Jabhat al-Nusra's position in Syria looks potentially unstable. However, for a majority of the Syrian opposition, Jabhat al-Nusra remains an indispensable military partner in the battle against the al-Assad regime. By continuing to demonstrate its value on the battlefield, such political differences may be papered over, for the time being.

### **A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing**

While the Islamic State's shock-and-awe strategy has helped its expansion around the world, al-Qa`ida's senior leadership has come under significant pressure and the operational independence of its affiliates has increased. Consequently, Jabhat al-Nusra and, more recently, al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula [See Katherine Zimmerman, "AQAP: A Resurgent Threat" in this issue, p. 19] have sought to implement a diametrically opposed strategy to that of the Islamic State, in which ideological extremism is temporarily downplayed in favor of implanting more sustainably within exploitable communities.

The sheer complexity of the conflict in Syria has made this strategy particularly challenging for Jabhat al-Nusra. At times, its real nature has emerged, sparking a Syrian-led backlash and a conscious and top-down moderation of Jabhat al-Nusra's behavior. Each of these phases has represented a test of the group's structural unity, and until late 2014 those tests had underlined al-Julani's successful ability to maintain internal loyalty.

However, Turkey's overt military intervention and the arrival of U.S.-trained fighters in July have fundamentally shaken up the favorable dynamics that Jabhat al-Nusra had contributed toward. With internal political and ideological debates threatening to split its central leadership and with its key Syrian allies now potentially

adopting more overt nationally focused strategic visions, al-Qa`ida hardliners appear to be emerging as the new face of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. Al-Julani's long-time balancing of differing ideological outlooks within his top command may be less viable.

The intensity of Jabhat al-Nusra's focus on ensuring al-Qa`ida's long-term durability in Syria since 2012 should still be a serious concern. The group's majority Syrian makeup—60–70 percent<sup>49</sup>—contributes to a crucial level of social grounding and is the reason why several prominent Syrian Salafists have launched secret initiatives encouraging local members to leave al-Qa`ida for more

overtly Syrian groups. Meanwhile, Jabhat al-Nusra's strict and highly selective foreign fighter recruitment policies have ensured an ongoing supply of high-caliber muhajireen truly committed to al-Qa`ida's cause.

Jabhat al-Nusra has faced challenges to its position within the Syrian revolution before and has escaped unscathed or has emerged in an even better position. Although the current challenge may well prove the most significant so far, the group's Syrian core and the continued intensity of the fight against regime forces remain its best insurance policies. **CTC**

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# AQAP: A Resurgent Threat

By Katherine Zimmerman

**Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is one of the few beneficiaries of Yemen's collapse into civil war. It now governs one of the country's three major ports and has expanded its operations in Yemen, benefiting from a larger recruiting pool. AQAP's enlarged safe haven supports its efforts locally but also serves as a sanctuary for the external operations cell that previously has threatened the United States several times. The affiliate remains al-Qa`ida's greatest direct threat to the United States, and it is growing stronger.**

**A**l-Qa`ida's Yemen-based affiliate has been quietly expanding as the country descends further into civil war. It may be one of the few beneficiaries of Yemen's collapse, other than the Islamic State, which is developing its own Yemeni franchise. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has taken advantage of the turmoil to try its hand at governance again and build support among Sunni tribes angered by the Huthi takeover of large swaths of the country.

Yemen's civil war has secured nearly all of AQAP's immediate military objectives. The West retreated. The Yemeni military and security forces, what is left of them, are no longer fighting AQAP. Those elements that remain are divided and degraded, operating without a central command, and have no incentive to enter into another fight. The Yemeni state is broken, and local authorities have filled the void. Mediation efforts with Yemeni stakeholders have not yielded much progress on the political front, and even if a new central government emerges, it will have to work hard to rebuild relationships with provincial and local authorities. Finally, there is an active insurgency in Yemen rooted in Sunni communities that provides an opportunity for AQAP to further establish itself.

The conditions are ripe for success, and AQAP is an adaptive organization. It appears to have learned from strategic errors in 2011 and 2012, which led to a popular uprising against it. The late AQAP emir, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, advised his Algerian counterpart in the summer of 2012 that, based on AQAP's experiences in Abyan, meeting the people's basic needs was the first step in governance.<sup>1</sup> The group also appears to have copied tactics from al-Qa`ida's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, and has better integrated itself into the population, by using local governance structures for example.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the broad mobilization of Sunnis against Huthis is giving AQAP momentum on which to draw. This condition was not

present during the Arab Spring and will only further serve AQAP's interests.

AQAP's gains in Yemen could have disastrous consequences. AQAP was behind at least four major attempted attacks on U.S. interests outside of Yemen, and all of those occurred when the group was weaker than it is today. AQAP is also still a key asset for the global al-Qa`ida network, providing overall leadership guidance, sharing expertise, and coordinating transnational attacks. AQAP's growing strength in Yemen could reverberate throughout the al-Qa`ida network, raising the stakes in the competition between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State to lead the global jihadist movement.<sup>3</sup>

## Tapping into Yemen's Insurgency

The Yemeni insurgency began in earnest after the Huthi takeover of the central Yemeni government in January 2015, though many local militias had mobilized months earlier. Yemen's complex political dynamics influenced the process. Many of those opposed to the Huthis also opposed the central government, but saw the Huthis as an invading force. These "popular resistance forces" draw from the local population and fight to protect their territory. They are not mobilizing along sectarian lines, but view the conflict in terms of the distribution of power. Despite the absence of religion as a primary factor, the frontline of the conflict ran through Sunni populations, creating a prime opportunity for AQAP in such places as al-Bayda, Shabwah, and Abyan, especially as AQAP tapped into the insurgency's momentum.

AQAP had already declared the Huthis as an enemy, describing them as heretics taking orders from Iran, who must be stopped.<sup>4</sup> By fall 2014, AQAP had expanded its campaign against them. Militants began conducting smaller-scale, disruptive attacks against Huthi positions and began assassinating Huthi officials. The campaign focused initially on the capital, Sana'a, and also al-Bayda governorate, where AQAP already had some limited support. AQAP conducted mass-casualty attacks against the Huthis, such as a December 18 twin suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) strike in the Red Sea port city of al-Hudaydah.<sup>4</sup>

a AQAP specifically considers the Huthis to be *rafidhah* (apostates), which distinguishes them from the entire Zaydi Shi'a population in Yemen. Zaydi Shiism is close to Sunnism, and Yemenis generally do not immediately identify along sectarian lines. AQAP was probably selecting a smaller segment of the Yemeni Shi'a population to single out for attack, particularly given ongoing allegations of Huthi ties to Iran. A March 2011 AQAP video on its November 2010 attacks targeting Huthi leadership accuses them of taking orders from Iran and mobilizing against Sunni. A February 2010 issue of AQAP's magazine *Sada al Malahem* (Echo of the Epics) contains articles referencing the Huthis specifically as apostates and levies a similar accusation. See "AQAP Releases Video on al-Jawf, Sa'ada Suicide Bombings," SITE Intelligence Group, March 25, 2011; Christopher Anzalone, "New Issue of Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's Magazine, Sada al-Malahim, Released," Views from the Occident, February 14, 2010; and AQAP, *Sada al Malahem*, Issue 12.

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AQAP militants pose in front of a museum in Sayun, Hadramawt province, Yemen.

AFP/GETTY

The dedication of resources to the fight against the Huthis had little tangible effect on AQAP's continued campaign against the Yemeni military. AQAP was able to sustain the same level of activity against the Yemeni military even as it increasingly targeted Huthis. This shows that AQAP had maintained some sort of reserve capability, and also that it was probably able to add strength over time. AQAP took advantage of the breakdown of Yemeni security forces in January 2015 and attacked now-isolated Yemeni military bases. Between February and April 2015, AQAP attacked the bases of the 19th Infantry Brigade in Shabwah, the 39th Armored Brigade in Abyan, and the 23rd Mechanized Brigade in Hadramawt.<sup>5</sup> AQAP seized weaponry in each attack. These weapons were probably distributed to AQAP forces in Abyan and Shabwah; there is little evidence of them appearing in al-Bayda. Complex AQAP attacks against the Yemeni military ended in April, when it was evident the Yemeni military had effectively disbanded.

AQAP's primary effort on the ground is against the Huthis, and it is using this fight to make inroads among other Sunni populations that have mobilized in resistance. It claims to be active on all fronts against the Huthis and to be running training camps for new fighters. Jalal al-Marqishi, an AQAP military commander who led the fight in 2011 and 2012, characterized AQAP's presence as both direct and indirect, including training and providing supplies and military advice.<sup>6</sup> The group's recent media releases include training videos on how to build improvised explosive devices (IEDs), for example.<sup>b</sup> AQAP appears to be attempting to replicate Jabhat al-Nusra's success in gaining acceptance by using its military capabilities in service of goals important to local interests.

The alignment of AQAP's objectives with those of the popular resistance militias created an alliance where it might not otherwise have existed, especially since AQAP's ideology is foreign to most

Yemenis. It is within this space that AQAP seems to have been able to expand its base within the insurgency. AQAP is now a dominant force in such places as al-Bayda, where its ability to organize military offensives against the Huthis seems to have led local tribal militias to accept the presence of AQAP forces.<sup>c</sup> AQAP's presence in al-Bayda is strategically important because a vital road from Yemen's capital to the southeast runs through the governorate, providing direct access to central Yemen.

AQAP had previously made inroads there, particularly in northwestern al-Bayda, where some of the local tribes openly supported it in 2012.<sup>7</sup> The group has expanded since, building on anti-Huthi sentiments among local tribes. Though some clans were initially neutral to the Huthis's arrival in al-Bayda, the deaths of fellow tribesmen began to drive popular resistance against the Huthis, and so AQAP stepped in to take advantage.<sup>8</sup> For example, AQAP reportedly formed an alliance with the al-Hamiqan tribe in southeastern al-Bayda in February 2015 to fight the Huthis.<sup>9</sup> AQAP has been careful to limit collateral damage and that has prevented a backlash against the group and allowed it to exploit local anger at the Huthis.<sup>d</sup> While the tribes may still turn on AQAP once the common enemy is defeated, opportunities to integrate AQAP's forces into local militias and personnel into local governance structures

c Dhi Na'im tribesmen in al-Bayda have become more accepting of AQAP's presence as the fight escalates against the Huthis. They joined an anti-Huthi tribal alliance in November 2014. AQAP's presence and involvement in clashes began being reported in mid-February and early March 2015, along with increasing reports of AQAP support for the tribal militias and AQAP claims of attacks in al-Bayda. See "12 Houthis killed in attack by tribesmen supported by al Qaeda in Dhi Na'im district in al Bayda governorate," al Masdar Online, March 8, 2015; "Source: 12 Houthi fighters killed in al Qaeda attack in 'Dhi Na'im' in al Bayda governorate," al Masdar Online, February 18, 2015; and "Arms Festival in al Bayda against al Houthi Group and in Solidarity with 'Qayfa,'" al Masdar Online, November 11, 2014.

b "AQAP Video Shows Manufacture, Use of IEDs on Yemeni Soldiers in Hadramawt," SITE Intelligence Group, July 20, 2015.

d Videos of roadside IED attacks show what could appear to be civilian vehicles being followed by military vehicles. The IED detonates under a military vehicle.

may mitigate this risk.

The Saudi-led military intervention is also creating opportunities for AQAP. In mid-July, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates deployed troops alongside newly trained Yemeni forces in Aden after a nearly four-month-long air campaign against the Huthis.<sup>10</sup> The coalition rolled back Huthi gains in Aden before focusing on Lahij and Abyan. AQAP is among the groups filling the power vacuum behind the coalition's advances. AQAP militants briefly seized buildings in Aden on August 22, and residents report AQAP forces are still in the city.<sup>e</sup> AQAP has also seized buildings in Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan, which AQAP held in 2011 and 2012.<sup>11</sup> The coalition forces, including the Saudis, Emiratis, and Yemeni militias, are not focused on AQAP's growing presence behind their frontline.

### AQAP's Experiment with Governance in Hadramawt

The deterioration of the Yemeni military has allowed AQAP to develop a safe haven in the country. It has been able to gather resources in areas removed from the frontlines, such as in Yemen's eastern Hadramawt governorate. AQAP seized control of al-Mukalla, one of Yemen's three major port cities, on April 2, 2015.<sup>12</sup> But AQAP did not raise the tell-tale black flag immediately.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the group took a softer approach. Its forces in al-Mukalla adopted the name, Sons of Hadramawt, and called for a local council to govern the city. Al-Mukalla-based leaders established the Hadhrami Domestic Council (HDC), a local council of Salafist-leaning individuals responsive to AQAP demands, which took over governance from the Sons of Hadramawt on April 13.<sup>f</sup> The failure of a powerful anti-government tribal alliance, the Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy (HTC), to re-secure al-Mukalla, first by force and then by negotiation, suggests that AQAP's influence is durable.<sup>g</sup>

The HDC runs the local government and administers the city. The Sons of Hadramawt maintain a security presence in the city, but reports from al-Mukalla described AQAP as operating in the shadows rather than openly, as it did in Abyan governorate during 2011. The Sons of Hadramawt turned over control of al-Mukalla's infrastructure in the months following the initial seizure, including returning control of the airport.<sup>14</sup> It is very likely that the Sons of Hadramawt is still able to move resources in and out of al-Mukalla's

e There is an ongoing debate over the extent of AQAP's presence in Aden. Iona Craig, a freelance journalist in Aden, has noted that AQAP is in Aden, but did not raise flags over buildings in the city or on its outskirts as reported. See tweets from Iona Craig (@ionacraig) from August 12 and August 17. AQAP has also contested reporting that it held a hostage in Aden. AQAP has previously held hostages in its safe havens, which adds credibility to AQAP's denial. See also Mohammed Mukhashaf, "Al Qaeda Deploy in Yemen's Aden, British Hostage Freed," Reuters, August 23, 2015; Saeed al Batati and Kareem Fahim, "Al Qaeda Fighters Try to Seize Yemeni Military Base in Aden," *New York Times*, August 23, 2015.

f The Hadhrami Domestic Council (al majlis al ahli al hadhrami) is also translated as the Hadramawt National Council or an iteration thereof. Its website (<http://www.mjlees.net/>) translates its name as Hadhrami Domestic Council, as does its Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/HadhramiDomesticCouncil>).

g A powerful tribal alliance, the Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy (HTC) attempted to re-secure al-Mukalla after AQAP's initial capture of the city and deployed forces to oust the militants. Typical of the complexities of Yemen, the HTC is an anti-government group, and so a Yemeni army unit based outside of the city clashed with HTC forces, preventing their entry into al-Mukalla. The HTC then attempted to negotiate with the HDC to turn over control of the city. Negotiations have been unsuccessful to date. The Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy is often referred to as the Hadramawt Tribal

## "The deterioration of the Yemeni military has allowed AQAP to develop a safe haven in the country."

air and sea ports, which will help AQAP support its efforts in southern and central Yemen.

The Sons of Hadramawt police the city, and it operates a group called the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice that is essentially a religious police force.<sup>15</sup> The group enforced a ban on the mild narcotic qat starting in early May, burning what it had seized in the street, and issued another warning against the drug in early July.<sup>16</sup> Violence is used sparingly, but as an example. AQAP publicly executed two men accused of providing the information that led to the death of the group's former emir, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, on June 17<sup>17</sup> and hung their bodies from a bridge as a warning.<sup>18</sup> At the end of July, the Sons of Hadramawt also publicly flogged individuals it claimed had used hashish.<sup>19</sup> The group seems to have cemented its presence in the city. Residents protested against AQAP in late April and early June, but these demonstrations died out.<sup>20</sup> Protesters in July cited the uptick in U.S. airstrikes in the area as a grievance and there were reports of the HDC negotiating AQAP's withdrawal from the city, yet it remains in control through the Sons of Hadramawt and the HDC.<sup>h</sup>

AQAP may be seeking to expand its control over Hadramawt. There are reports that Sons of Hadramawt convened a meeting in Shihri city in the district next to al-Mukalla in early August.<sup>21</sup> AQAP seized the major infrastructure in the city, including the oil terminal and the seaport, in April, but there had been no attempt to govern.<sup>22</sup> At the end of July, however, there were indications that AQAP may have been seeking to re-open the front in Wadi Hadramawt, the HTC's stronghold, which may be an attempt to secure the oil infrastructure there. On July 31, AQAP conducted a SVBIED attack targeting the 135th Brigade in al-Qatan, after more than four months of near inactivity.<sup>23</sup> A second roadside bomb attack on August 4 injured two soldiers in Sayun, Hadramawt.<sup>24</sup> The resumption of a front in Wadi Hadramawt would probably mobilize the HTC to prevent further gains by AQAP, though the HTC leadership may acquiesce to AQAP in order to avoid further conflict.

### An Enduring Threat

AQAP's threat is heightened by its position within al-Qa`ida's global network.<sup>25</sup> There have been a series of reports over the past two years that AQAP is working with al-Qa`ida individuals in Syria to target the United States or the West and that individuals trained

Alliance in media reporting, but translates its own name as "Confederacy" on its website ([www.alhelf.com](http://www.alhelf.com)) and on its Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/Hadramout.Tribes.Confederacy](http://www.facebook.com/Hadramout.Tribes.Confederacy)). "Important Announcement... HTA Decides to Advance on al Mukalla," Website of the Hadramawt Tribal Confederacy, April 3, 2015.

h At least eight U.S. airstrikes targeted AQAP militants in the vicinity of al-Mukalla between April and mid-July 2015.

by AQAP's imaginative bomb-maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, have moved into Syria.<sup>26</sup> Al-Asiri is the mastermind behind AQAP's most innovative and difficult-to-detect bombs, and he continues to improve his designs.<sup>27</sup> AQAP probably maintains a connection to Syria—and therefore the foreign fighters in Syria—through the al-Qa`ida cell operating alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, dubbed the Khorasan Group.<sup>28</sup>

Significant attrition within AQAP's leadership in 2015 has not reduced the threat.<sup>i</sup> AQAP, like other al-Qa`ida groups, is resilient to attrition. Al-Asiri remains at large and he has replicated his capabilities among apprentices.<sup>29</sup> The death of Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who had been emir since 2007 and had become al-Qa`ida's global general manager in 2013, did not cause notable shifts in AQAP's Yemeni operations.<sup>30</sup> Qasim al-Raymi, AQAP's military commander, who had been at al-Wuhayshi's side since 2006 and had overseen AQAP's major transnational attacks, now commands the entire organization and has pledged *bay`a* (allegiance) to al-Qa`ida emir Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>31</sup> A potential challenge for the group, however, will be replacing several leading religious leaders killed in recent drone strikes.<sup>j</sup> It is not readily apparent who will become that voice for AQAP, which will become a more important issue as the Islamic State expands in Yemen.<sup>32</sup>

The emergence of the Islamic State in Yemen increases the pressure on AQAP to sustain its success. The Islamic State's leadership has openly described their al-Qa`ida counterparts as having abandoned true jihad and pursuing a failed strategy.<sup>k</sup> The Islamic State's continued victories in Iraq and Syria, and its newfound strength in Sirte, Libya may encourage some Yemenis to support the Islamic State over AQAP, as will some Yemeni Salafist sheikhs declaring support for the Islamic State, such as Sheikh Abdul Majid al-Raymi.<sup>l</sup> An AQAP judge from Ibb, Ma'moun Abdulhamid Hatem, may have facilitated the initial growth of the Islamic State in Yemen. He publicly supported the group initially and the first major Islamic State suicide attack drew on recruits from Ibb.<sup>33</sup> Recruitment by the Islamic State still appears limited though, and the group is re-

i Important AQAP leaders killed since the start of 2015 include AQAP scholar Harith bin Ghazi al-Nadhari (January 31, 2015); Nasser bin Ali al-Ansi (April 22, 2015), Ma'moun Abdulhamid al Hatem (May 11, 2015); and Nasir al-Wuhayshi (June 9, 2015).

j Three senior religious leaders were killed in the first six months of 2015: they were Ibrahim al-Rubaish, Harith bin Ghazi al-Nadhari, and Nasser bin Ali al-Ansi.

k The critique from the Islamic State has been ongoing. The Islamic State spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani denounced al-Qa`ida's general command, accusing it of having deviated from the "correct method," and saying it has become a "pickaxe to demolish the project of the Islamic State and the coming caliphate," in an April 2014 audio statement. See "ISIL Spokesman Denounces General Command of al-Qaeda," SITE Intelligence Group, April 18, 2014.

l Sheikh Abdul Majid bin Mahmoud al-Hitari al-Raymi, a Salafist sheikh in Yemen, declared his support for the Islamic State in mid-July 2014. A Facebook post to his page from July 15, 2015 addressed al-Qa`ida supporters and called on them to support the Islamic Caliphate. His Facebook page and Twitter account have since been suspended.

m The Islamic State Wilayat al-Bayda first appeared in March 30, 2015, when it claimed the beheading of a Huthi militant. The next claimed attack was not until mid-May 2015 in Rada'a, al-Bayda. It began regular operations in June 2015 in al-Bayda, which has been the focus of AQAP's fight against the Huthis. The group has also claimed credit for attacks claimed by AQAP in al-Bayda, introducing doubt as to the perpetrators of some attacks. A pro-Islamic State Twitter account (@sds122dsd, now suspended) posted a photo of alleged Islamic State militants in al-Bayda on July 2, 2015. See

stricted to operating as small cells.<sup>34</sup> However, the Islamic State has signaled it may challenge AQAP in al-Bayda, expanding from its current focus on Sana'a.<sup>35</sup> For the time being, it is unlikely that the Islamic State will overtake AQAP as the predominant jihadist group in Yemen. AQAP is deepening its own relations with Sunni tribes and remains sensitive to Yemeni tribal *`urf* (customs), but AQAP must maintain its momentum with an ongoing narrative of victory if it is to prevent the Islamic State from making further gains.

As has been noted, the Islamic State's rise in the global jihadist movement challenges al-Qa`ida. Al-Qa`ida's response will probably be to attempt to prove that its strategy—one that uses attacks against the West to undermine support for governments in Muslim-majority lands—remains successful. As a result, al-Qa`ida is likely under pressure to conduct a spectacular attack against the West in order to demonstrate its continued relevance. That would almost certainly involve AQAP's well-developed capabilities, which have been enhanced by its expanded safe haven in Yemen. The persistence of AQAP's bomb-making capabilities and its expertise in transnational attacks underpins the enduring threat from that group. A July 30 statement attributed to al-Asiri noted that AQAP has "chosen war against America" and that "America is first."<sup>35</sup>

The leaders of both al-Qa`ida and AQAP have again begun pushing for smaller-scale lone-wolf attacks in the West.<sup>n</sup> AQAP first began calling for such attacks, which it calls lone jihad, in July 2010, with the release of its English-language magazine *Inspire* and regular statements from the late radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.<sup>36</sup> Khaled Batarfi, a senior AQAP commander who was freed from al-Mukalla's prison when AQAP took control of the city, appeared in an August 4 video that praised the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris and the Chattanooga shooter in the United States.<sup>37</sup> Batarfi called for Muslims to expand the "jihad uprising," and cited lone jihad as helping to achieve global goals.

## Conclusion

AQAP's recent successes in Yemen provide an important possible indicator of its future plans. The group remains strong and will probably continue to expand unless forces are deployed to combat the group. Its ability to tap into the momentum driving the anti-Huthi insurgency indicates an understanding of Yemeni political dynamics, which will help it integrate with tribal militias. This ability to better integrate with local forces strengthens its support among the population. Additionally, AQAP's control of al-Mukalla through local councils may serve as a template for how the group attempts to dominate other populated areas. Its ability to funnel supplies from al-Mukalla to the frontlines makes the city a strategic resource that it is unlikely to relinquish without a significant military campaign. And AQAP's strengthening relationship with some Sunni tribes may enable it to replicate structures in al-Mukalla elsewhere, extending the areas under its effective, but indirect, control.

The group's apparent focus on Yemen, however, masks its threat to the United States, with which AQAP remains at war. AQAP's en-

Katherine Zimmerman, "Exploring the Islamic State in Yemen," for map of the Islamic State activity in Yemen and the full case study of activity in al-Bayda, slide 8.

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larged sanctuary grants it additional freedom to develop, test, and train individuals on new explosive devices designed to slip through security measures. And the new leadership needs to prove it is just

as capable as its predecessors, if not more so, in attacking the United States. **CTC**

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# From Khorasan to the Levant: A Profile of Sanafi al-Nasr

By Kévin Jackson

**This article profiles Sanafi al-Nasr, a Saudi currently active with the Khorasan Group in Syria, whose ideological and personal animus toward the United States may influence the degree to which al-Qa`ida elements plot international terrorism from Syrian soil. He became active in al-Qa`ida's Saudi chapter in the early 2000s and established himself as a prolific online writer. In 2007, he joined al-Qa`ida in the Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran triangle where he learned from some of its top leaders and contributed to its media efforts and strategies. In April 2013, al-Nasr moved to Syria where he teamed up with Jabhat al-Nusra and emerged as a senior figure in the group.**

**A**bd al-Muhsin `Abdallah Ibrahim al-Sharikh is a leading Saudi figure in the so-called Khorasan Group best known by his online moniker "Sanafi al-Nasr," who has emerged as an important power broker and a strategic thinker in al-Qa`ida circles in Syria.<sup>a</sup> His growing influence is of significant concern because his writings reflect a deep-seated animus toward the United States that has both ideological and personal components. In the years after 9/11 one of his brothers was killed and two of his brothers were imprisoned by the United States. Even though al-Nasr has surfaced in media reports over the past year, this is the first comprehensive account of his jihadi trajectory.<sup>1</sup>

The stage is set for al-Nasr to play an even more prominent role in the Khorasan Group. On July 21, 2015, the Pentagon announced the July 8 death of Mohsin al-Fadhli, the alleged leader of the group in an airstrike in northwest Syria.<sup>2</sup> A veteran Kuwaiti jihadi with ties to Usama bin Ladin, al-Fadhli had gone to Syria in 2013 after helping run an al-Qa`ida facilitation network in Iran in collaboration with al-Nasr.<sup>3</sup> If confirmed, al-Fadhli's killing would be the latest in a series of losses for Syria-based al-Qa`ida elements previously located in the Khorasan region (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran). However, a number of these operatives remain active inside Syria and are worth scrutinizing because of the potential threat they pose to the security of Western countries. In Syria, some al-Qa`ida

delegates have high-ranking positions in Jabhat al-Nusra, testifying to the close relationship between the two groups. Even though Jabhat al-Nusra claims it has been ordered by al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri not to mount external operations,<sup>4</sup> the number of foreign recruits available to al-Qa`ida in Syria, the group's longstanding focus on the West, and intelligence suggesting that the Khorasan Group has engaged in plotting international terrorism,<sup>5</sup> make it vital to understand the Khorasan Group's leaders and their profile, agenda, and priorities.

## Jihadi Family

Al-Nasr was born in the Saudi town of al-Shaqra in Riyadh province on July 12, 1985,<sup>6</sup> into a family with longstanding ties to the Arab-Afghan milieu in general and al-Qa`ida in particular. His father fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s and later encouraged his sons to engage in militancy,<sup>7</sup> as did the father's now-deceased spouse.<sup>b</sup> Such activity earned the al-Sharikh the reputation for being a "mujahideen family" in a document found in 9/11 mastermind Khalid Shaykh Muhammad's hideout in March 2003.<sup>8</sup>

Raised in their parents' house in Riyadh's al-Shifa district, the seven al-Sharikh brothers lived in what a family acquaintance called "martyrs street."<sup>c</sup> One of the elder brothers—`Abd al-Latif—paved the way for several of the others to join jihadi groups. He trained at Khalden camp in Afghanistan before fighting with the Saudi jihadi Ibn al-Khattab in Chechnya, where he was killed in 2000.<sup>9</sup> His jihadi connections appear to have assisted his younger brothers' militant trajectory. In 2000, three of them (`Abd al-Rahman, `Abd al-Hadi, and `Abd al-Razzaq) used connections in their deceased brother's social network to migrate to Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> In Kandahar, the al-Qa`ida leadership groomed `Abd al-Hadi and `Abd al-Razzaq<sup>d</sup> to help with the organization's work in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>11</sup>

a Al-Nasr is on Saudi Arabia's February 2009 most-wanted list and the United Nations Security Council and the U.S. Treasury Department both added him to the list of al-Qa`ida figures on the sanctions list in August 2014. See "Tafasil fi Qa`ima al-85 al-Mulahaqin Amniyyan," `Ukadh, February 5, 2009. I am grateful to the blogger known as Mr. Orange for his help in translating Arabic texts; "United Nations Security Council Adds Names of Six Individuals to Al-Qaida Sanctions List," United Nations, August 15, 2014; "Treasury Designates Additional Supporters of the Al-Nusra Front and Al-Qaida," U.S. Department of the Treasury, August 22, 2014.

b An internal al-Qa`ida document states that "after [ `Abd al-Razzaq's] brother [ `Abd al-Latif] died in Chechnya, his mother sent him, along with two brothers, to jihad." See `Abd al-Razzaq's profile in "The Guantanamo Docket." *New York Times* (updated June 2015).

c It was named as such given that, besides `Abd al-Latif, another Saudi living close by nicknamed Abu `Abdallah al-Shabani was killed in Bosnia. See Hamad al-Qatari, "Min Qisas al-Shuhada' al-`Arab, `Ibad al-Najdi." Available at <http://www.saaaid.net/Doat/hamad/48.htm>. (shari' al-shuhada').

d While Sanafi al-Nasr has explicitly mentioned `Abd al-Latif and `Abd

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These plans were cut short when they were captured after the fall of the Taliban and sent to Guantanamo.<sup>e</sup> `Abd al-Rahman, for his part, died in a U.S. airstrike while defending the Kandahar airport in late 2001.<sup>12</sup>

### Early Militant Activities

Al-Nasr, the youngest of the brothers, stayed behind in Saudi Arabia and was likely inspired by his elder brothers. He began his jihadi career with al-Qa`ida's Saudi branch,<sup>f</sup> having developed ties to its membership, including its higher echelons. When asked about the branch's late leader Yusuf al-Uyayri and others, al-Nasr once said: "All of them [were] my companions."<sup>13</sup> Although not a senior operative, he provided logistics and financial assistance.<sup>14</sup> For instance, he helped shelter `Abdallah al-Rashud, a top ideologue in the Saudi offshoot.<sup>5</sup> Al-Nasr also reportedly plotted attacks inside the kingdom with his friend Salih al-Qa`rawi, who later became a field commander with the Levant-based Abdullah Azzam Brigades (AAB) before his arrest in 2012.<sup>15</sup>

During this period, the young Saudi jihadi also started to earn a reputation as a writer. He participated in Sahwist-affiliated<sup>h</sup> and later in popular jihadi internet networks<sup>i</sup> such as al-Hisba, where he posted numerous pictures and brief biographies about many jihadis.<sup>16</sup> An ardent supporter of al-Qa`ida in Mesopotamia and its later incarnations, al-Nasr summarized the content of their video

al-Rahman as his brothers, he did not do so concerning `Abd al-Razzaq (born in al-Shaqra, like al-Nasr) and `Abd al-Hadi. Nonetheless, it is evident that these two are also al-Nasr's brothers. Not only do they share the same family name, but the two also stated that `Abd al-Latif and `Abd al-Rahman were their brothers. See, for instance, `Abd al-Razzaq's profile in "The Guantanamo Docket." *New York Times* (updated June 2015). Bilal al-Khurasani, a personal friend of al-Nasr, though not naming `Abd al-Razzaq or `Abd al-Hadi, confirmed that two of al-Nasr's brothers had been imprisoned in Guantanamo. See Bilal al-Khurasani, "Wa madhi Kawkab min Kawakib Khurasan—al-Amir al-Nabil Sanafi al-Nasr Rahimahullah," March 26, 2014. On the connections between the brothers also see Thomas Joscelyn, "Treasury designates 2 'key' al Qaeda financiers," *The Long War Journal*, August 22, 2014.

- e After being transferred to their home country on September 5, 2007, the two brothers were later rearrested on terrorism suspicions. See "Former Guantanamo Detainee Terrorism Trends," Defense Intelligence Agency, April 8, 2009.
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- g Al-Nasr hid al-Rashud while the latter was "snubbed by many of those that he had considered to be among his closest friends." See Bilal al-Khurasani, "Wa madhi Kawkab min Kawakib Khurasan—al-Amir al-Nabil Sanafi al-Nasr Rahimahullah," March 26, 2014. Al-Rashud eventually managed to flee to Iraq, where he was killed in 2005.
- h The Sahwists were reformist Islamists who led the non-violent opposition against the Saudi regime in the first half of the 1990s.
- i Al-Nasr's early online involvement was recounted to this author by Aimen Dean. The Saudi Islamist-run forums al-Nasr was active on were al-Islah, owned by the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia, and al-Masrah, created by Kassab al-`Utaybi, a Saudi dissident. These were the two online platforms where Dean would come to know and interact with al-Nasr from 2000 onward.
- j Sanafi al-Nasr, "Hal Ta`rifun Sanafi al-Nasr, Innahu fi Sahat al-Wagha," Ana

## "Al-Nasr received mentoring from a number of prominent al-Qa`ida leaders."

materials<sup>17</sup> while scolding their detractors, including the Turkish administrator of a militant forum.<sup>18</sup> In May 2006, he issued a vitriolic warning about the Shi`a and their supposed entrenched "enmity [toward] Sunnis" and their expansionist plans, with a focus on Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.<sup>19</sup>

### Core Al-Qa`ida

In 2007, al-Nasr followed in his brothers' footsteps and moved to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. He left with Muhammad al-Mutlaq, a renowned writer in the digital jihadi sphere<sup>j</sup> better known as Qahir al-Salib. The pair flew to Bahrain on April 8, 2007,<sup>k</sup> and were smuggled into Iran's Kish Island by Muhammad Ja`far Iqbal,<sup>1</sup> a Bahraini jihadi veteran. Before setting off for Pakistan, al-Nasr met the Egyptian senior al-Qa`ida operative Sayf al-`Adl in Zahedan.<sup>20</sup>

On arriving in Pakistan's tribal areas, al-Nasr befriended a diverse array of *muhajiroun* (émigrés), although his inner circle seems to have largely comprised fellow Saudis. Among them was Abu Bashir al-Najdi, born `Abdallah al-Qahtani, an al-Qa`ida official killed in North Waziristan in November 2009.<sup>21</sup> Another close acolyte was `Abdallah `Azzam al-`Azdi (real name Mu`jab al-Zahrani), an al-Faruq camp alumnus who served as a senior leader responsible for new volunteers in Waziristan before his November 2008 death in Bannu, Pakistan.<sup>22</sup> Al-Nasr also reconnected with old acquaintances, such as Ikrima al-Najdi, whom he knew from Saudi Arabia.

Al-Nasr received mentoring from a number of prominent al-Qa`ida leaders. According to his friend Bilal al-Khorasani, who is currently in Syria, the Saudi jihadi was "brought up at the hands of Abu Yahya and `Atiyyatullah,"<sup>m</sup> two Libyan ideologues then in al-Qa`ida's leadership. Al-Nasr himself acknowledged `Atiyyatullah's influence by contending that the Libyan had left an indelible mark on him.<sup>23</sup> Further, al-Nasr learned from, among others, Abu al-

Muslim, May 5, 2007. Al-Mutlaq was likely killed in a U.S. drone strike that targeted a compound in North Waziristan on January 29, 2010. To read more on his background, see "2 More Web Jihadists Announced Dead," Jarret Brachman blog, February 1, 2010.

- k Before leaving, al-Nasr returned to his home to see his parents and bid them farewell.
- l Also known as Abu al-Harith, Iqbal went to Afghanistan in 1991 and 1992 before turning his attention to the Bosnian jihad in the mid-1990s. He enjoyed close relations with Libyan jihadis, especially in the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group.
- m Bilal al-Khurasani, "Wa madhi Kawkab min Kawakib Khurasan—al-Amir al-Nabil Sanafi al-Nasr Rahimahullah," March 26, 2014. For more on `Atiyyatullah al-Libi and his ideological views, see Christopher Anzalone, "Revisiting Shaykh Atiyyatullah's Works on Takfir and Mass Violence," *CTC Sentinel* 5:4, (2012). He was also known by the alias Abu `Abd al-Rahman. His real name is Jamal Ibrahim Ishtiwi al-Misrati. He was born in 1970 in Misrata, Libya, traveled to Afghanistan in the late 1980s and was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan on August 22, 2011. See Don Rassler et al, "Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?" *Combating Terrorism Center* at

Miqdaq al-Misri, a late member of al-Qa`ida's Shura council; Abu al-Layth al-Libi, a now-deceased top leader; and Khalid al-Husaynan, a slain Kuwaiti theologian.

This lengthy association with senior al-Qa`ida leaders helped al-Nasr to gradually ascend through the group. The Saudi émigré served as a *mulazim* (lieutenant) for Abu Yahya al-Libi and, in Bilal al-Khorasani's words, their close relation led the one "who worked with [al-Nasr to be] touched by a scent of Abu Yahya in him."<sup>24</sup> His brother-in-arms further praised him as "a noble, shy, and well-behaved man" who, despite his seniority, "hated to be called emir."<sup>25</sup>

There is little documentation of al-Nasr's engagement in al-Qa`ida's military efforts. He is said to have featured in an al-Sahab production showing rocket attacks in Paktika, a province in southeastern Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> Al-Nasr also provided a vivid account of a multi-pronged attack he had been charged with filming in 2007.<sup>27</sup> This supports other sources in which he was characterized as one of the "media men of Qa`idat al-Jihad in Khorasan" by a fellow member of the organization.<sup>n</sup> Al-Nasr's only other appearance in al-Qa`ida's official media was his later article for the group's magazine *Tala`i` Khorasan* in which he addressed the issue of Saudi women in custody.<sup>28</sup>

Most of his output was featured on jihadi forums such as al-Hisba and al-Fallujah, two of the most preeminent online platforms at the time. Al-Nasr acted as an on-the-ground "reporter" for his online audience, feeding it with news on the latest arrivals or battles in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.<sup>o</sup> Also, he penned a number of eulogies retracing the life and death of recently slain Arab militants, including mid-level al-Qa`ida commanders such as Abu Tayyib al-Sharqi.<sup>p</sup> Finally, the Saudi jihadi provided forums with audiovisual materials from the region, such as recordings of foreign fighters singing *anashid* (hymns).<sup>29</sup>

### Between Iran and Pakistan

In late 2008 or early 2009,<sup>q</sup> al-Nasr was dispatched to Iran, where according to the United Nations "he was appointed the Iran-based representative of al-Qa`ida to replace Yasin al-Suri, an al-Qa`ida operative who had been jailed by the Iranian authorities. From Tehran, he managed a facilitation network that transferred finances



*This photo, taken from a pro-jihadi Twitter account appears to show al-Nasr in Syria.*

and fighters to Afghanistan and Pakistan."<sup>r</sup>

The al-Sakina website reported that frictions between the group's leaders and Salih al-Qar`awi, the later AAB field commander, resulted in al-Nasr's promotion.<sup>s</sup> The article claims that during a June 2008 meeting in Waziristan, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, the then al-Qa`ida leader in Khorasan, enjoined al-Qar`awi to give *bay`a* (oath of allegiance) to Usama bin Ladin and that in return he would be handed control over the organization's Persian Gulf file. He refused and al-Qa`ida instead appointed al-Nasr.

But his tenure was short-lived. Iranian authorities arrested him at some point during 2009 and only released him in May 2011. According to the United Nations, he then moved back to North Waziristan, where he continued to be involved in facilitation activities,

West Point, May 3, 2012, p. 5.

n This was said on the Twitter account @Kmhajer63, which has since been shut down. Aimen Dean was also adamant that al-Nasr was an "al-Qa`ida Central media guy."

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p His real name is Talayhan al-Mutayri. Abu Tayyib al-Sharqi joined al-Qa`ida in the late 1990s. After three years in custody in Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of 9/11, he moved to the Afghan-Pakistan border region and reconnected with his group. He led a major assault against a U.S. military base in Khost in August 2008 before being killed in an airstrike shortly after. To read his eulogy, see Sanafi al-Nasr, "Silsilat `Am al-Huzn 1429h—Abu al-Tayyib al-Sharqi Rahimahullah," Ana Muslim, March 28, 2009.

q It is not clear exactly when al-Nasr traveled. This estimate is based on the author's analysis of al-Nasr's statements.

r "United Nations Security Council Adds Names of Six Individuals to Al-Qaida Sanctions List," United Nations, August 15, 2014. According to the U.S. Treasury, Yasin al-Suri has been active in al-Qa`ida's facilitation networks in Iran since 2005 and later became the head of its activities in the country. He was also involved in moving the group's elements from Khorasan into Syria. "Treasury Targets Key Al-Qa`ida Funding and Support Network Using Iran as a Critical Transit Point, U.S. Department of the Treasury Press Release," July 28, 2011. For more details on al-Suri's most recent activities, see Thomas Joscelyn, "Report: Senior al-Qaeda Facilitator 'Back on the Street' in Iran," *The Long War Journal*, January 31, 2014.

s See "Asbab Ghadhab al-Qa`ida `ala al-Qar`awi wa `Azluhu min Mansibihi,"

and as of 2012, he had taken “charge of the finances of Al-Qaida core.”<sup>t</sup>

Despite taking on an increasingly senior role for al-Qa`ida, al-Nasr continued his written output, frequently publishing on the jihadi media house al-Ansar Mailing Group, which was also used by other al-Qa`ida figures.<sup>30</sup> It issued his 2011 essay “[What is required] Before al-Nafir,” followed by “[What is required] After al-Nafir.”<sup>31</sup> Aimed at providing guidance to would-be volunteers for jihad overseas, his work built on discussions with seasoned militants and his personal readings. He focused on physical preparation, “an essential pillar” of jihad, as well as the importance of listening to and obeying the emir and respecting local supporters of the cause.

Sometime in late 2012 or early 2013, al-Nasr returned to Iran, where he resumed a senior role in al-Qa`ida’s fighter and financing facilitation network. During this time he fostered a working relationship with the future alleged leader of the Khorasan Group. According to the United Nations, during this second spell in Iran he acted as the deputy in the network to Kuwaiti al-Qa`ida veteran Muhsin al-Fadhli.<sup>32 u</sup>

In October 2012 the U.S. government stated:

*“The network uses Iran as a critical transit point and operates under an agreement between al-Qa`ida and the Iranian government. Under the terms of the agreement between al-Qa`ida and Iran, al-Qa`ida must refrain from conducting any operations within Iranian territory and recruiting operatives inside Iran while keeping Iranian authorities informed of their activities. In return, the Government of Iran gave the Iran-based al-Qa`ida network freedom of operation and uninhibited ability to travel for extremists and their families.”<sup>33 v</sup>*

## Syria

As early as 2012, al-Qa`ida elements began leaving Khorasan (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran) and moving to Syria. The exodus reflected a process sanctioned by al-Qa`ida’s general command, as those involved were characterized as “the members of the Khorasan delegation sent by Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri.”<sup>34</sup> The group has long been adept at deploying trusted operatives to local subsidiaries to assist and keep them in line with its policies. It was no surprise that al-Zawahiri wanted to replicate this in Syria, especially since his Iraqi affiliate, with its history of brutality, had dispatched members of its own, under the cover of Jabhat al-Nusra.

al-Sakina, February 22, 2015. Although it does not mention al-Nasr, an insider account substantiates the article’s information about al-Qa`ida’s strained relationship with al-Qa`rawi. In it, al-Qa`rawi is decried as a rogue element whose “reckless behavior” caused major troubles in the Khorasan-based militant community, which prompted al-Qa`ida’s leaders, including Abu al-Yazid, to attempt to “contain him.” See `Abd al-Hamid al-Iraqi, “Allahu Akbar—bi Idhnillah—Tahrir Bayt al-Maqdis ala yad al-Qa`ida (ma`a Dalil),” Post 13, Ana Muslim, July 17, 2010.

t “United Nations Security Council Adds Names of Six Individuals to Al-Qaida Sanctions List,” United Nations, August 15, 2014. In the same vein, the U.S. Treasury says that al-Nasr functioned “as a key financial facilitator in Pakistan” for the organization.

u It should be noted that al-Nasr hinted at his close relationship with al-Fadhli by lauding him as his “companion” when rumors surfaced that the Kuwaiti had been killed in a U.S. airstrike in Syria in September 2014.

## “Al-Nasr distinguished himself ‘with strategic acumen and an ideologically driven approach to jihad throughout his career.’”

According to the United Nations, al-Nasr left Iran and relocated to Syria in April 2013.<sup>v</sup> If al-Nasr’s Twitter feed is any indication, the timeline seems accurate. After joining Twitter in early January 2013, he barely mentioned the Syrian conflict and the material he posted related to actions in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A change occurred from mid-June, with later tweets clearly pointing to his presence in Syria. He began using the platform to reach out to senior Syria-based militant figures, informing his followers of his comrades “martyred” in Syria, and occasionally reporting what he witnessed.<sup>w</sup>

Operating in northern Syria, al-Nasr adopted the new alias Abu Yasir al-Jazrawi.<sup>35</sup> On account of their provenance, he and his associates were commonly referred to as the “brothers/mujahideen from Khorasan” in Syria’s militant circles.<sup>36</sup> They did not constitute a distinct group, but a mere extension of the Pakistan-based mother organization with specific instructions for implementation once in Syria. As al-Nasr related, “the organization Qa`idat al-Jihad asked all those who were sent to Syria to join Jabhat al-Nusra, except for two people [who were sent] to Ahrar al-Sham.”<sup>37</sup> Abu `Ubayda al-Maqdisi, the security chief who was in charge of dispatching al-Qa`ida members from Khorasan to Syria, even required an oath from operatives that they would team up with Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>x</sup>

While some al-Qa`ida veterans assumed a public position in Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Nasr’s exact duties in the group remain less clear and seem to have shifted over time. He served in a combat role in and around north-western Idlib and Latakia provinces<sup>38</sup> and, due to his years in Khorasan, was apparently appointed as Jabhat al-Nusra’s emir for al-Sahel in Latakia where his experience in mountain warfare was especially valuable.<sup>39 y</sup> Al-Nasr’s military contribution is further underscored by the severe injuries he suffered from a tank shell during the first day of the al-Anfal battle in Latakia on March 21, 2014.<sup>40</sup>

More importantly for his ascension through the ranks was al-Nasr’s emergence as one of the top strategists for al-Qa`ida in Syria. According to a former al-Qa`ida member, al-Nasr distinguished himself “with strategic acumen and an ideologically driven ap-

v The United States is less exact, identifying only the spring of 2013. Interestingly, there was a time lapse between early February 2013 and early April 2013 during which al-Nasr went dark on Twitter.

w Author monitoring of the @Snafialnasr Twitter account. The account contains many personal recollections in the first person indicating it is authored by al-Nasr, not a supporter.

x This was claimed by a Jordanian who defected from al-Qa`ida to the Islamic State and became a vocal opponent of his former group. See Abu Jarir al-Shamali, “Al-Qaidah of Waziristan,” *Dabiq*, Issue 6, December 29, 2014, p. 51.

y Al-Nasr is said to have been working with `Abd al-Rahman al-Juhani, a

proach to jihad throughout his career.<sup>z</sup> Upon al-Nasr's arrival in Syria, he headed a small al-Qa`ida council originally envisaged by Bin Ladin as offering guidance on "strategic policies and planning."<sup>aa</sup> Combined with his description as "one of [Jabhat al-Nusra's] top strategists"<sup>41</sup> by U.S. officials, it seems al-Nasr has been working as a senior advisor, this time with Jabhat al-Nusra's emir Abu Muhammad al-Julani and his top aides,<sup>bb</sup> especially since his injuries in 2014.<sup>42</sup>

In that regard, al-Nasr, along with other Saudis and Jordanians, is alleged to have played a role in keeping Jabhat al-Nusra in al-Qa`ida's orbit, even as some senior Jabhat al-Nusra figures pushed for a weaker relationship with the central leadership in Pakistan.<sup>cc</sup> Al-Nasr is also said to have participated in sidelining Jabhat al-Nusra's former top religious official, Abu Mariyya al-Qahtani, who was dismissed in favor of the Jordanian Sami al-`Uraydi in the summer of 2014.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, al-Nasr apparently helped bolster the theological and judicial clout of the Jordanians Abu Qatada al-Filistini and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi over Jabhat al-Nusra's Legal Committee.<sup>dd</sup> Both of these men had influenced him since his youth. Al-Nasr also reportedly contributed to the deepening of the Syrian affiliate's reach in the Levantine militant environment by helping it develop its "operational relationship"<sup>ee</sup> with the AAB.

It is unclear if al-Nasr had any operational role in the alleged

top leader of al-Qa`ida who arrived in Syria from Pakistan in 2012, in his duties in Latakia. See "United Nations Security Council Adds Names of Six Individuals to Al-Qaida Sanctions List."

z Interview with Aimen Dean, July 28, 2015. Based on his online conversations with al-Nasr, Dean saw him as being from "la crème de la crème" of jihadis, those who, as opposed to the "romantic" or "bloodthirsty" types, are "ideologically, politically, and strategically driven."

aa In late 2009 or early 2010, Bin Ladin addressed a letter to Mustafa Abu al-Yazid in which he brought up the need for "one or two brothers to specialize in the area of strategic policies and planning," adding that "this person might give us lucid ideas during the events the nation will go through since this is his field of study." U.S. intelligence sources told Thomas Joscelyn that this very restricted body eventually grew and became known as the "Shura al-Nasr" (Victory Council), with al-Nasr running it. I am indebted to Thomas Joscelyn for having shared his insights into the origins and development of the council.

bb On a broader level, the role played by al-Qa`ida's representatives in orienting Jabhat al-Nusra is echoed in primary sources. For example, an insider account refers to an unnamed "delegate of Ayman al-Zawahiri" as one of "Jabhat al-Nusra's advisors and leaders" keen to push forward reform in the group. See "Interview with Abu Samir al-Urduni," *Dabiq*, Issue 10, July 14, 2015, p. 76.

cc Interview with Aimen Dean, July 28, 2015. Charles Lister agrees that a cluster of Jordanians, Saudis, and some Kuwaitis lobbied for keeping Jabhat al-Nusra under al-Qa`ida's umbrella. To read more about Jabhat al-Nusra's internal divisions, see Charles Lister, "An Internal Struggle: Al Qaeda's Syrian Affiliate Is Grappling With Its Identity," *Huffington Post*, May 31, 2015.

dd Interview with Aimen Dean, July 28, 2015. During their discussions on Islamist forums, al-Nasr told Dean that the two most influential scholars he had come across were al-Filistini and al-Maqdisi, whose book al-Kawashif al-Jalliyya fi Kufri al-Dawla al-Sa`udiyya considerably influenced his views on the Saudi monarchy. Also, al-Nasr participated in online debates involving al-Filistini and the Syrian militant cleric Abu Basir al-Tartusi. Al-Nasr's role in specifically strengthening al-Filistini's standing in Jabhat al-Nusra led one member of Ahrar al-Sham to dismissively refer to the Saudi government as "nothing but a stooge of Abu Qatada."

ee Interview with Charles Lister, July 29, 2014. According to Lister, besides

## "Al-Nasr appears set to further increase his stature within al-Qa`ida's global network."

plotting of international attacks by the Khorasan Group. Nevertheless, in the case of an overseas attack in the making, it is most likely that he was, at the very least, made aware of the preparations owing to his close working relationship with al-Fadhli, who headed external operations for al-Qa`ida Central in Syria.<sup>44</sup>

In any event, al-Nasr's writings clearly showed that the Saudi had considerable motivation to target the West, especially the United States. Indeed, upon arriving in the Afghanistan/Pakistan/Iran region in 2007, al-Nasr recounted that what had captured his attention was the fate of jihadis in U.S. custody, citing the cases of "Shaykh `Umar `Abd al-Rahman (aka the blind sheikh) and our prisoners in Guantanamo." He then added that "we will take revenge for our brothers with all our strength" by striking the "Americans who hurt my brothers in Cuba" and their "Pakistani agents."<sup>45</sup> Besides his long involvement in al-Qa`ida, al-Nasr's grievances were also certainly cemented by the imprisonment and killing of his own brothers by the United States. Furthermore, according to the U.S. government he "used social media posts [in Syria] to demonstrate his aspiration to target Americans and U.S. interests."<sup>46</sup> His desire to orchestrate attacks against the West may, for the time being, have been tempered by al-Zawahiri's call for Jabhat al-Nusra not to use Syria as a base for international operations. His track record as a loyalist to al-Qa`ida's top command and his emphasis in his writings on obeying the emir suggests he is likely to abide by these orders.

### A Harsh Critic of the Islamic State

The period during which al-Nasr and many of his comrades migrated to Syria corresponded with the growing rift between Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. Indeed, as al-Qa`ida's emissaries entrusted with securing its interests in Syria, a number of them<sup>ff</sup> served as mediators in the then nascent *fitna* (sedition) that created the Islamic State, though there is no hard evidence that this was part of al-Nasr's portfolio.<sup>gg</sup>

Despite several reconciliation attempts throughout 2013,<sup>hh</sup> the

al-Qar`awi, al-Nasr also knew Majid al-Majid, the late emir of the AAB, and "had relationships into Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps." These contacts proved useful in fostering the Jabhat al-Nusra-AAB nexus. Lister added that the Lebanese-founded group "Jund al-Sham in Homs along the Lebanese border may have helped with several covert crossings to Tripoli in this regard."

ff Although he had the main authority in solving these internal disputes as per al-Zawahiri's orders, Abu Khalid al-Suri was not the only one involved. For example, the biography of Abu Firas al-Suri, a jihadi veteran now part of Jabhat al-Nusra's senior leadership, specifies that he "returned to Syria from Yemen in 2013 when the conflict between Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State took place and he desperately tried along with Shaykh Abu Khalid al-Suri to address the issues." See Abu Firas al-Suri, "Silsalah al-Shahada: Chain of Testimonies," al-Basira Media Productions, March 21, 2014.

gg Both Aimen Dean and Charles Lister raised doubts about al-Nasr's possible involvement in the mediation. Dean holds that al-Qa`ida favors "grey

rift only intensified. Although al-Nasr did not specifically point to the Islamic State, he railed against “adolescent jihadism [which manifests in a] disorder of priorities, a rush to set loose rulings, [and] on-the-spot decision-making by temper.”<sup>47</sup> After infighting with the Islamic State broke out in January 2014, al-Nasr grew more outspoken about Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s men. He noted the discrepancy between what he was told by Islamic State members, namely that “they do not excommunicate Ahrar al-Sham,” and their “calls to send car bombs” against the group.<sup>48</sup> The hostility that the al-Qa`ida envoys reported to the leadership in Pakistan was a driving factor in the organization’s decision to disown its Iraqi affiliate in February 2014.<sup>ii</sup> Al-Nasr’s aversion to the Islamic State reached its climax later that month with Abu Khalid

beards,” (meaning historically authoritative figures with long experience in jihad) for such a sensitive mission.

hh According to Abu `Abdallah al-Shami, a top Jabhat al-Nusra religious official, one of the proposed solutions was to send two figures, one from Jabhat al-Nusra and one from the Islamic State, to al-Zawahiri so that he could choose the most suitable candidate to lead both groups in Syria. See Abu `Abdallah al-Shami, “But If They Had Done What They Were (Actually) Told, It Would Have Been Best For Them,” al-Tahaya Media Foundation, March 30, 2014.

ii This had been reported by Adam Gadahn, a key figure in al-Sahab until his death, who declared that “numerous reports from reliable sources—including some sent to Syria especially for the purpose of evaluating the situation on the ground—confirmed the accuracy of many of the accusations leveled against Islamic State.” See “Resurgence,” al-Sahab, Issue 2, June 25, 2015, p. 54.

jj See <https://twitter.com/Snafialnasr/statuses/437596608906407936>. Al-Nasr further revealed what al-Suri had told him shortly before his assassination, from a meeting with Bin Ladin in Afghanistan in the 9/11 aftermath to the death threats he received from ISIS in Syria.

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- 4 “Translation: Interview with Abu Muhammad al-Joulani on Al Jazeera (Part 1),” al-Minara, June 1, 2015.
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- 7 Bilal al-Khurasani, “Wa madhi Kawkab min Kawakib Khurasan—al-Amir al-Nabil Sanafi al-Nasr Rahimahullah,” March 26, 2014, available at <http://justpaste.it/snafi>. For details on how the al-Sharikh patriarch directly encouraged his sons to take up the cause, see `Abd al-Hadi al-Sharikh’s profile on “The Guantanamo Docket,” *New York Times* (updated June 2015).
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 `Abd al-Hadi al-Sharikh’s profile on “The Guantanamo Docket,” *New York*

al-Suri’s slaying, which the Saudi blamed on the “state of oppression and injustice.”<sup>jj</sup>

Further asserting his anti-Islamic State sentiment, al-Nasr signed the joint statement “About al-Baghdadi’s group” issued on July 18, 2015.<sup>49</sup> The Saudi jihadi, alongside other prominent foreign militant figures, admonished al-Baghdadi’s forces for having “increased their crimes.” This was the first time that al-Nasr’s name featured on a public communiqué as one of Jabhat al-Nusra’s top representatives. Al-Nasr was last heard of on August 24, 2015, when he eulogized Idris al-Balushi—Khalid Shaykh Muhammad’s nephew, who he evidently knew—on a Twitter account he had apparently newly created.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

Al-Nasr’s trajectory from the Saudi wing of al-Qa`ida to al-Qa`ida in Khorasan epitomizes the intertwined nature of the jihadi milieu, where social bonds and family pedigree often prove to be significant in one’s radicalization process and subsequent role. Although he is a member of the younger generation that used to acclaim Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi’s jihad in Iraq, the Saudi has remained devoted to al-Qa`ida’s old guard, and established himself as a staunch critic of al-Zarqawi’s heirs in the Levant. In light of his recent feature role as one of Jabhat al-Nusra’s major officials and the demise of many of al-Qa`ida’s longtime figures, al-Nasr appears set to further increase his stature within al-Qa`ida’s global network. Should the organization change its calculus with regard to launching international attacks from Syria, al-Nasr’s background and mindset would likely see him play a key role in orchestrating terrorist attacks against the West. **CTC**

*Times* (updated June 2015).

- 11 `Abd al-Hadi al-Sharikh’s profile on “The Guantanamo Docket,” *New York Times* (updated June 2015). The mission they were assigned to was to attack a U.S. airbase in Saudi Arabia.
- 12 “Shuhada’ al-Islam alladhina Jahadu wa Nadhalu wa Nalu Sharaf al-Shahada wa al-Mawt fi Sabil Allah,” Ahla Shalahu, February 18, 2011.
- 13 Bilal al-Khurasani, “Wa madhi Kawkab min Kawakib Khurasan—al-Amir al-Nabil Sanafi al-Nasr Rahimahullah,” March 26, 2014. The relationship between al-Nasr and al-Uyayri was confirmed to this author by Aimen Dean, a former member of al-Qa`ida.
- 14 “`Abd al-Muhsin al-Sharikh, al-Sira al-Dhatiyya `an `Abd al-Muhsin al-Sharikh, Man Huwa Sanafi al-Nasr,” *Nahr al-Hub*, August 24, 2014.
- 15 “`Abd al-Muhsin al-Sharikh, al-Sira al-Dhatiyya `an `Abd al-Muhsin al-Sharikh, Man Huwa Sanafi al-Nasr,” *Nahr al-Hub*, August 24, 2014. For more on the cooperation between Jabhat al-Nusra and AAB see Charles Lister, “Al-Qa`ida Plays a Long Game in Syria” in this issue, p. 13.
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- 17 Sanafi al-Nasr, “Taqrir `an Film Qawafil al-Shuhada’ fi Bilad al-Rafidayn,” *Ana Muslim*, March 2, 2007.
- 18 Sanafi al-Nasr, “Maghalitat fi Bayan ‘Mish `an al-Juburi’ al-Mushrif al-`Am `ala Mawqi’ al-Mukhtasar,” *Ana Muslim*, February 26, 2007.
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- 21 "Istishhad al-Shaykh `Abdallah al-Qahtani—Abu Bashir al-Najdi—Ahad al-Matlubin," *Ana Muslim*, November 13, 2009.
- 22 Sanafi al-Nasr, "Wa rahala Hafid Abu Hurayra al-Qiyadi al-Bariz `Abdallah `Azzam al-`Azdi Rahimahullah," *Ana Muslim*, February 8, 2009.
- 23 This was mentioned on al-Nasr's former Twitter profile.
- 24 See Bilal al-Khurasani, "Wa madhi Kawkab min Kawakib Khurasan—al-Amir al-Nabil Sanafi al-Nasr Rahimahullah," posted on Justpaste and disseminated by pro al-Qa`ida Twitter accounts, March 26, 2014.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 See "Sharpshooters of Paktitka," *al-Sahab*, March 3, 2012. A comrade of al-Nasr made this claim on his now defunct account @ali\_gt959.
- 27 Sanafi al-Nasr, "Ibrat Madhi al-Tariq!," *Ana Muslim*, December 13, 2007.
- 28 "Hal Sayafaji'na al-i`alam al-Sa`udi bi-Quwa`im al-Matlubat," *Tala`i`i` Khurasan*, Issue 19, September 11, 2011.
- 29 "Khasrian...Jalasat Anashadiyya al-Ikhwanuna al-Mujahidin fi Afghanistan Muhadat Min al-Akh Sanafi al-Nasr li-Ghurfat al-Ansar," originally published on a jihadi forum, March 26, 2009. Accessed through archive.org. Al-Nasr also shared a video paying tribute to a cluster of foreign militants killed in Zabul, Afghanistan. The video was narrated by Abu Damdam al-Qurayshi (Khalid al-`Utaybi), a Saudi national reported to have facilitated al-Nasr's departure from Saudi Arabia. See "Ghurfat al-Ansar fi al-Baltuk Tuqaddim: Abrar fi Zaman al-Inkisar," *al-Qimmah Forum*, February 28, 2009.
- 30 See, for example, Abu `Ubayda al-Maqdisi, "Eulogy for the Lion of ash-Sham: Shaykh Mahmud Mihdi Aal Zaydan (Mansur ash-Shami)," *al-Ansar Mailing Group*, June 8, 2012.
- 31 Sanafi al-Nasr, "Ma Qabl al-Nafir," *Ana Muslim*, July 1, 2011; Sanafi al-Nasr, "Ma Ba`d al-Nafir," *Defender of the Lands Arabic*, September 30, 2011. The term *al-nafir* means heading to jihad.
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- 36 See for instance, <http://ask.fm/tash3ri/answer/73743073854>.
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- 38 Interview with Charles Lister, July 29, 2014.
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- 40 See Thomas Joscelyn, "Head of al Qaeda's 'Victory Committee' Survived Battle in Syria," *The Long War Journal*, April 19, 2014.
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- 42 One source claims that after his recovery, al-Nasr focused more on "administrative" tasks. See "Asbab Ghadhab al-Qa`ida `ala al-Qar`awi wa `Azluhu min Mansibihi," *al-Sakina*, February 22, 2015.
- 43 Ibid. Abu Qatada al-Filistini, who is also said to have played a role in Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership shift, categorically denied the allegations.
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