HURAS
AL-DIN

The Rise and Fall of
Al-Qaeda in the Levant

Mohammad Abu Rumman

Hassan Abu Haniyeh

Huras Al-Din

The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda in the Levant

Not for sale

Huras Al-Din

The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda in the Levant

Hassan Abu Haniyeh

Mohammad Abu Rumman

Dedication

To the Arab youth searching for new paths forward in the Mashriq to overcome the authoritarian policies that have robbed them of their dreams and freedoms, and who challenge the extremist and nihilist discourses that have threatened their very existence.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Huras Al-Din "Guardians of Religion" was founded in Syria on 27 February 2019. It is seen as the most recent incarnation of al-Qaeda in the Levant and in the wider Mashriq. In Syria, the peaceful protests that erupted in mid-March 2011 escalated into an armed military conflict, in which al-Qaeda become involved early on in order to pursue its broader goals for the Mashriq region. al-Qaeda took advantage of the power vacuum and the inability of the Syrian regime to maintain control over its territory and established various organizational frameworks and footholds for jihadism there.

Al-Qaeda utilized its extensive experience in conflicts to adapt to the many stages of Syria's ordeals, as it became an arena of international and regional conflict and "proxy wars". Syria quickly became the most important battlefield for the globalized jihadist movement. al-Qaeda jihadists flocked to Syria from all around the world and became involved in many different jihadist groups in order to obscure their affiliations and ideological orientations.

After the Arab Spring, al-Qaeda became a force to be reckoned with and developed particular influence in the Mashriq. Prior to the occupation of Iraq in 2003, al-Qaeda did not have a serious presence there, until al-Zarqawi came and established his own organization and joined al-Qaeda at the end of 2004. His operations and networks extended into neighboring countries, and he established the Abdullah

Azzam Brigades before he was killed in 2006 in a US strike. His organization began to lose power a year later; it returned to guerrilla warfare and waited for the right moment to come. The breakthrough came with the rise of the protest movements of 2011, when the organization began to become seriously involved in Iraq again and quickly achieved significant victories. It would later take control of considerable territory in Iraq, including Al Anbar and Mosul.

Al-Nusra Front had been operating in Syria since 2012 and was receiving direct support from al-Qaeda in Iraq, although its leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani had tried to conceal his links to the organization. During this period, al-Nusra was able to quickly attract thousands of foreign jihadists coming from abroad, and to recruit thousands of jihadists from inside the country. As a result, al-Nusra Front became one of the most powerful and dangerous armed groups working against the Syrian regime, if not the most powerful at the time.

Until that point, the umbrella organization of al-Qaeda had felt that its plans to take over the Levant were going well. It saw the branches in Iraq and Syria as extensions of the main ideological and political project launched by Osama bin Laden and his associates. When Bin Laden was killed in his hiding place in Pakistan in 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri took over leadership of the organization. However, this was turned upside down by the deep conflicts that emerged between al-Zarqawi and his organization in Iraq and the new organization in Syria, al-Nusra Front. On April 9, 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that al-Nusra Front had joined forces with his organization to found the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, which later became known as ISIS. This led al-Julani to proclaim his allegiance to the al-Qaeda parent organization in Khorasan; al-Zawahiri would later align himself with al-Julani. Thus began the organizational and ideological conflicts between the two sides, i.e. al-Qaeda and the al-Nusra Front on one side and ISIS on the other. The latter would later announce a caliphate led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

This was not limited to conflicts within al-Qaeda in the Mashriq (which includes Iraq and the Levant): the central branch of al-Qaeda was also dealing with these divisions. Around the world, jihadists were split between these two approaches (al-Qaeda and ISIS). It is not an exaggeration to speak of two separate approaches here, because ISIS's approach represented both an organizational and ideological change. This was a significant practical and theoretical shift in the history of global jihadism, that is, in recruitment methods, military strategy, and even combat tactics. The author of this book discussed this topic in his previous book, *The Islamic State Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism.*

Three years later, al-Qaeda experienced another blow when it appeared that the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda would also split from the main organization. It gradually began to distance itself from al-Qaeda. This happened after al-Nusra Front declared that it was breaking off material and symbolic ties with al-Qaeda and formed Fatah al-Sham in mid-2016. There were serious theoretical disagreements about "breaking off" from al-Qaeda, followed by Tahrir al-Sham splitting off to form its own organization at the beginning of 2017. Al-Qaeda became mired in political and ideological debates similar to those that had previously occurred with ISIS, and which culminated in a major rift between the two sides. Al-Qaeda supporters, and what remained of the globalized jihadist wing in Syria and Iraq, decided to form a new organization, "The Huras Al-Din".

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

This book follows the rise and fall of al-Qaeda in the Levant and broader Mashriq region, and focuses in particular on what happened in Syria,[1] and what has happened since ISIS's power began to wane. It

---

[1]   The author examined the emergence of al-Qaeda and its development in Iraq in a previous book entitled*The Islamic State Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Conflict over Global Jihadism.*

will also examine the emergence of divisions between al-Nusra and al-Qaeda, as well as fissures within al-Nusra itself. The Syrian case was different from the Iraqi case for many reasons, including geostrategic, societal, and political factors on both the regional and global level. It also considers the special conditions in Idlib and related domestic and international factors in Syria, especially since the beginning of the Turkish-Russian talks in Astana and Sochi.

Why the "Huras Al-Din"?

This is a legitimate and important question, since it is a small organization of limited capacities compared to organizations like al-Qaeda, ISIS or al-Nusra. The Huras Al-Din has dealt with major crises since its early days. The answer to this question, which will be addressed in the final chapter of this book, is that the group is important because it exemplifies what has happened withal-Qaeda in the Mashriq after it split from the main branch of al-Qaeda. This book will examine the ideological and organizational dimensions of al-Qaeda in the Mashriq, starting with the beginnings of the al-Qaeda project in the Levant and continuing through the Huras Al-Din. This is a history marked by moments of transformation, including the shift from local jihad against the "near enemy" to the globalization of jihad against the "far enemy". It examines al-Zarqawi's project in Iraq, which combined both approaches. In Syria, the rise of al-Nusra and ensuing ideological disputes, the critiques from the central branch of al-Qaeda, political conditions, and foreign policy have all contributed to the rise and fall of al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations, and later the Huras Al-Din. These factors also contributed to the splintering of Tahrir al-Sham from the main al-Qaeda organization.

This book includes eight main chapters, first starting with historical shifts in jihadist ideologies, and then following key turning points for jihadism in the region, leading up to the occupation of Iraq and the Arab Spring and subsequent fissures. This will eventually

lead us to the Huras Al-Din and its ideologies and organizational structure.

Chapter 1 of the book deals with the progression of global jihadism from local organizations (which were founded on principles of *tawhid* (the oneness of God), *hakimiyya* (the sovereignty of God), and jihad) and then the "jihad of solidarity" during the Afghanistan era until the mid-1990s with the emergence of al-Qaeda. In 1998, the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders was declared. This was followed by a shift away from fighting "nearby" Arab regimes to engaging the "far enemy", i.e., the US. This chapter traces the historical development of al-Qaeda's presence in the region leading up to the Arab Spring, including the events of 11 September 2001, and the formation of an al-Qaeda branch in Iraq after the US occupation of Iraq in 2003.

Chapter 2 of the book examines the most important features of al-Qaeda's expansion in the Mashriq. It begins with tracing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's role, and attempts to expand from Iraq into the Levant. It also looks at how the events of the Arab Spring helped al-Qaeda to develop its ideological and strategic approach and to spread through Iraq and Syria.

Chapter 3 moves away from this historical chronology in order to examine the strategic role of the Levant, Syria, and Palestine in al-Qaeda literature. It also sheds light on early jihadist literature that focused on the "near enemy", i.e., the Arab regimes in the region, and the subsequent globalization of jihad. It examines the transformations in the discourse of Bin Laden and al-Zarqa with at made Palestine the top priority in al-Qaeda propaganda and in its political and intellectual discourse.

Chapter 4 looks at the establishment of the al-Nusra Front as one of the new iterations of al-Qaeda in the Mashriq. This led some reevaluation of tactics and discourses, including the shift towards

what were called the Ansar al-Sharia groups, and efforts to become integrated within local society. After this, conflicts between al-Zarqawi and al-Zawahiri's approaches came to the forefront. The role of international policy and geopolitical games produced different conditions in Syria than in Iraq, which was reflected in the different respective priorities of ISIS and al-Nusra Front.

Chapter 5 takes a closer look at this trajectory, in order to better understand the nature of the disputes that led to the fragmentation of al-Qaeda and its rival ideological currents. It examines the emergence of two divergent ideological approaches in the beginning, following by the split withal-Nusra and the rise of a third approach.

Chapter 6 looks at the process of the separation between al-Qaeda and al-Nusra and how this took place. The latter would evolve into Fatah al-Sham, and then Tahrir al-Sham. It examines al-Qaeda's position on this split, and the information war between the two sides. This was followed by the formation of the Hittin Committee, composed of top al-Qaeda leadership, which assumed responsibility for managing the Syrian issue, following the disappearance of al-Zawahiri for about three years due to international surveillance. This chapter also tries to analyze the conflicts and disputes that happened within the organization between the globalized jihadists (and the Khorasan group) and the leader of al-Nusra, Abu Mohammad al-Julani. It also looks at the incubators that were formed among those who were opposed to separating from al-Qaeda. Finally, it turns to the effects of international and regional policies on these fissures, and the position of successive US administrations towards Tahrir al-Sham.

Chapter 7 examines the Huras Al-Din and its organizational infrastructure, military operations, and geographical scope of the movement. It also examines the alliances that it formed with different factions in Idlib, as well as the ongoing loss of leaders caught between a rock and a hard place, so to speak, as they dealt with both

the US Air Force and Tahrir al-Sham. The latter wanted to seize control of all of Idlib and reestablish its role in the region and the world.

Chapter 8 examines the ideology of the Huras Al-Din, and its ideological disputes, organizational crises, strategic vision, and new tactics. The end of the chapter analyzes the decline of the organization and how al-Qaeda lost its last chance in the Levant.

Finally, the book's conclusion offers an analytical framework for making sense of the most important features of these ideological shifts and the reasons behind the rise and fall of al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Levant.

Historical Background: Al-Qaeda and the Globalization of Jihad

The events that have directly affected me started with 1982 and what came after that, when the US allowed the Israelis to invade Lebanon. They bombed and killed many, and terrorized and displaced others, helped along by the US Sixth Fleet. These awful moments stirred up feelings that are difficult to describe, but they produced a firm resolve to reject injustice and punish the oppressors. When I looked at those destroyed towers in Lebanon, it occurred to me that we could punish the oppressors in the same way and destroy towers in America. Then they would taste some of what we tasted and stop killing our women and children. That day it became clear to me that this injustice and deliberate killing of innocent women and children are part and parcel of US policy. "Freedom and democracy" meant terrorizing, while "terrorism and reaction" was resistance.

Osama Bin Laden, 2004

Global jihadist ideologies have developed through a series of historical phases, political conditions, and social transformations. The theoretical underpinnings of global jihadism are tied to the history of the Salafi-Wahhabi school, and the Salafi movement as set forth in Qutbist and Mawdudi thought. Contemporary Salafi jihadism is inextricably linked to the legacies of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791) in Nejd, Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, and the writings of Abu Ala al-Mawdudi (1903-1979) in the Indian subcontinent. Al-Mawdudi founded the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan at the beginning of the 1940s. Jihad was an important part of the ideologies of all three of these figures, as a tool of liberation from the local practices that Salafi Wahhabism criticized, and to confront colonial policies and processes of identity loss.

Jihadist ideologies became more locally oriented as Arab regimes were established after the Second World War. This period saw deteriorating relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and Nasserist authorities. Sayyid Qutb began to develop a more radical and revolutionary Brotherhood ideology that critiqued the foundations of the nation-state in Islamic countries after colonialism ended. He wanted to establish an Islamic state under the absolute sovereignty of God.

Many factors contributed to the formation of local jihadist and militant movements, including escalating identity crises and the polarization of secular and Islamist currents. Another factor was the violent clashes between Arab regimes and Islamists, who were detained and imprisoned. This was followed by the Arab military disappointments against the Zionist project in Palestine, including dur-

ing the Nakba in 1948, and the defeat or "setback" of the June War in 1967. This historical context played a major role in the paving the way for the rise of Islamist political movements in general, and Salafi jihadist organizations in particular. They claimed that the reasons behind the failure of the Nahda and the military defeats of dictatorial regimes were caused by secular—especially nationalist and socialist—regimes losing touch with Islam and building their policies around foreign dependence.

These events led to the birth of "political jihad" based on fighting these regimes, which prioritized fighting the "near enemy". Sayyid Qutb's thought became both more influential and more extreme and shaped an entire generation of jihadists in Egypt and beyond. During the 1970s, organizations founded on this "Muslim rage"[1] directed their efforts internally in order to develop the mechanisms necessary to challenge local political regimes.

1. Looking Back before Al-Qaeda: The "Arab Afghans"

Afghanistan witnessed new forms of jihadism starting in 1979. There was a growing market for religious fat was to establish networks of solidarity jihad which made defending Islamic countries from foreign aggression a religious obligation. That year, a jihad against the Soviet-aligned Afghani regime was announced. This was followed by armed conflict with the Soviet forces that had entered Afghanistan. The situation in Afghanistan attracted jihadists from around the Arab and Islamic world, particularly leading figures from the global Salafi movement. These included Shaykh Abdullah Azzam, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Osama bin Laden, among others. The new generation of global Arab jihadists in Afghanistan became known as

---

[1] See: Rif'at Sayid Ahmad, *Tanzimat al-Ghadab al-Islami fi al-Sab'inat,* Maktabat al-Madbouli, Cairo, first edition, 1989.

the "Arab Afghans", and it was from this movement that al-Qaeda would emerge.

Civil war broke out in Afghanistan at the same time that the Cold War was escalating between the two key players in the international arena, the US and the Soviet Union. Afghanistan was one of the most important fronts in this conflict, and the US used the Soviet forces' arrival in Kabul as a pretext for undermining and dismantling the Soviet Union via the front in Afghanistan.

The US was working to establish alliances with sympathetic regimes in the Arab and Islamic world in order to destabilize the Socialist Bloc. The US succeeded in creating these alliances by using the "religion card". These efforts were aided by the strong desire of Arab and Islamic regimes to get rid of trouble some jihadists and their ideology of fighting the "near enemy". The jihadists drew inspiration from the Iranian revolution of 1979 as a model for replacing nation-state institutions with an Islamic state. Arab and Islamic regimes thus developed policies that were successful in exporting this "excessive jihadist violence" abroad. They built "solidarity jihad" networks to liberate Afghanistan from the Soviet invasion, and in so doing mitigated—at least for a time—the threat that these groups posed to Arab regimes. At this time, jihadism did not have an anti-American orientation. Jihadists during this time had close and cooperative relations with the US, especially Abdullah Azzam and Osama Bin Laden.[1]

The Afghani jihad attracted many of the key figures and thinkers from jihadist movements, as well as Qutbist Islamists, including Shaykh Abdullah Azzam, Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and other prominent jihadists who came from Arab countries to Afgha-

---

[1] Steve Cole, *Al Bin Laden: wa-'Alam al-Naftwa-l-Mal wa-l-Irhab* [*The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century*], translated by Eman Abdel Ghani Negm, Arab Network for Research and Publishing, Beirut. First Edition, 2014, p.400.

nistan. They created special camps for them.[1] The phenomenon of Arab Afghans was one of the most important factors in the rise of global jihadism and laid the groundwork for al-Qaeda. This was because the Afghani jihad had attracted thousands of Arab youth to become involved both in relief and fighting efforts. These youth absorbed jihadist thought and brought it back to their countries.

The US backed mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan and provided military, political, material, and media support to wear down the Soviet Union during the Cold War.[2] In the region, most Arab and Islamic governments began to provide diverse forms of aid and facilitated paths to volunteering and fighting for these groups and "the just Afghan cause". The Arab Afghans attracted many members and leaders from moderate, extreme, and violent Islamist groups for different reasons, in addition to independent jihadists. The largest number of volunteers came from the Muslim Brotherhood, particular its Qutbist current.[3] The first wave of jihadists was closer to Salafi

---

[1] These groups differed withal-Qaeda in their approach towards fighting the "far enemy", after the founding of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against "Jew and Crusaders" and Americans in 1998. However, the US war on terror after the 11 September attacks, and the invasion of Afghanistan, brought these groups togetherwithin the ranks of al-Qaeda. See: Abu Musab al-Suri, *Da'wat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'Alamiyya,* p. 451.

[2] During this period, Arab and Islamic regimes focused their energies on the leaders of Islamist movements in order to mobilize against what was dubbed the "red danger". Dr. Abdullah Azzam wrote a book on this subject in which he warned againstthe spread of communist thought in the Arab world. See: Abdullah Azzam, *al-Saratan al-Ahmar*, Maktabat al-Aqsa, Amman, 1980.

[3] There was a major controversy about the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood andal-Qaeda. This confusion perhaps arose from the fact that, historically, most al-Qaeda leadership hadprior links to the Brotherhood, either to the organization or its ideology. However, the truth is that most of al-Qaeda leadership had split off from the Brotherhood in various ways. Shaykh Abdullah Azzam had split off from the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, while Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiriwas closer with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and founded the Egyptian Islamic Jihad with a group from the radical Qutbist wing of the   =

Brotherhood thought and to Shaykh Abdullah Azzam and Osama Bin Laden. By this time, the total number of Arab volunteers had reached almost 40,000 jihadists, according to jihadist thinker Abu Musab al-Suri, while the number of Arab volunteer fighters was around one thousand.[1]

The arrival of Palestinian *shaykh* Abdullah Azzam[2] in Afghanistan in 1981 marked a historic turning point in the life of

---

= Brotherhood. Osama bin Laden had been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia, but also split off from them.

[1] According to Abu Musab al-Suri:"The number of Arab volunteers in the Afghani jihad until the fall of Kabul in 1991 was around 40,000. They whereof different nationalities: 20,000 from Saudi Arabia, 5,000 from Yemen, 4,000 from Egypt, 2,000 from Algeria, several hundred each from Morocco, Libya, Palestine, Jordan, and the UAE, and anywhere from dozens to a few hundred volunteersfrom Tunisia, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Mauritania, and Somalia". See Abu Musab al-Suri, *Da'wat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'alamiyya*, p. 896. However, Thomas Hegghammerquestioned these numbers, and presented other statistics based on several different sources, suggesting that the total number of foreign fighters in the Afghani jihad between 1979 and 1992was around 10,000 fighters, and that the number of Arab fighters was around 7,000. See: Thomas Hegghammer, *al-Qafila: Abdallah Azzamwa-Su'ud al-Jihad al-'Alami*[*The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*], translated by Obaida Amer, Arab Network for Research and Publishing, Beirut, first edition, 2021, p. 425.

[2] Abdullah Azzam was born in Palestine in the village of Silat al-Harithiya, near the city of Jenin, in 1941. He received his primary and secondary education in the village school, and then enrolled in the University of Damascus inthe Faculty of Sharia, wherehe received his degree in Sharia. After the 1967 war, he went to Jordan and then worked in Saudi Arabia as a teacher for a year.During this period, he studied atal-Azhar University, where he received his master's in principles of Islamicjurisprudence in 1968. Afterwards, he worked as a lecturer at the Faculty of Sharia in Amman between 1970-1975, and then moved to Cairo and received a doctorate in principles of Islamic jurisprudence in 1973. He worked as a teacher at the University of Jordan's Faculty of Sharia from 1973 to 1980, and then left in 1980 to Saudi Arabia to work at the King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah in 1981. He then moved to the International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan, and became involved in jihadist work in Peshawar. He established the "Maktab al-Khidamat" in 1984, whichsupported Arabs who wanted to volunteer in the Afghani jihad. He became one of the most important theoristsof the jihadist =

Arab Afghans. He is considered the father of this movement. Abdullah Azzam founded the Maktab al-Khidamat in October 1984 in coordination with Osama bin Laden, who was at that time setting up "Beit al-Ansar" in the city of Peshawar in Pakistan. The Maktab al-Khidamat carried out relief, reform, and advocacy[1] efforts as well as limited military activities. The two had worked together in the beginning, and Bin Laden was at this point still coming to Afghanistan to provide financial support for the Arab volunteers. This continued until he stopped doing jihadist work on the ground in Afghanistan after 1986, became more independent, and founded a separate jihadist organization and training camps. Mean while, the Arab volunteers began to organize amongst themselves to form a fighting force. During 1984-85, they established the "Abu Uthman guest-house" in the city of Peshawar.[2]

Many scholars consider Abdullah Azzam to be the father of global jihadism and the founder of the "Arab Afghan" movement. He worked on promoting the "solidarity jihad" and the religious obligation to defend Islamic countries from foreign aggression. For Azzam, this obligation would remain in effect until Palestine was liberated. Azzam was influenced by the writings of Sayyid Qutb, who was central to the founding of modern jihadism. His book, *Milestones* (*Ma'alim fi al-Tariq*), was considered a foundational text for the philosophy of the jihadist movement, with regard to both its vision and approach. It also addressed mechanisms of change in the context of the post colonial nation-state and discussed the struggle over the state and society's identity, using the two principles of *jahiliyya* (the

=   movement, and published the journal *al-Jihad* and the *Lahib al-Ma'raka* bulletin. He was killed in Peshawar in Pakistan on 24 February 1989 in unknown circumstances.

1   Basel Mohamed, *Safahat min Sijill al-Ansar al-'Arab fi Afghanistan.* Dar al-'Ilm for Printing and Publishing, Riyadh, 1991, p. 99.

2   Abdullah Anas, *Wiladat al-Afghan al-'Arab*, Dar Al Saqi, Beirut, first edition, 2002, p. 34.

reversion of the Muslim world to a state of pre-Islamic ignorance) and *hakimiyya* (sovereignty belongs to God alone).

After joining the Afghan jihadist movement, Azzam spent most of his time mobilizing for the jihad in Afghanistan on the international stage. When he was killed in 1989, he had become a living legend for jihadists and many Islamists, and one of the most influential jihadist theorists in the world.[1]

Abdullah Azzam had a significant influence on the founders of jihadist schools around the world, including Osama Bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He inspired the central branch of al-Qaeda (led by Bin Laden), and the Iraqi branch (led by al-Zarqawi)to establish a regional jihadist project in the Mashriq, including the Levant. This organization was called al-Qaeda in the Levant and Egypt, or the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, as will be discussed further. After the death of Abdullah Azzam, Abu Musab al-Suri further developed global jihadist writings and thought. There were also two thinkers from the Palestinian diaspora, Essam al-Barqawi (Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi) and 'Umar Mahmoud Abu 'Umar (Abu Qatada al-Filistini).

---

[1] Azzam had brought many foreign fighters to Afghanistan, which laid the groundwork foral-Qaeda and other radical groups. His Islamic credentials and degrees, international connections, and personal charisma made him an unusually effective recruiter. Without him, the Arab Afghans would not have reached this size or scope. Azzam's theoretical work was also influential, especially his claim that it was incumbent on Muslims to defend each other. By this logic, if one part of the Islamic world was under attack, then all of the believers were required to rush to itsdefense. This idea was the ideological basis for Islamists fighting abroad.This has been reflected in many other conflicts in the Islamic world, including Bosnia and Chechnya in the 1990s, Iraq and Somalia in the beginning of the 2000s, and Syria in the 2010s. Additionally, Azzam encouraged Islamists to shift their focus from the local to the international sphere, which provided theideological groundwork for the rise of an anti-Western jihadism in the 1990s. See: Thomas Hegghammer, "On the 30th Anniversary of the Mysterious Death of the 'Imam ofJihad': WhoKilled Shaykh Azzam?" Aljazeera.net, https://tinyurl.com/t4eds7cn.

They developed the idea of jihad and fighting the "far enemy", i.e. the US and its Arab allies, as a means of pursuing the liberation of Palestine.[1]

The Masada camp was a crucial moment in the split of the pragmatic wing and the Maktab al-Khidamat from the military radical wing led by Bin Laden. The Masada project led to an important event in the history of the Arab Afghans, namely the Battle of Jaji in Afghanistan in spring 1987. Mustafa Hamid (Abu Walid al-Masri) recalled that it was "a huge battle that led to the formation of al-Qaeda. Bin Laden served as the commander, with two powerful wings which were the cornerstones of that battle, led by Abu Ubaidahal-Banshiri[2] and Abu Hafs al-Masri.[3] The performance of that group drew particu-

---

[1] For more details see, Hazem al-Amin, *al-Salafi al-Yatim, al-Wajh al-Filastini li-l-Jihad al-'Alami wa-l-Qaeda*, Dar al-Saqi, Beirut, first edition, 2011.

[2] Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri(Ali Amin al-Rashidi) (1950-1996)was born in Cairo in May 1950 and worked for the Egyptian police and as atrainer at the police club in Cairo. He lived in Ain Shams and was a member of Nabil al-Maghribi's jihadist group. He is considered one of the founders of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which assassinated Sadat in an operation led by Mohammad Abd-al-Salam Faraj and Abbud al-Zumar. Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiriwas arrested after Sadat was assassinated in 1981. After he was released fromprison, he decided to go to Afghanistan. This was at the beginning of the Arab Afghan era, during whichmany Arabs flocked to Afghanistan for jihad in 1983.He settled in Wadi Banshir in Afghanistan and became known as Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri. He is considered one of the founders of al-Qaeda along with Osama Bin Laden, who he met in 1986, and who he accompanied to Sudan. al-Banshiri wasal-Qaeda's first military chief and was fundamental in establishingal-Qaeda cells in East Africa.Hedrowned on one of his trips to Lake Victoria in March 1996. In Kenya and Nigeria, he was known by other aliases such as Adel Habib, Karim, and Jalal.After the death of al-Banshiri, Abu Hafs al-Masri was appointed the military chief of al-Qaeda by Bin Laden.

[3] Abu Hafs al-Masri (Sobhi Mohammed Abu Sitta) (1944-2001)became military chief of al-Qaeda after the death of Ubaidah al-Banshiri. He was known by several names including Abu Hafs al-Masri, the Commander, and Mohamed Atef. He was also called Shaykh Taysir Abdullah, and was an agricultural engineer from KafrEl Dawwar in the Beheira governorate in Egypt. He worked as a reserve officer (first lieutenant) in the Egyptian army, and thentravelled to Afghanistan in the mid-1980s and worked as second in command to Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiriin   =

lar attention, as did the outcome of the battle. The jihadists consi-
dered the battle to be a complete success and a shining moment in
the history of al-Qaeda (although al-Qaeda had technically not yet
been established at that time). After the battle of Jaji, al-Bashiri and
Abu Hafs began to develop the organization they called al-Qaeda, un-
til it reached an advanced stage of growth over the course of about a
year. It brought Arab mujahideen from Afghanistan together with
Arab and non-Arab organizations. An observer close to the organiza-
tion estimated that the organization contained a total of around
12,000 people at the time".[1]

2. The Birth of Al-Qaeda

Although al-Qaeda had begun to form during this period, it is
unclear exactly when it was founded. According to Thomas Hegg-
hammer, the name "al-Qaeda" first appeared in reference to the Ma-
sada camp. It then became a shorthand for "people connected to the
base (*al-Qaeda*)", that is, those who spent time in Masada and sup-
ported the idea of advanced training.[2] However, it is certain that by

---

= the al-Qaeda leadership until 1995. Bin Laden gave him all of Abu Ubaidah's re-
sponsibilities afterthe death of the latter. Abu Hafs al-Masri gained fighting expe-
rience through training in Afghan camps and in the major battles against the So-
viet Union in Afghanistan. He also participated in intensivemilitary sessions that
were organized by al-Qaeda for its forces and leadership at various times. He
worked closely with Osama Bin Laden; they later became in-laws after Mohamed
bin Osama married Abu Hafs's daughter. The US accused him of bombing its em-
bassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and training members of al-Itihaad al-Islami,
which attacked US special forces in Somalia and killed 18 soldiers. He was the
military chief of al-Qaeda at the time of the 11 September 2011 attacks and was
killed in the US air strikes in November 2001, during the US invasion of Afghanis-
tan. Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi took his place; al-Iraqi was laterarrested in 2007 in Tur-
key and handed over to the US.

[1] Mustafa Hamid (Abu Walid al-Masri), *Tanzim al-Qaeda: Ila Ayna?*
https://tinyurl.com/67urkk6f.

[2] See: Thomas Hegghammer, *al-Qafila: Abdallah Azzamwa-Su'ud al-Jihad al-'Alami*
(*The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*), p. 538.

the beginning of 1988, Bin Laden had begun to establish a more bureaucratic jihadist organization. This was due to the need to have formal records of jihadists in order to keep track of who was killed and injured. After the fighting heated up, families had inquired after their children, especially those coming from Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and it had been embarrassing not to have answers. That is how the name al-Qaeda emerged, according to Abu Jandal al-Azadi.[1] These "registers became like an independent administration", and the group needed a name by which to internally refer to themselves. Shaykh Osama agreed with his associates that they could call the seal-Qaeda's registers, since this database [*al-qaeda*] included all of the groups from Beit al-Ansar, the training camps, and the front".[2]

1989 marked a radical shift in the international order, and also contributed to the transition from Arab muhajideen to Arab Afghans. Soviet forces had withdrawn that year from Afghanistan and the Soviet-backed government in Kabul fell in April 1992. This led to violent conflict and civil war among the Afghani factions, which continued until the Taliban movement came onto the scene. It wiped out the different factions and had taken over most of Afghanistan by 1994. However, these new conditions in Afghanistan, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the collapse of the Socialist Bloc produced a new international map of Islamist "hotspots" that drew Arab fighters. This was especially true for the countries that had emerged from the Soviet Union and Socialist Bloc, such as Tajikistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia, as well as traditional regions of conflict such as Kashmir, the Philippines, and Somalia.

---

[1] Abu Jandal al-Azadi (Faris al-Showeel al-Zahrani) was involvedin al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. He was arrested by Saudi authorities on 5 August 2004 and sentenced to death.

[2] Abu Jandal al-Azadi, *Osama Bin Laden*: *Mujaddid al-Zaman wa-Qahir al-Amrikan,* Muntada al-Ansar, Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, p. 36-37.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US put pressure on the Arab Afghans to coordinate with the Pakistani government. These fighters faced many difficult choices, including whether to return to the countries from which they had come. Some of them indeed returned to the Arab world and joined nascent jihadist forces there. Some Arab Afghans went to fight on new fronts for "solidarity jihad" especially on the Bosnian front and later in Chechnya and Tajikistan.[1] Others chose to remain in Pakistan and Afghanistan and joined the Taliban movement. Some joined other Afghani jihadist factions, while still others went to Europe and tried to establish networks to support solidarity jihad, especially in the media sphere.

The Arab Afghan movement thus began to develop new avenues within the ideological context of Salafi jihadism. Bin Laden's approach began to take shape as the initial seeds of al-Qaeda were planted. It is clear the name was initially drawn from the Arab Afghans' situation in 1988 and the registers recording the names of fighters. The group later became more organized and clearly structured during the period between 1992 and 1996. Al-Qaeda would then emerge as an independent jihadist organization[2] but without specifying objectives beyond the principles of solidarity jihad. This included the general goal of participating in the Afghani jihad and establishing an Islamic state in Afghanistan, and a more specific goal related to furthering jihadism in communist South Yemen. Bin Laden had set

---

[1] Murad Batal Shishani, *al-Harakaal-Islamiyya fi al-Shishanwa-l-Sira'al-Shishani- al-Rusi,* Al Quds Center for Political Studies, Amman, first edition, 2002, p. 216.

[2] Jamal Ahmed Mohammad al-Fadl (Abu Bakr al-Sudani) was a member of al-Qaeda whohad worked with Bin Laden in multiple places. He gave US authorities a preliminary sketch of the structure of al-Qaeda.al-Fadl explained that the organization was led by the "amir" Osama bin Laden, with Ayman al-Zawahiri as second in command, followed by the Shura Council, which consisted of the topfigures withinal-Qaeda. There were also military, financial, and sharia committees, in additional to a committee for Islamic studies and *fatwa*s.In the late 1990s, a communications council was also set up, which in 2005 announced that it had formed As-Sahab Media.

out to achieve this goal during 1989-1990 and continued his efforts without success until the unification of Yemen in 1990.[1]

3. The Globalization of Jihad and the 11 September Attacks

Jihadism entered a new international phase in response to the dynamics of globalization. This happened following the structural shifts in the international strategic arena between 1989 and 1992, including the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan on 15 February 1989, the beginning of the Second Gulf War after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990, and the unsuccessful US campaign in Somalia on 9 December 1992.[2] The collapse of the Soviet Union and Socialist Bloc led to the rise of the US as a hegemonic imperialist power that would try to expand and impose a new global order. This period also saw strategic transformations in the US's approach to the international political reality. During the Cold War, the US political and military strategy was based on the geopolitical containment of communism, and military and nuclear deterrence of the Soviet Union.

Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda turned their attention to Somalia and Yemen during the 1990s. Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri arrived in Sudan in December 1991 during the rule of Omar al-Bashir and his former ally, Dr. Hassan al-Turabi, the leader of the National Islamic Front. This was when al-Qaeda became immersed in economic projects and investments to support the Islamic state there.[3] At the same time, it began to establish al-Qaeda's East Africa cell, which set up headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, under the leadership of al-Qaeda's military chief Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri. The latter began to establish camps in Somalia at the end of 1991 under the supervision

---

[1] Interview with Bin Laden, conducted by Abdel Bari Atwan, editor-in-chief of the *AlQuds AlArabi* newspaper, published in London in November 1996.

[2] See: Olivier Roy, *'Awlamat al-Islam* (*Globalization of Islam*)*, translated by Lara Maalouf, Dar Al Saqi, Beirut, first edition, 2003, p. 195.

[3] Abu Musab al-Suri, *Da'wat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'alamiyya*, part 2, p. 879.

of Abu Hafs al-Masri. al-Masri was in charge of the Somalian front, and successfully established a number of camps in north and south Somalia.[1]

Yemen had been the main focus for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda since its earliest days. This interest in Yemen grew during the period before the unification of Yemen. Al-Qaeda's presence in Sudan was crucial to launching the Yemeni cell, particularly after the unification of Yemen in May 1990.[2] Bin Laden was keen to become in-

---

[1]   The bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 was the most important operation carried out by the East Africancell ofal-Qaeda.The US suffered heavy losses. Saleh Nabhan and Najeh Fadel had worked together to carry out the attack with the help of Abu Hafs al-Masri. Najeh Fadel himself carried out the bombing of the Paradise Hotel near the coastal resort of Mombasa in Kenya, with Nabhan's help.The attack killed 15 people including Israelis. This occurred around the same time as the failed attack on an Israeli plane as it left the Mombasa airport in Kenya in November 2002.

After the fall of Siad Barre's regime in 1991, Somalia had fallen into a state of chaos.This led to the intervention of UN forces in the US-led Operation Restore Hopein 1993. al-Qaeda was involved in fighting the US forces in Somalia, alongside some Somali jihadist factions. These included Shaykh Hassan Dahir Aweys, a leader of al-Itihaad al-Islami, Hassan al-Turki, leader of the Ras KamboniBrigades, and the Ogaden, who had connections withOsama bin Laden from Afghanistan.There were 18 US soldiers killed in the battles in Mogadishu in October 1993, while dozens were wounded, and two helicopters were downed. This resulted in the US withdrawal from Somalia, which al-Qaeda considered a major victory.According to Fadil Harun, Osama bin Laden made a visit to Somalia to see the fighters. See: Fadil Harun, *al-Harb 'ala al-Islam: MudhakiratFadil Harun*, ed. Shaykh Abu Khaybar al-Ansari, Center for the Study of the Islamic World, 1443 AH, part 2, p. 417.

For more on the establishment of the East African and Somalian cells, and how the camps were set up and organized, see: Fadil Harun, *al-Harb 'ala al-Islam: MudhakiratFadil Harun*, ed. Shaykh Abu Khaybar al-Ansari, Center for the Study of the Islamic World, 1443 AH, part 2, p. 417-341. The author of these memoirs was one of the members of the East Africa cell, and presentsa detailed account this previously-unknown era, with regard toal-Qaeda's role and how it was established and spread.

[2]   According to the jihadist thinker Abu Musab al-Suri, Osama bin Laden's felt that"amajor jihadist movement in southern Yemen was necessary.   =

volved in the Yemeni conflict after the fragmentation of the Socialist Republic of Southern Yemen following bloody civil war in January 1986. Following Bin Laden's directives, al-Zawahiri was in contact with Jamal al-Nahdi and Tariq al-Fadhli, a top Yemeni leader in Afghanistan. Al-Zawahiri convinced him to allow al-Qaeda to set training camps under the auspices of Saif al-Adel, the top security officer in al-Qaeda.[1]

Al-Qaeda cadres quickly began to flow into Yemen from Afghanistan, Egypt, Sudan, Iran, and some African countries such as Soma-

---

=   He began this during 1989-1990 and continued until unification. He did this even though a number of jihadists close to Shaykh Osama at the time, myselfincluded, had urged him to begin this jihad immediately. However, he was waiting to involve the leaders of the Islamic revival in Yemen, especially the Muslim Brotherhood leader at the time, Abdul Majeed al-Zindani". See Musabal-Suri, *Da'wat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'alamiyya*, part 2, p. 877.

1   Saif al-Adel: His real name was Mohammed ibn Salah al-Din ibn AbdelHalim Zaidan. He was born in 1960 and was a high-ranking officer in the Egyptian Special Forces. He was arrested in what themedia referred to as the "Revival of Islamic Jihad" case.al-Adel was later involved in the assassination attempt against Egyptian interior minister Hassan Abu Basha, but was later released due to the lack of evidence against him. He traveled to Afghanistan in 1989, where his military and security expertise were put to use in developing al-Qaeda's capabilities. He was in chargeof the Al Farouq camp in Afghanistan and was involved in "improving training and tacticsand developing battle plans.He had many roles withinal-Qaeda including security responsibilities". These included ensuring the security of the leadership, cadres, and all others within the organization. He marriedthe daughter of Abu Walid al-Masri (Mustafa Hamid), the well-known Islamist writer. According to this source, he played a major role in supporting and training Abu Musab al-Zarqawi when he arrived in Afghanistan. After Osama Bin Laden was killed, he was appointed fourth in command after Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Khayr al-Masri, and Abu Mohamed al-Zayat. After Abu al-Khayr was killed, Saif al-Adl became second in command after al-Zayat. He fled to Iran after the US occupation of Afghanistan, where he moved between house arrest and prison. He was released in 2015 as part of a prisoner exchange between Iran and al-Qaeda in Yemen. He had to stay within the country but was able to move freely and to carry out his leadership responsibilities. In the disputes that followed the founding of Fatah al-Sham, Saif al-Adlentirely rejected this step forward andinsteadstrongly supported establishing a new branch of al-Qaeda in Syria.

lia, Kenya, and Uganda. This was due to Bin Laden's explicit instructions regarding the need to take pressure off Somalia through striking US bases in Yemen. The groups that were given this task comprised about 300 individuals of all nationalities under the leadership of Tariq al-Fadhli. The first group carried out its operation targeting the Gold Mohur Hotel in Aden in December 1992. The second operation involved an attack on cargo planes on landing strips in the US air base in Aden.[1]

4. The New Ideology: Turning Towards the "Far Enemy"

By the end of 1994, there were signs that the solidarity jihad approach was failing. Jihadists began to search for a new strategy given the increased aggression from the US as well as from Arab regimes, especially Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the Taliban movement emerged in July 1994, led by Mullah Mohamed Omar. Meanwhile, Bin Laden was being persecuted in Sudan as a result of intense pressure on the al-Bashir government from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UK, and the US. After Saudi Arabia revoked Bin Laden's nationality on 5 March 1994, he began to be in contact with the Taliban movement. By early 1996, the Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan, and in May 1996 Bin Laden and many of his followers left Sudan and went to Afghanistan.

The set backs for both local and "solidarity" jihad prompted Bin Laden and al-Qaeda to develop a new ideological discourse. They began to establish a global and unified jihadist organization that called for overcoming Western hegemony in the Arab and Islamic world. Jihadist discourse moved beyond targeting the "near enemy", i.e. dictatorial regimes in Arab and Islamic countries, on the basis that these regimes did not operate on their own, but rather depended on the

---

[1] See Basheer Al Baker, *al-Qaeda fi al-Yemen wa-l-Sa'udiya*, Dar Al Saqi, Beirut, first edition, 2010, p. 86.

imperialist support of the US and its ally Israel. This was how the discourse prioritizing fighting the "far enemy" began to coalesce. The globalization of jihad was the result of three strategic factors. The first of these were local and national factors, namely the political stagnation in Arab countries and faltering progress of democratic change. The second factor was regional, namely, not reaching a just and fair solution and peace in Palestine. The third factor was global and had to do with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of the US as the single most powerful country, and the advent of globalization.[1]

The Palestinian issue and the US bias towards Israel was one of the key drivers for Bin Laden's anti-US ideology. However, the notion of confronting the US was still in its earliest stages and would develop further during the era of globalization.[2] The theoretical shift towards targeting the US as an "imperialist power" began to become clear amid strategic changes in the era of US-led globalization. These ideas crystallized during that period in the 1990s after Saddam Hussain invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990. At this time, Saudi Arabia de-

---

[1] François Burgat, *al-Islam al-Siyasi fi Zaman al-Qaeda* (*Islamism in the Shadow of al-Qaeda*), translated by Sahar Said, Cadmus Books, Beirut, first edition, 2006, p.60.

[2] Bin Laden revealed the roots of his anti-US thought in a second message to the American people in 2004, in which he said: "The events that have directly affected me started with 1982 and what came after that, when the US allowed the Israelis to invade Lebanon. They bombed and killed many, and terrorized and displaced others, helped along by the US Sixth Fleet. These awful moments stirred up feelings that are difficult to describe, but they produced a firm resolve to reject injustice and punish the oppressors. When I looked at those destroyed towers in Lebanon, it occurred to me that we could punish the oppressors in the same way and destroy towers in America. Then they would taste some of what we tasted and stop killing our women and children. That day it became clear to me that this injustice and deliberate killing of innocent women and children are part and parcel of US policy. 'Freedom and democracy'meant terrorizing, while 'terrorism and intolerance'was resistance". See: Osama Bin Laden, "al-Risala al-Thaniya ila al-Sha'b al-Amriki: al-Harb, Asbabuhawa-Nata'ijuha", 29 October 2004, ComprehensiveArchive of the Speeches of the Leader of the Mujahideen-Shaykh Osama Bin Mohamed Bin Laden, first edition, 2006.

cided to call on US forces to help and produced fat was from leading religious scholars on the "permissibility of seeking help from infidels".[1] Meanwhile, the Islamic Awakening movement's serious protests in Saudi Arabia led to the rise of a more radical current of jihadism. This current began to question the legitimacy of the ruling regime in Saudi Arabia.[2] During this period, Bin Laden was one of the most vocal of these regime skeptics and was targeted as a result. This continued until he was able to leave Saudi Arabia (as previously mentioned, he moved to Sudan before returning to Afghanistan during the rise of the Taliban movement).[3]

One of the direct results of the Gulf War that contributed to shifts in Bin Laden's and al-Qaeda's vision was the Palestinian issue and the beginnings of what would be called the peace process, which took place in Madrid in summer 1991. Bin Laden considered this to be a compromise at the expense of Palestinian and Islamic rights caused by the collusion of Arab regimes, especially Saudi Arabia. The peace process that reached its climax when the PLO signed the declaration of principles in Washington on 13 September 1993, which be-

---

[1] See: Abdullah ibn Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz, *Hukm al-Ista'ana bi-l-Kaffarfi Qital al-Kaffar,* Saudi Arabia, Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta, https://tinyurl.com/5fyadks5.

[2] For more details about the Islamic Awakening in Saudi Arabia and its position on the Gulf War, the use of US forces and the beginning of riftsin the current, see: Stéphane Lacroix, *Zaman al-Sahwa: al-Harakat al-Islamiyya al-Mu'asira fi al-Sa'udiya* (*The Awakening of Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*), translated by Abdelhaq Zammouri, Arab Network for Research and Publishing, Beirut, first edition,2012, p. 210-235.

[3] Bin Laden was able to leave Saudi Arabia for Pakistan in mid-1991, and several months later settled in Sudan. This was when his relationship with the Saudi regime became more tense and led to a kind of ruptureafter Saudi Arabia decided to freeze all his assets in late 1992. During this period Bin Laden was close to the Islamic Awakeningand made many demands. The Islamic Awakening went as far as to call for reforming the political, judicial, and administrative systems, and for pursuing social justice. See: Stéphane Lacroix, *Zaman al-Sahwa*, p. 234-244.

came known as the Oslo Accords.[1] Bin Laden considered the fatwa issued by the official Saudi religious institution, led by Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz,[2] to be the ultimate betrayal, since it permitted peace with the Jewish state.[3]

Bin Laden's position on Saudi Arabia and the US would develop further in light of local Saudi and regional conditions around the Palestinian issue, as well as international conditions tied to the rise of US power. He became convinced that the circumstances that the Islamic world was experiencing had reached unprecedented levels of horror, and that the Arabian Peninsula had become occupied by "Crusaders" (i.e., the Americans). He argued that the Islamic world was facing these manifold humiliations because of the occupation of al-Aqsa Mosque ("the first *qibla*") since 1948, and that it was on the verge of losing Mecca ("the second *qibla*"), because of the collusion of the Saudi rulers. Bin Laden contended that the modern Saudi state had always served imperialist foreign interests, first British and then American. He blamed King Abdulaziz, the founder of the Saudi state, as being responsible for the loss of Palestine.[4]

Although Bin Laden's views of the Saudi regime changed during this era, he also unleashed his anger towards the US. This was because the US was supporting the Saudi regime and other Arab and Islamic regimes in the region, in addition to its close strategic ties with the Israeli occupation. According to Bin Laden, the underlying problem was the US government, whereas the Saudi regime was just

---

[1] For more on the regional and international circumstances during the beginning of the circuitous path known as the peace process, see: Joseph Massad, *Daymuma al-Mas'ala al-Falastiniyya*, Dar al-Adab, Beirut, first edition, 2009.

[2] This fatwa was issued by the highest religious legal authority at the time, Shaykh ibn Baz, while the Oslo Accords were taking place, on 13 September 1993.

[3] "Risala Maftuhaila al-Shaykh ibn Baz bi-ButlanFatwahi bi-l-Sulh ma'a al-Yahud", Advice and Reform Committee, Statement no. 11, 29 December 1994.

[4] Interview with *MajalatNida'al-Islam*, 1996, in Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*, p. 161.

a branch of this larger issue.[1] This would become the fundamental point of al-Qaeda doctrine. Bin Laden affirmed that the enemy was what he called the Crusaders or Crusader-Jewish coalition, led by the US, UK, and Israel. He argued that some regimes in the Arab and Islamic world had also joined this alliance, and in so doing prevented Muslims from protecting what was sacred to them. By this logic, the first and most important enemies were the infidels, and then the regimes that had become tools of this alliance.[2]

This resulted in the creation of a jihadist discourse that was fundamentally different from the discourses of solidarity jihad, which had focused on defending Arab and Islamic countries, or the discourse of the "near enemy". Instead, jihadism began to take on a global dimension. From his refuge in the Taliban's Afghanistan, Bin Laden began to form connections with other jihadist movements, and launched camps, planning, and trainings. He was able to increase al-Qaeda's effectiveness and to build a central bureaucratic structure for the organization.[3] During the time when the Taliban were in power, a second wave of jihadists moved to Afghanistan, around the end of 1996, after local jihad efforts with the "near enemy" and solidarity jihad on many other fronts had failed. Many of the jihadists during this period were elites: their numbers did not reach more than a few thousand total at their height, including their families.

---

[1] Interview with Bin Laden on CNN, 1997, https://tinyurl.com/khyurauf.
[2] Interview with Bin Laden on ABC, December 1998, at: https://tinyurl.com/38vcdt8z.
[3] For more details on the organizational structure during this period, see Lawrence Wright, *al-Buruj al-Mushayyid: al-Qaeda wa-l-Tariq ila 11 Sibtimbir* (*The Looming Tower: al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*), translatedby Heba Naguib Maghribi, Kalimat 'Arabiyya for Translation and Publishing, Cairo, third edition, 2011. See also MichaelScheuer, *al-Fawqiyya al-Imbrialiyya al-Amrikiyya: Limadha Yakhsaru al-Gharb al-Harb 'ala al-Irhab*(*Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror*), translated by Sima Mohamed Abdrabbuh, Arab Scientific Publishers, Beirut, first edition, 2005.

Bin Laden was the architect of the globalization of the jihadist movement. On 23 February 1998, he declared a "World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders" along with several other leaders of jihadist and Islamist groups from the Arab and Islamic world. These were Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Ahmed Refai Taha, the president of the Shura council of al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt, Munir Hamza, the secretary of the Jamiat Ulema-e Islam in Pakistan, and Fadl al-Rahman, the leader of Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islamin Bangladesh. Together they issued a fatwa stating that the US and their allies, civilian or military, should be killed, and that this wasan individual duty for all Muslims.[1]

After the World Islamic Front was founded, Bin Laden began to prepare to strike the US. Given the fully-developed al-Qaeda networks in the East Africa and Yemen, the organization began to prepare to attack US interests there. The al-Qaeda cell in Eastern Africa, which had its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, was preparing to strike the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. This was to occur under the supervision of military chief Abu Hafs al-Masri, who succeeded Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri. On 7 August 1998, al-Qaeda carried out attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. The al-Qaeda cell in Yemen, which was of particular importance to Bin Laden, was able to carry out a suicide operation on a US destroyer (the USS Cole) on 12 October 2000, while it was anchored in the port of Aden.[2]

---

[1] See text of the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders: https://tinyurl.com/ja25ustf.

[2] The search for those responsible for this operation is ongoing. Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri was arrested in Dubai in November 2002, and was later transferred to the US and detained in Guantanamo. Yemeni authorities also detained Jamal Ahmad al-Badawi, who was later able to escape from political prison in Sanaa along with 22 others on the 3 February 2006. Saudi Mohammad Hamdi al-Ahdalwas arrested in Sanaa in November 2003, while Abu Ali al-Harithi (Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi), who was the commander of al-Qaeda in Yemen, was killed by a drone strike at the beginning of November 2002.

In 2000, al-Zawahiri outlined a new ideological framework for al-Qaeda, in his book *Fursantaht Rayat al-Nabi* (Knights Under the Prophet's Banner). In this book he presented the theoretical underpinnings and practical reasons for the rise of the new jihadist ideology. He also looked at how jihadism had developed from local jihad to solidarity jihad and the reasons for its shift towards targeting the "far enemy".

During this time, global jihadist ideology became more theoretically mature. However, it needed to implement this ideology on the ground in order to fully demonstrate these shifts and establish a new direction for the future of global jihadism. At this juncture, Bin Laden began to plan an attack on the US on its own soil. This was carried out on the morning of Tuesday, 11 September 2001, when the world witnessed the destruction of the Two Towers in Manhattan and the attack on the Pentagon. Nineteen people hijacked four planes with the goal of attacking multiple political, economic, and military targets of the US super power at the same time. Two of the planes targeted the Two Towers of the World Trade Center in New York, while a third attacked the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The fourth plane that was hijacked was intentionally crashed in Pennsylvania on its way to Washington. These attacks killed almost 3,000 people.[1]

5. A New Stage: The Emergence of Al-Qaeda Affiliates

After September 11, the US invaded Afghanistan on 7 October 2001. However, after Kabul fell in November 2001, it became clear

---

[1] For more details on the 11 September attacks, includingthe key individuals who carried out the attacks, see Mohamed Mahmoud OuldMohamedou, *al-Hajma al-Mudadda li-l-Hamla al-Salibiyya: Judhurwa-Tadaʿiyat al-Hadi 'Ashr min Sibtimbir*(*Contre-Croisade:Origines et Conséquences du 11 Septembre*), translated from the French by Ahmed Saleh al-Humaid, 'Alam al-Kutub al-Hadith, Irbid, Jordan, first edition, 2010.

that the Bush administration was exploiting the war on terrorism to justify its expansionist political strategy. This became clear in the speech that Bush gave on 29 January 2002, when he said that "the war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun". Bush announced that in addition to direct attacks on terrorist networks, the administration's "goal [was] to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction". In this speech, he referred to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the "Axis of Evil". However, the full strategic ramifications of the US administration's policy did not become fully clear until Bush announced a new doctrine based on "preemptive strikes".[1]

The policies developed for the "War on Terror" in the wake of 11 September led to major victories for the US that weakened al-Qaeda by detaining or killing a number of its leaders. On 1 March 2003, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the head of operations for al-Qaeda and architect of the 11 September attacks, was captured, which was a setback for al-Qaeda. The US also captured a number of other top al-Qaeda leaders including Abu Zubaydah, Ramzibin al-Shibh, Abu Faraj al-Libbi and others, and detained them in Guantanamo. US operations also successfully targeted other members of the al-Qaeda leadership, including Abu al-Yazid al-Masri and Abu Hafs al-Masri. Although these operations were not able to eliminate al-Qaeda, they produced a shift from a central administration to a decentralized structure for the organization.

Over the years, government officials as well as many researchers and analysts have debated how cohesive the central leadership of al-Qaeda still was during the ongoing war against terrorism. After US

---

1   For more on the new US strategy and the principle of preemptive war, see Paul-Marie de La Gorce, "Preemptive War: A Dangerous Strategic Concept", https://tinyurl.com/5skwsw2d.

forces eliminated al-Qaeda's foothold in Afghanistan at the end of 2001, many claimed that al-Qaeda had become a decentralized organization with limited vertical structure. They argued that it had become more of an ideology than an organization.[1] This seemed to be true during the months after the defeat of the Taliban. However, the notion that the central al-Qaeda leadership was fragmented and ineffective has also been over stated at various times over the years. This has obscured the reality that even at the organization's lowest point, during 2002-2004, al-Qaeda leadership was able to make plans for regional terrorist attacks and to carry these out.[2]

During the time that al-Qaeda was suffering from the loss of its hideouts in Afghanistan, and was almost on the verge of collapse, US president George W. Bush announced his military campaign in Iraq on 20 March 2003. This was supposed to end the war on terror by overthrowing Saddam's "dictatorship" and replacing it with a US-aligned "democracy". This would be the beginning of a "New Middle East" in the wild imaginations of the neoconservatives in Washington. The US strategy terrorized what became a new generation of jihadists and produced new hideouts for al-Qaeda. It also produced

---

[1] There was a major controversy withinal-Qaeda over centralization and decentralization. In his book *Da'wat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'alamiyya*, jihadist thinker Abu Musab al-Suri argued that the resistance needed to have a decentralized organizational structure, and outlinedthe principles and mechanisms this decentralized approach. See Abu Musab al-Suri (Umar Abdal-Karim): *Da'wat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'alamiyya,* 1425 Dhu al-Qa'da AH (December 2004) edition, p. 896.
Jihadist theorist Abu Bakr Naji instead emphasized the importance of establishing a centralized organizational framework. See Abu Bakr Naji, Idarat al-Tawahhush. n.d., p. 26.

[2] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Kyle Dabruzzi, "Hal la tazalu al-Qiyada al-Markaziyya li-l-Qaeda Mutarabita?" ("Is al-Qaeda's Central Leadership Still Relevant?"), translated by Sadiq Abu al-Saud, AlQuds Center for Political Studies, https://tinyurl.com/vhxvt72n. Compare with Mohammad Abu Rumman, *Min al-Qaeda ila al-Qawa'id: al-'Awa'idwa-l-Dara'ib*, AlGhad (Jordan), 25 July 2011.

chaotic conditions, which is the ideal environmental for jihadism, and led to the birth of anti-US movements that facilitated the movement of organizations like al-Qaeda across national borders. This led to a new era for jihadism that brought together al-Qaeda's global and local dimensions.

After the occupation of Iraq, different strands of jihadism joined together. Al-Qaeda began to target the West, the US, and local Arab and Islamic regimes through local and regional jihadist networks based in the Arab world. It developed a strategy which combined the global and the local in context of occupation.

During this period, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was not a member of al-Qaeda. When the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders was founded, he and most other jihadists were working outside the framework of this front. The front had failed to form an international alliance of Sunni Islamist organizations and religious leaders who shared a common political, religious, and strategic ideology for globalized jihad.

Bin Laden exploited Washington's efforts to occupy Iraq in order to rebuild al-Qaeda, expand its influence, and promote its ideology of targeting Crusaders and Jews. This helped legitimize al-Qaeda's approach, which focused on confronting US imperialism. On 11 February 2003, he called for confronting the US; this was before the US war on Iraq.[1]

---

[1] Bin Laden issued a tape entitled "To the People of Iraq, and to All Muslims", in which he said:"we are closely following the Crusaders' preparations to launch a war to occupy the former capital of Islam, to steal the wealth of Muslims, and to install a puppet government that willfollow their leaders in Washington and Tel Aviv, as has happened before other traitorous Arab governments that helped establishgreater Israel". Osama bin Laden, "First message to the People of Iraq, and to All Muslims", on 10 Dhu al-Hijjah 1423AH/ 11 February 2003, Comprehensive Archive of the Speeches of the Leader of the MujahideenShaykh Osama Bin Mohamed BinLaden, first collection, first edition, 3 June 2006.

The US occupation of Iraq revived al-Qaeda in the Arab world in general and the Mashriq in particular. It began to establish regional branches and form broader connections with local jihadist movements which later declared their allegiance to al-Qaeda. In Iraq, the Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn organization was formed on 8 October 2004. In Yemen there was Qaidat al-Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula, which was formed after the Saudi and Yemeni branches merged in January 2009, under the leadership of Yemeni Abu Basir Nasir al-Wuhayshi. In North Africa, the organization al-Qaeda for Jihad in the Islamic Maghreb was formed in 2007, led by Abu Musab Abdul Wudud. In Somalia, the al-Shabaab organization, led by Mukhtar Abdel Rahman Abu Zubair, emerged as one of the branches of al-Qaeda in East Africa. Al-Shabaab announced on February 2012 that it had joined al-Qaeda and declared allegiance to al-Zawahiri.

Al-Qaeda's Road to the Mashriq: From the Occupation of Iraq to the Arab Spring

The Levant is the land of the victorious sect (al-ta'ifa al-mansura). It is the land of al-Aqsa Mosque, the first of the two qiblas. It is the Holy Land and the land of epic battles. When you think of the Levant, you think of Palestine and al-Aqsa. We have witnessed a Jewish infidel occupation to the extent that even some Muslims seem to have forgotten this is Muslim land. Palestine has been under Jewish-Crusader occupation for more than 90 years—first from Britain, who helped the Jews establish their state there.

Saleh al-Qaraawi, leader of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades

To better understand why jihadism found a foothold in Syria, we must consider the occupation of Iraq and the role that the Syrian regime played at that time in facilitating the movement of jihadists there. Syria was tried to undermine US involvement in Iraq and allowed the country to become the main route into Iraq for jihadists. It was an environment conducive to jihadist recruitment and mobilization. Syria therefore became the most important gathering point and land route for jihadists who wanted to join the ranks of the Iraqi resistance.[1]

Given that the Syrian regime was facilitating the passage of militants into Iraq, Syrians came to constitute a significant percentage of the "third generation" of jihadists. In a study of the Arab volunteers in Iraq, which drew upon lists of names published in jihadist forums, Syrians ranked second overall (13 percent) after Saudis (53 percent), followed by Jordanians (around 6 percent). Another study based on al-Qaeda registers from Sinjar in northern Iraq found that Syrians made up 8.2 percent of Arab fighters in Iraq. Syrians were in third

---

[1] Soon after US military operations against Iraq began in March 2003, the US State Department began to express its concerns about Syrian support for the insurgency there. In a press conference in Baghdad in 2004, General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, said that "There are other foreign fighters. We know for a fact that a lot of them find their way into Iraq through Syria, for sure". According to some estimates, 80 percent of the foreign fighters that slipped into Iraq may have entered via the Syrian border. The Italian investigator on the recruitment of foreign fighters said that Syria had become the center of al-Qaeda's network.
See: Michael Rubin, "Syria's Path to Islamist Terror", *Middle East Forum*, winter 2010, https://tinyurl.com/42ja9h87.

place along with Yemenis and Algerians, after Saudis (41 percent) and Libyans (18.8 percent).[1]

Despite the importance of the Mashriq, the Levant, and the Palestinian issue for al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda failed to establish jihadist networks and structures in the Mashriq and Levant prior to the US occupation of Iraq in 2003. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was important in making al-Qaeda's vision of establishing a presence in the Mashriq and Levant a reality on the ground.

1. How Al-Zarqawi Established Al-Qaeda in the Mashriq

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had tried to establish his own jihadist network before announcing that he had joined al-Qaeda in 2004. The origins of al-Zarqawi's jihadist network can be traced back to the Second Gulf War in 1991. This was a crucial turning point in the development of global jihadist Salafism.[2]

---

[1] See: Murad Batal Shishani, *Abu Musab al-Suriwa-l-jil al-thalithmin al-Salafiyyin al-jihadiyyin,* p. 123.

[2] Al-Zarqawi became a Salafist jihadist in 1989. He quickly went from being a relative unknown in the Jordanian city of Zarqa to one of the most important jihadists in the world. This happened when he decided to go to Afghanistan to participate in the jihad in Peshawar, after being influenced by the speeches and writings of Abdullah Azzam. From the early days, he was involved in establishing a jihadist movement in the Levant, especially in Jordan and Palestine. He settled in the city of Jalalabad in the outskirts of Peshawar. Al-Qaeda considered this to be a key area for Arab and Afghan mujahideen. This area contained Beit al-Ansar, which was aligned with al-Qaeda and its leader Bin Laden, as well as the Maktab al-Khidamat, which operated under the auspices of Abdullah Azzam. This was one of the first places where volunteer jihadists arrived.

Al-Zarqawi witnessed the killing of Abdullah Azzam in Peshawar on 24 November 1989. After this, things escalated quickly. First, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. Then, civil war broke out among the different factions of mujahideen, and the Arab Afghans began to be persecuted in Peshawar. al-Zarqawi participated in the second wave of battles in the Afghan civil war and joined Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's camps. He was aligned with Jalaluddin Haqqani in several camps, especially Sada. Al-Zarqawi returned to Jordan in 1993,   =

Al-Zarqawi was released from prison on a royal pardon. He had been part of what was known as the Bay'at al-Imam case along with the Salafi jihadist thinker Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and other jihadists. The pardon, issued on 23 March 1999, applied to all Jordanian prisoners. After he was released from prison, he immediately began to prepare to leave for Afghanistan and settled in the city of Jalalabad near Peshawar, close to the border with Afghanistan. He worked on rebuilding his network for a while, using his existing connections with Bin Laden and al-Qaeda members. He began to work on establishing a camp in the Herat region on the Iran-Afghanistan border. He became a prominent leader for jihadists coming from Jordan, Palestine, and the Levant, and was able to establish extensive connections with major jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri had asked Saif al-Adel, the top security officer in al-Qaeda, to work with al-Zarqawi to establish a training camp that would form the beginnings of an al-Qaeda branch in the Mashriq, including the Levant. Al-Adel suggested to al-Zarqawi that they should form an organization called Jund al-Sham.[1]

= and immediately tried to set up a local jihadist movement. He was in contact at this time with one of the most important Salafist jihadist thinkers, Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi. They worked together to promote jihadist Salafism and established a jihadist group that was known in media and security circles as Bay'at al-Imam. The Jordanian security forces quickly targeted and destroyed the organization, and he was arrested. On 29 March 1994, the verdict was delivered andal-Zarqawi and al-Maqdisi both received fifteen years in prison. During their time in prison, al-Zarqawi made himself amirof the group since it was clear he had leadership capabilities. See: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, *Ifadat Asir: Yaqawmmaliad'ukumila al-jannawa-tad'unniila al-nar,* Comprehensive Archive of the Speeches and Writings of the "Lion of Islam" Shaykh Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, p. 8.

[1] According to Saif al-Adel, "the information that we had said that there were not many followers of al-Qaeda in Palestine and Jordan. So the plan we agreed upon prioritized getting established in Palestine and Jordan. The Palestinian question is the wounded heart of the Muslim homeland, and those who fight for Palestine are close to the heart of the Muslim world. Striking the Israelis and eliminating their state is part of liberating the homeland. There can be no liberation until =

The Herat camp, which al-Zarqawi founded at the beginning of 2000, contained about 42 al-Qaeda members and their families. These jihadists formed the initial nucleus of al-Zarqawi's network of Arab and foreign jihadists. The most important of these included: Khalid al-Aruri (Abu al-Qassam), Abdul Hadi Daghlas (Abu Ubaidah), Raed Khreisat (Abu Abdul Rahman al-Shami), Azmi al-Jayousi, Nidal Arabiyat, and Muammar al-Jaghbir. From Syria, there was also Sulayman Khalid Darwish (Abu Ghadiya). Al-Zarqawi worked on establishing a base in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and led training camps in the Sargat region.

Al-Zarqawi was able to establish a global jihadist network that extended into Europe. He also set up some cells in Syria, and successfully recruited a number of Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese jihadists. Al-Zarqawi was able to extend his network in Iraq, especially in the Kurdistan region, and received support from jihadist networks in Europe. He formed alliances with Islamist groups in Kurdistan, and in August 2001 held a meeting with his supporters, including Khalid al-Aruri and Abdul Hadi Daghlas, in order to establish camps in Kurdistan that would attract significant numbers of Arab Afghans and Jordanians. He established connections with Warya Saleh Abdullah (Abu Abdullah al-Shafi'i) who had founded Jund al-Islam. Mullah Krekar, who joined the Islamist movement in Kurdistan and became its mili-

---

= the state of Israel is defeated. The regional order is tied to the continued existence of the Israeli state, and this order exists to serve Israel's objectives and pave the way for it to expand further. The links between the existing Israeli regime and Arab states have been controversial. We have agreed that there can be no liberation without change, and no change without weakening Israel, and no weakening of Israel without challenging the Arab regimes that serve Israel, and without removing Western support for Israel and for these regimes. We therefore need to be present everywhere in this part of the region. How could we give up this golden opportunity to establish a presence in Palestine and Jordan? How could we give up the chance of working with Abu Musab and his colleagues in other countries?" See: Saif al-Adel, *Tajribatima'a Abu Musab al-Zarqawi,* Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, https://tinyurl.com/yzlxvu3d.

tary leader, joined forces with Jund al-Islam to become Ansar al-Islam, which became embroiled in a conflict with Kurdish political parties.[1]

After the occupation of Iraq, al-Zarqawi organized the mujahideen and expanded his organization. He established a group that would later become a significant force in the region, with branches and supporters in various Arab countries, and would play a crucial role in the development of global jihadism. Global jihadist ideologies progressed significantly under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who declared his allegiance to Osama bin Laden on 8 October 2004. He announced that he was no longer operating as the Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, and thus the Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn was formed.[2] During this period al-Qaeda adopted a new approach based on a strategy of bringing together global, regional, and local jihadism under the same umbrella.[3] Al-Zarqawi had taken a crucial step in establishing a global jihadist movement under the auspices of al-Qaeda in the Mashriq.

Al-Zarqawi focused on developing a network among Syrians, who joined him in the Herat camp in Afghanistan, and moved with him to Kurdistan in northern Iraq, and from there to Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. The most prominent of these were Abu Ghadiya Sulayman Khalid Darwish, who was coordinating operations between Iraq and Syria. He was killed at the hands of US forces in Iraq in 2006. Abu Ghadiya worked on recruiting Arab and Syrian fighters and was helped along by Syrian security forces that were trying to revive jihadism in Syria, and allowed imams to preach this cause in mosques

---

[1] See: Jean-Charles Brisard, *Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: al-Wijh al-akhar li-Tanzim al-Qa'ida*(*The New Face of al-Qaeda*), translated by Hala Salah Eldin Lulu, Arab Scientific Publishers, first edition, 2007, p. 125-126.

[2] See: Statement of Allegiance of the Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad to Qa'idat al-Jihad, https://tinyurl.com/yzw95596.

[3] See: Hassan Abu Haniyeh, *al-Qa'idawa-Indimajal-ab'ad: wiladathalithawa-nash'amusta'nifa,* Aljazeera.net, https://tinyurl.com/ye8chru8.

under the pretext of resisting the US occupation of Iraq. The Salafi jihadist Abu al-Qaqaa (Mahmud Qul Aghasi) from Aleppo also played an important role in this work. He drew upon the US occupation of Iraq in his Salafi jihadist speeches, and in training groups of followers to fight in Iraq under government oversight, which it used to its advantage.[1]

The efforts of Abu al-Qaqaa and others resulted in the recruitment of large numbers of Syrian fighters, which led al-Zarqawi to launch his jihadist project in the Levant. He tried to establish a branch of al-Qaeda in Syria. At the beginning of June 2005, the interior minister at that time, Ghazi Kanaan, stated during a meeting with the UN's Counter-Terrorism Committee that there was no al-Qaeda or Taliban activity at all in Syria. However, only a month later, on 11 July 2005, the Syrian regime stated there had been armed clashes with "infidel" groups that called themselves Jund al-Sham li-l-Jihad wa-l-Tawhid, and which was linked to al-Qaeda. These clashes had resulted in the killing of several of its members.[2]

2. The Abdullah Azzam Brigades: The Vanguard of Al-Qaeda

While al-Zarqawi was fighting in Iraq, he continued to work on establishing jihadist networks in the Levant. This was a joint effort with the central branch of al-Qaeda. During the height of his power in Iraq in 2004, he asked Saudi Salih al-Qaraawi, who had fought alongside him in Fallujah, to found the Abdullah Azzam Brigades. This organization worked throughout the Levant. While al-Qaraawi was traveling between Iraq and Syria, he was arrested by the Syrian authorities in 2015 and handed over to Saudi Arabia. After he was released in 2006, he was in contact with al-Zarqawi again, and went to

---

[1]   See: RazanZaitouneh, "al-Islamiyyun al-Suriyyunwa-ghawayat al-jihad fi al-Iraq", in the book *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun fi Suriya*, p. 271.

[2]   Ibid., p. 276-277.

Afghanistan to resume his leadership of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades. The name of the new branch of al-Qaeda thus became "al-Qaeda in the Levant and Egypt/Abdullah Azzam Brigades". A number of other brigades emerged under this umbrella, including Saraya Ziad al-Jarrah in Lebanon and Palestine, Saraya Mohammed Atta in Egypt, Saraya Yusef al-Ayeri in the Arabian Peninsula, and Saraya Husayn ibn Ali, and which targeted Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria.

Al-Qaraawi discussed al-Qaeda and the Abdullah Azzam Brigades' vision for the Levant in general and Palestine in particular in an interview published by the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Fajr Media at the end of 2009. He said: "The Levant is the land of the victorious sect (*al-ta'ifa al-mansura*). It is the land of al-Aqsa Mosque, the first of the two *qibla*s. It is the Holy Land and the land of epic literature. When you think of the Levant, you think of Palestine and al-Aqsa. We have witnessed a Jewish infidel occupation to the extent that even some Muslims seem to have forgotten this is Muslim land. Palestine has been under Jewish-Crusader occupation for more than 90 years— first from Britain, who helped the Jews establish their state there. We have seen the lands of Islam fall far behind in their duty to fight for our people in Palestine. We therefore believe it is necessary to gather Muslims together, to put these energies to work, to take responsibility, and unite in order to expel the Jews from Palestine. This must be our first priority".[1]

The Abdullah Azzam Brigades carried out several operations. On 23 July 2005, they carried out three operations at the same time on tourist sites in Sharm El Sheikh in the southern Sinai. These operations killed about 88 people and wounded more than 200 others. On 19 August 2005, they launched three Katyusha rockets from Aqaba towards Eilat and the Gulf of Aqaba. One of the missiles fell near the

---

[1]   See: al-Fajr Media's interview with Saleh al-Qaraawi, field commander of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, https://tinyurl.com/yfemuan2.

airport in Eilat, while the other two, which had been aiming for a US ship in the port of Aqaba, missed their target. One of these rockets struck and killed a Jordanian soldier and wounded another. On 28 December 2005, ten Grad rockets were launched from Lebanese territory towards towns in northern Israel. At the same time, several other rockets were launched towards Kiryat Shmona from the central and western sectors of Lebanon. These included rockets that fell near the town of Shlomi, and near other border towns. On 2 August 2010, other Abdullah Azzam Brigades bombed the cities of Eilat and Aqaba with five Grad rockets that took the life of a Jordanian citizen. The same day, Ayyub al-Tishan of the Saraya Yusef al-Ayeri, which was aligned with the Brigades, carried out a suicide bombing against the M Star, a Japanese oil tanker, in the Strait of Hormuz off the Emirati coast. There were no casualties or material damage.[1]

The Abdullah Azzam Brigades became less active after the Arab Spring. Al-Qaraawi was wounded in a US drone strike in Afghanistan in June 2010. He lost his right leg and hand in the strike and turned himself in to Saudi Arabia. Majid Mohammad al-Majid, who was Saudi, took over leadership of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades in June 2012 in Syria. The US placed the Abdullah Azzam Brigades on its list of terrorist organizations in 24 May 2012. Documents published by al-Qaeda in 2011 indicate that communications that took place between the leader of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Majid al-Majid, and Atiyatallah al-Libi, al-Qaeda's third in command, who was in charge of the group's regional branches. The latter was killed in a drone strike in Waziristan on 22 August 2011. These communications confirmed that the second in command in the Abdullah Azzam Brigades was Abu Muhammad al-Filastini, who was involved in Syria.[2] The Abdullah Azzam Brigades' most important operations during this time in-

---

[1]   See: "Kata'ib Abdullah Azzam", *Aljazeera.net*, https://tinyurl.com/ye8zhku9.

[2]   See: Collected communications between the two *shaykhs* Atiyatallah al-Libi and Majid al-Majid, *Nukhbat al-Fikr*, https://tinyurl.com/ygzrgpkq.

cluded what it called the "invasion of the Iranian embassy" on 19 November 2013. This was one of the largest operations that the Brigades carried out, and resulted in the killing of 23 people, including the cultural attaché at the embassy. On 26 December 2014, Lebanese security detained al-Majid at a hospital after he had gone in for treatment for kidney failure. A few days later, on 3 January 2014, the leader of the Brigades passed away in custody because of his illness.[1]

After the death of al-Majid, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades in Syria became dormant for a while. This was also because of internal divisions and conflicts: their followers were split between ISIS and the al-Nusra Front. In November 2019, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades announced that they had decided to disband in Syria: "We in the Abdullah Azzam Brigades in Syria, after careful study and for the good of the Muslim community, feel that it is most appropriate to announce the complete disbandment of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades in the Levant". They called on their members and supporters to "continue the path of jihad".[2]

Abu Abdullah al-Shami, jurisconsult for al-Nusra Front, revealed in his book *Fi zilaldawhat al-jihad* that the Levant had been al-Qaeda's dream for decades. It was closer to achieving this dream than it had ever been before after the US invasion of Iraq. Al-Shami affirmed that al-Zarqawi had intended to start working in the Levant after the organization was established in Iraq. He did in fact establish a secret branch in Syria and "provided financial support in preparation for getting set up there". However, he was killed soon after that, and the Syrian branch was targeted in by "a series of security strikes that resulted in the killing or imprisonment of most of the

---

1   See: "Majid al-Majid yamut'ala sariri'tiqalihi bi-l-mustashfa al-'askari fi Bayrut", *France 24,* https://tinyurl.com/yf9fh8nt.

2   See: "'Alwiyat Abdullah Azzam'tahullnafsiha fi Suriya", ("Abdullah Azzam Brigades dissolves itself in Syria), *Long War Journal*, translated by the Nedaa Post (Syria), https://tinyurl.com/yjbmf3a4.

leadership between 2005 and 2008". However, this did not stop al-Qaeda's ambitions. In 2008, Osama bin Laden sent a representative to the Levant, who was from the area, in order to set up a branch there and examine the issue again. However, this agent was detained, and was not released until many years later.[1]

During this time there was a major change in the Syrian regime's stance towards Arab jihadists. The regime was accused of assassinating former Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri on 14 February 2005. Lebanon then experienced a political and popular revolution against the Syrian presence there, and on 26 April 2005, the Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon. The Syrian regime was ostracized by the international community, and under intense pressure began to rethink its position and became a partner in the War on Terror. The regime's political calculations had changed: it began to impose restrictions on the movement of militants. Abu al-Qaqaa was killed in unknown circumstances on 28 September 2007, after 85 to 90 percent of the foreign fighters in Iraq had entered via the Syrian border. The Syrian jihadist network had become a crucial extension of Iraqi networks, and continued to operate without direct support from the Assad regime.[2]

In light of the regime's new stance toward jihadist fighters, it began a wide-reaching campaign of arrests targeting Islamists as a whole and jihadists in particular. This led to an increase in the number of Islamists in Sednaya prison between 2004 and 2008 from 200 to almost 1460, most of whom were aligned with jihadist groups of different varieties. The number of other prisoners was not more than 200 persons, who had been detained on various grounds: belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood or Hizbut-Tahrir, human rights activists,

---

[1] See Abu Abdullah al-Shami, *Fi zilaldawhat al-jihad,* first edition, 2016, Jami' al-Kutub al-Musawwara, https://tinyurl.com/4aj97ncb.

[2] See: Hassan Abu Haniyeh and Muhammad Abu Rumman, *Tanzim al-dawla al-Islamiyya*, p. 75-76.

political activists who opposed the regime, Kurdish activists from different parties and organizations, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, and those accused of collaborating with Israel. After 2005, Sednaya prison became an important site for developing extremism, since the regime had tried to throw anyone coming back from the war in Iraq into prison.[1]

3. The Arab Spring and Al-Qaeda's Ideological Shifts

The first spark of the nonviolent Arab Spring uprisings in the streets of Tunisia on 17 December 2010 quickly spread throughout the Arab world. These revolutions posed a challenge to al-Qaeda and to global jihadism. The nonviolent protest movement caused confusion and uncertainty for al-Qaeda, since the ideological premise of global jihadism rested on the idea that change would happen through violent jihad, and that nonviolent change was impossible.

The initial success of these uprisings and the potential for democratic transformation seemed to be the death knell for al-Qaeda's anti-democratic jihadist ideologies. Despite the counterrevolutions against the Arab Spring, and even after the protest movement militarized—as later happened in Libya, Syria, and Yemen—experts at the time remained confident in the ideological defeat of al-Qaeda and the Salafi jihadist paradigm.[2]

---

[1] See: Diab Sariya, AkadimiyatsijnSaydnaya al-'askari: Sina'at al-tatarruf, *Aljumhuriyya.net,* https://tinyurl.com/23prjc2y.

[2] After the Arab Spring revolutions and the killing of Bin Laden, some experts and scholars incorrectly concluded this meant the end of al-Qaeda. See for example: Dr. Fawaz Gerges, *al-Qaeda, al-Su'udwa-l-uful: Tafkiknazariyat al-harb 'ala al-irhab,* translated by Dr. Mohammad Shitta, Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut, first edition, 2012; Manuela Lameda, "Hal wafat al-shaykh nihaya li-tanzim al-Qaeda?" in *al-Qaeda ba'd bin Laden,* multiple authors, al-Mesbar, Dubai, first edition, 2012, p. 22-23.

These assumptions that global jihadism and al-Qaeda had been defeated became more pronounced after the US killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011 in a special operation carried out by a group of Navy Seals and the CIA on his residence in Abottabad, Pakistan. Before his death, Bin Laden had issued one recording about the Arab Spring, which was published after he was killed. In this recording ("Kalimat shahid al-Islam, kamanahsubuhu, li-ummatihi al-Muslima") from 20 April 2011, Bin Laden welcomed the revolutions that had toppled two dictators in Egypt and Tunisia, and called for the implementation of shari'a.[1]

Bin Laden was killed just as the Arab uprisings achieved spectacular victories in several countries. Al-Qaeda issued a statement confirming Bin Laden's death, in which they indicated that he had been happy about the revolutions,[2] and that al-Qaeda had appointed Ayman al-Zawahiri as its new leader on 16 June 2011.[3] He took on significant responsibilities at that exceptional historical moment, given the death of Bin Laden and the apparent success of the nonviolent Arab Spring uprisings.

---

[1] One of the messages in the "Abottabad documents" (document no. 10), written on 25 April 2011, addressed the head of operations Atiyatallah al-Libi (Jamal Ibrahim Shitiwi al-Misrati). Bin Laden congratulated those who participated in the revolutions on what they had achieved, but also warned them to be "careful about dialogue". He said that the revolutions could be an opportunity for the Muslim community to liberate themselves from the whims of rulers, human law, and Western hegemony. See: Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad, al-qiyada al-'amma, "Kalimat shahid al-Islam, kamanahsubuhu, li-ummatihi al-Muslima", *As-Sahab Media,* 17 Jumada al-Thani 1432/ 20 May 2011,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkiGwWG3xuw.

[2] Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad (al-Qiyada al-'amma), "Ishta hamidanwa-muttashahidan", Bayan bi-sha'nmalhamat al-iba' wa-ishtihad al-shaykh Osama bin Laden, rahhamahu Allah, *al-Fajr Media,* Tuesday 29 Jumada al-Awwal 1432 AH/ 3 May 2011, https://archive.org/details/Qaeda_BenLaden2.

[3] TanzimQa'idat al-Jihad (al-Qiyada al-'amma), Bayan bi-sha'n khilafat al-shaykh Osama bin Laden fi imaratjama'atQai'dat al-jihad, *al-Fajr Media*, https://archive.org/details/nvbdspocez.

After the Arab Spring revolutions failed, global jihadists, including al-Qaeda, quickly developed a new dynamic through a series of "ideological accommodations". The Arab Spring protests became a blossoming of jihadism instead. Al-Qaeda realized it would be necessary to adapt to these structural changes by transitioning from an elite to a popular approach using the Ansar al-Shari'a theory. Al-Qaeda did its best to take advantage of the changes that were happening and to form linkages between its ideological goals and the popular uprising. The black banner of the jihadists became part of the public sphere, and al-Qaeda claimed that its skirmishes with the "near enemy" and battle with the "far enemy" had paved the way for the Arab uprisings.

The name "Ansar al-Shari'a" appeared first in Yemen at an early stage in the Arab uprisings; Yemen's revolution had begun on 11 February 2011. This was one of the adaptations employed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. This was the strongest and most active regional branch at the time, even compared to the central branch in Pakistan, after the Yemeni and Saudi branches joined together in early 2009. According to the jurisconsult of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Adel ibn Abdullah ibn Thabit al-Abab (Shaykh Abu Zubayr), Ansar al-Shari'a was founded on 22 April 2011. He said: "The purpose of this renaming was to spread shari'a in the areas that al-Qaeda controlled". It would attract tribes and local residents in Yemen to al-Qaeda ideologies and Salafi jihadist thought through "transforming shari'a rule from an elite to a popular project".[1]

4. The Spread of Al-Qaeda in the Mashriq

Al-Qaeda took advantage of the nonviolent uprising in Syria in mid-March 2011 in order to establish lasting organizational struc-

---

[1]   See: Murad Batal Shishani, "Man humm 'Ansar al-Shari'a' fi al-Yemen?"
https://tinyurl.com/s74hkmvw.

tures and a regional branch of al-Qaeda in Syria and the Levant. As the nonviolent protests turned into armed military conflict, al-Qaeda became involved early on in Syria in order to pursue its broader goals in the Levant. al-Qaeda took advantage of the power vacuum and inability of the Syrian regime to maintain control over its territory and established various organizational frameworks and footholds for jihadism there. Before this, al-Qaeda had been unable to establish jihadist structures in Syria.

During the Arab Spring of 2011, the Assad regime relied on a discourse of fear—domestically, regionally, and internationally. It cast the protest movements in Syria as "terrorist" or "sectarian"— not only rhetorically, but also through developing a strategy on the ground. On 31 May 2011, after the escalation of the nonviolent popular uprising, the Syrian regime issued a presidential pardon for the prisoners in Sednaya.[1] As soon as they were released, the Sednaya prisoners immediately formed the vertical structure of the armed Islamist opposition. There were three leaders in charge of the three main jihadist factions: Zahran Alloush, who founded the Battalion of Islam, Hassan Abboud (Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi), the leader of Ahrar al-Sham, and Issa al-Shaikh, who became the leader of Liwa Suqour al-Islam. All three had previously been arrested during 2004.[2]

The events of the years before the popular uprising contributed to the speed with which the Syrian jihadist movement grew after the Arab Spring. Previously, the al-Assad regime and intelligence agencies had supported jihadist groups and tried to manipulate them to serve the regime's interests. When the current conflict erupted in Syria, it was not surprising that jihadist organizations first

---

[1] For more details on the history of Sednaya prison, see: Haitham Manna, "Sijn-Sednaya: Bayna al-haqiqawa-l-tawzif", *Aljazeera.net*, https://tinyurl.com/48nk4aec.

[2] See: Basil al-Junaidi, "Qisat 'asdiqa' Sednaya': Aqwa thalatharijal fi Suriya al-yawm!" *Aljumhuriya.net,* https://tinyurl.com/yw84xaay.

appeared in eastern areas of the country, where the crossing points with Iraq had been.[1]

After the Syrian revolution took a military turn about three months in, the term "jihad" became more widely used. Salafi jihadist organizations began to pop up in Syria. The most important of these were the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Fatah al-Sham, Jaysh al-Sahaba (in the Levant), and Ahrar al-Sham. A look at their published statements suggests that "sectarianism" had become an important part of their vocabulary along with "jihad".[2]

---

[1] See Peter Neumann, "Jihadiyu fi Suriya: La yalum al-Assad ilanafsihi" ("Suspects into collaborators: Peter Neumann argues that Assad has himself to blame"), translated by Yasser al-Zayyat, *Aljumhurriya.net,* https://tinyurl.com/266f37pp.

[2] For more on the rise of Salafist jihadist organizations in Syria in mid-2011 and early 2012, see Dr. Akram Hijazi, "al-Thawra al-Suriyyawa-masarat al-tadwil" (6), Kharita al-quwa al-musallaha, *Zaman al-wasl* https://tinyurl.com/ydka6v9r.

Understanding "The Levant" in Al-Qaeda's Ideology and Strategy

The Muslim community cannot ignore that the most immediate jihad, in order to liberate our brothers in Palestine, is Iraq. This is where we must focus our energies. It is particularly incumbent on Muslims in neighboring countries, on the people of the Levant, and on the people of the Holy Land, to shoulder the burden God has placed on them, and to carry out their duties to help their brothers fighting for jihad in Iraq.

Osama bin Laden

Before moving on to the important developments that took place as al-Qaeda moved into Syria and other countries, we must pause to examine the ideological and strategic importance of the Mashriq in al-Qaeda's religious, ideological, and strategic literature, especially Syria and Palestine.

Al-Qaeda, as mentioned previously, did not have a significant presence in Iraq prior to the occupation in 2003, when al-Zarqawi was able to establish a jihadist organization that later became part of al-Qaeda. Jihadist organizations generally focused on the "near enemy" at this point, that is, fighting Arab regimes took priority over the Palestinian question. However, this does not mean that the Levant and especially Palestine were not of significant religious, symbolic, and strategic importance in jihadist literature, and indeed gained greater significance with the ideological shifts starting with the globalization of jihad and continuing through the events of 11 September 2001.

There are many reasons for the symbolic, historical, and religious value placed on the Levant in general and Palestine in particular. For al-Qaeda leaders, including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the land was considered to be "holy", the land of mobilization and frontier outposts (*ard al-hashdwa-l-ribat)*, and the land of the "victorious sect" (*al-ta'ifa al-mansura)* or the saved sect (*al-firqa al-najiya*). Since 1948, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian question had imbued the Mashriq and Levant with even greater meaning and importance. Jihadists argued that the main path to liberating Palestine was through

jihad. They saw Palestine from an Islamist perspective that drew upon their understandings of the Qur'an and the Prophetic hadith.[1]

1. Palestine in Earlier Jihadist Literature

From early on, local jihadist movements argued that Palestine's liberation would come through fighting the "near enemy", i.e. the Arab regimes. Abd al-Salam Faraj[2] wrote his book *Jihad: The Neglected Duty* (*al-Farida al-gha'iba*) at the beginning of 1981 in the wake of the signing of the Camp David accords in 1979 between Israel and Egypt. This agreement was the theoretical starting point for the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat on 6 October 1981. Faraj wrote: "There are some who say that jihad today means liberating the Holy Land in Jerusalem, and indeed liberating the Holy

---

[1]   See: Dr. Akram Hijazi, *Rihla fi samim 'aql al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya: al-Qaeda namudhijan,* p. 33-35,
https://tinyurl.com/yg2bpxhd. There are a number of Qur'anic verses that describe Palestine as part of the Levant and as holy. It is variously described as "the land of *isra'* and *mir'aj*" (the two parts of the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey), "land of the Prophets", "the land of fortresses" (*ard al-ribat*)", or Bayt al-Muqaddas. There are also many hadith that talk about the Levant as a place for defense (*ribat*) and jihad, and as a place of blessings and peace, and of the "victorious sect" (*al-ta'ifa al-mansura*). The hadith describe three specific regions: the Levant, Yemen, and Iraq, and gave blessings to Yemen and the Levant. However, with regard to battle and worldly blessings, these were centered in the Levant and Jerusalem. The hadith also single out the Levant for God's blessings, while in another narration it is protected by angels. It is described as a safe haven where the apocalyptic final battle is to occur at the end of time.

[2]   Mohammad Abd al-Salam Faraj (1942-1982) was an Egyptian born in El Delengat village in Beheiragovernorate. He graduated from the Faculty of Engineering at Cairo University and worked at the university beforebecomingamirof the Egyptian Islamic Jihad organization in 1979. He was able to get Khalid al-Islambouli to join the organization in 1980, and together they planned the assassination of President Anwar Sadat on 6 October 1981. Faraj was executed in April 1982.

Land is incumbent upon on us as Muslims. However, we must first fight the near enemy before we turn to the far enemy".[1]

Ayman al-Zawahiri also felt from early on that the "struggles in Palestine, Algeria, Bosnia, and Chechnya are a single battle happening on many fronts. The battle in Palestine will not be won and Jerusalem will not be liberated until we are victorious in Egypt and Algeria, until Cairo is also liberated".[2] The controversy during this time within jihadist movements was about defining the "far enemy" and the "near enemy". Some felt that fighting local regimes was the first step for this jihad, while others felt that fighting Israel should be the priority.

Palestine was one of the key drivers of jihad from the beginning. It is therefore not strange that major jihadist thinkers were of Palestinian origin. Dr. Saleh Sirriyya[3] is considered one of the first Palestinians to believe in global jihad. He worked on founding an Islamist jihadist organization in Egypt known as al-Faniyya al-'Askariyya. Sirriyya was sentenced to death in 1974 and executed. He was trying

---

[1]   See: Mohammad Abd al-Salam Faraj, *al-Jihad: al-Farida al-gha'iba,* Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, https://tinyurl.com/yjjfyy2r.

[2]   See: Ayman al-Zawahiri, "al-Tariq ila al-Quds yammur 'abr al-Qahira", *Majallat al-Mujahidin*, Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, https://tinyurl.com/yzvckd6g.

[3]   Saleh Sirriyya (1937-1976) was a Palestinian born in the village of Ajzam near Jaffa in Palestine in 1937. He witnessed the events of September 1970 in Jordan, which resulted in the departure of Palestinian organizations from Jordan to Beirut after an armed conflict. Sirriyya did not personally participate in these events. He then moved to Iraq and worked with the Muslim Brotherhood there. He fled to Egypt in 1971 after being sentenced to death in absentia for forming a cell of Hizbut-Tahrir and organizing against the regime. In Egypt he worked in the Arab League headquarters and received a doctorate in Islamic education (*tarbiya*) from Ain Shams University. In 1973, he founded the Shabaab Mohammad organization, which was known as al-Faniyya al-'Askariyya. He launched an unsuccessful coup attempt on 18 April 1974 and was sentenced to death on 31 May 1975 along with Karam al-Anaduli, while 29 other members were imprisoned and 60 others found innocent. He was executed in 1976. He did not have any organizational connections with Hizbut-Tahrir, except for his interest in the writings of Shaykh Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani.

to overthrow the Egyptian regime as a step towards liberating Palestine, based on this vision of prioritizing the "near enemy" (Arab regimes), which stood in the way of fighting the "far enemy" (Israel). Sirriyya summarized his thoughts on this in a single document entitled *Risalat al-Iman*, which he wrote in 1973. He developed his thinking with Palestinian Mohammad Salim al-Rihal, who helped formulate the ideology behind the Egyptian Islamic Jihad organization.

Despite Dr. Abdullah Azzam's linkages with the idea of solidarity jihad in Afghanistan, as previously mentioned, Palestine was the main driver for his ideology and his speeches. For Abdullah Azzam, liberating Palestine was an indisputable religious obligation.

Azzam affirmed that the "Palestinian question was an issue of doctrine". He lamented having to give up the jihad in Palestine after the events of September 1970 on several occasions, and said that "we cannot rest until we continue the jihad in Palestine".

For Azzam, Palestine was not only the task at hand, but the priority above all other struggles in the Muslim world. Even while he was involved in the Afghani jihad, he declared that "Palestine comes before Afghanistan", and that Kabul led to the long-term goal of liberating Jerusalem. Azzam defended himself against the criticisms about abandoning the jihad in Palestine and going to Afghanistan, by pointing to the fact that secular left-wing organizations were dominating the Palestinian issue, and that that battlefield had been practically inaccessible since the 1970s. The problem was not only that Israel was guarding its borders well, but that its neighbors were helping in this task: Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon also prevented fighters from getting within striking distance of Israel.[1]

---

[1] See: Thomas Hegghammer, *al-Qafila: Abdallah Azzam wa-su'ud al-jihad al-'alami* (*The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*), translated by Obaida Amer, Arab Network for Research and Publishing, Beirut, first edition, 2021, p.66-68.

2. Palestine in Al-Qaeda Ideology

Priorities shifted from solidarity jihad to globalized jihad after the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Socialist Bloc. A globalized world under US military hegemony emerged alongside globalized jihadism. Al-Qaeda gave priority to fighting the "far enemy", as has been discussed above.[1]

After entering a new phase of ideological development—the "globalization of jihad"— al-Qaeda brought the Palestinian issue to the forefront once again. It became a key part of its political and medial discourse and strategic plans. Since 1998, when the World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders was established, Palestine had become a central theme in the thought and discourse of bin Laden.[2] After the 11 September 2001 attacks, he famously said "I swear to God that America will not live in peace until we can live in Palestine, and until we expel all of the infidel armies from the Prophet's land".[3]

Bin Laden's focus on a global jihad to liberate Palestine had both a religious and strategic basis. By this logic, the space for jihadism in the Levant would provide the necessary strategic depth to liberate Palestine. Bin Laden said: "The Muslim community cannot ignore that the most immediate jihad, in order to liberate our brothers in Palestine, is Iraq. This is where we must focus our energies. It is particularly incumbent on Muslims in neighboring countries, on the people of the Levant, and on the people of the Holy Land, to shoulder

---

[1] See: Ayman al-Zawahiri, *FursantahtRa'ya al-Nabi*, Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, https://tinyurl.com/yjekec9s.

[2] See Diaa Rashwan: *Filastin fi ru'yat Osama bin Laden: Dalil al-harakat al-Islamiyya fi al-'alam,* al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, first edition, January 2006, chapter 10.

[3] See: Dr. Akram Hijazi, *Dirasat fi al-Salafiyya al-jihadiyya,* Madarat for Research and Publishing, Cairo, third edition, 2013, p. 193-216.

the burden God has placed on them, and to carry out their duties to help their brothers fighting for jihad in Iraq. It is a great opportunity and obligation on our brothers who have left Palestine behind, and who stand in the way of jihad in Jerusalem. They must throw off the illusions of political parties that serve the hoax of idolatrous democracies, and quickly return to their place in the ranks of mujahideen in the Mashriq. Mutual aid and trust in God and God's assistance will grant them victory. Then we will go together to al-Aqsa, and the mujahideen from abroad will stand alongside their brothers here, and by the grace of God, will revive the memory of [the battle of] Hittin and achieve victory for Muslims".[1]

The Palestinian issue was one of the most important points agreed upon by al-Zarqawi and Bin Laden. Global jihadist discourse had developed in the Levant in general, and in Palestine in particular. Bin Laden, the leader of central branch of al-Qaeda, made frequent reference to Palestine, while Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in the Mashriq, mentioned in his first video speech, "A message and warning for the people" (from Qur'an 14:52) that "we fight in Iraq with our eyes on Jerusalem". This became a clear theme in global jihadist discourse: Palestine appeared in all of the statements announcing the establishment of different regional branches of al-Qaeda. In the statement announcing the establishment of Qa'idat al-Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula, after the Saudi and Yemeni branches joined in early 2008, the title of the tape published by Malahim Media was "We'll start here and meet at al-Aqsa".

The videotapes issued by al-Qaeda's As-Sahab Media likewise changed their approach after the war on Gaza in 2009. They began to put a picture of al-Aqsa Mosque in the background at the beginning of each tape, and the regional branches did the same. For example, al-

---

[1] See: Osama bin Laden, audio recording, *al-Sabil li-khalas Filastin,* As-Sahab Media, https://tinyurl.com/yhysjb8x.

Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its media group al-Andalus started using the Dome of the Rock as the background for their recordings beginning in 2009, accompanied by "Adhra Filastin". On the recording "Ghazwat al-Shari'a", the Dome of the Rock appeared alongside the song "Sabrya Aqsa".[1]

One of the strategic documents for al-Qaeda made reference to the centrality of Palestine and the Levant in the Mashriq in their planning vision. In the third stage outlined in the document "Marhalat al-nuhudwa-l-wuquf 'ala al-qadamayn", they planned a major leap forward in the area around Iraq. In the beginning, this would focus on the Levant.

This was not a random choice for al-Qaeda; it was drawn from hadith that discussed besieging the Levant after Iraq. The document emphasized the role that the Jund al-Sham vanguard would play in launching attacks within Syria. In the second stage of the plan for 2003-2006 ("Fatah al-Uyun"), al-Qaeda would try to achieve two main goals for Palestine. The first was to mobilize for and defend the areas around Jerusalem. When Muslims became aware of this reality and this current of thought became more widespread and powerful, there would be a direct conflict with the Jewish state in Palestine, to pave the way for establishing a caliphate with its center in Jerusalem.[2]

---

[1] See: Hassan Abu Haniyeh, "Hal dakhalat al-jihadiya al-'alamiyya Filastin*", Arabi 21*, https://tinyurl.com/ydkfqz3l.

[2] See: Fuad Hussein, *al-Zarqawi: al-jil al-thani li-l-Qa'ida,* Dar al-Khayal, first edition, 2005, p. 204-206.

Al-Nusra Front: Al-Qaeda's New Face in the Arab Mashriq

To our brothers fighting in the Levant: God knows that if not for the war raging with the modern Crusaders, if not for the borders drawn by Sykes-Picot that have been honored by our rulers, then my brothers and I would have come to your aid. However, it is a consolation for us that in the Levant of Islam and martyrdom, there are more than enough mujahideen.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, Leader of al-Qaeda

Jihadism in Syria has always been closely connected to al-Qaeda and its nearby branch in Iraq. Since July 2011, there have been communications between Syrian jihadists, especially those fighting in Iraq, and the central branch of al-Qaeda.[1]

The al-Nusra Front embodied the new direction that al-Qaeda was taking in the Levant. Jihadists began to flock to Syria to work with the central branch of al-Qaeda, and under the auspices of al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch. They would avoid mentioning their linkages with either branch in order to avoid the problems that the Iraqi branch had fallen into, and to escape the oversight of intelligence agencies. They worked with other armed factions as per the Ansar al-Shari'a approach that al-Qaeda developed after the 2011 uprisings in order to adapt to the changes taking place in the region.[2]

Al-Zawahiri explained how the al-Nusra Front had been established through agreements about jihadism in Syria between the central branch of al-Qaeda and the Iraqi branch known as the Islamic State of Iraq. He said that the strategy during this period was that

---

[1] Al-Zawahiri issued a videorecording entitled "'Azz al-sharqawwalahu Dimashq", in which he said: "To our brothers fighting in the Levant: God knows that if not for the war raging with the modern Crusaders, if not for the borders drawn by Sykes-Picot that have been honored by our rulers, then my brothers and I would have come to your aid. We honor those giving their lives for the jihad in the Levant". See: Ayman al-Zawahiri, videorecording entitled "'Azz al-sharqawwalahu Dimashq", 28 July 2011, *As-Sahab Media,* https://tinyurl.com/yg46ekm2.

[2] The name "Ansar al-Shari'a" appeared first in Yemen, at the beginning of the 2011 Arab uprisings, and originated with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. See Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Haniyeh, "Ansar al-Shari'a: Ashkalistijabat 'al-Qaeda' li-l-tahawwul al-dimukrati fi al-'alam al-'Arabi", *Lebanese Center for Studies and Consulting*, https://tinyurl.com/yzcxx37c.

"the leadership decided that we would not announce that al-Qaeda was involved in the Levant. This was what we agreed upon, even with our brothers in Iraq".[1]

1. Al-Nusra Front: A Domestic and International Force

Ideologically speaking, the al-Nusra Front in Syria was split between two different religious authorities and approaches. One was linked to the political approach of the central branch of al-Qaeda, and its ideological adaptations after the Arab Spring revolutions with regard to the Ansar al-Shari'a. The second approach was the identity-based approach of the Iraqi branch, which was relatively independent. The confusion over the group's new identity came to the forefront after it officially announced the founding of the "al-Nusra Front in the Levant" in Syria, to be led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, in a video recording entitled "Sham al-Jihad", on 24 January 2012.[2] The organization had in fact existed since July 2011 without a formal name, after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda, sent a group led by Hajji Abdul Nasser Qardash, Haji Bakr al-Khlifawi, Abu Ali al-Anbari, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, and Abu Muhammad al-Adnani as the core group for spreading al-Qaeda's ideology in Syria and establishing a branch of al-Qaeda in the Levant.[3]

Despite attempts to disguise this, the connections between al-Nusra and the central branch of al-Qaeda were clear. The leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, appeared in a video recording entitled "Ila al-amamyausud al-Sham", which announced the founding of al-Nusra. The recording was released by al-Qaeda's As-Sahab Media on 12 Feb-

---

[1] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "al-waqi' bayna al-Alamwa-l-Amal", Audio interview with As-Sahab 7 May 2014, https://tinyurl.com/ye69hgbb.

[2] See: Announcement of the formation of al-Nusra Front in the Levant, https://tinyurl.com/yg2fvase.

[3] See: "Alarabiya.net tanfarid bi-hiwar ma' ahammqadat Daesh fi al-Iraq (Abdel Nasser Qardash), *Alarabiya.net,* https://tinyurl.com/ya3dmyu5.

ruary 2012. In this recording, al-Zawahiri moved between political and identitarian approaches in describing the Syrian regime. He affirmed that al-Qaeda's approach was based on confronting the US, its allies, and Israel. He said: "With the escalation of the secular sectarian Baathist regime's criminal activity, our brave mujahideen must become more patient and steadfast every day in order to fight this noble battle against the sectarian secular regime, and to prepare to liberate al-Aqsa".[1] The US was not fooled by al-Nusra's attempts to try to hide its ties to al-Qaeda, and added it to the list of terrorist organizations on 11 December 2012, as an extension of the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda known as the "Islamic State of Iraq".[2]

The al-Nusra Front began to adapt to the developments in Syria and to become more pragmatic in its approach. It gradually began to distance itself from the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda's approach, and to adopt the central branch of al-Qaeda's approach of Ansar al-Shari'a and adaptation to local conditions. As Charles Lister put it: "since mid-to-late 2012, the group has demonstrated a surprising level of pragmatism in terms of moderating its behavior and limiting its immediate ideological objectives. In keeping with its allegiance to al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra aims, in the long term, to establish an Islamic state in Syria as a stepping stone to liberating Jerusalem and establishing an Islamic Caliphate. In the short term, however, the group is operating at a very local level while paying particular attention to maintaining healthy relations with civilians and moderate rebels. It has also banned the imposition of *hudud* punishments during war".[3] During the following years, al-Nusra's strategy was to

---

1   Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Ila al-amamyausud al-Sham", *As-Sahab Media*, 12 February 2012, https://tinyurl.com/ygqgwso6.
2   See: "Amrika ta'tabir Jabhat al-Nusra al-Suriyya al-mu'arida munazzama irhabiyya", *Reuters*, https://tinyurl.com/yh6kctww.
3   See: Charles Lister, "Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape", *Brookings Doha Center,* Policy brief, May 2014, p. 2, https://tinyurl.com/yhjadd66.

focus on the "Syrianization" of the organization first, and then "Levantization" second. The global therefore took second priority to these local dimensions.[1]

The conflicts between al-Nusra and the Islamic State grew as a result of the contradictions between ideological stances and strategic choices on the ground. While the Iraqi branch drew its theoretical approach from the jurisprudence of Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir, and for practical matters from Abu Bakr al-Naji, the al-Nusra Front lacked ideological coherence. Al-Julani relied for both theory and practice on the writings of Abu Musab al-Suri, while the previous jurisconsult for al-Nusra, Abu Maria al-Qahtani, tended to draw on the writings of al-Qaeda strategist Atiyatallah al-Libi. Meanwhile, jurisconsult Sami al-Aridi drew upon the writings of Abdullah Azzam and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. These divergent approaches produced organizational fissures and challenges on the ground. One of the points of disagreement was between a centralized approach,[2] which Abu Bakr al-Naji defended in his book *Idarat al-Tawahhush,*[3] and which was adopted by the Islamic State, and the decentralized approach laid out by Abu Musab al-Suri in his book *Da'wat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'Alamiyya*,[4] which was adopted by al-Nusra.

---

[1] See: Hassan Abu Haniyeh and Muhammad Abu Rumman, *Tanzim al-dawla al-Islamiyya: al-Azma al-Sunniyawa-l-Sira' 'ala al-Jihadiya al-'alamiyya,* Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Amman, first edition, 2015, p. 88-89.

[2] For more on centralization versus decentralization among jihadists, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Kyle Dabuzzi, "Hal la tazalu al-qiyada al-markaziyya li-al-Qaeda mutarabita?" ("Is al-Qaeda's Central Leadership Still Relevant?"), translated by Sadiq Abu al-Saud, *Al Quds Center for Political Studies*, https://tinyurl.com/yzr99u5z.

[3] Abu Bakr Naji, "Idarat al-Tawahhush: Akhtar marhalasa-tammurbiha al-Umma*",* n.d., p. 26, https://tinyurl.com/ydnzkprm.

[4] Abu Musab al-Suri (Umar Abd al-Hakim), *Da'wat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'alamiyya,* 1425 Dhu al-Qa'da AH (December 2004) edition, p. 896, https://tinyurl.com/yf99gduo.

The conflicts between the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Nusra reached their head when the mediation between the two sides failed to reach a workable solution. The communications from al-Zawahiri did not resolve the conflict because al-Nusra was interested in becoming more pragmatic and adapting to local Syrian conditions, while the Iraqi branch was moving towards greater ideological rigidity and Sunni extremism. This led Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq to announce on 9 April 2013 that al-Nusra Front in Syria had joined with his nascent "state" in Iraq in order to form ISIS.[1] The announcement revealed conflicts between the Iraqi branch and the Khorasan group, which had previously been more contained under al-Zarqawi and Bin Laden. These conflicts developed further after the leader of al-Nusra, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, announced the following day (10 April) that he rejected this joining of the two groups and the formation of ISIS, and affirmed his connections with the central branch of al-Qaeda and allegiance to al-Zawahiri.[2] The official name of al-Nusra then became: "Al Nusra Front/Qa'idat al-Jihad Organization in the Levant".

2. Ideological Disputes Come to the Forefront

Al-Zawahiri tried to exert control over the disputes between the Iraqi and Syrian branches, and to repair the rift between the two sides. He sent a message indicating he had made a series of crucial decisions regarding the Iraqi branch's insurgency. One decision, on 9 June 2013, specified the geographic scope of the two branches, and canceled the merger of the groups into ISIS. It stated that al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq remained two separate branches under

---

[1]   See: "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, audio recording entitled "Wa-bashr al-mu'minin", *al-Furqan Media*, https://tinyurl.com/yer2gyuq.
[2]   See: "Jabhat al-Nusra al-Suriyyatabia' al-Zawahiriza'im al-Qaeda", *Reuters*, https://tinyurl.com/yeusg4yn.

al-Qaeda.[1] However, al-Zawahiri's efforts failed, and the Islamic state withdrew from under al-Qaeda's purview and founded a new kind of jihadism.

Al-Julani's allegiance to al-Qaeda indicated a new stage of jihadism, which would be characterized by divisions, conflict, and competition over legitimacy. This stage involved infighting among groups, which traded accusations of being infidels or deviating from the true Islam. The al-Nusra Front's declaration of allegiance to al-Qaeda also prompted a heated controversy among the Syrian revolution's many different factions. Many leaders denounced this connection with al-Qaeda and expressed concerned that this could link the revolution with extremism and terrorism, especially since the al-Nusra Front was not a small faction that could be easily isolated and contained. It was in fact one of the largest factions and constituted a significant part of the war effort against Bashar al-Assad's regime at the time.

Many called for separating al-Nusra from al-Qaeda from the first moment they joined forces. The leadership of the factions issued a statement regarding al-Nusra's allegiance to al-Qaeda, identifying this as the only obstacle in the way of the unity the protests demanded. This was especially true after the withdraw of factions from Aleppo, after the regime took control of the city. Given growing popular pressure and the desire of the al-Nusra Front leadership to successfully unify the factions into a single military entity, they decided to split from al-Qaeda.[2]

---

[1] See: "al-Zawahiriyulghidamaj 'jihadiyyi' Suriyawa-l-Iraq", *Aljazeera.net*, https://tinyurl.com/yjzma9x6.

[2] See: Abdel-Ghani Mazuz, *TanzimHurras al-Din: Ishkaliyat al-nash'awa-l-tafkik,* Egyptian Institute for Studies, https://tinyurl.com/4732ubsy.

Despite the growing concerns about al-Nusra's actions, there were continuing regional efforts from Turkey to get al-Nusra to become more moderate. This would happen through cooperation with moderate forces from among the Syrian revolutionary factions, and through calling for splitting with al-Qaeda. The calls for moderation were hampered by conflicts among different wings within al-Nusra, especially the globalized wing that was known as the Khorasan group. Ultimately, al-Nusra was not able to overcome its structural issues and to develop a new framework. Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the leader of al-Nusra (Qa'idat al-Jihad in the Levant) made statements on the possibility of becoming moderate during an extended interview between the two sides on Aljazeera; the first part was broadcast on 27 May 2015, and the second on 3 June 2015. However, these hopes were disappointed. There were not radical changes made to the rigid principles of Salafi jihadist discourse with regard to the state, society, democracy, diversity, or citizenship. These issues were not part of Salafi jihadist thought since they were seen to constitute blasphemy and apostasy.

With regard al-Qaeda's approach to jihadism, al-Julani's statements marked a significant shift in developing al-Qaeda's ideological framework to prioritize fighting the "far enemy" — the West, and the US in particular.

One of the most important issues that al-Julani raised was connected to his organization's relationship with al-Qaeda, which also marked a notable shift. Although al-Julani confirmed the linkages between al-Nusra and al-Qaeda and denied that the two had split, these statements were at odds with al-Qaeda's previous ideological focus on fighting the "far enemy". Al-Julani instead moved towards the thinking of towards Ayman al-Zawahiri, saying that "we have received guidance that we should not use the Levant for operations against the West". However, he emphasized that "we could still consider this option if the coalition strikes continue". He sent a reassur-

ing message to the West affirming that given al-Zawahiri's approach, "Al-Nusra's job was to bring down the regime and its allies, and to work with the other factions to establish Islamic rule.[1]

3. International Policy and the Geopolitical Game

Russia's intervention in Syria on 30 September 2015 under the pretense of fighting the Islamic state and terrorism marked a shift in the course of the Syrian crisis and the fate of jihadists. Russia and Turkey then became the most important players in the conflict. Although there were tensions in Russian-Turkish relations after Turkey destroyed a Russian Sukhoi plane on 24 November 2015, the conflict was quickly defused after the two countries decided to resort to dialogue and mitigate areas of conflict. Reconciliation between the two countries occurred on 9 August 2016, when Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin met in St. Petersburg. This was helped along by the Russian president strongly denouncing the attempted coup in Turkey on 15 July 2016, at a time when most Western responses were vague and after the fact. This reconciliation allowed Turkey to become militarily involved in Syria (in the Euphrates Shield operations starting in August 2016, the Olive Branch operations in January 2018, and the Peace Spring operations in October 2019). This intervention was aimed at blocking the expansion of the Kurdish Democratic Union in northern Syria. Russia turned a blind eye to the issue because of Turkey's connections with many of the rebel groups in the Syrian resistance, such as the Free Syrian Army, Sunni groups, and even extremist jihadist and Turkmen groups. Russia understood that they could not resolve the crisis without some level of cooperation from Turkey, but the former maintained the upper hand and did not

---

[1] See: "Bila hudud: Abu Muhammad al-Julani, Amir Jabhat al-Nusra", *Aljazeera.net*, https://tinyurl.com/yhxe5z9l.

intend to make any major concession to Ankara, especially regarding the future of the Syrian regime.[1]

Because of the Russian-Turkish agreements, the governorate of Idlib in northwest Syria and the surrounding areas was able to avoid full-on military strikes. The leaders of jihadist movements had retreated to this area, after formerly spreading through wide swathes of Syrian territory. This last opposition stronghold contained about three million people, mostly civilians.

The al-Nusra Front had been pragmatic from early on in order to deal with local conditions. Al-Qaeda had lost its branch in Iraq after it split off to form ISIS in 2013, but al-Nusra then declared its allegiance to al-Qaeda with the aim of preventing the new organization from dominating the global jihadist movement. Al-Nusra found itself under intense international and regional pressures to break off its connection with al-Qaeda and operate as a moderate force fighting the Syrian regime and its Iranian alliances to avoid being labeled a terrorist organization. **Al-Qaeda quickly lost its new branch in Syria, as it began to draw away from al-Qaeda ideology. Al-Nusra announced it was splitting off from al-Qaeda and formed the Fatah al-Sham organization on 28 July 2016.** This was supposed to be a change in name only, but the group then announced it had formed Tahrir al-Sham on 28 January 2017. This would lead to the establishment of a new organization in Syria aligned with al-Qaeda, from the globalized wing within al-Nusra. Al-Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani's interview with Aljazeera revealed the depth of the identity crisis within the ranks of al-Nusra. Al-Julani was caught between these two currents — one that wanted to integrate fully with al-Qaeda and globalized jihad, and another that wanted to adapt

---

[1] See: Didier Billion, "Al'abmakirawa-masalihmushtaraka: al-'alaqa al-Turkiyya al-Rusiyyabayna al-tahalluf al-mustahilwa-l-qati'a ghayr al-muhtamala*", ("Russie-Turquie: Alliance impossible, rupture improbable") translated by Hisham al-Mansuri, *Orient XXI*, https://tinyurl.com/yhtvhm6q.

to local conditions and Syrianize al-Nusra. This also revealed the limits of moderation that al-Nusra could reach, and the extent of the support of the new regional coalition for al-Nusra's role in Syria. It also demonstrated that its efforts to be more pragmatic and adapt to Syrian conditions would pave the way for later international involvement. However, the US insisted that it would be impossible for al-Nusra to become a major player in a post-Assad Syria. Al-Julani's statements thus disappointed his supporters and detractors alike. It had become clear that al-Nusra was suffering from divisions and ideological fissures.[1]

---

[1] See: "Bila hudud: Abu Muhammad al-Julani, Amir Jabhat al-Nusra".

Confronting Ideological Fissures

Our position on other Islamists organizations is that we will cooperate on issues we agree on and show good will towards one another on issues we disagree on. The priority is on confronting the enemies of Islam. We must not let our disagreements with other Islamist organizations distract us from the fight against the enemies of Islam.

Ayman al-Zawahiri

During the Bin Laden era, al-Qaeda was able to become a global Salafi jihadist movement. After the 11 September 2001 attacks, it began to spread through establishing a global jihadist network and a group of regional branches.

Despite the successive international and local strikes during the global war on terrorism and the ongoing pressures and challenges the organization faced, Bin Laden was successful in maintaining an ideologically and structurally unified organization. After he was killed in May 2011, and Ayman al-Zawahiri took the helm, internal divisions emerged among al-Qaeda's leadership. This included ideological conflicts and structural problems. Al-Qaeda entered a period of confusion and loss of centralized leadership over its regional branches. The Iraqi branch quickly split off from al-Qaeda, followed by a similar split with the Syrian branch. Bin Laden's charismatic personality had been able to maintain a cohesive structure and ideological discourse, whereas al-Zawahiri lacked this capacity and failed to hold the organization together. Internal divisions and insurrections proliferated, while the organization's discourse underwent a similar upheaval.

This chapter interrupts the historical trajectory, which left off in the last chapter at the moment when al-Nusra became Tahrir al-Sham, in order to examine the implications of this split and the movement away from a centralized al-Qaeda. We will look at the ideological dimensions of al-Qaeda's trajectory and the corresponding conflicts between competing schools of thought within al-Qaeda. This will begin with the conflict between the central organization and

al-Nusra with the Islamic State, and the later conflict between the central branch of al-Qaeda and al-Nusra.

These major developments in global jihadism had many important causes. First, there were various contexts that produced these divisions and transformations and led al-Qaeda to split into competing groups. Secondly, this had to do with the other differences that governed the political and social environment in which these three organizations were operating. Thirdly, this was caused by the ideological underpinnings and contexts of each organization and its leaders. As a result, three separate approaches emerged, as will be discussed below.

1. Al-Zawahiri's Leadership and Al-Qaeda's Critiques

When the Arab Spring began, the top leaders of al-Qaeda were caught in intense internal conflicts over why the jihadist movement had failed to build and maintain an Islamic state with popular support. Al-Qaeda in Iraq's brief effort to establish an Islamic state in the period between 2006 and 2007 made clear to many jihadist leaders that a strategy grounded in authoritarianism and imposed by force was bound to fail. Al-Qaeda in Iraq began to move towards acts of terrorism and random violence. Its ideological zeal produced resentment among the local Iraqi population and ultimately contributed to undermining its project. Some of the main jihadist leadership felt that this strategy of imposing Islamic rule was not feasible.[1]

It seems that al-Zawahiri's support for the long-term approaches that focused on local issues with the goal of creating a lasting jihad were a response to the pressures from regional branches

---

[1]   See: Charles Lister, "Ta'thirat al-azma al-Suriyyawa-inkisar al-Qa'ida (The Syria Effect: al-Qaeda Fractures), translated by Heba al-Mansi, *al-Watan al-Arabi*, https://tinyurl.com/294j3vfv.

after the Arab Spring began. Al-Qaeda branches had emphasized the need to adapt to these changes by moving from an elite to a popular approach via the Ansar al-Shari'a, which al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula had developed. The strongest regional branch at that time announced on 22 April 2011 that Ansar al-Shari'a had been formed.[1]

Abdelmalek Droukdal (Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud), the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, had reached this conclusion when he issued a message in July 2012 entitled "General Trends in Islamic Jihadism in Azawad". He discussed events in northern Mali, which the Tuareg people called Azawad, and said that "the hegemonic powers on the global stage have been weakened by their military defeats and financial crises, but they still have a significant amount of clout and can use this to prevent the establishment of an Islamic or jihadist state in Azawad". He added that "it is very likely and perhaps certain that there would be indirect or direct military intervention and a complete economic, political, or military siege, and extensive pressure exerted. This would ultimately force us to retreat or, else result in the people rising up against us as a result of starvation and loss of salaries and supplies. This would exacerbate conflict between us and the other armed political movements in the region". Abdel Wadoud therefore called on his followers to not take leadership positions and to appoint a stand-in Tuareg authority in its place. There was also a lack of focus on applying shari'a principles, and to be lenient in their implementation so people would more amenable to this new rule.[2]

---

[1] For more details on the Ansar al-Shari'a phenomenon and the strategic approaches developed by al-Qaeda thinkers, see Hassan Abu Haniyeh, *Al-jihadiya al- Arabiyya: Indimajal-ab'ad: al-Nikaya wa-l-tamkinbayna "al-Dawla al-Islamiyya" wa-"Qa'idat al-Jihad",* Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha/Beirut, first edition, 2018, p. 135-163.

[2] See: Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, *Tawjihat 'amma bi-khusus al-mashru' al-Islami al-jihadi bi-Asawad*, Comprehensive Islamic Library, https://tinyurl.com/yb52bnj5.

The fragmentation within al-Qaeda and establishment of new jihadist splinter movements is a well-known phenomenon, historically speaking. All rigid ideologies, religious or not, have to adapt to the political, economic, and social realities around them. Ideological rigidity forces the movement to deal with these difficulties, either through greater rigidity and extremism, or else through moderation and compromise. This was what happened with the regional branches of al-Qaeda in the Mashriq, since these jihadist groups suffered from divisions and conflicts with the central branch. They became involved in disputes over jihadist approaches that escalated to the point of armed military conflict over influence and control.

Meanwhile, voices emerged among the followers of al-Qaeda accusing al-Zawahiri of being unable to deal with the Iraqi branch's split, failing to take firm positions, and being unable to attract new followers and maintain the cohesiveness of the organization. Al-Zawahiri tried to beat back these concerns by issuing a handbook and "code of honor" which defined the main principles and goals of al-Qaeda, and which were supposed to be general principles developed in consultation with all the organization's branches. The document was issued in September 2013 and was entitled "**General Approaches to Jihadist Work**", and was published by As-Sahab Media (the official media group for al-Qaeda), and was essentially like a charter or constitution for al-Qaeda.

This document produced many conflicting responses within the global jihadist movement. Some considered the document to be a reconsideration and correction of al-Qaeda's approach on Zawahiri's part. It contained 17 points that clearly set out where the organization was headed, including its position on military operations, fighting Arab regimes, how it viewed different sects, Islamic movements, and oppressed peoples around the world, as well as positions on topics such as non-Muslims in Muslim countries.

Despite the extensive number of materials that al-Qaeda leaders and thinkers produced (written, video, and audio), this was the first time since its founding that al-Qaeda had issued such a message to lay out its overarching plans for the movement. The document was therefore considered to be akin to a constitution for al-Qaeda, and was to apply to all of its branches and supporters.

The document demonstrated al-Zawahiri's adherence to the principles that Bin Laden had originally established. In the charter, al-Zawahiri laid out al-Qaeda's traditional approach prioritizing fighting the far enemy. He said: "Al-Qaeda's military efforts must first target the leader of the infidels, the US, and its ally Israel". He affirmed that the focus was not on targeting the near enemy unless there was a particular need to do so, in specific cases in which these regimes were connected to the far enemy. Al-Zawahiri stated that al-Qaeda should "not fight these regimes unless we are forced to, since local regimes are just one part of US power, as we have seen in Afghanistan, or if they are fighting the mujahideen on the US's behalf, as we have seen in Somalia and the Arabian Peninsula. We might also need to fight local regimes when they do not accept the presence of jihadist fighters, as occurred in the Islamic Maghreb, the Levant, and Iraq. However, it is better to avoid fighting these regimes when possible, unless we are forced to fight them, because our battle with them is part of defending ourselves against the Crusaders' campaign against Muslims".

Al-Zawahiri denied that there was any sectarian element to al-Qaeda. He said that "we do not fight deviant groups such as the Rafida [Shi'a], Isma'ilis or Sufis as long as they are not fighting Sunnis, that is, only to defend ourselves". With regard to fighting operations and bombings in public spaces such as mosques, markets, and gatherings, which cause significant human losses or damage to property, the document contained two points. It stressed the need to "refrain from harming Muslims through bombings, killings, kidnappings,

or damage to property, and from targeting enemies in mosques, markets, or gatherings that contain Muslims or anyone whom we are not fighting".

Regarding al-Qaeda's position towards other Islamic organizations, the document stated: "Our position on other Islamist organizations is that we will cooperate as agreed upon, and work together on our differences. The priority is on confronting the enemies of Islam. We must therefore overcome our internal differences among Islamist organizations in order to focus on fighting the enemies of Islam and our military, ideological, and political opponents. So we support them [the other Islamist organizations] and we thank them for all their good work, and we advise them when they err, in private for private mistakes, in public for public ones. We are committed to respond with clear proofs following a serious, intellectual approach, without any personal offense or disrespect. Strength lies in guidance, not censure".[1]

2. A War Between Brothers: The Fragmentation of Global Jihadism

The Iraqi branch's response to al-Zawahiri was often decisive with regard to the nature of the conflict with al-Qaeda. The official Islamic State spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, issued an audio recording on 11 May 2014 entitled "Adhra Amir al-Qaeda", in which he spoke about the most important points of disagreement and causes of division. Al-Adnani accused al-Zawahiri of deviating from al-Qaeda's principles and denied that there was any link between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. He discussed al-Qaeda's suspi-

---

[1] See: Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Tawjihat 'amma li-l-'amal al-jihadi,* As-Sahab Media, https://tinyurl.com/y59jtwu4.

cious involvement with Iran[1] and blamed al-Zawahiri for the fighting among jihadists and for the fragmentation within al-Qaeda and its alleged ideological deviations. He concluded this had left al-Zawahiri with two choices: either "you continue with your stubborn errors as the fighting and divisions continue, or acknowledge your mistakes, and we extend our hand to you again". He called for a response to al-Julani's declaration of allegiance, whom he considered to be a traitor seeking "bloodshed". He told al-Qaeda's leader not to "mess around with the principles of shari'a" and clarified his position on a number of matters. This included former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, whom he considered an infidel, and the Muslim Brotherhood. He called on al-Zawahiri to "reject nonviolence" and to "clearly call the Muslims to jihad" and emphasized that an independent judiciary was "impossible" in Syria. He said that the Islamic State would not leave Syria and called on all branches of al-Qaeda to take a clear position in the controversy.[2]

The Syrian branch of al-Qaeda launched a wide-reaching military and media campaign against the Islamic State, and two days later, Abu Maria al-Qahtani, the jurisconsult for al-Nusra and commander of operations in the eastern region at the time, issued an audio recording responding to al-Adnani on 13 May 2014. This was entitled "Ayyuha al-Mutaraddid", and called on all the mujahideenin Syria to fight ISIS with the goal of eliminating them entirely. Al-Qahtani affirmed that fighting ISIS was imperative in order to defeat the "Kharijites of this age", and to stop the regime's brutality. By this logic, any jihadist who was unwilling to fight them was betraying the Syrian people. He added that "the cure for this organization is Ali's sword, which he gave to the Prophet to fight the Kharijites in Nahrawan, and called on God to reward him". Al-Qahtani stated that the Syrian re-

---

[1]   See: Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, audio recording, *'Adhra Amir al-Qaeda,* Furqan Media, https://tinyurl.com/ymhu43st.
[2]   Ibid.

gime benefitted from this organization, which helped the Alawites harm Muslims and kill innocents.[1]

However, ISIS did not pay any heed to this and continued its methods of controlling territory through terrorizing tactics. It showed no interested in requests for arbitration and mediation. As a result, al-Zawahiri decided that al-Qaeda would cut off ties with ISIS, so that they would not be responsible for these actions.

This period witnessed sharp polarization among jihadists and intensifying media battles, as well as battles over legitimacy – different factions traded insults and accusations. They each drew upon other moments of division in Islamic history. Al-Nusra launched its war on ISIS in the "Battle of Nahrawan", the site of a historic battle between Imam Ali and the Kharijites. For this reason, they called ISIS "al-Baghdadi's Kharijites", while ISIS described its battles against al-Nusra as the "Wars of Apostasy", a series of wars in early Islamic history in which Caliph Abu Bakr al-Siddiq fought against those who disputed his authority after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. ISIS therefore described the factions of the Free Syrian Army as infidels and apostates, and other jihadist factions as collaborators and revivalists.

The war between al-Qaeda and ISIS in Syria continued, and other regional branches became involved in violent fighting in Afghanistan and central, west, and east Africa, the Sahel, and Yemen. The conflict with al-Qaeda became one of the main topics in ISIS media outlets. The *al-Naba* newspaper covered al-Qaeda, as did various periodicals (which later stopped publication) such as *Dabiq*, while ISIS broadcasting also included content explaining how its approach differed from that of al-Qaeda.

---

[1]   See: Abu Maria al-Qahtani, *Ayyuha al-Mutaraddid*, Audio recording, https://tinyurl.com/266kd8x9.

During this time, there was a group of promotional films re-
leased by ISIS and its various branches. The material issued by ISIS's
Yemeni branch in April 2020 detailed the reasons that had caused
ISIS to split from al-Qaeda. This documentary film, entitled *Ma'dhirai-
la Rabbikum*, tried to show how al-Qaeda ideology had failed and de-
viated from its path after the Arab Spring.

Although the film was not covering new ground in the conflict
between ISIS and al-Qaeda, it was important because it summarized
these conflicts and why they had occurred. The documentary in-
cluded all of the matters of dispute between the two organizations
and shed light not only on the depth of the crisis between them, but
also within the jihadist movement more generally, and sent a mes-
sage to its own followers. It focused on what it described as al-
Qaeda's deviations after the Arab Spring, and in particular accused al-
Qaeda of failing to establish an Islamic state. The film claimed that al-
Qaeda refused to implement shari'a in areas it controlled, despite its
religious obligation to do so. It accused al-Qaeda of being hypocritical
because it had refused to fight Shi'a and Sufis (whom the Islamic
State considered idolaters), and instead fought against ISIS and called
them Kharijites.[1]

The goal of broadcasting this film was to affirm ISIS's position
that it was necessary to intensify attacks on al-Qaeda, especially in
the Arabian Peninsula, and to undermine the organization by exacer-
bating internal divisions. This happened at the same time that an in-
creasing number of trials of spies occurred within al-Qaeda in Yemen,
some of its leadership resigned, and internal collaborators turned
themselves in to the Saudi authorities. The content of this film served
this goal and shed light on the cooperation between the branch of al-
Qaeda in Yemen and the Yemeni government, and how its lands had

---

[1]   See: *Wilayat al-Yemen: Ma'dhirailaRabbikum: Watha'iqiyusallit al-daw' 'ala musi-
ratinhiraftanzimal-Qaeda ba'd ma 'urifa (bi-thawrat al-rabi' al-'Arabi),* video re-
cording, https://tinyurl.com/26p546v2.

been handed over to tribal councils and socialist parties instead of founding an Islamic state in Yemen.

3. A Question of Approach: Disputes Among Jihadists

The divisions between ISIS and al-Qaeda indicated the rise of violent currents within jihadist groups. These developments in the global jihadist movement led to al-Qaeda splitting into two separate groups instead of a single organization. It seems that the ongoing conflict and competition between al-Qaeda and ISIS was the product of "terrorist one-upmanship", as each tried to demonstrate it was the more successful in recruitment and funding through carrying out larger and more precise terrorist attacks. This split can be understood through answering the following questions:

First: "Who are we fighting?" Answering this question aims to contextualize the conflict, and sheds light on who the main enemy was—either the local regimes or the "far enemy" in the West. Osama bin Laden answered this question by focusing on the need to fight the Western states that controlled local regimes, and targeted the US in the 11 September 2001 attacks. However, the US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan led to a focus on targeting local regimes ("the near enemy"), which led to al-Qaeda in Iraq splitting off in 2006, and the beginnings of the rise of the Islamic State. With the Arab Spring and the fall of Arab regimes in the Middle East, there were more opportunities for the Islamic State to make a case for its different priorities and approach – namely, founding an Islamic state in Iraq and Syria. On the other hand, al-Qaeda urged its followers to not be swept up in ISIS's claims, and to maintain a strategic patience.

Secondly: "What are we fighting for?" This question aims to uncover the objectives of the jihadist groups. Al-Qaeda and ISIS were both trying to establish a system of governance based upon Islamic shari'a with a Sunni leader. However, they each envisioned different

ways of implementing this. Al-Qaeda felt that it was not the right time to establish Islamic rule without the approval of the masses, whereas ISIS felt it was its right to establish an Islamic state within the lands its controlled, and to enjoin good and forbid wrong. It therefore refused to work with other Salafi and Islamist organizations.

Thirdly: "According to religious law, whom can we fight?" Both organizations had a clear enemy in mind: al-Qaeda focused on the "far enemy", and did not target its co-religionists, even if they were Shi'i or Sufi, despite issuing fat was against their apostasy. However, ISIS saw no religious obstacle to targeting local regimes and those whom it considered to be apostates. This extended to anyone who cooperated with these entities or individuals, even co-religionists. They declared Shi'a and Sufis to be apostates and deemed it permissible to kill them.[1]

In the film *Ma'dhiraila Rabbikum*, ISIS affirmed that it was the most concerned with implementing all the tenets of religion, and was the most aligned with Salafi doctrine. It emphasized that al-Qaeda had deviated from its path and from Salafi ideology and developed false slogans and fake popular support. It considered al-Qaeda to be the most geographically close enemy of ISIS and developed a series of justifications for its positions, the most important of which were:

1) Establishing an Islamic State and Implementing Shari'a: The different approaches within jihadist thought regarding establishing an Islamic state can be divided into three strands. First, al-Qaeda did not see establishing an Islamic state as a priority at that moment in time and felt that the popular uprisings against regimes should be supported first. This was to occur through forming tactical alliances with pro-revolution elites and avoiding policies that would be pro-

---

[1]   See Mohammad Hafez, "al-Azma dakhil al-haraka al-jihadiyya: Tashaddud Tanzim al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi muqabilsha'bawiyyat al-Qaeda*", Counterterrorism Centre*, https://tinyurl.com/2d38ms7a.

vocative for the people of those countries.[1] The second approach was that of local jihadists, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan or Ahrar al-Sham in Syria, which were fighting to establish Islamic rule in the context of the nation-state, without trying to change or remove its borders. The third perspective, which was adopted by the Islamic State, involved ambitions to establish an Islamic caliphate along the borders that had existed prior to Sykes-Picot. This third school of thought did not take into consideration local Islamist factions, the peoples of these countries, or foreign interests. They accused al-Qaeda of ignoring its historic responsibility to establish an Islamic state on the lands it controlled and to impose shari'a there. Al-Qaeda leadership had handed over the reins of jihad to a generation of younger Islamists who were influenced by democratic principles and integrated these with the ideas of shari'a. They were interested in building a middle ground between Islamism, nationalism, secularism, and socialism. The Islamic state accused al-Qaeda of betraying its allies, and the two groups fought as enemies in Syria, Libya, Mali, Egypt, and Sudan.

2) Rejecting Alliances that Violated Shari'a: The Islamic State felt that al-Qaeda had established alliances with political parties that did not abide by the principles of Salafism and jihad, and even encouraged local jihadists to avoid carrying out Islamic work. The film drew upon several examples. First, the Taliban movement, which it saw as deviant apostates because they had tried to form alliances

---

[1]   During the last two decades, al-Qaeda has not published anything indicating intent to occupy lands or take over territory within an Arab or Islamic country and to impose extremist religious rule there. The audio and video recordings from its leadership have instead focused on the general duty of Muslims for jihad. ISIS's strategy was bolder: it tried to take control over territory in order to establish a state exclusively for Sunni Muslims under Islamic shari'a, as defined by the group. Its leadership felt that by ruling in this way they could build an army to take over more land in order to establish a caliphate composed of various "provinces" without national borders.

with "idolatrous" Pakistani intelligence agencies and also acknowledged Iran's borders, in addition to negotiating with the US to fight ISIS. The film also examined al-Nusra in Syria, which had split from al-Qaeda and formed alliances with factions sponsored by the Gulf and Turkey. It also looked at al-Qaeda in Yemen and its extensive cooperation with the Yemeni government, which was supported by coalition forces that were fighting ISIS and the Houthis. Ayman al-Zawahiri did not escape critique either: the film criticized him for supporting the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt prior to its ouster in 2013, and for giving legitimacy to apostates.

3) Sectarianism: The Islamic State felt that al-Qaeda had chosen not to target sectarian differences due to fears about public perception. As evidence, they pointed to Ayman al-Zawahiri's statement that the best approach was to spread the word through social cohesion, not sectarian conflict. Additionally, he described Egyptian Copts as "our partners in the nation". The Taliban had also protected the Shi'i Hazaras instead of labelling them as apostates or imposing *hudud* punishments on them. However, since Abu Musab al-Zarqawi founded ISIS, he made collective labelling of apostates permissible, because he felt that jihadists were not in a situation that enabled them to deal with individual cases of apostasy.

4) Defending Extremism: The Islamic State felt that al-Qaeda had fallen into a state of hypocrisy, because they attacked ISIS forces and considered them modern Kharijites whom they could fight and kill. Al-Qaeda treated secularists, Shi'a, Christians, and the Muslim Brotherhood as strategic allies, so ISIS argued that al-Qaeda was not fit to lead Islamists. It claimed that the Islamic State was the only organization that was placing jihad in the service of divine unity (*tawhid*), and rejected alliances with non-Muslims according to the principles of loyalty and disavowal (*al-wala' wa-l-bara'*).

Al-Qaeda, which had led the global jihadist movement for almost two decades, began to lose its place at the helm as ISIS gained

power. It was no longer the number one force financially or with regard to organizational, military or media power. Some of its branches around the world even announced that they had joined ISIS and declared their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who gave new energy to the global jihadist movement. The group was able to attract new followers and young men and women from around the world to join the Islamic State.[1]

4. The Clash with Al-Nusra and Jihadism's Three Ideological Approaches

The problems that al-Qaeda was facing were not limited to splitting with the more extremist Islamic State. It had also lost its more moderate Syrian branch, al-Nusra, which split off from al-Qaeda on the basis of the latter being too extremist. Al-Nusra instead presented itself as a local jihadist group that was trying to fight the Syrian regime without any global jihadist agenda.

The Islamic State, which had split from al-Qaeda in Iraq, became more rigid and extremist in its jihadist ideology, and developed a radical and violent approach to fighting. It claimed al-Qaeda had deviated in its strategic and theoretical approach. Meanwhile, Tahrir al-Sham, which had split from al-Qaeda in Syria, said that al-Qaeda was too rigid and extremist both ideologically and strategically, and that al-Qaeda had strayed from its original principles and strategic goals. These dueling principles of extremism and moderation shaped the dynamic that would dictate whether groups maintained strategic and ideological alliances with al-Qaeda and led to internal conflicts within its central branch. This ultimately led to a decline in its status as other splinter branches gained prominence in the region.

---

[1] Ibid.

Global jihadism became fragmented and divided after the Arab Spring. These divisions can be sorted into three main approaches:

The first approach maintained al-Qaeda's traditional agenda as set forth by Osama bin Laden, with the stated priority of fighting the "far enemy", i.e. the West and especially the US. It saw these distant powers as the force behind authoritarian Arab regimes and as the sponsor of its strategic ally, Israel. This approach developed a strategy based on carrying out retaliatory operations that relied on *jihad al-nikaya* (fighting to hurt the enemy) by a vanguard that would create the right conditions for the jihad of all Muslims, whether Sunni or Shi'i. It therefore worked on forming ties with Iran and cooperating with all Islamist groups regardless of internal differences of jihadist and political approach. It also worked on creating relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and other similar organizations. For al-Qaeda, these groups together formed the Muslim community that would implement Islamic shari'a in order to establish the caliphate. Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, worked on bridging the gap between elite and popular currents of jihad, through the Ansar al-Shari'a approach, which became al-Qaeda's main strategy, and which would later lead to disintegration of the organization.

The second approach was adopted by the Iraqi branch known as the Islamic State, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and later Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi. It gave priority to fighting the "near enemy" in the context of a comprehensive doctrine that brought together elements of local, regional, and international jihadism, and different forms and methods of jihad. The first of these was *tamkin* jihad, which would happen through establishing territorial control, implementing shari'a, and proclaiming the caliphate. The second was *nikaya*jihad, which would happen through retaliatory military operations that utilized very violent approaches such as lone wolf attacks, coordinated strikes, or even suicide and commando operations. Thirdly, there was

"solidarity" jihad, which was carried out through supporting relevant issues. ISIS focused on fighting the near enemy (Arab regimes), which it considered to be apostate infidels, and on fighting the far enemy (US and Europe), the Crusader infidels. It also fought regional enemies such as Iranian Shi'a, whom it described as regional infidels carrying out their "Safavid project". It also called for fighting the Jewish-Israeli enemy, which it labelled as Zionist infidels. Religious identity (Muslim, Christian, or Jewish) and sectarian divisions (Sunni and Shi'i) thus became a key ideological driver for the Iraqi branch that had split from al-Qaeda. ISIS considered al-Qaeda to have deviated from the path of global jihadism and to be working against Islamic shari'a due to the connections they had formed with infidels and apostates such as Iran. It also criticized the alliances they had formed with Islamist, political, and jihadist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Taliban, which ISIS described as infidels and apostates, since they were national movements that did not conform to Islamic principles such as *tawhid*, loyalty and disavowal, and rejection of idolatry. Instead, they tried to establish local national governments that formed alliances with infidels, abandoned shari'a, and did not try to establish an Islamic caliphate.

The third approach was adopted by the al-Nusra Front, the Syrian splinter branch of al-Qaeda, which was led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani. Al-Nusra who became involved in a series of deep transformations after renaming itself Tahrir al-Sham in January 2017. The organization tried to do away with its ties to al-Qaeda on the grounds that it was too extremist both ideologically and strategically. It instead tried to present itself as a local jihadist group that wanted to fight the Syrian regime but did not have a global jihadist agenda. It no longer used global jihadist terminology that al-Qaeda would use, such as "jihad of the *umma*" or sectarian language such as "jihad against the *Nusayriyya*" (a pejorative term that Salafi jihadists used to de-

scribe Alawites). Other terminology took its place, such as a "jihad" to defend the Syrian revolution, or the "struggle for the freedom of the Syrian people". It tried to open channels of communication with regional and global powers. After cutting off connections with the Islamic State in 2013, and with al-Qaeda in 2017, it became involved up in a bloody armed conflict with them to defend its claims of moderation. The group instead tried to get delisted as a global terrorist organization and to rebrand itself.

Tahrir Al-Sham Splits with Al-Qaeda

The people of the Levant want to get rid of the pretexts that the international community, especially the US and Russia, use to justify their attacks. They justify the bombing and displacement of Muslim populations by claiming they are targeting al-Nusra, which is linked to Qa'idat al-Jihad. So, we have decided to stop working under the name "al-Nusra Front" and to form a new organization which will be called Fatah al-Sham.

Abu Muhammad al-Julani

The Russian military intervention in September 2015 was a turning point in the

Syrian crisis. It shifted the balance of power, which had previously been on the side of global and local jihadists, the political and military national opposition forces, and their regional and international allies. Russia was able to shift the map of the conflict entirely and to take control of all opposition areas – except in the north – through using excessive force. It also neutralized and isolated some regional players and forced them to cut off their connections with armed opposition factions. The main areas of action in Syria came under the control of a tripartite force (Russia, Turkey, and Iran). The path of the conflict would be determined by the outcomes of the talks in Astana and Sochi.

The Astana talks were sponsored by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, starting with the first round of talks on 23 January 2017, after the opposition lost its foothold in Aleppo to the regime. This created a dynamic focused on Russia's involvement in devising "de-escalation" mechanisms.[1] The Sochi I conference was held on 30 January 2018

---

[1]   The second round was held on 15 February 2017, when a tripartite group was formed (with Russia, Turkey and Iran) to oversee the "cessation of hostilities" and establish mechanisms for prisoner exchanges between the regime and opposition. The opposition boycotted the third round of talks which happened on 14 March 2017, because of the lack of adherence of the regime and its allies to the ceasefire. The fourth round of talks was held on 4 May 2017, in whichthe three parties agreed to establish four regions for de-escalation. The fifth round was held on 4 July 2017, but the parties failed to agree on borders for these areas of de-escalation. The sixth round was held on 14 September 2017 and involved the "establishment of a Turkish-Russian-Iranian joint coordination center that   =

amid Russian efforts to form a partnership with Turkey and Iran. They aimed to move the political dialogue about Syria's fate beyond the framework of the international Geneva conference,[1] the first round of which was held on 30 June 2012 and included "a group of actors concerned about Syria" under UN auspices. The participants in the Geneva talks had agreed on the need for a political solution to the crisis in Syria, with the Syrian opposition delegation calling for the establishment of a fully-fledged transitional governing body.[2]

The Sochi agreement was the best option from among Idlib's limited choices, given the series of international crises. After September 2017, a partial ceasefire was established following the Turkish-Iranian-Russian "de-escalation" agreement to protect Idlib. There was also an agreement reached in September 2018 between Turkey

---

= aimed to coordinate the activities of the forces monitoring areas of de-escalation". The seventh round was held on 30 October 2017 and ended without achieving any tangible results. The eight round was held on 21 December 2017 set a date for the Intra-Syria Dialogue Conference in the city of Sochi. The ninth round was led on 14 May 2018 without reaching any new results.

[1] The second Geneva conference was held in February 2014, and a fourth round was held in Geneva in February 2017, focusing on a ceasefire, a new draft constitution, and how to hold elections in the country. In the fifth round of talks in April 2017, the attendees discussed four main issues: governance, the constitution, the elections, and counterterrorism. The sixth, seventh, and eighth rounds of the Geneva talks happened without any tangible progress between the opposition and the Syrian government. The last round of talks took place in Vienna on 25 January 2018. During these talks, the participating countries came to an unofficial agreement on the political process in Syria. The negotiating parties were unable to reach an agreement about a ceasefire in eastern Ghouta, which was controlled by the armed opposition.

[2] The dynamics of Sochi put aside UN resolution 2254, which had been unanimously adopted on 18 December 2015. It stated that negotiations between Syrian groups would occur under UN oversight, and that a new constitution for Syria would be in place within six months, and elections within 18 months, also under UN oversight. The opposition felt that Bashar al-Assad had no place in Syria according to their interpretation of this resolution, while the Syrian governmental delegation rejected this interpretation, and demanded that "terrorism" be put at the top of the list of priorities.

and Russia. In the Sochi talks, held at a resort on the Black Sea, an imminent attack by the regime was discussed, which strengthened the previous agreement.

It is important to mention here that the "de-escalation" agreement required all actors to isolate and fight jihadist groups. The Sochi agreement specified additional procedures for removing "extremist terrorist organizations" from the demilitarized zone in Idlib. The responsibility for carrying out the Sochi agreement fell primarily on Turkey, which has so far fallen short, according to Russia. At the same time, attacks between militants in Idlib and the regime forces escalated. A Turkish patrol established in the demilitarized zones on 8 March was a significant step forward, but the Sochi agreement required more.

This chapter will discuss the effects of these strategic shifts and the Turkish-Russian agreements on al-Nusra, and how it split from al-Qaeda to form Fatah al-Sham in 2016, and then Tahrir al-Sham in 2017. These ideological shifts continued as it returned to a focus on local identity, which led to clashes with the central branch of al-Qaeda and between the al-Qaeda-affiliated global wing and local Syrian wing. Finally, the chapter examines al-Nusra's efforts to present itself to the international community in a new light.

1. The Birth of Fatah Al-Sham and its Split with Al-Qaeda

The geostrategic shifts taking place made al-Nusra more pragmatic in its approach. In order to adapt to the new reality, and to form closer relations with Turkey, it began to present itself as a moderate, local jihadist movement in order to avoid US airstrikes and Russian attacks.

Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the head of al-Nusra, first spoke about this new approach on 28 July 2016 in a video on Aljazeera with

top al-Nusra leaders Abdel Rahim Atoun and Abu Faraj al-Masri. They announced that they would no longer be working under the name "al-Nusra Front" and would form a new entity that would be called Fatah al-Sham. They affirmed that this new group had no ties with foreign powers, in an effort to disassociate themselves from any connection with al-Qaeda. Al-Julani said: "We will stop working under the name al-Nusra and will form a new organization called Fatah al-Sham". He thanked "the leadership of al-Qaeda for their understanding that we need to break ties with them". He said this decision reflected the fact that "the people of the Levant want to get rid of the pretexts that the international community, especially the US and Russia use to justify their attacks. They justify the bombing and displacement of Muslim populations by claiming they are targeting al-Nusra, which is linked to Qa'idat al-Jihad. So, we have decided to stop working under the name "al-Nusra Front" and to form a new organization which will be called Fatah al-Sham". He also listed the goals for this new step forward, which included "working to unify the different factions to close the ranks of jihadists, in order to liberate the Levant from the rule of idolaters, and to get rid of the regime and its collaborators".[1]

Hours before this speech was broadcast, al-Nusra's al-Manara al-Bayda had published an audio recording from Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, al-Qaeda's second-in-command. In the recording, he announced that al-Qaeda had agreed to al-Nusra's splitting off and congratulated them on this step. He affirmed that al-Qaeda had "decided to do everything it can to maintain its jihad in the Levant, and to remove all the flimsy pretexts set up by the enemy to cut the jihadists off from their support base". It added that "in this stage, as the broader Muslim community joins the jihad, we are shifting from a jihad of the elites to a jihad of the nation. Such a jihad must not be

---

[1]   See: "al-Nusra tanfasil'aynal-Qaeda wa-tughayyirismaha", *Aljazeera.net,* https://tinyurl.com/2t2kwhj2.

conducted with a mentality centered around the group or organization, but rather jihadist groups must work to unify and mobilize the people instead of dividing them".[1] In al-Zawahiri's recording, he said that "Our brotherhood in Islam is stronger than any fleeting organizational structure", adding that "unity is more important than these superficial connections, and takes precedence over organizational ties or political partisanship". Al-Zawahiri affirmed that "these partisan structures can be sacrificed if they are at odds with your unity and cohesion against the secular sectarian enemy, who is backed by the *Rafida* Safavid forces [Iran], Russia, and China and collaborates with the modern Crusader's campaign".[2]

Abu Khayr al-Masri had notified the leadership of al-Nusra that his powers as second-in-command granted him the authority to decide the fate of al-Nusra's ties to al-Qaeda, according to al-Nusra's jurisconsult Abdel Rahim Atoun. On this basis, Abu Muhammad al-Julani made an agreement with Abu Khayr al-Masri on changing the name of al-Nusra and announcing its split with al-Qaeda. The plan was that this name shift would happen for public relations purposes only, while they would secretly maintain allegiance to al-Qaeda. If the revolutionary factions were successful in achieving unity, al-Nusra would cut off its ties to al-Qaeda, but if the factions failed to unite, then al-Nusra would maintain its allegiance.[3]

Abu Khayr al-Masri's reasoning here were not unanimously supported within al-Nusra. Al-Nusra's Shura council was split evenly on the decision to announce the split with al-Qaeda. When Abu Khayr

---

[1] See: "al-Qaeda" tuwafiqdimniyyan'ala infisalal-Nusra'anha", *Arabi 21*, https://tinyurl.com/5f8n3w4k.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Abdel Rahim Atoun, Response to al-Zawahiri's speech, "Sa-nuqatilukumhata la takunfitna", https://tinyurl.com/8cxp2955.

al-Masri sent a message to Saif al-Adel and Abu Muhammad al-Masri[1] in Iran, so that they could review the contents of his agreement with al-Julani and give him their opinion on this, they rejected the agreement.[2] Abu Khayr al-Masri insisted on carrying out the announcement about separating from al-Qaeda, drawing on the powers vested in him as second-in-command to the leader of al-Qaeda.[3]

---

[1] Abu Muhammad al-Masri: His real name was Abdullah Ahmad Abdullah, and he was known as Mohammad al-Masri or al-Zayyat. He was born in Egypt in 1963 and was an officer in the Egyptian army. He was the second-in-command in al-Qaeda and was previously a leader and trainer for the al-Qaeda forces that fought against the US forces in Somalia and forced them to withdraw from the country in 1993. He was also directly in charge of planning of the two US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Tanzania in 1998. After this operation, Osama bin Laden appointed him the leader of al-Qaeda's foreign operations, and he became the third in command after the killing of Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri. He was then put in charge of all the camps and fronts, as well as foreign operations. (He was with Osama bin Laden in Sudan; they left together after intensive pressure on the National Salvation government. After the 11 September attacks, when the US forces invaded Afghanistan, al-Masri left for Iran with his family, the family of Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leadership. In Iran, Hamza bin Osama bin Laden married his daughter Maryam. He moved between house arrest and prison until he was released as part of the deal between al-Qaeda in Yemen and Iran, but did not leave the country. After Abu al-Khayr al-Masri was killed, he became second-in-command to al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda. al-Masri was assassinated in Iran on 7 August 2020 with his daughter Maryam, the widow of Hamza bin Laden, in a shooting from a car in Tehran carried out by Israeli operatives, according to the New York Times.

[2] See: Sami al-Aridi, "Silsilat Allah thamma li-l-tarikh: Shahadat hawlafakk al-irtibatbayna Jabhat al-Nusra wa-Tanzim al-Qaeda", https://tinyurl.com/4jt48x95.

[3] It is important to mention here that the al-Nusra front's transition to becoming Fatah al-Sham was not very popular among the more extremist parts of the organization. Actually, during the al-Nusra Shura council's final vote on this matter, about half of the members of the leadership voted no, and afterwards dozens of high-profile leaders left the group or refused to take up their new positions in Fatah al-Sham. From that point onwards, there were marked divisions and fragmentation in the group, since many opposed this renaming as part of the dangerous set of compromises that were being made to support the Syrian opposition. See: Charles Lister, "Inqilab al-Qaeda 'ala tabi'ha al-Suri"("al-Qaeda's Turning Against its Syrian Affiliate")translated by Unsa Issa, Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, https://tinyurl.com/4rd8evxa.

Following this controversy over the announcement about the split between al-Nusra and al-Qaeda, and the formation of Fatah al-Sham, there was a drone strike on 8 September 2016 targeting a meeting of top Fatah al-Sham leaders in Kafr Naha in the outskirts of west Aleppo. The Pentagon denied any role in the killing of the military commander of "Jaish al-Fatah".[1] The strike killed Usama Nammoura,[2] a top al-Qaeda leader who was known by different names such as Abu Hajjar al-Homsi, Abu Omar Saraqeb, and Abu Khaled Lubnan.

Abu Hajjar was the leader and military commander of Jaish al-Fatah, and was the architect of the operation to end the siege of Aleppo. He had been suspended from the organization months before he was killed in June 2016, and his relationship with al-Julani had become tense. According to various sources, the suspension occurred because he had categorically opposed the split with al-Qaeda and had persistent doubts about any suggestion put forth by the moderate

---

[1] See: "Amrika lam taqtul 'Abu Umar Saraqeb', wa-l-arjah anna gharat Rusiyyaqatalathu fi Halab", *France 24*, https://tinyurl.com/5bjshenn.

[2] Usama Nammoura was one of the founders of al-Nusra and was known by several different names, including Abu Hajjar al-Homsi, Abu Omar Saraqeb, Abu Khaled Lubnan, and Abu Hajjar. He was a sponsor of Jaish al-Fatah and its military leader. He is considered to be the architect of the operation that ended the siege of Aleppo and had a major role in the spread of al-Nusra in Qalamun. He was in charge of the "Emirate of Idlib" and later the "Emirate of Aleppo". Nammoura was born in Idlib and had emigrated to Iraq a year after US forces arrived. He was detained there under unknown circumstances, but it is thought that he met Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi while detained. Nammoura was moved to Syria after that, following an agreement between the Iraqi and Syrian governments, and was imprisoned in the Palestine branch of military security for three years. Abu Hajjar was released from prison under one the pardons for Islamists issued by the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, just after the Syrian revolution began. As al-Nusra became more prominent, he also came into the spotlight.

wing and its supporters, including Abu Maria al-Qahtani, Yusuf al-Arjani, Abu Hassan al-Kuwaiti, and Mazhar Alwais.[1]

It is clear that the steps that al-Julani took did not succeed in ending Fatah al-Sham's apparent connection with al-Qaeda to be delisted as a terrorist organization. According to Charles Lister, al-Nusra's announcement that it was breaking ties with al-Qaeda was only a ruse so that it could become more involved in the Syrian revolution. He wrote: "Nobody should be confused by this maneuver: Jabhat al-Nusra, which is also known as the Nusra Front, remains as potentially dangerous, and as radical, as ever. In severing its ties to al Qaeda, the organization is more clearly than ever demonstrating its long-game approach to Syria, in which it seeks to embed within revolutionary dynamics and encourage Islamist unity to outsmart its enemies, both near and far".[2]

Washington agreed that the new name for al-Nusra was an obvious ploy. Starting from January 2017, US officials no longer referred to the "Khorasan Group" as part of al-Qaeda and they were no longer concerned about distinguishing between al-Nusra and the Khorasan Group, describing them all as "al-Qaeda". The US began to undertake further airstrikes against Fatah al-Sham (previously al-Nusra) and others connected to al-Qaeda. This led to further controversy within al-Nusra's wings. The pragmatic wing had begun to think seriously about actually breaking ties with al-Qaeda, as pressure grew on al-Nusra from Washington, Moscow, and Ankara, and from armed opposition factions.

---

[1] See: Nasib Abdel Aziz, "Maqtal Abu Hajjar al-Homsi: Akthar min gharajawiyya*", al-Mudun*, https://tinyurl.com/v7jjmhc.

[2] See: Charles Lister: "Jabhat al-Nusra matatwa-aqwa min ayywaqtmada", ("The Nusra Front is Dead and Stronger than Ever Before", *Foreign Policy*), translated by Abdel Rahman al-Husseini, *al-Ghad*:https://tinyurl.com/b92x23eh.

The US approach, which treated Fatah al-Sham as a branch of al-Qaeda in Syria, drove the organization to distance itself from al-Qaeda as dissension among its ranks grew. In practical terms, what this meant was that the US targeted Fatah al-Sham for attack, albeit only its radical globalized wing that had ties to al-Qaeda, regardless of the fact that it called itself the "Khorasan Group".[1]

On 2 January 2017, coalition planes targeted two Fatah al-Sham cars in succession on the highway near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing and the town of Sarmada. The attack left 11 dead, including two foreign fighters who were not of Syrian nationality. On 4 January 2017, a coalition airstrike targeted the headquarters of Fatah al-Sham in the outskirts of Idlib in northwestern Syria. A Fatah al-Sham source said that the coalition bombing of the headquarters occurred between the towns of Sarmada and Kafar Dariyan in the outskirts of Idlib in northwestern Syria. This attack killed everyone inside— 25 people in all.[2] On 19 January 2017, there was another US airstrike on the Shaykh Suleiman camp on al-Nusra's regiment 111, to the west of the town of Darat Izza. This resulted in the killing of 110 Fatah al-Sham (al-Nusra) militants, as well as some Nour al-Din al-Zenki fighters.[3]

---

[1] The US State Department had received directives from former US president Barack Obama to begin targeting Fatah al-Sham leaders. Before this, operations had focused on the al-Qaeda-linked Khorasan group. It seems starting from early 2017, Russia and the US took serious steps to coordinate joint operations to strike Fatah al-Sham, which they both considered to be an enemy. They had previously agreed in July 2016 that they should coordinate together to strike al-Nusra. See "Hal tamtalik Amrika 'Bank Ightiyalat" li-darb Fatah al-Sham?: al-Gharat al-akhiratu'id li-l-adhan ittifaqMuskuwa-Washintun li-tasfiyatiha", *Alsouria Net*, https://tinyurl.com/e7ysz9u2.

[2] See: "Gharalil-tahalluftaqtul 25 'ansaran min Jabhat Fatah al-Sham", *Aljazeera.net,* https://tinyurl.com/eundp25h.

[3] See: "Maqtal al-'asharatmin al-Nusra fi Rif Halab al-gharbi bi-gharat li-l-tahaluf", *Al Mayadeen* https://tinyurl.com/wspkyd4m.

Following this last airstrike, shortly after the Astana confe-rence, Fatah al-Sham became embroiled in armed conflicts with Ahrar al-Sham and other groups from the Free Syrian Army. Fatah al-Sham directed itsattacks against factions that had participated in the Astana conference, which in turn threw themselves into the arms of Ahrar al-Sham for protection. Shortly after these clashes began, six revolutionary factions announced that they had joined the Ahrar al-Sham movement: the Army of Mujahideen, the Levant Front, the Su-qour al-Sham Brigades, Jaysh al-Islam (Idlib division), the al-Sham Revolutionary Brigades, and the Fastaqim Union. As Fatah al-Sham was launching its campaign against these factions, they began coor-dinating with other factions and groups in order to form a broader coalition. According to Aaron Lund, the main center of gravity for the opposition, which had until recently been balanced between Ahrar al-Sham and Fatah al-Sham, then shifted decisively in favor of the Sa-lafi-jihadist camp.[1]

2. A Major Step Away from Al-Qaeda: The Emergence of Tahrir Al-Sham

After the Astana talks began between the Syrian regime and the opposition, with Iranian, Russian, and Turkish involvement, Sy-rian opposition forces split between those participating and those boycotting the talks. This led to some clashes between anti-regime militants, which in turn led Fatah al-Sham to integrate more quickly with the factions that rejected the Astana talks. Fatah al-Sham did this in order to end its isolation because of its links to al-Qaeda, to avoid being listed as a terrorist group, and to stop the US airstrikes. The Tahrir al-Sham organization was then announced on 28 January 2017. This joining together of forces was a product of what was hap-pening in the Syrian revolution with regard to "conspiracies and in-

---

[1] Aaron Lund, "The Jihadi Spiral", *Carnegie Middle East Center,* https://tinyurl.com/yxbw52rj.

ternal fighting that threatened its very existence". The statement announcing the founding of Tahrir al-Sham also called on factions working in Syria to join this new organization in order to preserve what the revolution and jihad had accomplished. Fatah al-Sham (previously al-Nusra), one of the most important parts of this new organization, considered the Astana talks to be part of the conspiracies against the Syrian revolution.[1]

The Tahrir al-Sham organization brought together several different jihadist factions and brigades, the most important of which were: Fatah al-Sham, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Brigades (part of the CIA-backed opposition), the Ansar al-Din Front (the umbrella group for foreign and Syrian Salafi jihadists), Jaysh al-Sunna (a small group of fighters who had fled from Homs to Idlib), and Liwa al-Haqq (a small jihadist group in Idlib). Other groups also joined Tahrir al-Sham, including a splinter group from Ahrar al-Sham known as the Ashidaa Mujahideen Brigades, led by Abu al-Abd Ashidaa. Tahrir al-Sham also attracted Salafi *shaykh*s such as Abdullah al-Muhaysini and Abdel Razzaq al-Mahdi. Others Ahrar al-Sham leaders also split off to join Tahrir-al-Sham, including Hashim al-Shaykh, leader of Jaysh al-Ahrar, which had split off from Ahrar al-Sham, Abu Salih Tuhan, Abu Muhammad al-Sadiq, and Abu Yusuf al-Muhajir. Hashim al-Shaykh was appointed leader of Tahrir al-Sham, with Abu Muhammad al-Julani working behind the scenes.[2]

Within a few months, Tahrir al-Sham had itself experienced various internal divisions. There were three main factions that emerged: the Nour al-Din al-Zenki movement, Jaysh al-Ahrar, and the Ibn Taymiyya Battalions. Several of the leaders announced they were stepping down, including Abdullah al-Muhaysini and al-Shaykh Musleh al-Alyani.

---

[1] See: "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Takattul al-Rafidin li-Astana", *Aljazeera.net*, https://tinyurl.com/y6jkbjbx.

[2] Ibid.

Al-Julani, leader of Fatah al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra), became the commander of Tahrir al-Sham after a meeting of the Shura council. According to an official statement issued by the organization, they accepted the resignation of Hashim al-Shaykh, and appointed deputy Abu Muhammad al-Julani in his place. It was clear from the beginning that al-Julani was the main leader of the organization, and that Hashim al-Shaykh was leading only in name.[1]

This announcement of Tahrir al-Sham was a turning point in starting to establish control over Idlib, after it defeated all the local armed opposition factions and made the crucial decision to break with al-Qaeda. However, the US still categorized it as a terrorist organization, and as another name for the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. However, the organization realized that the US was only targeting its globalized jihadist wing, which was mostly comprised of foreign fighters. About a month after announcing that Tahrir al-Sham had been formed, a drone strike killed Abu Khayr al-Masri on 26 February 2017. This strengthened the theory held by the organization's radical al-Qaeda-aligned wing that al-Julani had been collaborating with the coalition forces. The previous leader of al-Nusra, Saleh al-Hamawi (Muzamjar al-Sham) hinted that al-Julani had been involved in a coalition airstrike that killed members of the Khorasan Group, who had come from Afghanistan to join al-Nusra. He said that their presence posed a risk to al-Julani because they were much more experienced jihadists. These leaders included the Saudi Abdel Mohsin al-Sharikh (Sanafi al-Nasr) and the Kuwaiti Muhsin al-Fadhli. He also suggested that al-Julani had been involved in the killings of the Egyptians Abu Khayr and Abu Faraj, because they knew about al-Julani's promises to declare his allegiance to al-Zawahiri again if the latter asked for this.[2]

---

[1]   See: Paula Astih, "Inshiqaqat fi Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham wa-Hashim al-Shaykh yastaqilmin al-qiyada*", Asharq al-Awsat*, https://tinyurl.com/2ehz4ae6.

[2]   See: "Muzamjar yakshif ma'lumat muthira 'an al-Qa'ida wa-l-Urduniyyin wa-l-Julani".

It is worth mentioning that the conflict within Tahrir al-Sham over the nature of its relationship with al-Qaeda escalated further after the killing of Abu Khayr al-Masri. There was a lack of trust in the radical wing that had remained loyal to al-Qaeda. Abu Khayr al-Masri seemed to have held two conflicting roles. For radicals, he was a seasoned global jihadist who held onto al-Qaeda's principles, and who had retracted his support for the decision to split from al-Qaeda after he realized al-Julani was intending to fully split from al-Qaeda.[1] For the pragmatists, he was a composed and compromising figure with independent ideas that differed from those of the organization's leadership. He was the one who after arriving in Syria had been offered leadership of al-Nusra and refused, who had urged al-Nusra to open an office by which to communicate with Turkey, and who had tried to convince the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda to abandon its foreign-based work.[2]

After al-Nusra renamed itself Tahrir al-Sham in January 2017, Tahrir al-Sham tried to present itself as a local group trying to fight the Syrian regime without any global agenda. A quick look at the organization's statement sand weekly magazine (*Iba'*) as well as interviews with the leadership, is enough to see the shift in its discourse from global jihad to a local focus. Terms such as "jihad of the *umma*" or "jihad against the *Nusayriyya*" were replaced by terms like "jihad" to defend the Syrian revolution, or the "struggle for the freedom of the Syrian people". For the leadership, severing ties with ISIS and al-Qaeda in 2013 and 2017 was part of getting off global lists of terrorist groups and ensuring their political future in Syria.[3]

---

[1] See: Sami al-Aridi, "Shahadat hawlafakk al-Irtibat bayna Jabhat al-Nusra wa-Tanzim al-Qa'ida".

[2] See: Abdel Rahim Atoun, Response to al-Zawahiri's speech.

[3] Orwa Ajoub, "Hal sa-taqdi Tahriral-Sham 'ala al-Qa'idafiSuriya?" https://tinyurl.com/rwcycetc.

3. Al-Qaeda Sets Up the "Hittin Committee" in Iran

The recording broadcast by al-Nusra's al-Manara al-Bayda, which included al-Zawahiri's speech, suggested that al-Nusra was splitting from al-Qaeda and that this had been approved by the central branch of al-Qaeda with the blessings of al-Zawahiri himself. However, al-Zawahiri's speech had actually been previously broadcast to al-Nusra. It was being used out of context and had no relation with the decision to sever ties. Communications between al-Zawahiri and al-Nusra were cut off between November 2013 and September 2016, which confirms that al-Zawahiri was not consulted about the decision to sever ties. In fact, he rejected the decision upon discovering that the Syrian branch had become Fatah al-Sham.[1]

During this period in which communications between al-Zawahiri and al-Nusra were cut off, there was an important development that took place. A group of major al-Qaeda leaders arrived in Syria after being released from prison in Iran as part of a prisoner exchange in March 2015 with al-Qaeda in Yemen. This included four Egyptians (Saif al-Adel, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Abu Khayr al-Masri, and Abu Abdel Karim al-Masri) and two Jordanians (Abu al-Qassam and Sari Shihab).[2] Tehran allowed some of these leaders to leave Iran and move to Syria: Abu Khayr al-Masri, Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni, Khilad

---

[1] Before communications were cut with al-Nusra, al-Zawahiri clarified that his second-in-command was Abu Basir al-Wuhayshi, the commander of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (based in Yemen). He stated that al-Wuhayshi was responsible for the affairs of the organization until they resumed communications. However, Nasir al-Wuhayshi was killed in Yemen in June 2015. Abu Khayr al-Masri presented an important document to the al-Nusra leadership that indicated his leadership position and role within al-Qaeda and included the names of the individuals who were to take positions in the al-Qaeda leadership in Ayman al-Zawahiri's absence. Abu Khayr al-Masri became second-in-command until al-Zawahiri could take control again. See: "Wathiqa takshifkhulafa' al-Zawahiri fi qiyadatal-Qa'ida", *France 24*, https://tinyurl.com/stab7dbr.

[2] See: "New York Times: 'Amliyat tabadul asra bayna Iran wa-l-Qa'ida", *Arabi 21*, https://tinyurl.com/ygv4xqqd.

al-Muhandis (Sari al-Shihab), and Abu Abdel Karim al-Masri. There were two others released from prison who were not allowed to leave the country (Saif al-Adel and Abu Muhammad al-Masri).[1] This group played a decisive role in the course of the conflict and divisions between the Syrian branch and central branch of al-Qaeda.[2]

The lack of communications between the central branch of al-Qaeda in Khorasan (led by al-Zawahiri) and the other regional branches created a state of general confusion over decision-making mechanisms. Al-Qaeda had come to rely on a centralized decision-making process with decentralized implementation of these decisions. However, the al-Zawahiri leadership formed a special committee for the branch of the organization in Syria and the Levant, which it called the Hittin Committee. It appeared in the wake of the conflict over whether to announce the severing of ties between al-Nusra and al-Qaeda and the establishment of Fatah al-Sham. The committee had been created by a direct order from Ayman al-Zawahiri, and its role was to deal with al-Qaeda's challenges in the Levant on behalf of al-Zawahiri, since he sometimes had to go into hiding for security reasons. **The Hittin Committee was composed of the leadership of al-Qaeda in Iran: Saif al-Adel, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Abu Khayr al-Masri, and Abu Abdel Karim al-Masri.[3]**

---

[1] See: Cole Bunzel, "Why are Al Qaeda Leaders in Iran?" *Foreign Affairs,* https://tinyurl.com/yyyfuz8r.

[2] The previous leader of al-Nusra, Saleh al-Hamawi, who was known as Muzamjar al-Sham, stated that Egyptian and Jordanian leaders had been released from prison in Iran in a prisoner exchange with al-Qaeda in Yemen, and some of them moved to Syria without al-Julani's knowledge. This posed a threat to the latter, especially because al-Qaeda had formed a Shura council that included the recently-released leaders. These included Abu Omar Saraqeb (Abu Hajjar al-Homsi) who was leading the organization in place of al-Julani. al-Homsi's death had been good news for al-Julani. See "Muzamjar yakshif ma'lumat muthira' an al-Qa'idawa-l-Urduniyyin wa-l-Julani", *Arabi 21*, https://tinyurl.com/ffcaxrsx.

[3] See: "Ma hiya lajnat al-Hittin wa mimman takawwanat wa-ma hiya mahammaha wa-madhahalla biha al-ana?" *al-Hassad al-Aswad*, https://tinyurl.com/5mvt7epz.

When Ayman al-Zawahiri came back into communication shortly after the severing of ties had been announced, he expressed his complete rejection of this step (i.e., of breaking ties for appearances while maintaining a secret allegiance). In his message, he criticized Abu Khayr al-Masri for approving this action and affirmed that no leader had the authority to split any branch of al-Qaeda from another, and that this required the approval of the Shura council. He also stated that the subordinate's privileges were not the same as the deputy's.[1] In an effort to contain the conflict, al-Julani sent a message to Ayman al-Zawahiri in which he explained at length the reasons for forming Fatah al-Sham, and clarified the full implications and objectives of the idea. However, al-Zawahiri had been opposed to the idea of secret allegiances since the Iraqi branch had split off. Abdel al-Rahim Atoun, a leader in Fatah al-Sham, said that al-Zawahiri had been influenced by a message he had received from Saif al-Adel in Iran, and thus had an incorrect impression of what was happening.[2] However, the major decisions in the central branch of al-Qaeda often took place in consultation with the regional committees. Saif al-Adel was responsible for the branch in the Levant and in Syria through the Hittin Committee, and al-Zawahiri's message was strengthened by Saif al-Adel's support in refusing to sever ties. However, al-Julani stood his ground regarding Fatah al-Sham.

These developments led to a difficult period for al-Qaeda after the failed Ansar al-Shari'a project which had been adopted at the beginning of the Arab Spring. This was followed by the splitting off of the Iraqi branch, the rapid rise and fall of the Islamic State, and the defeat of the Yemeni branch in Mukalla, the capital of Hadhramaut, including the killing of its leader Abu Basir Nasir al-Wuhayshi. This led al-Qaeda to give up its approach of fighting from wars based on

---

1   Ibid.
2   See: Abdel Rahim Atoun, Response to al-Zawahiri's speech.

establishing territorial control. It returned to the strategy of fighting the "far enemy" through guerrilla warfare.

The turning point for al-Qaeda was the defeat of the Islamic State and the fall of its caliphate in Syria and Iraq during that time. This encouraged al-Qaeda to step in to fill the gap and to shift its center of gravity to Syria. A group of former leaders from the Levant branch joined, and al-Zawahiri said that they would return to fighting the far enemy using guerrilla warfare. In an audio recording from As-Sahab Media entitled "Unfuru li-l-Sham" on 5 May 2016", he called on al-Qaeda's followers to join the "battle for the Levant" and to support the military work in Syria. He said: "The Levant today is the hope of the Muslim *umma*" and added that "it is our duty to protect the jihad in the Levant against the conspiracies against it, which are hatched in the US, the UK, Saudi Arabia, and their offshoots among regimes in the region".

In al-Zawahiri's speech, he rejected the idea of al-Nusra splitting with al-Qaeda. He asked: "Will the criminals be satisfied if al-Nusra splits with al-Qaeda, or will they make them sit at the table with these murderers, and have them submit to these humiliating talks?" He stated that the "jihadists in the Levant are standing at the borders of Palestine". Less than 24 hours later, Hamza bin Laden, the son of Osama bin Laden, issued an audio recording entitled "Ma al-Quds ila'arus-unmahruhadamuna", (Jerusalem is a bride whose dowry is our blood) in which he called for establishing a huge army to liberate Jerusalem and said that "the path to liberate Palestine today is from the battlefields of the Levant".[1]

Al-Qaeda made the most of the symbolic power of Bin Laden's son Hamza, and he began to issue further messages about holding onto his father's goals of prioritizing fighting the US, the West, and

---

[1]   Radwan Mortada, "al-Qa'ida: Tariq al-Qudsya murr fi Suriya", *al-Akhbar*, https://tinyurl.com/4bc87h9p.

Israel. On 10 July 2016, As-Sahab Media issued a tape entitled "Kullu-na Osama" (We are all Osama) in which Hamza threatened the US with attacks on its soil and abroad. He added that "we will continue the jihad in God's cause, and we will continue to strike you in your country and abroad". On 12 May 2017, As-Sahab issued another audio recording entitled "Wasaya li-l-Fida'iyyin fi-l-gharb" in which he called for "fighting the Americans, Westerners, Jews and even the Russians". The US placed Hamza on its terrorist blacklist in early January 2017, noting that al-Qaeda had integrated him within their leadership structures since August 2015.[1]

Ayman al-Zawahiri later issued another audio recording entitled "Sa-nuqatilukumhata la takunfitna", which was broadcast by As-Sahab on 4 October 2017. In this recording, he denounced the split with al-Qaeda and insisted that "allegiance was a binding legal contract that could not be reversed" for any reason. He said that the justifications for severing ties between al-Qaeda and al-Nusra were flimsy and did not have any basis in shari'a. This step was taken in response to international pressures to avoid being targeted as terrorists. He said: "those who justify [this decision] say: we want to avoid being bombed, we want to not be classified [as terrorists], our funders are making us distance ourselves from those whom the US hates

---

[1] See: Hassan Abu Haniyeh, "Hal yaqud Hamza bin Laden al-Qa'ida ila hiqbaji hadiyya jadida?" *Arabi 21*, https://tinyurl.com/4mwwhtp3. Al-Qaeda supporters claimed that Hamza bin Laden was on his way to Syria and that he would lead the Syrian branch in its fight against Tahrir al-Sham. The Daily Mail reported that Hamza bin Laden was present in Syria and that the British commandos had launched a campaign to kill or imprison Hamza, the son of the late al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Hamza issued a video recording in which he called upon those who sympathized with al-Qaeda to launch bloody attacks in the West. See "Mahammat Britanniya fi ghayat al-sirriya li-qatlnajl bin Laden fi Suriya*", RT*, https://tinyurl.com/42sh5d53.

so that they don't classify us as terrorists, and we don't want to cut off supplies from foreign fighters".[1]

At the same time, Abdel Rahim Atoun, the leader of Tahrir al-Sham, responded to al-Zawahiri by saying that that the severing of ties with al-Qaeda was the product of the agreement of the majority of al-Nusra's top leadership. Abu Khayr al-Masri had approved the decision and said it was in his purview to do so. In reality, this decision to split off, even in name only, was not a majority decision.

Sami al-Aridi affirmed that Abu Khayr al-Masri had not known about the formation of Tahrir al-Sham and the severing of organizational ties with al-Qaeda, and that he found out through the media. In his response to Atoun, Abu Qassam al-Urduni said he personally agreed with establishing Fatah al-Sham at first, but when he spoke to Saif al-Adel and Abu Muhammad al-Masri in Iran, they told him they were opposed and he changed his opinion. The leaders in Iran also informed him that he could now get in contact with al-Zawahiri, and that they should wait for his decision first.[2]

4. Tahrir El-Sham: Al-Qaeda's Allies and Adversaries

Tahrir al-Sham experienced internal discord on whether to adopt a local or global approach and how to define the objectives of global jihadism. At the same time, the Syrian crisis reached its bleakest point as the international War on Terror escalated to new heights. The US-led coalition and Syrian Democratic Forces tightened their stranglehold on northeastern Syria in an effort to take back Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State.

---

[1] See: Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Sa-nuqatilukum hata la takunfitna", *As-Sahab Media* https://tinyurl.com/2ajfvahc.

[2] See: Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni, *Shahadat warada'ala al-abatil al-warida fi kalimat al-Shaykh Abdel Rahim Atoun,* https://tinyurl.com/4x8j52rx.

Al-Qaeda's concerns about its former Syrian branch grew after the latter renamed itself in January 2017. The Syrian branch set out to build a rival movement that would allegedly be more loyal to al-Qaeda's cross-border approach and strategic vision. The central branch of al-Qaeda stopped classifying Tahrir al-Sham as one of its official branches for two reasons: First, al-Qaeda felt that Tahrir al-Sham had failed to adopt appropriate standards of purity in its organizational structure, discourse, and practices. According to the central branch, the Syrian leadership had allegedly broken its oath of religious fealty to al-Qaeda's commander Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Zawahiri issued an audio recording to the fighters in Syria, in which he warned against those advocating an agenda centered on Syria. He called on them to stop their wrongdoing and to adopt a global, cross-border agenda in order to ensure victory.

Al-Zawahiri's message split the defectors within al-Nusra into divergent camps. Some suspended their activities with the new organization, while others still split off, but in secret. The defectors began to communicate directly with al-Qaeda's central and regional leadership. Abu Qassam al-Urduni[1] was in charge of communicating

---

[1] Abu Qassam al-Urduni: The military commander of the Huras Al-Din. His real name was Khalid al-Aruriand he was born in 1967. He was an Arab Afghan veteran and had fought against the Russians in Afghanistan three decades previous. During that time, he met Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Their families later became linked through marriage after he married one of al-Zarqawi's sisters. They also spent time in a Jordanian prison along with Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Al-Aruri was deeply influenced by al-Maqdisi's writings, especially his famous book, *Millat Ibrahim.* After al-Zarqawi established Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad in Iraq after the US occupation, he appointed al-Aruri as his second-in-command; before that the latter had been al-Zarqawi's adviser in Afghanistan. Al-Zarqawi asked al-Aruri to carry out an operation in Iran, where he was detained until being released in 2015 as part of a prisoner exchange between Iran and al-Qaeda in Yemen. He remained loyal to al-Qaeda and remained in contact with its leadership. al-Aruri was instrumental in convincing some militant groups to split off from Tahrir al-Sham to join al-Qaeda's new project in Syria. There is not much known about his personal life and writings, with the exception of some short =

with the Hittin Committee in the Levant (led by Saif al-Adel) and the central leadership (led by al-Zawahiri) and keeping the leadership abreast of developments. During this period, those that split off from al-Nusra discovered that Fatah al-Sham was being formed. They tried to convince the defectors who supported al-Qaeda to sever ties. They were in contact with military and religious elites in the leadership, as well as the leadership of the brigades and groups of foreign fighters. They informed them that the central leadership of al-Qaeda did not approve of the establishment of Fatah al-Sham, and that al-Qaeda was going to resume operations in Syria soon under a different name and new organizational structure when the time was right. The Jordanian leadership played a key role in drumming up support for splitting with al-Nusra and establishing a new version of al-Qaeda in Syria. The most important of these leaders were Sami al-Aridi, Iyad al-Tubasi, Bilal Khreisat, Abu Qassam al-Urduni, and Khiladal-Muhandis.[1]

=   impromptu responses that he produced during the Tahrir al-Sham crisis. He admitted in one of these responses that writing and interacting with what was published online was not a priority for him. Tahrir al-Sham seized his computer during the arrest campaign that it launched against pro-al-Qaeda figures. They found that he was in direct communication with Saif al-Adel and Abu Muhammad al-Masri and was giving them detailed updates on what was happening in Syria. He was killed on 14 June 2020 in a drone strike in Idlib that hit the car he was traveling in. Bilal al-Sanaani, another Huras Al-Din leader and the former leader of the Badia Army, was also killed in the attack.

[1]   Khiladal-Muhandis: His real name was Sari al-Shihab. He was Jordanian and was involved in the jihadist struggles in Afghanistan twenty years previous, and then in Iraq and Syria. Little is known about his personal life. He was part of the al-Qaeda leadership that arrived in Syria in 2015 after the prisoner exchange deal between al-Qaeda in Yemen, and Iran. Based on the statement after his death issued by the al-Qaeda leadership, it seems that he had a leading role in the organization. The statement described him as an "veteranscholar of jihad" and "towering figure". They said that he was "among those who participated in developing the jihadist movement, which drew upon his writings and ideas to fight the enemy". Khilad al-Muhandis wrote regularly in his Telegram channel and signed posts with the name "the forgotten amir". He played an important role in establishing the Huras Al-Din and was among the leaders detained by Tahrir al-Sham in their campaign against al-Qaeda. He was killed on 22 August 2019 in a car bombing in Idlib.

127

Tahrir al-Sham's security apparatus monitored the activities of leaders with ties to al-Qaeda to prevent a major rebellion from occurring. They even arrested the wife and children of Iyad al-Tubasi (Abu Julaybibal-Urduni)[1] at a Tahrir al-Sham security checkpoint on 18 April 2017. They claimed they were trying to find out where al-Tubasi was, but this also sent a clear message regarding the extent to which the group would go in dealing with al-Qaeda. Abu Julaybib said in a message he sent to al-Julani that a member of Tahrir al-Sham said to his son: "You are the son of a traitor". He added that his wife had said to a member of Tahrir al-Sham: "Are we not your kin? Are we not working for the same things?" He replied to her: "No, we are not kin, and we do not have the same approach".[2]

---

[1] Abu Julaybibal-Urduni: His real name was Iyad al-Tubasi and he was born in 1974 in Zarqa, Jordan. He travelled to Afghanistan where he joined al-Qaeda's camps, and then went to Iraq and joined al-Qaeda fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, which was led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He became close friends with al-Zarqawi, and their families were also linked by marriage. He stayed in Iraq until the Syrian revolution broke out in 2011. He went to Daraa in 2011 in order to help establish the first al-Nusra cells and to lead the emirate there. He left Daraa for Idlib along with the other top al-Nusra leadership, including Abu Maria al-Qahtani, Mazhar Alwais, Sami al-Aridi, and Abu Muhammad Shuhayl, among others. al-Julani appointed him as leader of the border and coastal regions in the north, but he gave up the post soon after and decided to go back to Daraa in the south. However, al-Nusra's leadership refused to give him permission to return to Daraa and blocked his route on multiple occasions. Abu Julaybib rejected the newly-formed Fatah al-Sham and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. He was among those detained by Tahrir al-Sham in 2017 as part of their campaign against those trying to establish a new branch of al-Qaeda in Syria. He held a leadership role in the Huras Al-Din after it was founded on 29 December 2018. He was killed under unknown circumstances along with other associates in Daraa. The Huras Al-Din issued an official statement mourning his death, stating that Abu Julaybib and his associates "have gone to their Lord while they were working to rekindle jihad in Hauran, the birthplace of this blessed struggle".

[2] See: "Abu Julaybibal-Urduni li-l-Julani, "Hakadha 'asa'at Tahrir al-Sham li-zawjati", *Arabi 21*, https://tinyurl.com/wtau327f.

Abu Julaybib's statement indicates the extent of the conflict within Tahrir al-Sham between the radicals and pragmatists. After communications were cut off between the central branch of al-Qaeda and its leader al-Zawahiri, communications took place with the al-Qaeda leadership in Iran (Saif al-Adel and Abu Muhammad al-Masri). It is clear that the al-Qaeda leadership no longer considered Tahrir al-Sham to be the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. It therefore began to try to build a new branch in Syria. A document issued by Tahrir al-Sham indicated that Abu Qassam al-Urduni had sent a message to Saif al-Adel in which he told him that he had started to form a new branch of al-Qaeda. He added that he had convinced about 200 people to join in addition to the Malahim group within Tahrir al-Sham. He said that he was waiting for the right moment to announce the establishment of the new group. Abu Qassam said that his efforts were focused on the groups that had disagreements with or had split off from Tahrir al-Sham. This included groups such as Liwa al-Aqsa. The document stated that Sami al-Aridi, Iyad al-Tubasi, and Bilal Khreisat alleged that Tahrir al-Sham had deviated from its path in order to dodge charges of terrorism, and that it was in communication with infidel countries and anti-Islamic groups.[1]

In order to prevent the formation of a new jihadist arm of al-Qaeda in Syria, Tahrir al-Sham issued a circular on 27 July 2017 "forbidding the formation of any new group under any name in the liberated north". It explained that the "Tahrir al-Sham leadership was keen to avoid fragmentation and to promote collective work to preserve the revolution and the Syrian people". These decisions demonstrated the extent of Tahrir al-Sham's control in northwestern Syria and especially Idlib. The circular indicated that fighters could not take their weapons with them if they split off. This was a clear refer-

---

[1]　See: "Li-madha aqdamat Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham 'ala khatwat al-tawqif al-akhira li-ba'd al-ikhwa", Document published by Radeef Media (Tahrir al-Sham), https://tinyurl.com/ap6hf3ab.

ence to al-Qaeda, i.e. that "any individual or group that splits from any other group, including Tahrir al-Sham, must leave without their weapons".[1]

The crisis reached a breaking point after the central branch of al-Qaeda lost control over its Syrian branch, al-Nusra, which announced it had become Tahrir al-Sham. Abu Khayr al-Masri only heard what was happening through the media, according to al-Aridi and Saleh al-Hamawi. The shift to Fatah al-Sham was a change in name only (i.e., it announced it had split off from al-Qaeda, while secretly maintaining ties). However, this led to fierce debates within the organization, including its Shura council, over the validity of this step according to the shari'a. Tahrir al-Sham was then established without consulting the central branch of al-Qaeda or its supporters in Syria. Sami al-Aridi subsequently resigned, along with other al-Qaeda-affiliated leadership. al-Aridi compared what Abu Muhammad al-Julani had done to what Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi did in founding the Islamic State. This war of words escalated to unprecedented levels, and the rifts within the organization grew wider. Hashim al-Shaykh, who was officially the commander of Tahrir al-Sham, announced his resignation on 1 October 2017, and al-Julani resumed leadership of the group.

5. Al-Qaeda Incubators: Ansar al-Furqan and the Badia Army

At the height of the conflict between al-Qaeda and its Syrian branch, a new jihadist group, Ansar al-Furqan in Bilad al-Sham, was formed on 9 October 2017. The group said that it was composed of Syrian and foreign fighters from different jihadist factions in Syria. In fact, it was a direct offshoot of al-Qaeda. The group was fairly short-lived. Ansar al-Furqan announced in the only statement it issued that

---

[1]   See: "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham tastakmal saytaratuha 'ala Idlib ba'd tard khasmiha Ahrar al-Sham", *al-Quds al-Arabi*, https://tinyurl.com/26s3dncj.

it was committed to al-Qaeda's new goals in Syria with regard to guerrilla warfare and focusing on targeting the West. The organization defined itself as a "Sunni jihadist group composed of foreign fighters and supporters who had fought in most of the battles in Syria, and which represents all strata of fighting groups in Syria". It was rumored at that time that Hamza bin Laden was leading the organization, with support from Saif al-Adel and Sami al-Aridi.[1]

The emergence of Ansar al-Furqan in Bilad al-Sham was an indication of deep fissures between al-Qaeda and its Syrian branch, which was led by al-Julani. This branch began to follow in the footsteps of the Iraqi branch, led by al-Baghdadi, and began to split off from al-Qaeda. However, in Ansar al-Furqan's case, this was because it saw al-Qaeda as too extremist. What began as a localized conflict among jihadists in Syria became a major problem for global jihadism.

Various jihadist figures and entities intervened to resolve the crisis, and various initiatives were proposed. This included "Ahl al-'ilm li-l-sulhbayna al-mujahideen" which was known as the "Reconciliation is best" initiative (from Qur'an 4:18). Its first statement, issued on 25 October 2017, was signed by various jihadist leaders, including Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filistini, and Abu al-Fadl al-Haddouchi. Abu Qassam al-Urduni and Abu Humam al-Suri also expressed support for the initiative, as did al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. However, Tahrir al-Sham remained silent. Abu Qatada al-Filistini withdrew from the initiative, allegedly because he did not want to meddle in the affairs of Syrian groups. However, it was generally understood that his withdrawal signaled support for Tahrir al-Sham. The committee in charge of the initiative issued a statement in

---

[1]   See: Hassan Abu Haniyeh, "Hurras al-Din wa-takyifatal-Qaeda fi Suriya", *Arabi 21,* https://tinyurl.com/345k837b.

which they expressed their regrets that they had not received any response from Tahrir al-Sham.[1]

Tahrir al-Sham had evidently decided to split off from al-Qaeda and to fight against its leadership and members. In particular, it opposed any effort to reestablish a new branch of al-Qaeda in Syria. Not only did Tahrir al-Sham ignore the various reconciliation initiatives, it also launched an arrest campaign against al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist leadership. This occurred after al-Qaeda vehemently opposed its decision to sever ties on 27 November 2017. The security apparatus of Tahrir al-Sham detained a group of prominent leaders, including Sami al-Aridi (Abu Mahmoud al-Shami), Iyad al-Tubasi (Abu Julaybib), and Samir Hijazi (Abu Humam al-Shami). Tahrir al-Sham's security forces were not able to detain Khalid al-Aruri (Abu Qassam), although they raided his house and seized his communications with al-Qaeda. In a statement, Tahrir al-Sham described the detainees as "leaders of discord (*fitna*)" and claimed that they had "tried unsuccessfully to resolve the situation through dialogue". They affirmed that the issue needed to be brought before a judge.[2]

These clashes did not end here. Some members of Tahrir al-Sham personally attacked al-Zawahiri Meanwhile, al-Qaeda launched a media campaign against al-Julani. For al-Qaeda, al-Julani was no longer "the honorableshaykh*",* "the victorious leader", or "the wise (*hakim*)"; now he was the treacherous breaker of vows. al-Julani responded to this with a similar escalation in the media on the part of various Tahrir al-Sham leaders. Al-Ghazzi, a jurisconsult for Tahrir al-Sham, accused the branch of al-Qaeda in Somalia of deviating from its path and committing crimes.

---

[1]   See: Abdel-Ghani Mazuz, *Tanzim Hurras al-Din: Ishkaliyat al-nash'awa-l-tafkik.*

[2]   See: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, "Wa-li-l-qada' kalimat al-fasl", https://tinyurl.com/635n9dd.

The pace of Tahrir al-Sham media attacks on al-Qaeda's leaders continued to escalate. In an article, Tahrir al-Sham jurisconsult Abu al-Harith al-Masri described al-Zawahiri as "the leader of the very lowest". Abdel Rahim Atoun, a top figure alongside al-Julani, also cast doubts on al-Zawahiri's stances. For al-Julani and al-Nusra, al-Zawahiri changed overnight from being the wisest among Muslims to a fool. According to former al-Nusra leader Saleh Hamawi, al-Julani wanted to send a message to the international community that he was fighting extremism, and that he had given up global jihad and could be negotiated with.[1]

Only a day after the al-Qaeda-linked leaders were detained, As-Sahab Media broadcast Ayman al-Zawahiri's audio recording ("Fal nuqatilhum bunyanan marsusan"). This was recorded several months after the conflict between al-Qaeda and its Syrian branch had escalated, but it was not immediately broadcast in order to try to mend the rift. Al-Zawahiri accused Tahrir al-Sham and its leader al-Julani of breaking their vows. He said that after severing ties with al-Qaeda the previous year al-Julani had "established a new entity that only exacerbated conflict". Al-Zawahiri stated that al-Qaeda still had a presence in Syria. He said that Tahrir al-Sham had attacked anyone who had links to al-Qaeda, detained their women, and questioned their children. He added that they had given Tahrir al-Sham more than a year to resolve these matters, and that the latter had ignored its requests. Al-Zawahiri emphasized that he opposed giving up the jihad of the *umma* and did not support Tahrir al-Sham's efforts to make this a local project only. He said that he did not accept al-Nusra renouncing its allegiance. He gave them two options: either the mu-

---

[1]   See: Muzamjaral-Sham, "al-Qa'ida fi Suriya: al-Wilaya al-thaniyya", *Ala Basira*, https://tinyurl.com/yvxfbr4j.

jahideen would all join together, or an Islamic government would be set up.[1]

Al-Zawahiri's speech, which came in the wake of Tahrir al-Sham's arrest campaigns, led to immediate and tangible results. There was an enormous wave of discontent in the ranks of Tahrir al-Sham, which led to deep divisions among its leadership. These new splinter groups called themselves Jaysh al-Malahim, the Badia Army, the Badia company, Ansar al-Furqan, and the Elite Army. It also resulted in a number of leaders splitting off, including Abu al-Miqdad al-Urduni, Abu Qassam, Hussein al-Kurdi, Abdel Rahman al-Shishani, Abu Basir al-Britani, and Abu Malik al-Turkmani. Before this, other leaders had already parted ways, including Abu Anas al-Saudi, Abu Mokhtar al-Turki, Abu Humam al-Suri, and a number of other military and field leaders. On 5 December 2017, the Badia Army launched a Telegram channel – their first post used the hashtag "Qa'idat al-Jihad". This was the first time that an armed splinter group from Tahrir al-Sham publicly revealed that it had split off and declared its allegiance to al-Qaeda. The next day the Badia Army's media committee shared its first video clip ("Rakb al-Shuhadaa"). On 11 December 2017, the commander of the Badia Army rejected the decision from Tahrir al-Sham's leadership to dismiss him. The media committee issued another series of video clips and photographs that showed the army's activities and explained their stances. These included a clip explaining what the Badia army was, details about the Abu Turab al-Hamawi camp, the army's battles in the Idlib countryside, and its take on the "deal of the century", among others.

On 23 December 2017, the Jaysh al-Malahim channel appeared, which shared a group of photos that it said depicted "Jaysh al-Malahim defending the frontiers (*ribat*) in the northern Hama coun-

---

[1]   See: Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Fal-nuqatilhum bunyanan marsusan", *As-Sahab Media*, https://tinyurl.com/2hzt3wyp.

tryside". The leader of the Jaysh al-Malahim, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Makki, published a statement acknowledging that he had been in contact with Sami al-Aridi and Abu Qassam al-Urduni, and that he had asked their opinion about splitting from Tahrir al-Sham".[1]

The scope of the divisions up to this point and fears that other leaders would also split off resulted in the release of the detained al-Qaeda leadership. Tahrir al-Sham also responded to the "Reconciliation is best" initiative that had been formed in order to resolve the conflict between Tahrir al-Sham and al-Qaeda. The most important members of that initiative were Abu Qatada al-Albani, Abu Abdel Karim al-Masri, and Abu Humam al-Suri. Additionally, Abu Malik al-Talli represented al-Julani at the talks. The two sides agreed on a de-escalation, and that al-Qaeda would not try to find new recruits from among Tahrir al-Sham members, in order to stem this attrition to al-Qaeda. Al-Julani offered a significant amount of money to the al-Qaeda leadership in order to ensure this clause would be enforced.[2]

Tahrir al-Sham tried to mitigate the attrition of foreign fighters who left to join al-Qaeda. Some foreign fighters within Tahrir al-Sham issued a statement entitled, "Loyalty to our people in the Levant". This was signed by dozens of members and military leaders from among the foreign fighters in Tahrir al-Sham. It was essentially an open letter to Ayman al-Zawahiri, expressing surprise about what he had said in his speech, since "the impression that you got is far removed from the reality that we are experiencing". They added that "al-Nusra Front, Fatah al-Sham, and Tahrir al-Sham have been models of loyalty and goodness".[3]

---

[1] See: Abdel-Ghani Mazuz, *TanzimHurras al-Din: Ishkaliyat al-nash'awa-l-tafkik.*

[2] See Muzamjaral-Sham, "al-Qa'ida fi Suriya: al-Wilaya al-thaniyya".

[3] See: "Bayan min majmu'amin al-muhajirin fi al-Sham",
https://tinyurl.com/xywxafnz.

In light of the developments during the second half of 2017, the central leadership of al-Qaeda outside Syria had become convinced that it was impossible to bring back Tahrir al-Sham to al-Qaeda. They no longer considered Tahrir al-Sham to be one of their branches and began to establish a new branch from among various figures and entities that had remained local to al-Qaeda. As-Sahab Media published a statement from al-Qaeda's leadership on 7 January 2018 entitled, "It is our duty to bring victory to the believers". It addressed its followers around the world, especially those fighting in the "Levant of the frontier", i.e. Syria. Syria. Al-Zawahiri said: "I ask my brothers fighting with Qa'idat al-Jihad in the Levant to cooperate with all sincere mujahideen, and to try to mend this rift, and to serve the mujahideen, the foreign fighters, the oppressed, and all other Muslims".[1] Al-Qaeda's messages about Qa'idat al-Sham were followed by a "Nafir" circular. On 19 February 2018, it called for "forming councils and agencies to resolve differences among jihadists in Syria". On 20 February, al-Zawahiri renewed his calls for "jihadists to join together and engage in guerrilla warfare against their enemies".[2]

However, the rifts between al-Qaeda and Tahrir al-Sham continued to harden. Tahrir al-Sham launched its popular approach using strategies of "calculated pragmatism", "strategic patience", and "localism", according to Charles Lister. Al-Nusra tried to become a key component of the Syrian revolution in order to control the revolution's trajectory. In order to achieve this goal, it tried to establish itself as the leader of an all-encompassing and representative Islamic state. Meanwhile, the traditional elitist perspective of al-Qaeda remained in place.[3] Tahrir al-Sham adopted an entirely different strategy of governance based on efforts to exert control over the Syrian

---

[1]   See: "Bayan Wa-kana haqqan'alaynanasr al-mu'minin", Qa'idat al-Jihad (al-Qiyada al-'amma) https://tinyurl.com/9njnmxud.

[2]   See: "al-Nafir", *As-Sahab Media*, https://tinyurl.com/ydm4frb.

[3]   See: Charles Lister, "Ta'thirat al-azma al-Suriyyawa-inkisar al-Qa'ida".

uprising. This strategy relied on four main elements: a more effective political leadership, a more cohesive military organization, an effective government, and a certain independence from funders by preventing direct intervention, without fully cutting ties. This approach was at odds with the previous approaches of al-Nusra Front or Fatah al-Sham, which were more amenable to compromise with other factions. It had allowed local councils to work independently from the General Administration for Services; some worked under the interim government. Tahrir al-Sham tried to exert control over the revolutionary forces by trying to unite all the local councils in its areas of influence in Idlib under what it called the Civil Administration for Services. It also controlled the strategically-important Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkey. This enabled it to expand the administrative powers and ambitions of the "Salvation Government" which was the political, administrative, and civil wing of Tahrir al-Sham.[1]

6. International and US Policy on Tahrir al-Sham

After Tahrir al-Sham decided to split from al-Qaeda, it also began to try to change its image starting in summer 2017 through a communications campaign aimed at the West. There was a meeting between Tahrir al-Sham's political representative, Zayd Attar, and Jonathan Powell, the former British diplomat, who was overseeing various back channels for negotiation with terrorist groups at the national and international level.[2] This change in Tahrir al-Sham's approach became clearer by the end of 2019.

Abdel Rahim Atoun, Tahrir Al Sham's jurisconsult, had written on 4 September 2020 in the Swiss newspaper *Le Temps* that Tahrir

---

[1] See: Abida Amer, "Rihlaal-Julani: Min rahim Da'ish ilaistinsakh Hezbollah", *Aljazeera.net*, https://tinyurl.com/43rykn3w.

[2] See: "Liqa' al-Julani bi-'ilamiyyin Gharbiyyin: al-dalalatwa-l-ahdaf", *Jusoor Center for Studies,* https://tinyurl.com/4zyb86j2.

al-Sham did not pose a threat to the West, and that the area that it controlled was in need of international aid. He asked that the organization be removed from terrorist blacklists.[1] Al-Julani's meeting with the International Crisis Group at the end of January 2020 was also clear evidence of this shift. He explained Tahrir al-Sham's situation and its doctrine, following a series of efforts to change its name and image. Tahrir al-Sham came to present itself as a group of local and independent fighters separate from the al-Qaeda leadership. They claimed their agenda was focused on Syria only and did not promote cross-border Salafi jihadism.

Al-Julani stated: "I was influenced by Salafi jihadism, which emerged out of a desire to resist the US occupation of Iraq. But today, our reference point is the reality on the ground". He said that Tahrir al-Sham's sole aim was to fight the regime in Damascus — "a regime that had lost all its legitimacy". He added that Tahrir al-Sham's ideology was now based on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), like any other local Sunni Islamist group in Syria". Tahrir al-Sham presented itself as a moderate movement fighting terrorism. Al-Julani stated: "we have systematically pursued ISIS cells in Idlib and for this reason there have not seen any ISIS attacks in Idlib for the last six months. We have also contained the Huras Al-Din, with whom we have a complicated relationship. They have promised not to use Syria as a base from which to launch jihad abroad".[2]

Tahrir al-Sham's ambitions grew as it shifted from presenting itself as a terrorist organization to a moderate local Islamist movement. Various figures and institutions responded to these shifts and called on Tahrir al-Sham to become more moderate. The former US

---

[1] See "Qiyadi fi Tahrir al-Sham yakshif 'an ittijahfasilihi li-l-tatbi' wa-tawdih 'ajilminal-Hay'a", *El Dorar El Shamia,* https://tinyurl.com/jtd5fzht.

[2] See: "al-'Amil al-Jihadi fi Idlib al-Suriyya: Hadith ma'a Abu Muhammad al-Julani", International Crisis Group, in cooperation with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva, https://tinyurl.com/yhuyh26r.

envoy to Syria, James Jeffrey, stated that removing Tahrir al-Sham from the list of terrorist organizations required meeting certain conditions that it had not been able to do yet. He implied that if they met the conditions, then they would be removed the list. Jeffrey said in statement on 5 February 2020 that Tahrir al-Sham had focused on fighting the al-Assad regime and that it had claimed that it was a national opposition group that contained fighters but not terrorists. He said they had not produced any international threats for a long time.[1]

The International Crisis Group presented several proposals to Joe Biden's new administration to address Washington's overly militarized foreign policy. It said that "Idlib was an opportunity to redefine the US counterterrorism strategy" and recommended that the US administration take Tahrir al-Sham off the list of terrorists.[2]

---

[1]   See: "Jeffrey yashrahsiyasatbiladihi fi Suriya wa-yuqaddim wasfan mufaja'an li-Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham", *Syria TV*, https://tinyurl.com/4a72j658.

[2]   The International Crisis Group stated in its report on 3 February 2020 that "if the Biden administration is looking to correct Washington's overly militarized foreign policy, one opportunity to redefine U.S. counter-terrorism strategy lies in Idlib". The report argued that the "terrorist" classification for "Idlib's strongest rebel group" undermined the ceasefire and closed off all options for preventing military confrontation and reflected a gap in Western policy". The report added that the changes that Tahrir al-Sham was going through, such as its split from al-Qaeda and its effort to participate in the political future of Syria, paved the way for preventing further violence in the region. Practically speaking, the fact that it remained on terrorist blacklists in US, Russia, and Turkey, in addition to that of the UN Security Council, remained a key obstacle. This affected Western aid for basic services in Idlib and led to a deepening humanitarian crisis. It also prevented talks from taking place with Tahrir al-Sham about its previous actions and the future of the region that it controlled. Western countries and the UN avoided communication entirely, while Turkey did only the minimum required to facilitate its military presence in Idlib. See: "Fi Idlib al-Suriya, fursat Washington li-i'adattasawwurmukafahat al-irhab", ("In Syria's Idlib, Washington's Chance to Reimagine Counter-terrorism"), *International Crisis Group*, https://tinyurl.com/3s8kerme.

Despite the many recommendations to reevaluate Tahrir al-Sham's classification as a terrorist organization, it remained on the global watch list. The US State Department also considered it to be a terrorist organization on the grounds that "in January 2017, al-Nusra established Tahrir al-Sham as a means of strengthening its position in the Syrian resistance and achieving its objectives as a base for al-Qaeda. From that point on, the group worked through Tahrir al-Sham to achieve its goals. The Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Ambassador Nathan A. Sales, stated that "today's designation serves notice that the United States is not fooled by this al-Qaeda affiliate's attempt to rebrand itself. Whatever name Nusrah chooses, we will continue to deny it the resources it seeks". He said that Tahrir al-Sham was just another alias for al-Nusra.[1]

Tahrir al-Sham benefitted from Turkish-Russian agreements to strengthen their control over Idlib. They gained full control by January 2019, when Tahrir al-Sham began its project of local Islamist rule. The group's top leaders officially declared their commitment to "jihad", but in reality, they were flexible and pragmatic.

Tahrir al-Sham made a number of compromises with Turkey that violated jihadist principles but also ensured that the group would continue to have a foothold in Syria. It did not seem that there would be military attacks soon on Idlib, since a Russia-backed attack on the regime would have high costs from a military, humanitarian, and political perspective. Instead, Russia seemed to have prioritized its relationship with Turkey, as well as keeping its political operations in Syria going".[2]

---

[1] See: Hassan Abu Haniyeh, "Limadha sannafat Amrika Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham munazzama irhabiyya?" *Arabi 21*, https://tinyurl.com/whfewtwp.

[2] See: "Afdal al-khiyarat al-sayyi'a li-Idlib al-Suriyya", *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report no. 197, 14 March 2019, https://tinyurl.com/cc89vz4.

Much of the Idlib governorate and surrounding area in north-west Syria still constituted a last stronghold for jihadist and other opposition factions. Idlib was very strategically important. It bordered Turkey, which had come to have significant influence within Syria after it entered conflict on the side of the opposition. Idlib also bordered the Latakia governorate, the stronghold of the Alawites, the sect to which President Bashar al-Assad belonged.

The city of Idlib was located in the middle of the governorate, near the Aleppo-Damascus international highway, which had been a target for regime forces for years. After various attacks, the regime was able to fully retake it, and Tahrir al-Sham's area of control was reduced to less than half the area of Idlib. According to Fabrice Balanche, Tahrir al-Sham and other factions now controlled only three thousand square kilometers, compared to nine thousand in 2017. Since the last attacks, there had been a Turkey-Russia-brokered ceasefire in the Idlib governorate. Tahrir al-Sham controlled these areas. It maintained control through civil society organizations connected to its Salvation Government as well a judicial and security apparatus. It was responsible for the affairs of almost three million people, mostly internally displaced persons. Tahrir al-Sham also received revenue from the movement of goods across the border in the areas controlled by the regime and Turkey. Its total number of fighters was in the tens of thousands, according to a UN report. The report indicated that Tahrir al-Sham had a monopoly on the distribution of petroleum, and that the value of these profits had reached almost a million dollars per month. Tahrir al-Sham also controlled the distribution of humanitarian aid, some of which it confiscated for its own client networks.[1]

---

[1] See: "Hal tatahawwal Idlib al-Suriyyaila Qita' Ghazzajadid?" *Euronews*, https://tinyurl.com/3nnrvhxd.

Huras Al-Din: Al-Qaeda's Last Chance in the Levant

We have seen the injustices brought on by Tahrir al-Sham. They have even coordinated with Turkish intelligence agencies in their investigations against Muslims, and helped the Turkish intelligence go after Muslims. They have committed one of the nullifiers (nawaqid) of Islam.

Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Jordanian Salafi jihadist thinker

The Huras Al-Din was officially established on 27 February 2018 in a statement entitled "Anqidhufustatal-Muslimin". The statement called for liberating Ghouta in eastern Damascus, which had been under a suffocating siege from the Syrian forces. The statement vowed to "launch military operations against the Syrian regime" and called on military factions in northern Syria that had been involved in the armed conflict to "end infighting". Tahrir al-Sham and the Syria Liberation Front both called to end infighting between the groups and focus on fighting the regime and consolidating their efforts to "reduce pressure on eastern Ghouta".[1]

The Huras Al-Din defined themselves on their Telegram account as an "Islamist organization at the heart of the blessed Syrian revolution, trying to liberate the oppressed and spread justice among Muslims, for Islam is the source of law". The group did not mention any link to al-Qaeda.

1. Organizational Structure:
   Branches of Al-Qaeda and the Jordanian Role

The Huras Al-Din was composed of various jihadist globalized leaders with links to al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda rejected al-Nusra's decision to sever ties after it announced that Fatah al-Sham would be formed, and later Tahrir al-Sham. The new entity was formed from among various jihadist factions close to al-Qaeda that joined together. There

---

[1]   See: "Anqidhu Fustat al-Muslimin", statement no. 1, Huras Al-Din,
      https://tinyurl.com/yfc48u6r.

were originally seven different jihadist groups in Idlib and the surrounding area which formed the initial core of the Huras Al-Din. These groups were Jaysh al-Malahim, Jaysh al-Sahel, the Badia Army, Saraya al-Sahel, Saraya Kabul, Jund al-Shari'a, and Jund al-Aqsa.

There were 32 small jihadist bands that also joined the Al-Huras. These included the Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Brigade, Abu Ubaida Ibn al-Jarra Brigade, al-Bitar Brigade, Saraya Kabul, Saraya al-Ghuraba', Saraya Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf, al-Ghouta Battalion, Saraya Douma, Jund al-Sham, Fursanal-Iman, the Elite Army, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Usudal-Tawhid Brigade, the Badia company, and Ansar al-Furqan. These groups were important because of their organizational ties or ideological connections with al-Qaeda. Most of these groups were also entities that had split off from Tahrir al-Sham.

At the time of its founding, Samir Hijazi (Abu Humam al-Shami) was the top leader of the Al-Huras, while the military leader was Khalid al-Aruri (Abu Qassam al-Urduni), and the jurisconsult was Sami al-Aridi (Abu Mahmud al-Shami). The Shura council consisted of: Bilal Khreisat (Abu Khadija al-Urduni), Iyad al-Tubasi (Abu Julaybibal-Urduni), Abu Abd al-Karim al-Masri, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Makki, and Faraj Ahmad Nanaa. There were a number of other jihadist leaders who also joined, such as Abu Basir al-Britani, Abu Anas al-Saudi, Hussein al-Kurdi, Bilal al-Sanaani, Sari al-Shihab (Khiladal-Muhandis), Abu al-Bara al-Tunisi, Abu Umar al-Tunisi, Abu Dujanaal-Tunisi, Abu Yahya al-Jazairi, Abu Dhar al-Masri, and other prominent Syrian jihadists who were loyal to al-Qaeda.[1]

---

[1]   There is information from Western intelligence and media sources that suggests that al-Qaeda's central leadership appointed Abu Qassam al-Urduni as the actual leader of the Huras Al-Din, while Abu Humam al-Shami was only listed as the leader on paper because he had Syrian nationality. However, many jihadist sources refute this. According to Colin Clarke and Charles Lister, there were two sources that indicated that Hijazi had recently been replaced as the leader of the Al-Huras by Khalid al-Aruri (Abu Qassam al-Urduni) from al-Qaeda. These sources said that al-Zawahiri had recently been appointed as one of the three   =

There were organizational and ideological connections among the groups that made up the Huras Al-Din. For the most part, it adhered to the jihadist Salafi school of thought. However, the Huras lacked ideological coherence or a centralized administrative structure. It also did not have sustainable financial resources, which would later lead to divisions and splintering. Its organizational infrastructural was distributed among small groups in different areas of northwestern Syria. Each group worked on recruiting foreign and local fighters, including those who had split off from Tahrir al-Sham.

Huras Al-Din had a promising start, and the organization witnessed major growth over a short period. Al-Qaeda's central leadership in Khorasan and regional leadership in Iran depended on the Syrian branch to revitalize its project in the Levant. According to the UN, the total number of Huras Al-Din members at the time of its founding was between 1500 and 2000. These estimates were relatively accurate and match those from other sources. Saleh al-Hamawi calculated that there were around 1700 fighters, while the Syrian Observatory put the number around 1800. The percentage of foreigners and locals was more or less the same. At the height of the group's power at the beginning of 2020, membership had further expanded. A report published by the UN on 6 February 2020 stated that the number of Huras Al-Din members was between 3500 and 5000 militants who were fighting in Idlib and the surrounding areas. It added

---

=   deputies to al-Qaeda's leader, alongside Saif al-Adel and Abdullah Ahmad Abdullah (Abu Muhammad al-Masri), who were in Iran. Al-Aruri is one of at least two Huras Al-Din members who had seats in al-Qaeda's 12-person global Shura council; the majority of the others were from South Asia. Syria had replaced Yemen as the center of al-Qaeda. See: Colin P. Clarke and Charles Lister, "Tanzim al-Qaeda musta'idd li-muhajamatikum marra ukhra" ("al-Qaeda is Ready to Attack You Again", in *Foreign Policy*), translated by Alaa al-Din Abu Zeina, *al-Ghad*, https://tinyurl.com/bumax8zn.

that 60 to 70 percent of the fighters were foreign.[1] Fighters came from most countries in the Middle East, especially Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and North African countries, especially Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria. There were also militants from central Asia.

The Huras Al-Din did not have heavy weapons: Tahrir al-Sham had confiscated these from splinter groups that would later form the Huras Al-Din. As a result, the Huras depended on light and medium weapons in its attacks, which meant it needed to coordinate with other groups including Tahrir al-Sham.

Huras Al-Din established a presence in 14 villages and towns in opposition-controlled areas of Idlib. In other words, it controlled 14 of a total 206 sites that were under the control of the National Front or Tahrir al-Sham. In other words, the Al-Huras controlled only 7 percent of all opposition areas, most of which were located in the southwest. It is worth noting that their presence in these areas cannot exactly be described as control, because of the organization's dynamics. They depended on quick action and temporary expansion into other areas for very short periods of time in order to achieve specific objectives.[2]

The Huras Al-Din formed alliances with other Salafi jihadist organizations and rejected the Sochi agreement taking place under Turkish-Russian oversight. They also had reservations about Tahrir al-Sham's stances. On 28 April 2018 the Huras Al-Din joined with Ansar al-Tawhid to form Nusrat al-Islam. Ansar al-Tawhid had emerged

---

[1]   See: Edmund Fitton-Brown, "al-Tahdidal-mustamirr min tanzimayyal-Dawla al-Islamiyyawa-l-Qaeda: Wijhatnazar al-Umamal-Muttahida", ("The Persistent Threat from the Islamic State and al-Qaeda: The View from the UN"), *Washington Institute*, https://tinyurl.com/eksytr.

[2]   See: "Tanzim Hurras al-Din: al-Nash'awa-l-dinamiyatwa-l-ittijahat al-mustaqbaliyya", Report, *Omran Center for Strategic Studies,* https://tinyurl.com/rmwur5bp.

from the remnants of Jund al-Aqsa.[1] **Huras Al-Din succeeded in attracting jihadist factions in Idlib to join a joint operations room called the Rouse the Believers Operations Room,** which was officially announced on 17 November 2018, although it had existed before then.

This operations room contained the Huras Al-Din, Ansar al-Din, Ansar al-Tawhid, and Jama'at Ansar al-Islam. The statement announcing the group's establishment explained that the "goal of forming this military operations room was to attack, not only to defend. The group would launch military operations in areas controlled by al-Assad and his allies, liberate these areas, expel Russian occupying forces from Syrian territory, and impose shari'a law". This group carried out a number of operations against regime forces in several areas of northwestern Syria.[2]

Although the Huras Al-Din was newly-established, it had already carried out about 200 attacks by the beginning of 2019, according to its own data. These attacks occurred throughout rural areas and small towns, including 12 sites in the Aleppo governorate, 16 in Hama, seven in Idlib, and 15 in Latakia. **It is worth noting that three of the alleged attacks were carried out in coordination with Tahrir al-Sham, which indicates that their relationship was not entirely hostile.** Abu al-Layth al-Halabi, a fighter with Tahrir al-Sham, said Tahrir al-Sham gave provisions and ammunition to Huras Al-Din on a daily basis.[3]

---

[1] See: "Tashkiljadid fi Idlib tahtmusama 'Hilf Nusrat al-Islam,'" *Enab Baladi*, https://tinyurl.com/4cwt4wvn.

[2] See: "Arba'atashkilat 'jihadiyya' tarfudittifaq Idlib wa-tuhawil 'arqalatahu: ta'arrafilayha", *Enab Baladi*, https://tinyurl.com/n9w5c6m2.

[3] See: Aaron Y. Zelin, "Hurras al-Din: Jama'at Tanzim al-Qaeda, al-mutaghadaanha fi Suriya" ("Hurrasal-Din: The Overlooked al-Qaeda Group in Syria", *Washington Institute*, https://tinyurl.com/hvcy28z7.

The new branch of al-Qaeda in northeastern Syria continue to grow. It seized the opportunity as US-led coalition forces focused on fighting the Islamic State. ISIS was defeated, and expelled from its last stronghold in Baghuz in northeastern Syria in March 2019.

Although Huras Al-Din was less active during 2020 due to US attacks and regional pressures, it carried out a major operation in early 2021. It targeted a new Russian base near the Tal al-Saman village in the northern Raqqa countryside in a car bomb attack on 1 January 2021. The Al-Huras' Sham al-Ribat Media stated that "one of the brigades" had been able to carry out "a raid on the Russian occupying forces in Tal al-Saman in the governorate of Raqqa" without mentioning any details. Sources close to Al-Huras and local sources stated that the attacks had targeted a military base and began with a suicide attack using a car bomb. The commandos then entered the base and clashes occurred.[1] According to local sources, there were six attackers, all of whom were killed in the attack. One suicide bomber blew up a car at the entrance to the base, and then his five accomplishes stormed the Russian military facility. According to some sources, the incident resulted in 20 casualties (killed or wounded), although this was not confirmed by Russian sources.[2] About a month after the attack, Al-Huras media sources broadcast a video recording stating that it had attacked a Russian base in Raqqa governorate. The recording contained speeches from the perpetrators and footage from before the operation was carried out as well as footage of explosions and clashes.

---

[1] See: "Li-awwal mara, 'Hurrasal-Din' yatabana mufakhkhakha tudarrib Qa'idat Rusiya fi al-Raqqa", *Enab Baladi*, https://tinyurl.com/fdyrchs.

[2] See: "Muskutajannabat al-ta'liq'ala hujum 'Tal al-Saman' wa-khubara' yashukkun bi-mas'uliyat 'Hurras al-Din", *Shabkatal-Sham*, https://tinyurl.com/su7b5yns.

2. Pursued by the US Air Force

The US began to pay more attention to the growing al-Qaeda threat in Syria. US officials believed that if al-Qaeda was given sufficient space for planning, the Huras Al-Din would carry out attacks against US interests on American soil and abroad. The US-led mission in eastern Syria was the cornerstone of ongoing efforts by the international coalition and local partners to defeat what remained of the Islamic State. The US forces in Syria supported efforts to target al-Qaeda operatives in Syria, including those who were trying to carry out attacks against US interests, such as the Huras Al-Din.[1]

The defeat of the Islamic State did not give al-Qaeda the opportunity to present itself as the new face of global jihadism, nor to rebuild al-Qaeda in Syria. Instead, the defeat of the former enabled the US to direct its attention to fighting this branch of al-Qaeda in Syria. Numerous reports were issued on the danger of al-Qaeda's new strategy, in which Syria was a launching pad for a jihad that combined global and local dimensions. The US Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Nathan Sales, said in August 2019 that "al-Qaeda has been strategic and patient over the past several years. It's let ISIS absorb the brunt of the world's counterterrorism efforts while patiently reconstituting itself".[2]

The World Economic Forum's report warned that al-Qaeda wanted to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the Syrian Civil War and that it had begun to move from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Syria. Dan Coats, the former US Director of National Intelligence, said in a statement before Congress in May 2017 that "Europe

---

[1]   See: Matthew Levitt, "al-Muwa'ama bayna mukafahat al-irhabwa-tanafus al-quwa al-'uzma" ("Harmonizing Counterterrorism and Great-Power Competition"), *Washington Institute*, https://tinyurl.com/kw9tp6h4.

[2]   See: Eric Schmitt, "Tahdhirat Amrikiyya min khatarfar' 'al-Qa'ida' al-Suri".

will remain vulnerable to terrorist attacks, and elements of both ISIS and al Qaeda are likely to continue to direct and enable plots against targets in Europe".[1]

Although the US continued to classify Tahrir al-Sham as a terrorist organization affiliated with al-Qaeda, it began to distinguish between Tahrir al-Sham and Huras Al-Din. In his September 2019 testimony, Coats quoted a recent UN assessment that stated that "HTS [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham] and HAD [Tanzim Huras al-Din] are assessed to share a history and an ideology but to differ on policy. HTS centered its agenda on [Syria], with no interest in conducting attacks abroad. HAD, by contrast, was said to have a more international outlook. The leader of al-Qaida, Aiman al-Zawahiri, was the defining authority for HAD, but not for HTS". This last distinction fit with al-Zawahiri's description of the situation in Syria. This dated back to January 2018, when he had acknowledged for the first time that Tahrir al-Sham was separate from al-Qaeda in Bilad al-Sham, when it began to attract attention from the Russian and Syrian militaries. The Huras Al-Din could follow al-Qaeda's agenda if they wished, and the leadership repeatedly discussed the value of striking the West from Syria.[2]

The renewed US interest in counterterrorism efforts against the Huras Al-Din in Syria deserves further attention. On 10 September 2019, the US government classified the Huras Al-Din as a terrorist organization, and as a branch of al-Qaeda in Syria. The US Department of State offered a sizable reward (five million dollars) to anyone who could offer information that would help uncover the whereabouts of the three top al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Huras leaders. These were Abu Abdel Karim al-Masri, Sami al-Aridi, and Farouq al-

---

[1] See: "Taqrir yuhadhdhir min 'awdat Tanzim al-Qaeda 'bi-aslubjadid,'" *Alhurra*, https://tinyurl.com/fmjkaz48.
[2] See: Colin P. Clarke and Charles Lister, "Tanzim al-Qa'ida musta'idd li-muhajamatikum marra ukhra".

Suri. The statement went into detail about these targets. These included Abu Abdel Karim al-Masri (Karim), an Egyptian citizen and member of the Shura council of the Huras Al-Din in 2018. He worked as an intermediary between the Al-Huras and al-Nusra. Farouq al-Suri (also known as Samir Hijazi and Abu Humam al-Shami) was a Syrian citizen who had fought in Afghanistan in the 1990s and had trained al-Qaeda fighters in Iraq. The statement also mentioned Sami al-Aridi (Abu Mahmoud al-Shami), a Jordanian citizen and leading jurisconsult for the Al-Huras. He had previously been involved in terrorist schemes against the US and Israel.[1]

The Pentagon set up a hotline with the Russian leadership in order to carry out airstrikes without opposition against al-Qaeda leaders and training camps in Aleppo and Idlib.[2] Coalition planes were also working constantly to target and kill al-Qaeda leaders in airstrikes as Tahrir al-Sham forces and security agencies launched arrest campaigns and raided headquarters.

3. "A Complicated Relationship" with Tahrir Al-Sham

Al-Julani described the relationship between Tahrir al-Sham and al-Nusra as "complicated". This was an accurate description of the push-and-pull happening between the two sides. The relationship was shaped by numerous factors related to the strategic conditions on the ground in the Idlib governorate, as well as the stances of international and regional forces, especially Turkey and the War on Terror. It was also shaped by al-Nusra's efforts to turn over a new leaf with the West, while also continuing to develop jihadism, in case the Russian-Turkish talks should collapse.

---

[1] See: "Washingtun tukhassis mukafa'at li-l-qabd'ala qiyadat Hurras al-Din", *Alhurra*, https://tinyurl.com/yfwkyf8y.
[2] See: Eric Schmitt, "Tahdhirat Amrikiyya min khatarfar' 'al-Qa'ida' al-Suri".

Tahrir al-Sham used the US and international stances on Syria in order to exert greater pressure on the Huras Al-Din. It accused it of cooperating with the US and providing intelligence to them. The Al-Huras likewise accused some of Tahrir al-Sham's leadership of sending geocoordinates to the international coalition (i.e., the US) and accused Abu Muhammad al-Julani of collaborating with the Turks and Americans and slipping information to foreign leadership about the Al-Huras.[1]

On 13 December 2019, Tahrir al-Sham and the Huras Al-Din agreed to end fighting between the two sides in the Idlib province in northern Syria. This occurred via mediation from Jama'at Ansar al-Islam. The agreement stipulated that detainees from both sides would be released, and that a joint judiciary committee would be formed within 24 hours of the agreement. It also emphasized that all detainees would be turned over to this committee, and stipulated that Abu Abdel Karim al-Masri, who had ties to Tahrir al-Sham, would oversee the committee with the support of Jama'at Ansar al-Islam. However, the agreement quickly fell to pieces after Tahrir al-Sham carried out another round of raids and arrests against the Al-Huras.

One key point of contention between Huras Al-Din and Tahrir al-Sham was their stances on Turkey. At the end of 2020, there had been three operations against the Turkish forces by unknown actors, which resulted in a number of casualties among the Turkish troops. There were several similar attacks carried out at the beginning of 2021, which targeted Turkey conveys on the road to Ma'arrat Misrin in northern Idlib. There were also two sniper attacks in which five Turkey soldiers were killed or injured at a Turkish outpost near Batabo in western Aleppo on 17 January 2021. On 31 January, another Turkish soldier was killed after an extremist group targeted the Abu

---

[1]   See: "Tanzim Hurras al-Din: al-Nash'awa-l-dinamiyatwa-l-ittijahat al-mustaqbaliyya",

Zubayr checkpoint near the town of Furaykah in West Idlib. According to researchers, the operations that were launched from time to time against Turkish forces and patrols "came from groups with unknown affiliations; they were not part of an official brigade or faction". They added that the "factions carrying out the operations did not identify themselves except that their aim was to target Turkish soldiers. It was as if they had formed a group for that specific purpose". It is likely that the "Huras Al-Din is behind these groups that targets Turkish forces in the area", given the rifts between the Al-Huras and Tahrir al-Sham about the Turkish army's involvement in the fourth de-escalation zone.[1]

These operations against the Turkish presence in Syria occurred in the context of a complicated relationship between Turkey and Tahrir al-Sham, and a similarly complicated relationship between Tahrir al-Sham and the Huras Al-Din. Al-Julani discussed the above relations in his meeting with the International Crisis Group, in addition to the even more complicated relationship between Turkey and Russia. The Syrian regime, backed by the Russian air force, launched a campaign at the beginning of 2020 that killed more than 50 Turkish soldiers. After weeks of escalating attacks between the two sides, the opposition forces lost Saraqeb, the most strategically-important area, located at the intersection of the M4 and M5 Motorways. This happened after the Syrian army took control of this area, as well as Ma'arratal-Nu'man, Sher Maghar, Khan Shaykhun, and Morek, and blocked Turkish observation posts in these areas. The Syrian army also took back control of the M5 Motorway between Damascus and Aleppo, and of significant territory within the borders of the 2018 Sochi agreement. This agreement was signed by Russian presi-

---

[1] See: Muhammad Ahmad, "Hal yaqif Hurrasal-Din wara'istihdaf al-dawriyat al-Turkiyya bi-Idlib?" *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, https://tinyurl.com/2uesap3k.

dent Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdo-gan, to protect Idlib from attacks by the Syrian army.[1]

The Russian-supported regime attacks resulted in the retreat of the armed opposition. The March 2020 ceasefire produced a calm period that gave Tahrir al-Sham the space to ramp up its campaign against cross-border jihadists. They went after the remaining ISIS cells and also struck a blow to the al-Qaeda-affiliated Huras Al-Din. As long as Tahrir al-Sham could control Idlib—which was its explicit priority—it had sufficient reason to fight back the elements that opposed the ceasefire or threatened local stability. The ceasefire was still fragile, and Turkey's role seemed insufficient in preventing renewed hostilities. The joint Russian-Turkish patrols along the M4 Motorway ended after August 2020, and the exchange of fire across the frontlines continued. Russia also resumed its airstrikes from time to time.

The classification of Tahrir al-Sham as a terrorist organization undermined the ceasefire. In March 2020, Russia and Turkey had agreed to "fight terrorism in all its forms, and to eliminate all terrorist organizations in Syria as defined by the UN Security Council". Moscow repeatedly argued that Tahrir al-Sham was classified as a terrorist organization by the Security Council to justify regime attacks in Idlib. It said that the military strikes against the group needed to continue, and that the ceasefire was temporary.[2]

Concerns about the aggression of the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies was a point of common ground between the Al-Huras and Tahrir al-Sham. However, their divergent stances on Turkey remained a crucial point of contention. The Huras Al-Din

---

[1] See: "Turkish-Russian agreement on Idlib", *Strategiecs*, https://tinyurl.com/7jpjbjkm.

[2] See: "Fi Idlib al-Suriya, fursat Washington li-i'adat tasawwur mukafahat al-irhab", *International Crisis Group.*

had rejected all previous agreements because it considered the Turkish army and Russian forces to be occupying powers. For the Al-Huras, Turkey was no different that Russia; it was also a secular infidel state. Tahrir al-Sham accepted the Russian-Turkish agreement in Sochi and later agreements. It prevented the opposition from launching a war against the regime and protected Russian patrols carrying out their mission. Abu Humam al-Shami, the leader of the Huras Al-Din, warned in a recorded speech on 7 March 2020 against trusting Russia and Turkey and "falling prey to these pressures, or being deceived by their promises. They will rob you of your will to fight, and you will become a prisoner to their decisions".[1]

Tahrir al-Sham realized that in order to ensure it did not lose its foothold entirely, it needed to keep up a "cooperative" relationship" with Ankara. Turkey was the only country militarily, economically, and politically involved in the Syrian conflict that was capable of fighting al-Assad. Antagonizing Turkey, the main backer of Tahrir al-Sham's local enemy, the Syrian national army, would put Tahrir al-Sham in an impossible situation (i.e., between the Turkish army and its local partners, and the al-Assad regime). There were twelve Turkish military observation points in Idlib set up with help from Tahrir al-Sham in 2018. This was only the beginning of more decisive involvement from Ankara. Tahrir al-Sham was still nervous about the growing Turkish presence in Syria: it struggled to find a religious justification to convince its fighters to not target Turkish forces.[2]

An audio recording from the Egyptian Yahya bin Tahir (Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali), a military jurisconsult and Shura council member in Tahrir al-Sham, was leaked in March 2020, just days after the Russian-Turkish agreement. The recording highlighted the common ground of Salafism that Tahrir al-Sham and the Al-Huras shared and

1   See: Hurras al-Din fi-muwajahat al-wujud al-turkiwa-'inqilab' al-Julani", *Enab Baladi*, https://tinyurl.com/2s7x6kk9.
2   See: Orwa Ajjoub, "Hal sa-taqdi Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham 'ala al-Qa'ida fi Suriya?"

also discussed points of disagreement between them. Al-Farghali spoke about the relationship with the Turkish army and how Tahrir al-Sham might benefit from its presence in Idlib in addition to the likelihood of conflict. He labeled the Turkish army as a secular occupying force and said that this secularism was tantamount to apostasy. This provoked an uproar among the Turkish-aligned opposition.[1]

The accusations exchanged between the Al-Huras and Tahrir al-Sham can be summarized as follows:

The Al-Huras criticized Tahrir al-Sham's acceptance of the Sochi agreement. It also claimed that Tahrir al-Sham had prevented the opposition from launching a war against the regime, but been reluctant to attack Russian patrols, and even protected them. It had also allegedly turned in some ISIS fighters to the international coalition and been involved in international efforts against the Al-Huras.

For its part, Tahrir al-Sham accused the Al-Huras of being a *takfiri* organization and causing rifts within Tahrir al-Sham through encouraging its members to split off. It also claimed that the Al-Huras harbored extremist fighters and helped ISIS cells in Idlib take root.

---

[1] Al-Farghali said: "It is not within our power to stop the current developments. We cannot prevent the Turks from getting involved, although we did not want this to happen". He added that "God has shown us the way, and we have taken back the areas that we had lost. It will not be hard to get the Turks out. If the Turks do not leave, we will consider them as an occupying force and we will fight them like any other group". They defended their position on religious grounds based on two principles: first, "seeking help frominfidels against infidels", which Islamic jurisprudence allowed in times of need. In this context, in order to defeat the "infidel" Kurds, it would be permissible to align with the "infidel" Turks. Secondly, the "lesser of two evils", which in this case meant that cooperating with Turkey was less harmful to Tahrir al-Sham than fighting a battle they were likely to lose, given that it was already fighting the Syrian regime on several fronts. Although this could lead to Turkey applying secular law in areas currently controlled by Tahrir al-Sham, al-Farghali promised this would not happen. See: Sam Heller, "Leak Reveals Jihadists' Weaking Grip in Syria's Idlib", *War on The Rocks,* https://tinyurl.com/huh9du94.

Tensions escalated between the two sides, with the first major conflict occurring in June 2020.[1]

4. The Fa Ithbatu Operations Room and Conflict with Tahrir Al-Sham

The transformations occurring inside Syria created a new reality on the ground. International concern for Syria receded, and US and European interests were limited to preventing the rise of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Huras Al-Din in Syria and resolving the problem of foreign fighters. The Russian-Turkish agreements shaped Idlib's fate. Like Gaza, Idlib became an open-air prison for almost three million people, subject to siege and bombing in a small area controlled by "terrorist" forces.

The Turkish foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu made this comparison after the Russian-Turkish agreement in March 2020. The former British foreign secretary and head of the International Rescue Committee, David Miliband, also described Idlib as a being like Gaza.[2] It was in this context that Tahrir al-Sham tried to distance itself from being labeled a terrorist group. It tried to use issues such as foreign fighters to reshape jihadism in a way that would serve its interests and ensure its inclusion in any future agreement in Syria.

Al-Julani's pragmatism led other jihadists to accuse him of "compromising [principles] in international and regional agreements and of unilateral decision-making". His opponents regathered themselves to form an operations room called Fa Ithbatu ("So Be Stead-

---

[1] See: Saleh al-Hamawi, "Sira' Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham wa-Hurras al-Din, min al-shirakaila al-'ada'!" ("İdlib'de HTS – Hurrasü'd-Din Rekabeti: İdeolojik Ortaklıktan Düşmanlığa"), translated by Ali Kamakh, *Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies*: https://tinyurl.com/9vy8p9zu.

[2] See: "Turkiyatasif Idlib bi-Qita' Ghaza al-jadid, ma awjah al-shibh?" *Enab Baladi*, https://tinyurl.com/rs9exp3k.

fast", from Qur'an 8:45). This was an attempt to deal with limited options at the time. According to the statement it issued on 12 June 2020, the room contained five factions: Tansiqiya al-Jihad, Liwa' al-Muqatilin al-Ansar, Jama'at Ansar al-Din, Jama'at Ansar al-Islam, and the Huras Al-Din.

This statement announced the formation of a new group that had come to "fight the aggressors and the occupiers' conspiracies". Tansiqiyatal-Jihad was led by former Tahrir al-Sham leader Abu al-Abd Ashidaa, while Liwa al-Muqatilinal-Insar was led by Jamal Zayniya (Abu Malik al-Talli). He had split off from Tahrir al-Sham in April 2020, after serving as an al-Nusra leader for many years in western Qalamun, and as a member of the Shura Council of Tahrir al-Sham. Ansar al-Din was led by Abu Abdullah al-Shami, who had split off from Tahrir al-Sham in 2018. The Fa Ithbatu Operations Room included many foreign fighters and Syrians. The fighters from this group were spread throughout the countryside of Latakia, Idlib, Hamaa, and Aleppo.[1]

Both Tahrir al-Sham and the United States were quick to respond to the establishment of this new organization, and its partner, the Huras Al-Din. On 14 June 2020, the US-led international coalition targeted the car of Abu Qassam al-Urduni, a key Huras Al-Din leader, and Bilal al-Sanaani in the outskirts of Idlib. Two days later, Tahrir al-Sham arrested top leader Abu Saleh al-Uzbeki, who had split from Tahrir al-Sham to join Ansar al-Din. A week after that, Tahrir al-Sham detained a former member of its Shura council, Abu Malik al-Talli, who had formed a new faction called Liwa al-Muqatilin al-Ansar without announcing that he had split off from Tahrir al-Sham. All four of these figures had joined the Fa Ithbatu

---

[1] See: Amin al-Assi, "FaIthbatuwa-l-mutamarridun'ala al-Nusra, istibaqanlil-l-ma'raka", *al-Arabyal-Jadeed,* https://tinyurl.com/ypb94hp3.

Operations Room, which grew out of the Rouse the Believers Operations Room.

Tahrir al-Sham launched numerous attacks on factions in the operations room, which shut down their military bases and prevented any new factions or operation rooms from forming. Tahrir al-Sham thus killed two birds with one stone: It gained the upper hand against its rivals while at the same time demonstrating it could be a good partner to Turkey and the international community in the War on Terror.[1]

Tahrir al-Sham's response to these events also included ideological and symbolic dimensions. A week after the Fa Ithbatu Operations Room was formed, Tahrir al-Sham issued a response without responding directly. Rather than Tahrir al-Sham or its Shura council issuing a statement, it came directly from foreign fighters working with Tahrir al-Sham. The statement was issued on 18 June 2020 and was entitled "Shukr wa-Ta'yid" ("Gratitude and Support").[2] The fighters offered "their support for Tahrir al-Sham and its policies in the region" and affirmed that "they agreed with what the Syrians would

---

[1]   See: Orwa Ajjoub, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham wa-l-Qa'ida fi Suriya: al-Tawfiq bayna al-mutanaqidin" ("HTS and al-Qaeda in Syria: Reconciling the Irreconcilable"), translated by Ahmed Barakat, *Aswat Online*, https://tinyurl.com/uj8azvta.

[2]   This statement was signed by Omar al-Turkistani (Turkistan Islamic Party), Abu Saleh al-Uzbeki (Katibat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad), Abu Muhammad al-Dagestani (Jaysh al-Muhajirinwa-l-Insar, from the Caucasus), Abu Qatada al-Albani (Xhemati Alban) who also ran Tahrir al-Sham's military academy, and Abu Safiya (Muhajirinal-Sunna, from Iran). There was also Rabita al-Ma'ali from Saudi Arabia, which included Mu'tasim Bi-llahal-Madani, a member of Tahrir al-Sham's *fatwa* council, and Abu al-Walid al-Mutairi. There was also Abu Ayyub al-Maldifi (Mujahidu al-Maldif), Abu Jaber al-Maghrebi (Sham al-Islam, from Morocco). There were several members representing Tahrir al-Sham: Shaykh Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali (a member of the Shura council and *fatwa* council), Mokhtar al-Turki (Tahrir al-Sham's military leader**)**, Abu al-Hussain al-Urduni (head of defense), Abu Hajjar al-Tunisi (head of foreign fighters), and Abu Abdel Rahman al-Zubayr al-Ghazi. (a judge from the military wing).

decide regarding the political course of the country". They called on others to "put aside divisions and join ranks to fight the enemy". This implied that they rejected the new operations room and would remain loyal to Tahrir al-Sham.

Perhaps Tahrir al-Sham had intentionally chosen to have foreign fighters issue the statement in order to respond to foreign fighters in other groups. This was part of maintaining their legitimacy among jihadists. Tahrir al-Sham was also signaling that it was capable of controlling cross-border jihad and the movements of foreign groups within its ranks. In other words, they affirmed that the foreign fighters were "subject to Syrian decision-making in the organization". However, it is also clear from the statement that the groups and individuals listed fell into two main camps: groups with limited influence, and groups with greater clout, but which were still limited by the regional forces. One such group in the latter camp was the Turkistan Islamic Party, which al-Julani said during his interview with the International Crisis Group was "committed to Tahrir al-Sham's policies". Tahrir al-Sham was trying to monopolize the field of jihadism while also establishing similar authority in military, security, administrative, and economic matters. They did this through setting up a Salvation Government that would prevent the formation of any rival groups.[1]

Tahrir al-Sham "had tightened its grip on the Huras Al-Din as a signal to Ankara and the international community", according to Orwa Ajjoub. Top al-Qaeda leaders were targeted during this time. Abu Qassam al-Urduni was not the first member of the upper-level leadership to be killed in coalition strikes in Syria, and will likely not be

---

[1]   See: "al-Hay'a wa-i'adat tashkil al-fada' al-jihadi: Tartibat dakhliyya wa-rasa'il kharijiyya", *Omran Center for Strategic Studies*,
https://tinyurl.com/279y9xm8.

the last. Abu Khadija al-Urduni[1] and Abu Ahmad al-Zarqawi had also been killed previously; the coalition's sources for these attacks remain unknown. However, it is clear that al-Julani is willing to pay any price to ensure Tahrir al-Sham has a seat at the table in a future Syria. Those he called friends yesterday might tomorrow be labeled apostates and infidels. Given that al-Julani was already trying to neutralize al-Qaeda's presence in northwest Syria, it seems his goals were aligned with those of the coalition.[2]

5. Blows Dealt to Al-Qaeda and the Huras Al-Din

The Huras Al-Din struggled to keep its foothold during the US-led coalition's airstrikes, and Tahrir al-Sham's campaigns on the ground. The group saw considerable growth after it was founded in 2018—it was able to recruit nearly five thousand fighters, and to

---

[1]   Abu Khadija al-Urduni: His real name was Bilal al-Khreisat and he was Jordanian. He was close to Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi; they had spent many years in prison together. During this time Abu Khadija studied creed ('*aqida*) and principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) with Maqdisi. After more than 10 years in prison he was released at the beginning of Syrian revolution and left forSyria, where he joined al-Nusra Front and worked as jurisconsult in eastern Ghouta, and then as a judge for the security forces. He was later removed from the position on the recommendation of al-Nusra's monitoring committee. Throughout his time in Syria, he was close to Abu Julaybibal-Urduni. After Fatah al-Sham's announcement, he expressed his rejection of this step and declared that he would maintain allegiance to al-Qaeda. He worked with other leadership to establish the Huras Al-Din. Abu Khadija was killed in a drone strike that hit his car in the Idlib governorate on 21 December 2019. A few months before he was killed, he had a conflict with the Al-Huras leadership, which Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi confirmed in a tweet after Abu Khadija was killed. Al-Maqdisi said that he was not part of either the Al-Huras or al-Qaeda. However, this does not mean that he did not play an important role in establishing the Al-Huras, especially because he was active on social media. He continued to try to drum up support for a return to al-Qaeda, as was clear from the statement published by the Al-Huras after his death.

[2]   See: Orwa Ajjoub, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham wa-l-Qa'ida fi Suriya: al-Tawfiq bayna al-mutanaqidin".

form connections and alliances with Salafi jihadist movements. However, by early 2021, it was already in decline. By this point, it had fewer than 500 fighters scattered among different areas. They lacked sufficient funding, heavy or medium weapons, established bases, or centralized leadership. These groups lived in a state of constant fear of international coalition airstrikes and Tahrir al-Sham's arrest campaigns.[1]

By the beginning of 2021, the Huras Al-Din had lost most of its leadership through US drone strikes or in incidents on the ground. From early on, coalition attacks had targeted al-Qaeda-linked jihadist leadership in Syria. The US referred to these leaders as the "Khorasan Group". These included: Muhsin al-Fadhli (killed on 8 July 2015), French jihadist David Drugeon (5 July 2015), Abdel Mohsen Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh/Sanafial-Nasr (15 October 2015), Abu Omar al-Kurdi (5 March 2015), Abu Musab al-Filistini, Abu al-Baraa al-Ansari, and Abu Firas al-Suri (3 April 2015), Refa'i Taha/Abu Yasser al-Masri (5 April 2015), Ahmad Salama Mabruk/Abu Faraj al-Masri (3 October 2015), Osama Nammoura/Abu Omar Saraqeb/Abu Hajjar al-Homsi (8 September 2016) and Abu Khayr al-Masri Ahmed Hasasn Abu al-Khayr (26 February 2017).

After the Huras Al-Din was established, the pace of strikes against its leadership increased. Iyad al-Tubasi (Abu Julaybibal-Urduni) was killed at the end of December 2018 in the Lajat area in the Daraa countryside. He was shot by regime forces while trying to set up a branch in southern Syria. The Jordanian leader Sari al-Shihab (Abu Khiladal-Muhandis) was killed on 22 August 2019 in a car bombing in Idlib. On 30 June 2019, members of the Huras Al-Din were killed in US airstrikes in the al-Muhandiseen countryside in

---

[1]   See: "Hal far' al-Qa'ida bi-Idlib fi tariqihiila al-zawal? ("Is al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria's Idlib on its way to demise?") *al-Monitor,* translated by the Nedaa Post, https://tinyurl.com/4yzemwnr.

western Aleppo. These included: Abu Umar al-Tunisi, Abu Dhar al-Masri, Abu Yahya al-Jazairi, and Abu Dujanaal-Tunisi. On 22 December 2019, Bilal Khreisat (Abu Khadija al-Urduni) was killed in a US strike that hit his car, near Termanin near the northern Idlib countryside. On 15 October 2020, Abu Muhammad al-Sudani was killed in a US airstrike on the village of Arab Saeed west of Idlib. On 14 June 2020, Khalid al-Aruri (Abu Qassam al-Urduni) was killed in a US airstrike on the Idlib governorate in northwest Syria.

At the same time thatal-Qaeda was losing leaders in its Syrian branch, the Huras Al-Din, it was also suffering similar losses in Afghanistan. It also lost leaders from its regional branches in Yemen, Morocco, and elsewhere, as well as two of the top leaders who were responsible for al-Qaeda's affairs in the Levant, particularly in Syria. On August 2019, Hamza bin Laden, son of former al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, was killed by US special operations at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. He had been put forth to lead al-Qaeda, restructure the group, and revive al-Qaeda in Syria. On 7 August 2020, al-Qaeda also lost Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah (Abu Muhammad al-Masri), the second-in-command in al-Qaeda, and one of the members of the Hittin committee. He had overseen al-Qaeda's work in the Levant and Syria. Al-Masri was killed in Tehran by Mossad operatives.[1]

The Huras Al-Din was targeted by international coalition airstrikes and Tahrir al-Sham arrest campaigns, and also suffered from internal ideological and regional conflicts. These factors contributed to the decline of the group. Although the Al-Huras had adopted many Salafi jihadist ideas and maintained ideological and organizational ties with al-Qaeda, the group did not have the same ideological cohesion. It was split among different approaches and schools of thought,

---

[1]   See: Hassan Abu Haniyeh, "Tanzimal-Qa'ida ''ala tariq al-inqisamwa-l-inhidar", *Arabi 21*, https://tinyurl.com/ywar54ur.

on both theoretical and practical levels. With regard to its theoretical approach, the group was split between Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Atiyatallahal-Libi, and in practical matters, between Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Since the Al-Huras was founded, al-Qaeda had lacked a cohesive organizational structure as well as resources and funding, and its organizational components were divided across scattered, small groups.

Al-Huras' Ideology and Organizational Crisis

Given these dangerous circumstances, the jihadist leadership needs to revise its approach, which is at odds with the current reality. Its needs to get its affairs in order and prepare for guerrilla warfare. The wise have advised this path, but their power has blinded them to their own advice. Some of them even say 'we now control territory larger than that of some countries, such as Qatar, Bahrain or Kuwait.'

Sami al-Aridi, Huras Al-Din theorist

The Huras Al-Din were ideologically and doctrinally grounded in Salafism and the global jihadism that al-Qaeda had established. Since it was a regional branch of al-Qaeda, it did not have a separate approach to doctrine, ideology, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), or policy. The other regional branches of al-Qaeda such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or the Islamic Maghreb were reasonably ideologically cohesive. However, the leadership of the Syrian branch was split between the Wahhabi Salafi school of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and the Qutbist Salafi school of Atiyatallahal-Libi. With regard to practice, the Al-Huras were split between Osama bin Laden's Qutbist approach on one hand and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Wahhabi approach on the other.[1]

---

[1] The ideological and religious approach of contemporary Sunni jihadism is drawn from different strands of historical and contemporary Salafism. However, the ideological approaches of contemporary global jihadism are connected to the legacy of the Saudi Wahhabi school of Salafism, and the Qutbi school as set forth by the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Muhammad ibn Abdel Wahhab and his school, as well as Sayyid Qutb and his contemporaries, form the ideological, doctrinal, and jurisprudential foundations of contemporary jihadism.

Over the centuries, global jihadism produced a lexicon that was developed and reinterpreted according to the particular historical moment. These terms were used extensively by Muhammad ibn Abdel Wahhab and Sayyid Qutb, and included *tawhid* (oneness of God), *Dar al-Islam,* the caliphate*,* jihad*, al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal), *hakimiyya* (sovereignty belongs to God alone) *jahiliyya* (the reversion of the Muslim world to a state of pre-Islamic ignorance)*, taghut* (idolaters), *jama'a* (congregation), *tali'a* (vanguard), *nikaya* (defiance, i.e., fighting to harm the enemy), *tamkin* (endurance, i.e., fighting to consolidate power). These concepts formed the foundations of jihadist practice. Although they were commonly used among jihadists, there was a great deal of disagreement over what these terms meant in theory and in practice, and their meanings shifted depending on the context. Some words were a particular source of controversy, such as *al-imanwa-l-irja'* (faith and postponement of judgment),   =

1. A Disagreement Between Religious Authorities: Atiyatallah and Al-Maqdisi

There was evident ideological diversity within the Al-Huras. Some of the leaders who had founded the group had ideological, organizational, and personal connections with al-Qaeda's central leadership, Osama bin Laden, and Atiyatallahal-Libi, who coordinated operations. Others had ties with the Iraqi branch and its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the theorist Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. The more extremist Jordanian group within the Al-Huras had ties with al-Zarqawi and al-Maqdisi. These members included Sami al-Aridi (Abu Muhammad al-Shami), Khalid al-Aruri (Abu Qassam al-Urduni), Bilal Khreisat (Abu Khadija al-Urduni), Iyad al-Tubasi (Abu Julaybibal-Urduni), Sari al-Shihab (Khiladal-Muhandis), and others. Although their shared origins would seem to indicate some degree of cohesiveness, this current was itself split along a rift between al-Maqdisi and al-Zarqawi, who regularly criticized the other's positions.

= *al-takfir wa-l-tajhil*(accusing others of unbelief or pre-Islamic ignorance), *al-tawaqqufwa-l-tabayyun*(suspension of judgment and verification), and *al-firqawa-l-ta'ifa*(sects and subgroups), among others.

The many reinterpretations of the original concepts from the jihadist lexicon produced rifts among different groups, which accused each other of misusing or misunderstanding the terms. These terms also produced divergent strategic visions with regard to their applicability and validity in the present day. Global jihadism thus split in two. One group adopted the traditional agenda of al-Qaeda and Bin Laden, which prioritized fighting the "far enemy" (the West, and the US in particular). It developed a strategic approach based on carrying out retaliatory operations based on the principle of *nikaya*jihad, using an elite vanguard force. The objective was to spread Islamism and work towards creating a jihad among all Muslims and an Islamic State. The second group adopted Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's approach and focused on fighting the "near enemy", based on a comprehensive doctrine that combined elements of local, regional, and international jihadism, and brought together different forms of jihad, such as *tamkin*and *nikaya*jihad. It tried to take control of territory in order to establish an Islamic state.

The Egyptian and Syrian currents in the Al-Huras had ties with Bin Laden and Atiyatallah. This included Samir Hijazi (Abu Humam al-Shami), although he supportedal-Zarqawi, Radwan Namus (Abu Firas al-Suri), and Abu Abdel Karim al-Masri. The Khorasan group was closer to this group. However, there were still divisions within this current, and conflicts of approach between Bin Laden and Atiyatallah.

It could be said that the third current was closer to ISIS. This was the North African current, and included Abu Umar al-Tunisi, Abu Yahya al-Jazairi, and Abu Dujanaal-Tunisi, among others. This was the most internally-divided group.

Although al-Maqdisi and Atiyatallah disagreed on various theoretical and practical issues, both still fell within the general categories of Salafism and jihadism. Al-Maqdisi was known for being a jurisprudential theorist,[1] while Atiyatallah[1] was the operations coordina-

---

[1] Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (Abu Muhammad): His real name was Essam ibn Muhammad Taher al-Barqawi and he is considered one of the most important and influential living jihadist thinkers today. This is due in part to a study of his writings published by Will McCants in 2006, which suggested that al-Maqdisi was one of the most overlooked living jihadist thinkers. He was originally descended from the Otaibah clan and was born in the village of Burqa near Nablus, Palestine, on 3 July 1959. He then moved with his family at the age of three or four to Kuwait where he continued his secondary schooling and then studied Islamic sciences (*'ulum*) at Mosul University in northern Iraq. He had some ties to Islamist groups, particularly the Salafist Sururites who were affiliated with Shaykh Muhammad Surur, to Juhayman's organization, and to a number ofQutbi-*shaykhs*. He moved between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia where he solidified his knowledge of Wahhabi Salafism and became familiar with the legacy of the Najdi Imams. He travelled to Pakistan and Afghanistan several times and became a prominent Salafist jihadist. During this time he wrote his first book, *Millat Ibrahim*, and settled in Jordan with his family in 1992 after the Second Gulf War. He also published a book on the apostasy of democracy, entitled *Democracy is a Religion,* and engaged with traditional Salafist thought. He tried to spread his message in all the cities in Jordan and was detained for the first time in Jordan in 1993 for belonging to Bayat al-Imam, along with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.   =

tor. Al-Maqdisi's positions were more extreme on practical matters, while Atiyatallah's were more extreme with regard to theory. For example, al-Maqdisi described most Islamist groups as well as anyone that did not consider secular leaders to be unbelievers as engaging in*irja'* (postponement of judgment), thus implying that they had failed to adhere to true faith in both doctrine and practice. Atiyatallah

---

=   He was sentenced to 15 years but got out on a royal pardon in 1999. He was arrested on several other occasions and accused of joining various organizations, and was recently released. His writings are considered an important reference for global jihadist Salafist thought. He has published many books, messages, and fatwas, including *Millat Ibrahim*, *al-Kawashif al-jaliyya fi kafr al-dawla al-Sa'udiyya, Imta' al-nazr fi kashfshubuhatmurji'at al-'asr,, al-Dimukratiya din*, *I'dad al-qada al-fawaris bi-hajrfasad al-madaris, al-risala al-thalathiniya fi al-tahdhirmin al-ghuluww fi al-tafkir, Waqfat ma' thamarat al-jihad, Kashf al-niqab 'aynshari'a al-ghab,* and *Mashrou' al-Sharq al-Awsat al-Kabir.* He also has a website called "Minbar al-tawhid wa-l-jihad".

1   His real name was Jamal Ibrahim Shitiwi al-Misrati and he was known as Atiyatallahal-Libi. He was born in Misrata, Libya, in 1969, and went to Afghanistan at the end of 1988. There he joined al-Qaeda in the Hajji camp in Afghanistan. He was among those who joined al-Qaeda when it was first founded, and was involved in some of the major operations in Afghanistan such as Fatah Khost. He specialized in mortar weapons and explosives. After Mohammad Najibullah's regime fell and fighting broke out between the different Afghani political parties, he went to Sudan to join the leadership there along with Osama bin Laden. In 1995, Osama bin Laden asked him to join the jihadist leadership in Algeria, and afterwards he returned to Afghanistan again. After the 11 September attacks, he left Afghanistan to neighboring countries and then returned with others to some of the safe zones in Afghanistan. When the US invaded Iraq, Osama bin Laden asked him in 2006 to go to Iraq to lead the jihad there alongside Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. However, he was not able to enter Iraq and returned to Afghanistan, where he played an important leadership role as deputy to Mustafa Abu al-Yazid. He soon became the second-in-command after Mostafa Abu al-Yazid and Osama bin Laden were killed. He was the foreign operations officer for al-Qaeda and operations coordinator for its regional branches, and was considered one of the group's top strategists. He was also the military commander for operations in Pakistan and on the US watchlist. He wrote many books, letters, and statements, which were published after he was killed in a large volume entitled *al-A'amal al-kamila li-l-shaykh al-shahid Atiyatallahal-Libi*. He was killed in a US drone strike in the Waziristan in Pakistan on 22 August 2011.

acknowledged the existence of differences and disputes without de-scribing those that had violated certain principles as guilty of *irja'*.

Unlike al-Maqdisi, Atiyatallah defended those who had partici-pated in parliaments as a means of reform or to issue Islamic laws and decisions. He felt that they should not be in a rush to label people unbelievers. Atiyatallah did not see any violation of shari'a in fighters receiving military support or information from an infidel state to fight other infidel states. The important thing was that this was done for the purposes of jihad. Al-Maqdisi rejected this as a flawed doc-trine and approach.

With regard to declaring other organizations infidels or sus-pending judgment, Atiyatallah warned youth in the emerging jihadist current about getting involved in labeling individuals or groups as infidels. He felt that it was enough for them to have complete faith in God and to reject idolatry. For him, judging specific individuals or organizations was the purview of the 'ulama'. Al-Maqdisi was not particularly interested in this last issue, for which Atiyatallah criti-cized him. He said of al-Maqdisi: "I notice there is some perhaps in-tentional exaggeration happening. People are saying that Shaykh al-Maqdisi is a jihadist leader and thinker! I have seen some people say that he is one of greatest thinkers, or that sort of thing! In my opinion this is not a fair or accurate description at all".[1]

The Al-Huras do not provide particular referents for their ideo-logical framework. However, their comments and statements on the internet are consistent with the positions and writings of al-Maqdisi. After the clash between the Al-Huras and Tahrir al-Sham in June 2020, al-Maqdisi launched a violent attack against Tahrir al-Sham and ruled that joining the security apparatus was forbidden. He said: "In such situations, Muslims cannot workin such an evil agency which

---

[1] See: Karam al-Hafyan, "al-Maqdisi wa-l-Salafiyya al-jihadiyya: al-Makana wa-l-ta'thir", *Egyptian Institute for Studies*, https://tinyurl.com/ssskkyje.

works to support the intelligence services of a secular state and NATO member. For us, those who help the Turkish intelligence against Muslims commits one of the nullifiers of Islam (*nawaqid al-Islam*), i.e. supporting idolaters against Muslims". He added on his Telegram channel that "We have seen the injustices brought on by Tahrir al-Sham. They have even coordinated with Turkish intelligence agencies in their investigations against Muslims".

Tahrir al-Sham announced in October 2020 that they rejected the approach of al-Maqdisi, whom al-Qaeda considered to be one of the most important religious authorities. In a statement issued by the general shari'a council of Tahrir al-Sham, he said: "He is not part of us, and vice versa, and we are not following his method. We distinguish between his *bid'a*approach to affirming the oneness of God (*tawhid*), and the approach to *tawhid* that we have received from our fore bearers. May God protect us from the approach of al-Barqawi [al-Maqdisi]". The statement accused al-Maqdisi of using the language of "apostates, collaborators, and traitors", siding with the "Kharijite groups" and spreading discord (*fitna*), immorality, and hostility in the "battlefields of jihad", bothin Afghanistan and Iraq, and of failing to follow Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*).[1]

Given al-Maqdisi's status among the Al-Huras and most followers of global jihadism, Tahrir al-Sham launched a wide-reaching campaign to tarnish al-Maqdisi's reputation. Al-Bayyinah Media made a satirical website that looked like it was actually al-Maqdisi's "Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad" website, which contained jihadist resources. This site tried to undermine al-Maqdisi's legitimacy through posting articles about his extremism and incorrect positions. At the top of the site, they wrote that al-Maqdisi had designed "Minbar al-tawhid wa-l-jihad", to be his online media platform and explained

---

[1] See: "Tahrir al-Sham tanqalib 'ala al-Maqdisi wa-tamna' tadawal kutubihi", *Arab 21,* https://tinyurl.com/hczkeb9j.

that "al-Tahwid was al-Maqdisi's registered trademark" and that he could determine who was legitimate.

It is clear that the site was intended to denigrate al-Maqdisi and his controversial stances. It is interesting that the site also published quotes from the founder of the Islamic State, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and another major al-Qaeda theorist, Atiyatallah Abdel Rahman al-Libi. These quotes suggested that al-Maqdisi was making important contributions to the jihadist movement but rejected the idea that he was infallible.[1]

2. Huras Al-Din: Beset by Ideological Conflicts

One of the main ideological conflicts within the ranks of the Al-Huras dealt with both practical priorities and theoretical foundations. Abu Yahya al-Jaza'iri and Abu Dhar al-Masri, who were members of the group's shari'a council, decided to not get involved in fighting the opposition factions coming from the Euphrates Shield operation area. Abu Yahya al-Jazairi wrote an article criticizing the leaders' decision to condone fighting under national flags, i.e. rather than fighting to implement shari'a. Abu Yahya al-Jazairi and Abu Dhar al-Masri also commented on Al-Huras' participation alongside other Euphrates factions in battle. With regard to organizational and tactical matters, they said it was necessary to launch new fronts for battle. These two leaders were not the only ones to express their religious, structural, and military concerns. They were followed by dozens of jihadist activists and bloggers affiliated with the Al-Huras, as well as other leaders including that of Abu Yaman al-Wazzani, the Al-Huras' jurisconsult.

---

[1]   See: Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-'Aysh tawilan bima yakfi li-tara nafsak tusbah al-rajl al-sharir: Qadiyat Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi" ("Living Long Enough to See Yourself Become the Villain: The Case of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi), *Washington Institute*, https://tinyurl.com/re79h97n.

There was a shift in the growing criticism of the Huras Al-Din by Abu Yahya al-Jazairi, Abu Dhar al-Masri, and their students and followers from reservations on shari'a or military grounds to ideological critiques. The Guardian's leadership council decided to dismiss both Abu Dhar and Abu Yahya, but they did not comply with the decision and claimed that such decisions needed to be made by a judge. Three hundred members of the Huras Al-Din, including some of the group's leaders, brought forth cases to resolve the matter. That same day, Abu Amr al-Tunisi, the judge for fixed and discretionary punishments (*al-hudud wa-l-ta'zirat*) for the Al-Huras, responded to the cases brought forth, and issued subpoenas for those involved in the case. These persons were: Abu Humam al-Shami, Sami al-Aridi, Abu Yahya al-Jazairi, and Abu Dhar al-Masri. Not only did these leaders ignore their subpoenas, but they issued a new circular dismissing various leaders, including the judge in the case, Abu Amr al-Tunisi, as well as Abu Yaman al-Wazzani and Abu Musab al-Libi. This led to a sharp polarization both on among actual forces and on social media platforms.

On 30 June 2019, only four years after the dismissed judges had issued their subpoenas against the group's leaders, international coalition planes bombed a meeting that contained a number of the dismissed leaders and killed several of them. These included Abu Dhar al-Masri and Abu Amr al-Tunisi and others. Abu Yahya al-Jazairi and jurisconsult Abu Yaman al-Wazzani were also injured in the attack. This deadly strike dealt a serious blow to the opposition within the Al-Huras.

The disagreements in both practical and theoretical spheres continued to escalate further, particularly over the meaning of *tawhid* (the oneness of God) and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal), as well as the implementation of shari'a, the *nawaqid* (nullifiers of Islam), and *kufr* and *ridda* (unbelief and apostasy). This led some groups to split off from the Al-Huras, including Ansar al-Haq. This

splinter group was led by former Al-Huras jurisconsult Abu Yaman al-Wazzani, who Tahrir al-Sham had detained after accusing him of extremism and practicing *takfir*.[1]

3. A Strategic Vision for Guerrilla Warfare

With regard to their strategic vision, the Al-Huras shifted their priorities and vision in accordance with the shifts in the central leadership. They adopted a vision that brought together local and global elements, *nikaya* and *tamkin*jihad, and conventional and guerrilla warfare. They planned to impose shari'a in liberated areas using the Ansar al-Shari'a approach, which had become al-Qaeda's main strategy. After the Arab Spring, when a territorial strategy had failed in Yemen, Iraq, Mali and other areas, al-Qaeda moved away from *tamkin* wars and controlling territory. It returned to its preferred strategy of fighting the far enemy through guerrilla warfare and *nikaya* jihad. Al-Zawahiri discussed this return to the fighting the far enemy and to guerrilla warfare tactics in a September 2013 speech ("Tawjihat'amma li-l-'amal al-jihadi"). This became even clearer in later speeches (such as "Unfuru li-l-Sham", 5 May 2016).

Since the Huras Al-Din was established in early 2018, it had called for a shift from direct confrontation to guerrilla warfare based on tactics such as raids, ambushes, and avoiding taking control of territory or appearing openly in villages and towns. This was in response to the vision adopted by al-Qaeda's central leadership. As-Sahab media had published a speech by al-Zawahiri on 23 April 2017 ("al-Sham lantarka' ila li-llah"). In this speech, al-Zawahiri said that "the strategy for jihad in the Levant needs to focus on guerrilla warfare that tries to wear down the enemy. This is how the weak attack the powerful. We are not concerned with controlling territory, but rather focus on undermining morale and sowing discord, and contin-

---

[1]   See: Abdel Ghani Mazuz, *Tanzim Hurras al-Din: Ishkaliyat al-nash'awa-l-tafkik.*

uing strikes that cause grave losses for their forces".[1] The jurisconsult for the Al-Huras, Sami al-Aridi, affirmed the need to practice guerrilla warfare and to follow the lead of the central branch. He said: "Given these dangerous circumstances, the jihadist leadership needs to revise its approach, which is at odds with the current reality. Its needs to get its affairs in order and prepare for guerrilla warfare. The wise have advised this path, but their power has blinded them to their own advice. Some of them even say 'we now control territory larger than that of some countries, such as Qatar, Bahrain or Kuwait.'" He added that "the time has come for jihadists to gather under the banner of the global jihadist movement, to heed to the advice of their leaders ... without delay".[2]

The leader of the Al-Huras, Abu Humam al-Shami, affirmed this approach in his audio recording on 7 March 2020. He said: "Do not limit yourselves to fighting your enemies face-to-face; utilize all tactics, especially guerrilla warfare, which is how the underdog fights. Frighten them with raids and commando attacks— make the ground beneath their feet shake, use even the trees and the rocks, until night becomes day and day becomes night for them".[3]

Before their decline, the Al-Huras worked to spread their ideology throughout the Idlib governorate. They established the Du'at al-Tawhid al-Da'wi Center under the leadership of Abu Osama al-Shawkani. The other main figures that had contributed to spreading their religious message were Abu Huraira al-Shami, Abu al-Baraa al-Muhajir (al-Tunisi), Abu Adnan al-Shami, Abu Muhammad al-Shami, Abu Qasuraal-Shami, and Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Makki.

---

[1] See: Ayman al-Zawahiri, "al-Sham lantarka' ila li-llah", *As-Sahab media*, https://tinyurl.com/2n9w4hdc.

[2] See: Sami al-Aridi, "Badhaltlihumnushi bi-mun'arij al-law", https://tinyurl.com/ruwpm86p.

[3] Abu Humam al-Shami, "Ya Ahl al-Sham al-thabat al-thabat", Audio recording by Sham al-Ribat Media, https://tinyurl.com/2f76k3p9.

The center's work included Friday sermons, lectures for youth, forums and trips for outreach (*da'wa*), cultural lessons, and hospital visits. The members also distributed pamphlets at car checkpoints and hung signs promoting their ideologies and activities.

The Al-Huras utilized electronic resources to promote about 100 different activities in 14 different cities and villages in Idlib. They also opened the Du'at al-Tawhid al-Da'wi Center, which was a summer school for children ages 5-10 years in Sahlal-Ruj. The school offered free transportation and Arabic and English language courses, religious studies (Qur'an, hadith, and shari'a), and sports.

The Al-Huras established the "Hay'at al-amr bi-l-ma'rufwa-l-nahi 'an al-munkar". The members of this group organized *hisba* (moral) patrols and distributed what it considered to be appropriate Islamic clothing to schoolchildren. It also organized campaigns to collect donations using the slogan "money is a pillar of jihad; without it, the jihadists' work will be compromised". They asked supporters to send messages to specific Telegram and Whatsapp accounts and would then provide information on bank accounts to which money could be sent.[1]

The Al-Huras also founded Sham al-Ribat Media on 3 April 2018 as the official agency for producing and distributing its media content. It issued 21 statements in a two-year period that outlined the group's stances on various issues. Seven of these dealt with external issues and were not connected to the Syrian revolution.

They Al-Huras produced seven short films: three short video speeches from the jurisconsult Sami al-Aridi, three were about the training camps, and support for the frontlines, and one looked at the

---

[1] See: Aaron Y. Zelin, "Hurras al-Din: Jama'at Tanzim al-Qaeda, al-mutaghadi 'ayn-ha fi Suriya".

military operations. There were also three audio clips that focused on Abu al-Humam al-Shami and Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Makki.

Chapter Conclusion: The Huras Al-Din and the Fall of Al-Qaeda in the Mashriq

The central al-Qaeda leadership in Khorasan and regional leadership in Iran depended on the Syrian branch to revive al-Qaeda's ambitions in the Levant. Al-Qaeda became involved in Syria immediately after the popular uprisings against the regime, and Syria quickly became one of the most important fronts of the globalized jihadist movement. Jihadists from around the world came to Syria to join al-Qaeda and became involved with various jihadist groups in order to disguise their different organizational and ideological affiliations.

The Huras Al-Din was the newest of al-Qaeda's regional branches. It had been formed in February 2018 and had rocky start. It emerged in the wake of al-Qaeda's failed projects in Iraq and Syria, after the Iraqi branch split off in 2013. The Syrian branch al-Nusra Front did the same in 2016, followed by Tahrir al-Sham two years later.

The new branch of al-Qaeda in northeastern Syria continued to grow. It seized the opportunity as US-led coalition forces focused on fighting the Islamic State. After ISIS was defeated and expelled from its last stronghold in Baghuz in northeastern Syria in March 2019, the US turned to face this rising danger from the Al-Huras.

The defeat of the Islamic State did not give al-Qaeda the opportunity to rebrand itself as the exclusive representative of global jihadism, nor to rebuild al-Qaeda in Syria. Instead, the defeat enabled the US to direct its attention to fighting this branch of al-Qaeda in Syria. Numerous reports were issued on the danger of al-Qaeda's new

strategy, in which Syria was a launching pad for a jihad that combined global and local dimensions.

Although the US continued to classify Tahrir al-Sham as a terrorist organization affiliated with al-Qaeda, it began to distinguish between Tahrir al-Sham and the Huras Al-Din. In his testimony, Coats said that "HTS [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham] and HAD [Tanzim Huras al-Din] are assessed to share a history and an ideology but to differ on policy. HTS centered its agenda on [Syria], with no interest in conducting attacks abroad. HAD, by contrast, was said to have a more international outlook". On 10 September 2019, the US government classified the Huras Al-Din as a terrorist organization, and as a branch of al-Qaeda in Syria. The US Department of State offered a sizable reward (five million dollars) to anyone who could offer information that would help uncover where the three top al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Huras leaders were hiding. These were Abu Abdel Karim al-Suri, Sami al-Aridi, and Farouq al-Suri.

The Huras Al-Din found itself caught between a rock and a hard place, so to speak, as it dealt with both the US Air Force and Tahrir al-Sham. The leadership and its headquarters remained regular targets for the US airstrikes and Tahrir al-Sham attacks on the ground. The Pentagon set up a hotline with the Russian leadership in order to carry out airstrikes without opposition against al-Qaeda leaders and training camps in Aleppo and Idlib.

As coalition airstrikes tirelessly hunted down and killed the organization's leaders, HTS security agencies conducted a campaign to arrest members of the Al-Huras and seize their headquarters. Signals from the US that drew a distinction between the Huras Al-Din and Tahrir al-Sham encouraged the latter to step up its pressure on the Huras Al-Din, while the Al-Huras accused HTS of collaborating with the US and providing it valuable intelligence information.

The Huras Al-Din struggled to keep its foothold during the US-led coalition's airstrikes, and Tahrir al-Sham's campaigns on the ground. The group saw considerable growth after was founded in 2018— it was able to recruit nearly five thousand fighters, and to form connections and alliances with Salafi jihadist movements. However, by early 2021, it was in decline. By this point, there were not more than 500 total fighters scattered in different areas. They lacked sufficient funding, heavy and medium weapons, established bases, or centralized leadership. These groups lived in a state of constant fear of international coalition airstrikes and Tahrir al-Sham's arrest campaigns.

By the beginning of 2021, the Huras Al-Din had lost most of its leadership through US drone strikes or in the field. From early on, coalition attacks had targeted al-Qaeda-linked jihadist leadership in Syria. The US referred to these leaders as the "Khorasan Group". These included: Muhsin al-Fadhli (killed on 8 July 2015), French jihadist David Drugeon (5 July 2015), Abdel Mohsen Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh/Sanafial-Nasr (15 October 2015), Abu Omar al-Kurdi (5 March 2015), Abu Musab al-Filistini, Abu al-Baraa al-Ansari, and Abu Firas al-Suri was killed (3 April 2015), Refa'i Taha/Abu Yasser al-Masri (5 April 2015), Ahmad Salama Mabruk/Abu Faraj al-Masri (3 October 2015), Osama Nammoura/Abu Omar Saraqeb/Abu Hajjar al-Homsi (8 September 2016) and Abu Khayr al-Masri Ahmed Hasasn Abu al-Khayr (26 February 2017).

After the Huras Al-Din was established, the pace of strikes against its leadership increased. Iyad al-Tubasi (Abu Julaybibal-Urduni) was killed at the end of December 2018 in the Lajat area in the Daraa countryside. He was shot by regime forces while trying to set up a branch in southern Syria. The Jordanian leader Sari al-Shihab (Abu Khiladal-Muhandis) was killed on 22 August 2019 in a car bombing in Idlib. On 30 June 2019, members of the Huras Al-Din were killed in US airstrikes in the al-Muhandiseen countryside in

western Aleppo. These included: Abu Umar al-Tunisi, Abu Dhar al-Masri, Abu Yahya al-Jazairi, and Abu Dujanaal-Tunisi. On 22 December 2019, Bilal Khreisat (Abu Khadija al-Urduni) was killed in a US strike that hit his car, near Termanin near the northern Idlib countryside. On 15 October 2020, Abu Muhammad al-Sudani was killed in a US airstrike on the village of Arab Saeed west of Idlib. On 14 June 2020, Khalid al-Aruri (Abu Qassam al-Urduni) was killed in a US airstrike on the Idlib governorate in northwest Syria.

The Huras Al-Din was targeted by international coalition airstrikes and Tahrir al-Sham arrest campaigns and also suffered from internal ideological and regional conflicts. These factors led to the decline of the group. Although the Al-Huras had adopted many Salafi jihadist ideas and maintained ideological and organizational ties with al-Qaeda, the group did not have the same ideological cohesion. It was split among different approaches and schools of thought, and on both theoretical and practical levels. With regard to its theoretical approach, the group was split between Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Atiyatallahal-Libi, and on the practical matters, between Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Since the Al-Huras was founded, al-Qaeda had lacked a cohesive organizational structure as well as resources and funding.

Conclusion

Al-Qaeda's critical error, particularly in the Mashriq (the Iraq and the Levant) was to become isolated from its strategic and political context—domestically, regionally, and internationally. This context helps account for the shifts that it underwent and the diverse networks and branches that formed. Local jihadist organizations had emerged, which saw fighting local regimes as the "neglected duty" (*al-farida al-gha'iba*) in the words of Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj. The formation of the Huras Al-Din was the culmination all the ups and downs of al-Qaeda's project since the occupation of Iraq in 2003.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a crucial factor in al-Qaeda's fate. After the Afghan jihad of the "Arab Afghans" during the Second Gulf War (at the beginning of the 1990s), and then the globalization of jihad in 1998, jihad shifted from local struggles against regimes and military occupation to fighting the "far enemy", the US—the main center of power in the unipolar world order. This was followed by the 11 September 2001 attacks, the War in Afghanistan, and the 2003 occupation of Iraq. The US neoconservatives brought this into the context of the "War on Terror", which led to the consolidation of al-Qaeda in Iraq and transformed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi from a relative unknown among jihadists to a major international target.

Although al-Zarqawi joined al-Qaeda a year after the occupation of Iraq, the two approaches remained significantly distinct from each other. Al-Qaeda focused on global jihad, while the Iraqi branch brought the local and global elements together. The latter endeavored to fight the near and far enemy at the same time, while also bringing sectarianism into its approach.

The occupation of Iraq encouraged the growth of Iranian influence in Iraq. Bin Laden's presence had acted to prevent the fragmentation that would later emerge after the Arab Spring, as local and regional policies paved the way for jihadism to grow in Syria and Iraq and revived al-Qaeda after US airstrikes had forced it into retreat. The "Sunni Awakening" movement was formed in 2007-2008 in Iraq, followed by the Arab Spring and a "Sunni crisis" of sorts in Iraq and Syria.

It is worth examining some of the key events here, including the Arab Spring and counterrevolutions that conservative Arab regimes launched in an effort to halt the progression of democracy. This set the region on the dangerous new course dictated by al-Qaeda and its branches in Iraq and Syria. The Arab Spring was unfolding at the same time that Osama bin Laden was killed. This helped al-Qaeda solidify its new approach of local groups embedded in society that avoided confrontation. Al-Zawahiri, who lacked the charisma of his predecessor, was unable to grapple with the internal conflicts taking place.

During this time, regional and international circumstances facilitated al-Nusra's resurgence as the new face of al-Qaeda in the Mashriq. At the beginning, it concealed its ties to the central branch of al-Qaeda. The leader of the Islamic State revealed this connection in 2013, when he demanded that the Syrian branch join the Iraqi branch to form a cross-border state within the Mashriq region. This marked the first major conflict between al-Qaeda's Syrian and Iraqi branches, the latter of which had declared a caliphate in Iraq.

These circumstances enabled the specter of jihadism to grow. This period saw the demise of the emerging state in Iraq and Syria, and the splitting off of the Syrian branch from the central branch of al-Qaeda after it established a foothold in Idlib. The Syrian branch was dependent on the outcome of international and regional negotiations and Russian-Turkish relations.

Geopolitics and the role of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the US were all important factors in determining the fate of Idlib. In return for protection, al-Nusra had to disassociate from al-Qaeda and became Tahrir al-Sham. This plunged the leader of al-Qaeda into a new round of conflict with an organization that was supposed to offer a different model for al-Qaeda. The conflict had an impact on Tahrir al-Sham itself, causing internal divisions and ultimately the splitting off of the Huras Al-Din.

The new organization had a rocky start and difficulty finding a foothold in a troubled Syria. Its ideological approach, organizational structure, and even its geographical position were shaped by the accumulated crises of recent years. In the case of Idlib in particular, it is not a stretch to say that the Al-Huras seems to have been al-Qaeda's final miscalculation in the Mashriq.

The regional and international political context had a profound influence on al-Qaeda and its branches. The US's role in the unipolar international order and the Gulf War of 1990 contributed to jihadism's shift towards globalization. The 11 September attacks, the occupation of Iraq, and the growing specter of Iranian influence and sectarianism paved the way for al-Zarqawi's project. Al-Zarqawi had different priorities, strategies, and tactics than the central branch of al-Qaeda. This led to ideological disputes on several key issues, including the conflict with the US, the issue of sectarianism, relations with Iran, and establishing a state on lands that jihadists controlled. This was followed by the Arab Spring and corresponding shifts in international and regional policies, followed by counterrevolutions, and the crisis in Idlib. This led to another rift in al-Qaeda, which found itself divided among the three main approaches described in this book.

Geopolitics has played an important role in shaping ideological differences and helps explain why different groups split off from al-

Qaeda. After the US launched attacks against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, the latter was forced to strike an implicit deal with Iran. Meanwhile, al-Zarqawi aligned himself with Sunni elements in Iraq and was hostile towards Iran and the Iraqi government. Al-Nusra was dealing with different international and regional circumstances in Syria due to involvement from the US, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. It split with al-Qaeda's globalized approach and tried to avoid being targeted in the "War on Terror".

Will al-Qaeda rise again? This is difficult to answer because it depends less on what al-Qaeda itself does, and rather on the local, regional, and international context. Equally important to al-Qaeda's fate are the policies of Arab regimes. In other words, the brutal ideology of ISIS and the rise of jihadism in the Mashriq cannot be separated from the domestic crises, the failure of development projects, and political stagnation. How else would jihadism have gained a foothold in the Sinai, Libya, and Yemen, and formed cells to carry out terrorist operations in so many Arab countries?

Why has a violent extremist organization like the Islamic State attracted thousands of followers? Why has it found popular support in Iraq and Syria and other countries in the region? Why did it come back after the Arab Spring failed, and efforts to establish democracy began to falter?

In conclusion, it is evident that jihadist ideologies of all kinds are far removed from the path of democracy or human rights. They do not acknowledge the value of pluralism, but rather feed off feelings of frustration, marginalization, and injustice among Arab youth, and the present lack of nonviolent avenues for change and reform.

Key Figures from the Huras Al-Din

Given the importance of al-Qaeda's project in the Levant, the central al-Qaeda leadership was particularly concerned with the fate of its Syrian branch. It formed a group of Syrian leaders early on known as the "Khorasan Group". The central leadership of al-Qaeda also formed a regional committee that would oversee al-Qaeda's work in the Levant, which was called the Hittin committee.

The Huras Al-Din's leadership structure included local, regional, and global leadership. The central branch made strategic decisions, while the local leadership made tactical decisions.

Ayman al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan was the head of the global leadership, while the Hittin committee in Iran constituted the regional leadership. This committee included Saif al-Adel, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Abu Khayr al-Masri, and Abu Abdel Karim al-Masri. After the latter two of these leaders went to Syria, they took on different roles.

The local leadership consisted of Abu Humam al-Suri, Abu Qassam al-Urduni, Abu Khadija al-Urduni, Abu Julaybibal-Urduni, Sami al-Aridi, and Khiladal-Muhandis. Here we provide short biographic notes on the most important figures from the local and regional leadership of al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, the Huras Al-Din.[1]

---

[1] The biographical information about jihadists is drawn from various sources, but particularly Abdel Ghani Mazouz's *Tanzim Hurras al-Din: Ishkaliyat al-nash'awa-l-tafkik.*

Saif al-Adel: His real name was Mohammed ibn Salah al-Din ibn Abdel Halim Zaidan. He was born in 1960 and was a lieutenant colonel in the Egyptian Special Forces. He was arrested in what the media referred to as the "Revival of Islamic Jihad" case. Al-Adel was later involved in the assassination attempt against Egyptian Interior Minister Hassan Abu Basha, but was later released due to the lack of evidence against him. He traveled to Afghanistan in 1989, where his military and security expertise were put to use in developing al-Qaeda's capabilities. He was in charge of the Al Farouq camp in Afghanistan and was involved in "improving training and tactics and developing battle plans. He had many roles within al-Qaeda, including security responsibilities". These included ensuring the security of the leadership, cadres, and all others within the organization. He married the daughter of Abu Walid al-Masri (Mustafa Hamid), the well-known Islamist writer. According to this source, he played a major role in supporting and training Abu Musab al-Zarqawi when he arrived in Afghanistan. After Osama Bin Laden was killed, he was appointed fourth in command after Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Khayr al-Masri, and Abu Mohamed al-Zayat. After Abu al-Khayr was killed, Saif al-Adl became second in command after al-Zayat. He fled to Iran after the US occupation of Afghanistan, where he moved between house arrest and prison. He was released in 2015 as part of a prisoner exchange between Iran and al-Qaeda in Yemen. He had to stay within the country but was able to move freely and to carry out his leadership responsibilities. In the disputes that followed the founding of Fatah al-Sham, Saif al-Adl entirely rejected this step forward and instead strongly supported establishing a new branch of al-Qaeda in Syria. He was added to the US and UN lists of terrorists, and the US State Department offered a large reward for anyone with knowledge of his whereabouts (10 million dollars).

Abu Khayr al-Masri: His real name was Abdullah Muhammad Rajab Abdel Rahman. He was born in northern Egypt in 1957, accord-

ing to jihadist sources. He was known as Ahmad Hassan Abu Khayr, and was a member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad along with Ayman al-Zawahiri. He left Egypt in the mid-1980s, and lived in several different countries including Sudan, which he visited with al-Zawahiri at the beginning of the 1990s. He then went to Afghanistan to join Osama bin Laden and to fight in the Bosnian war during 1992-1995. He was sentenced to death in absentia in Egypt in 1998 in the "returnees from Albania" case, and left Afghanistan after the 11 September attacks forIran. He was detained there in April 2003 along with Saif al-Adel and Abu Muhammad al-Masri. In March 2015, he was released by Iran in a prisoner exchange and then traveled to Syria. US intelligence indicated that Abu Khayr al-Masri was the likely successor to Ayman al-Zawahiri as leader of al-Qaeda, after the previous second-in-command Nasir al-Wuyashi (the leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) was killed in an airstrike in Yemen in 2015. Abu Khayr al-Masri led the political committee within al-Qaeda and was also a member of its Shura council. The US added him to its list of terrorists in 2005.

Abu Khayr was a member of the Hittin Committee, which was the regional leadership for al-Qaeda's branches in the Levant. According to jihadist sources, Abu Khayr al-Masri had worked with others on establishing a branch of al-Qaeda in Syria after al-Nusra split off in July 2016. His position on al-Nusra's decision has been the subject of debate, but it is certain that he remained aligned with al-Qaeda's central leadership. He was killed on 26 February 2017, after a drone strike targeted his car neat the al-Mastuma camp in the Idlib countryside.

Abu Muhammad al-Masri: His real name was Abdullah Ahmad Abdullah, and he was known as Mohammad al-Masri or al-Zayyat. He was born in Egypt in 1963 and was an officer in the Egyp-

tian army. He was the second-in-command in al-Qaeda and was pre-viously a leader and trainer for the al-Qaeda forces that fought against the US forces in Somalia and forced them to withdraw from the country in 1993. He was also directly in charge of planning the two US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Tanzania in 1998. After this operation, Osama bin Laden appointed him leader of al-Qaeda's foreign operations, and he became the third in command after the killing of Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri. He was then put in charge of all the camps and fronts, as well as foreign operations. (He was with Osama bin Laden in Sudan; they left together after intensive pressure on the National Salvation government. After the 11 September at-tacks, when the US forces invaded Afghanistan, al-Masri left forIran with his family, the family of Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leadership. In Iran, Hamza bin Osama bin Laden married his daugh-ter Maryam. He moved between house arrest and prison until he was released as part of the deal between al-Qaeda in Yemen and Iran, but did not leave the country. After Abu al-Khayr al-Masri was killed, he became second-in-command to al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda. al-Masri was assassinated in Iran on 7 August 2020 with his daughter Maryam, the widow of Hamza bin Laden, in a shooting from a car in Tehran carried out by Israeli operatives, according to the New York Times.

Muhsin al-Fadhli: His real name was Muhsin Fadl Iyad Ashour al-Fadhli. He was Kuwaiti and was born on 24 April 1981 to a Shi'i family but later became Sunni after being influenced by al-Qaeda. He was accused in various terrorist cases in Kuwait and elsewhere. His name was placed on a list of 36 wanted persons in Saudi Arabia in June 2005, after he was released from Saudi prison after being de-tained due to links to terrorist groups in 2001 and added to the "Arab Afghan" case. He worked with a group of Kuwaitis to establish the Arifjan cell in order to target US forces in Camp Arifjan in Kuwait in

2007 as well as US troops stationed on Failaka island. He was also accused in the USS Cole Bombing on the coast of Yemen on 12 October 2000, but was acquitted.

Al-Fadli went to Syria at the end of 2011 and joined the ranks of al-Nusra. The US State Department issued a statement in 2012 offering a seven-million-dollar reward for information about his whereabouts. In 2004 and 2005 he was added to the list of most wanted terrorists. The leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, made him his personal representative in Syria after Abu Khiladal-Suri was killed in 2014. The US targeted him in September 2014 and the Pentagon announced on 21 July 2015 that he had been killed in an airstrike in Syria, and said that he was the top member of the Khorasan Group.

Abu Abdel Karim al-Masri was a relatively unknown figure from Egypt. His real name is not known, although he was known in Syria as Karim. He was a member of the Shura council of the Huras Al-Din and was an intermediary between the Huras Al-Din and Tahrir al-Sham. He went to Syria with a group of al-Qaeda leaders in Iran after the prisoner exchange between al-Qaeda and Iran in March 2015. He was also a member of the Hittin committee that the central leadership had formed to oversee al-Qaeda's branches in Syria and the Levant. This committee included Saif al-Adel, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, and Abu Khayr al-Masri. According to the US State Department, Abu Karim al-Masri was a senior member of al-Qaeda and of the Huras Al-Din, and a member of the Shura council of the Huras Al-Din. The US put him on its list of terrorists and offered a five million dollar reward for information about his whereabouts.

Abu Humam al-Shami: His real name was Samir Hijazi. He was the leader of the Huras Al-Din and was also known as Farouq al-

Suri. He traveled to Afghanistan at the end of the 1990s and joined the Al Ghuraba camp there with Abu Musab al-Suri for a year. He later moved to the al- Farouk and then the al-Matar camp and was at the top of his training group after Abu Abbas al-Zahrani, who was involved in the 11 September attacks. Saif al-Adel appointed him to al-Matar region, where he worked as a trainer in the camp. He declared allegiance to Osama bin Laden and Abu Hafs al-Masri, al-Qaeda's military commander, put him in charge of Syrian jihadists in Afghanistan.

He left Afghanistan with Saif al-Adel after the US intervention there and was appointed by Mostafa Abu Yazid to work with al-Qaeda in Iraq. During that time, he met Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. He worked on training some al-Qaeda fi Bilad al-Rafidayn cadres on al-Zarqawi's orders. Abu Humam al-Suri returned to Afghanistan in 2005 and the leadership there asked him to oversee al-Qaeda's work in Syria. He was detained in Lebanon and spent five years in prison. When he was released after the Syrian revolution, he joined al-Nusra. al-Julani appointed him military commander and he remained in that role until Fatah al-Sham was founded, and then resigned. He maintained allegiance to al-Qaeda until the Huras Al-Din was announced and he became its leader. In September 2019, the US State Department offered five million dollars for information leading to his capture.

Sami al-Aridi: His real name was Mahmoud Muhammad al-Aridi and he was known as Abu Mahmoud al-Shami. He was born in Amman in 1973 and received his bachelor's and master's degrees in Islamic shari'a from the University of Jordan and a doctorate in 2001 in hadith studies ('*ilm al-hadith*). He was influenced by Salafi jihadist thought but limited his activities to scholarly and theoretical work until the Syrian revolution broke out in 2011, when he joined the

ranks of al-Nusra. He was the jurisconsult for al-Nusra and was asked to elaborate on al-Nusra's doctrine and approaches. He left the group after Fatah al-Sham was formed but retained his ties to al-Qaeda until he founded the Huras Al-Din with other associates and became the head jurisconsult. The US put him on its list of terrorists in September 2019 and said that he had been involved in "planning" terrorist operations against the US and Israeli. It offered a five-million-dollar reward for information leading to his capture.

Abu Qassam al-Urduni: His real name was Khalid Mustafa al-Aruri. He was the military commander of the Huras Al-Din and was born in 1967. He was an Arab Afghan veteran and had fought against the Russians in Afghanistan three decades previous. During that time, he met Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and their families later became linked through marriage after he married one of al-Zarqawi's sisters. They also spent time in a Jordanian prison, along with Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi as part of the Bayat al-Imam case. Abu Qassam was deeply influenced by al-Maqdisi's writings, especially his famous book, *Millat Ibrahim.* After he got out of prison in 1999, he went to Afghanistan and joined the Herat camp under al-Zarqawi's leadership. After the 11 September attacks, he went to Iran and was detained until being released in 2015 as part of a prisoner exchange between Iran and al-Qaeda in Yemen. He remained loyal to al-Qaeda and remained in contact with its leadership.

Abu Qassam was instrumental in convincing some militant groups to split off from Tahrir al-Sham to join al-Qaeda's new project in Syria. He was the field operations commander and not much is known about his personal life and writings, with the exception of some short, impromptu responses that he produced during the Tahrir al-Sham crisis. He admitted in one of these responses that writing and interacting with what was published online was not a priori-

ty for him. Tahrir al-Sham seized his computer during the arrest campaign that it launched against pro-al-Qaeda figures. They found that he was in direct communication with Saif al-Adel and Abu Muhammad al-Masri and was giving them detailed updates on what was happening in Syria. He was killed on 14 June 2020 in a drone strike in Idlib that hit the car he was traveling in. Bilal al-Sanaani, another Huras Al-Din leader, and former leader of the Badia Army, was also killed in the attack.

Khilad al-Muhandis: His real name was Sari Muhammad Hassan Shihab. He was Jordanian and was involved in the jihadist struggles in Afghanistan twenty years previous and then in Iraq and Syria. Little is known about his personal life. A state security judge in Jordan in 2004 brought conspiracy charges against him in absentia, specifically regarding carrying out terrorist operations. He was part of a case with 15 other people, including Khalid al-Aruri. The case was known as the "al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Islam" case. He was part of the al-Qaeda leadership that arrived in Syria in 2015 after the prisoner exchange deal between al-Qaeda in Yemen and Iran. Based on the statement after his death issued by the al-Qaeda leadership, it seems that he had a leading role in the organization. The statement described him as a "esteemed scholar of jihad" and "towering figure". They said that he was "among those who participated in developing the jihadist movement, which drew upon his writings and ideas to fight the enemy". Khilad al-Muhandis wrote regularly in his Telegram channel and signed his posts under the name "the forgotten amir". He played an important role in establishing the Huras Al-Din and was among the leaders who were detained by Tahrir al-Sham in their campaign against al-Qaeda. He was killed on 22 August 2019 in a car bombing in Idlib.

Abu Julaybibal-Urduni: His real name was Iyad al-Tubasi and he was born in 1974 in Zarqa, Jordan. He travelled to Afghanis-

tan where he joined al-Qaeda's camps, and then went to Iraq and joined al-Qaeda fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, which was led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He became close friends with al-Zarqawi, and their families were also linked by marriage. He stayed in Iraq until the Syrian revolution broke out in 2011. He went to Daraa in 2011 in order to help establish the first al-Nusra cells and to lead the emirate there. He left Daraa for Idlib along with the other top al-Nusra leadership, including Abu Maria al-Qahtani, Mazhar Alwais, Sami al-Aridi, and Abu Muhammad Shuhayl, among others. Al-Julani appointed him as leader of the border and coastal regions in the north, but he gave up the post soon after and decided to go back to Daraa in the south. However, al-Nusra's leadership refused to give him permission to return to Daraa, and blocked his route on multiple occasions. Abu Julaybib rejected the newly-formed Fatah al-Sham and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. He was among those detained by Tahrir al-Sham in 2017 as part of their campaign against those trying to establish a new branch of al-Qaeda in Syria. He held a leadership role in the Huras Al-Din after it was founded on 29 December 2018. He was killed under unknown circumstances along with other associates in Daraa. The Huras Al-Din issued an official statement mourning his death, stating that Abu Julaybib and his associates "have gone to their Lord while they were working to rekindle jihad in Hauran, the birthplace of this blessed struggle".

Abu Khadija al-Urduni: His real name was Bilal al-Khreisat. He was Jordanian and was close to Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi: they had spent many years in prison together. During this time Abu Khadija studied creed ('*aqida*) and principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) with Maqdisi. After more than ten years in prison he was released at the beginning of Syrian revolution and left for Syria where he joined the al-Nusra Front and worked as jurisconsult in eastern Ghouta, and then as a judge for the security forces. He was later re-

moved from the position on the recommendation of al-Nusra's monitoring committee. Throughout his time in Syria, he was close to Abu Julaybibal-Urduni. After Fatah al-Sham's announcement, he expressed his rejection of this step and declared that he would maintain allegiance to al-Qaeda. He worked with other leadership to establish the Huras Al-Din. Abu Khadija was killed in a drone strike that hit his car in the Idlib governorate on 21 December 2019. A few months before he was killed, he had a conflict with the Al-Huras leadership, which Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi confirmed in a tweet after Abu Khadija was killed. Al-Maqdisi said that he was not part of either the Al-Huras or al-Qaeda. However, this does not mean that he did not play an important role in establishing the Al-Huras, especially because he was active on social media. He continued to try to drum up support for a return to al-Qaeda, as was clear from the statement published by the Al-Huras after his death.

Bibliography

Books (in Arabic and in translation)

Abdullah Anas. Wiladat al-Afghan al-'Arab. Beirut: Dar Al Saqi. First edition, 2002.

Abdullah Azzam. *al-Saratanal-Ahmar*. Amman: Maktabat al-Aqsa, 1980.

Abu Abdullah al-Shami. *Fi zilaldawhat al-jihad.* First edition, 2016. Jami' al-Kutub al-Musawwara. https://tinyurl.com/4aj97ncb

Abu Bakr Naji. "Idarat al-Tawahhush: Akhtar marhalasa-tammurbiha al-Umma". N.d. https://tinyurl.com/ydnzkprm.

Abu Jandal al-Azadi. *Osama Bin Laden*: *Mujaddid al-Zaman wa-Qahir al-Amrikan.* Muntadaal-Ansar, Minbar al-Tawhidwa-l-Jihad. N.d.

Abu Musabal-Suri (Umar Abd al-Hakim). *Da'wat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'alamiyya.* 1425 Dhu al-Qa'da AH (December 2004) edition. https://tinyurl.com/yf99gduo

Akram Hijazi. *Dirasatfi al-Salafiyya al-jihadiyya.* Cairo: Madarat for Research and Publishing. Third edition, 2013.

Akram Hijazi. *Rihla fi samim'aql al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya: al-Qaeda namudhijan.* https://tinyurl.com/yg2bpxhd.

Ayman al-Zawahiri. *Fursantaht Raya al-Nabi.* Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad. https://tinyurl.com/yjekec9s.

Basel Mohamed. *Safahat min Sijill al-Ansar al-'Arab fi Afghanistan.* Riyadh: Dar al-'Ilm for Printing and Publishing, 1991.

Basheer Al Baker. *al-Qa'ida fi al-Yemen wa-l-Sa'udiya*. Beirut: Dar Al Saqi. First edition, 2010.

Camille Tawil*. al-Qa'idawa-Akhawatiha: Qisat al-Jihadiyyinal-'Arab.* Beirut: Dar al-Saqi. First edition, 2007.

Diaa Rashwan. *Filastin fi ru'yat Osama bin Laden: Dalil al-harakat al-Islamiyya fi al-'alam.* al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. First edition, January 2006, chapter 10.

Fadil Harun. *al-Harb 'ala al-Islam: MudhakiratFadil Harun*. Ed. Shaykh Abu Khaybar al-Ansari. Center for the Study of the Islamic World, 1443 AH.

Fawaz Gerges. *al-Qa'ida, al-su'udwa-l-uful: Tafkiknazariyat al-harb 'ala al-irhab.* Translated by Dr. Mohammad Shitta. Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut. First edition, 2012.

François Burgat. *al-Islam al-Siyasi fi Zaman al-Qa'ida*(*Islamism in the Shadow of al-Qaeda*). Translated by Sahar Said. Beirut: Cadmus Books. First edition, 2006.

Fuad Hussein. *al-Zarqawi: al-Jil al-thani li-l-Qa'ida.* Dar al-Khayal. First edition, 2005.

Hassan Abu Haniyeh. *al-Jihadiya al-'Arabiyya: Indimaj al-ab'ad: al-Nikaya wa-l-tamkinbayna "al-Dawla al-Islamiyya" wa-"Qa'idat al-Jihad".* Doha/Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. First edition, 2018.

Hassan Abu Haniyeh and Muhammad Abu Rumman. *Tanzim al-dawla al-Islamiyya: al-Azma al-Sunniyawa-l-Sira' 'ala al-Jihadiya al-'alamiyya,* Amman: Friedrich Ebert Foundation. First edition, 2015.

Hazem al-Amin. *al-Salafi al-Yatim, al-Wajh al-Filastini li-l-Jihad al-'Alami wa-l-Qa'ida*. Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2011.

Jean-Charles Brisard. *Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: al-Wijh al-akhar li-Tanzim al-Qa'ida*(*The New Face of al-Qaeda*). Translated by Hala Salah Eldin Lulu. Arab Scientific Publishers. first edition, 2006.

Jonathan Randall. *Osama* (*Osama: The Making of a Terrorist*). Translated by Shukri Rahim. Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk. First edition. 2005.

Joseph Massad. *Daymumat al-Mas'ala al-Filastiniyya*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab. First edition, 2009.

Lawrence Wright. *al-Buruj al-Mushayyid: al-Qa'idawa-l-Tariq ila 11 Sibtimbir*(*The Looming Tower: al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*)*.* Translated by Heba Naguib Maghribi. Cairo: Kalimat 'Arabiyya for Translation and Publishing. Third edition, 2011.

Manuela Lameda. "Hal wafat al-shaykh nihaya li-tanzim al-Qa'ida?" In *al-Qa'idaba'd bin Laden* (multiple authors). Dubai: al-Mesbar. First edition, 2012.

Michael Scheuer. *al-Fawqiyya al-Imbrialiyya al-Amrikiyya: Limadha Yakhsaru al-Gharb al-Harb 'ala al-Irhab* (*Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror*). Translated by Sima Mohamed Abdrabbuh. Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers. First edition, 2005.

Mohamed Mahmoud OuldMohamedou. *al-hajma al-mudadda li-l-hamla al-salibiyya: judhurwa-tada'iyat al-hadi 'ashr min Sibtimbir*(*Contre-Croisade: Origines et Conséquences du 11 Septembre*). Translated from the French by Ahmed Saleh al-Humaid. Irbid, Jordan: 'Alam al-Kutub al-Hadith. First edition, 2010.

Mohammad Abd al-Salam Faraj. *al-Jihad: al-Farida al-gha'iba,* Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad. https://tinyurl.com/yjjfyy2r

Muhammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Haniyeh. *'Ashiqat al-shahada: Tashakku-lat al-jihadiyya al-nisawiyyaminal-Qaeda ila al-Dawla al-Islamiyya*. Amman: Friedrich Ebert Foundation. First edition, 2017.

Muhammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Haniyeh. *al-Salafiya al-jihadiyya fi-l-Urdunba'dmaqtal al-Zarqawi: Muqaribat al-Huwwiya, Azmat al-Qiyada, Daba-biyat al-Ru'ya.* Amman: Friedrich Ebert Foundation. First edition, 2009.

Mahmoud al-Rifa'i. *al-Mashru' al-islahi fi al-Sa'udiya: Qisatal-Hawaliwa-l-'Awda.* Washington, 1995.

Murad Batal Shishani. *al-Harakaal-Islamiyya fi al-Shishanwa-l-Sira' al-Shishani al-Rusi.* Amman: Al Quds Center for Political Studies. First edition, 2002.

Olivier Roy. *'Awlamat al-Islam (Globalization of Islam).* Translated by Lara Maalouf. Beirut: Dar Al Saqi. First edition, 2003.

Osama Bin Laden. Comprehensive Archive of the Speeches of the Leader of the Mujahideen Shaykh Osama Bin Mohamed Bin Laden. First edition, 2006.

Rif'at Sayid Ahmad. *Tanzimat al-Ghadab al-Islami fi al-Sab'inat.* Cairo: Maktabat al-Madbouli. First edition, 1989.

Robert Taber. *Harb al-Mustad'afin: DirasaKlasikiyya fi Harb al-Asabat.* (*The War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare*). With commentary by Shaykh Abu Musab al-Suri. https://tinyurl.com/uad3y4sn.

Stéphane Lacroix. *Zaman al-Sahwa: al-Harakat al-Islamiyya al-Mu'asira fi al-Sa'udiya* (*The Awakening of Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*). Translated by Abdelhaq Zammouri. Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing. First edition, 2012.

Steve Cole. *Al Bin Laden: wa-'Alam al-Naftwa-l-Mal wa-l-Irhab*(*The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century*). Translated by Eman Abdel Ghani Negm. Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing. First edition, 2014.

Thomas Hegghammer. *al-Qafila: Abdallah Azzam wa-Su'ud al-Jihad al-'Alami (The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad).* Translated by Obaida Amer. Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing. First edition, 2021.

Articles and Studies

Aaron Lund. "The Jihadi Spiral". *Carnegie Middle East Center,*
https://tinyurl.com/yxbw52rj

Aaron Y. Zelin. "al-Muqatilun al-Sunna al-ajanib fi Suria: al-Khalfiyawa-l-'awamil al-musahilawa-l-istijabat al-mukhtara". *Washington Institute.*
https://tinyurl.com/yegtgrew

Abdel-Ghani Mazuz. "Tanzim Hurras al-Din: Ishkaliyat al-nash'awa-l-tafkik". Egyptian Institute for Studies. https://tinyurl.com/4732ubsy

Abdullah ibn Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz. "Hukm al-Ista'ana bi-l-KuffarfiQital al-Kuffar*".* Saudi Arabia: *Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta.*
https://tinyurl.com/5fyadks5

Abida Amer. "Rihlatal-Julani: Min rahimDa'ish ila istinsakh Hezbollah". *Aljazeera.net*.
https://tinyurl.com/43rykn3w

Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud. "Tawjihat'amma bi-khusus al-mashru' al-Islami al-jihadi bi-Asawad". *Comprehensive Islamic Library*. https://tinyurl.com/yb52bnj5.

Abu Musab al-Suri. *Mulahizathawla al-tajriba al-jihadiyya fi Suriya.*
https://tinyurl.com/43mxcvey.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. *Ahl al-Sunna fi al-Sham fi-muwajat al-Nusayriya al-Salibiyya*wa-*l-Yahud*. https://tinyurl.com/yeuaw9jv

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. "Ifadat Asir: Yaqawmmaliad'ukumila al-jannawa-tad'unniila al-nar". *Comprehensive Archive of the Speeches and Writings of the "Lion of Islam" Shaykh Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.*

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Interview with Shaykh Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. 1427 AH. Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad. https://tinyurl.com/yg7ujod7

Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni. *Shahadatwarada'ala al-abatil al-waridafikalimat al - Shaykh Abdel RahimAtoun,* https://tinyurl.com/4x8j52rx

Adam Roberts, "The End of the Occupation: Iraq 2004". *al-Mustaqbalal-'Arabi* 307. Beirut.

Akram Hijazi. "al-Thawra al-Suriyyawa-masarat al-tadwil" (6). Kharitat al-quwa al-musallaha. *Zaman al-wasl.* https://tinyurl.com/ydka6v9r

Amin al-Assi. "FaIthbatuwa-l-mutamarridun'ala al-Nusra, istibaqanlil-l-ma'raka". *al-Arabyal-Jadeed.* https://tinyurl.com/ypb94hp3

Andrew Gavin Marshall. *The Imperial Anatomy of al-Qaeda.* In partial translation at: https://tinyurl.com/5ftdj2ve.

Anthony Cordesman. *The Iraq War: Strategies, Tactics, and Military Lessons.* Translated as "al 'Iraq ma al-'amal" in *al-Mustaqbalal-'Arabi* 305. Beirut.

Ayman al-Zawahiri. "al-Tariq ila al-Quds yammur'abr al-Qahira", *Majallat al-Mujahidin.* Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, https://tinyurl.com/yzvckd6g.

Ayman al-Zawahiri. "Tawjihat ʾamma li-l-'amal al-jihadi". *As-Sahab Media.* https://tinyurl.com/y59jtwu4

Basil al-Junaidi. "Qisat 'asdiqa' Sednaya': Aqwa thalatha rijal fi Suriya al-yawm!" *Al-jumhuriya.net,* https://tinyurl.com/yw84xaay

Charles Lister. "Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape". *Brookings Doha Center.* Policy brief, May 2014. https://tinyurl.com/yhjadd66

Charles Lister. "Inqilab al-Qaeda 'ala tabi'ha al-Suri"("al-Qaeda's Turning Against its Syrian Affiliate"). Translated by Unsa Issa. Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies. https://tinyurl.com/4rd8evxa

Charles Lister. "Jabhat al-Nusra matatwa-aqwa min ayywaqtmada", ("The Nusra Front is Dead and Stronger than Ever Before", *Foreign Policy*). Translated by Abdel Rahman al-Husseini, *al-Ghad.* https://tinyurl.com/b92x23eh

Charles Lister. "Ta'thirat al-azma al-Suriyyawa-inkisar al-Qaeda (The Syria Effect: al-Qaeda Fractures). Translated by Heba al-Mansi. *al-Watan al-Arabi.* https://tinyurl.com/294j3vfv

Cole Bunzel. "Why are Al Qaeda Leaders in Iran?" *Foreign Affairs.* https://tinyurl.com/yyyfuz8r

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Kyle Dabruzzi. "Hal latazalu al-Qiyada al-Markaziyya li-l-Qaeda Mutarabita?" ("Is al-Qaeda's Central Leadership Still Relevant?"). Translated by Sadiq Abu al-Saud. *Al Quds Center for Political Studies.* https://tinyurl.com/vhxvt72n.

Diab Sariya. "Akadimiyatsijn Saydnaya al-'askari: Sina'at al-tatarruf". *Aljumhuriyya.net.* https://tinyurl.com/23prjc2y.

Didier Billion. "Al'abmakirawa-masalih mushtaraka: al-'alaqa al-Turkiyya al-Rusiyyabayna al-tahalluf al-mustahilwa-l-qati'a ghayr al-muhtamala" ("Russie-Turquie: Alliance impossible, rupture improbable"). Translated by Hisham al-Mansuri. *Orient XXI*. https://tinyurl.com/yhtvhm6q

Eric Schmitt. "Tahdhirat Amrikiyya min khatarfar' 'al-Qaeda' al-Suri". *New York Times.* Translated by Basil Darwish. *Arabi 21.* https://tinyurl.com/4jra8dxy

FadiShamiya. "al-Ikhwan al-Muslimunwa-l-tali'a al-muqatilawa-l-'alaqama' al-sulta". In *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun fi Suriya* (multiple authors). al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research. Book no. 33. August 2009.

Fateh Krekar. "al-ru'ya al-Zarqawiyyawa-himluha al-thaqil". *Aljazeera.net*. https://tinyurl.com/yzs4xbk3

Francesco Marone. "Why European Countries Do Not Repatriate Their Foreign Fighters". *European Eye on Radicalization.* https://tinyurl.com/4mmr7pe6

Haitham Manna. "SijnSednaya: Bayna al-haqiqawa-l-tawzif". *Aljazeera.net*. https://tinyurl.com/48nk4aec

Hassan Abu Haniyeh. "Filastin: Ka-marhalajadida li-Tanzim 'al-Dawla al-Islamiyya' zaman "Safqat al-Qarn". *Aljazeera.net.* https://tinyurl.com/yt9b4avk.

Hassan Abu Haniyeh. "Hal dakhalat al-jihadiya al-'alamiyya Filastin". *Arabi 21*. https://tinyurl.com/ydkfqz3l

Hassan Abu Haniyeh. "Hal intahat 'Majmu'at Khorasan' dahkilal-Nusra?" *Arabi 21.* https://tinyurl.com/yk53mvs7

Hassan Abu Haniyeh. "Hal yaqud Hamza bin Laden al-Qaeda ilahiqba jihadiyya jadida?" *Arabi 21*. https://tinyurl.com/4mwwhtp3

Hassan Abu Haniyeh. "Hurras al-Din wa-takyifatal-Qa'ida fi Suriya". *Arabi 21.* https://tinyurl.com/345k837b

Hassan Abu Haniyeh. "Limadha sannafat Amrika Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham munazzama irhabiyya?" *Arabi 21*. https://tinyurl.com/whfewtwp.

Hassan Abu Haniyeh. "Tanzimal-Qa'ida ''ala tariq al-inqisamwa-l-inhidar". *Arabi 21*. https://tinyurl.com/ywar54ur

Hassan Abu Haniyeh."al-Qaeda wa-Indimaj al-ab'ad: wiladathalitha wa-nash'amusta'nifa". *Aljazeera.net.* https://tinyurl.com/ye8chru8

Jennifer Cafarella, Nicholas Heras, and Genevieve Casagrande. "al-Qaeda Is Gaining Strength in Syria". *Foreign Policy.* Translated by Abdel Rahman al-Hussaini in *al-Ghad* at https://tinyurl.com/4u7vysmc

Jonathan Marcus. "Suriya wa-Ghumudyuhitbil-mustaqbalba'disti'adat Halab". *BBC Arabic.* https://tinyurl.com/s9txa395

Karam al-Hafyan, "al-Maqdisi wa-l-Salafiyya al-jihadiyya: al-Makana wa-l-ta'thir", *Egyptian Institute for Studies*. https://tinyurl.com/ssskkyje

Matthew Levitt. "al-Muwa'mabaynamukafahat al-irhabwa-tanafus al-quwa al-'uzma" ("Harmonizing Counterterrorism and Great-Power Competition"). *Washington Institute*. https://tinyurl.com/kw9tp6h4

Maxim Cheks. "Ghumudal-Gharbhawla Idlib wa-tamziq al-mu'ahadat al-shaytan". Translated by Sarab al-Asmar. *al-Thawra.* https://tinyurl.com/nbxh3tsy.

Michael Rubin. "Syria's Path to Islamist Terror". *Middle East Forum*. Winter 2010. https://tinyurl.com/42ja9h87

Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Haniyeh. "Ansar al-Shari'a: Ashkal istijabat 'al-Qaeda' li-l-tahawwul al-dimukratifi al-'alam al-'Arabi". *Lebanese Center for Studies and Consulting*. https://tinyurl.com/yzcxx37c.

Mohammad Hafez. "al-Azma dakhil al-haraka al-jihadiyya: Tashaddud Tanzim al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi muqabilsha'bawiyat al-Qaeda*". Counterterrorism Centre*. https://tinyurl.com/2d38ms7a

Murad Batal Shishani. "Abu Musab al-Suri wa-l-jil al-thalithmin al-Salafiyyin al-Jihadiyyin". In *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun fi Suriya* (multiple authors). al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research. Book No. 32. August 2009.

Murad Batal Shishani. "Man humm 'Ansar al-Shari'a' fi Yemen?" https://tinyurl.com/s74hkmvw

Mustafa Hamid (Abu Walid al-Masri) . *Tanzimal-Qa'ida: Ila Ayna?* https://tinyurl.com/67urkk6f

Muzamjaral-Sham. "al-Qaeda fiSuriya: al-Wilaya al-thaniyya". *Ala Basira*. https://tinyurl.com/yvxfbr4j.

Nasib Abdel Aziz. "Maqtal Abu Hajjar al-Homsi: Akthar min gharajawiyya". *al-Mudun.* https://tinyurl.com/v7jjmhc

Orwa Ajjoub. "Hal sa-taqdi Tahriral-Sham 'ala al-Qaeda fiSuriya?" https://tinyurl.com/rwcycetc

Orwa Ajjoub."Hay'at Tahriral-Sham wa-l-Qa'idafiSuriya: al-Tawfiqbayna al-mutanaqidin" ("HTS and al-Qaeda in Syria: Reconciling the Irreconcilable"). Translated by Ahmed Barakat. *Aswat Online*, https://tinyurl.com/uj8azvta

Osama Bin Laden. "al-Risala al-Thaniya ila al-Sha'b al-Amriki: al-Harb, Asbabuhawa-Nata'ijuha". 29 October 2004. Comprehensive Archive of the Speeches of the Leader of the Mujahideen Shaykh Osama Bin Mohamed Bin Laden. First edition, 2006.

Osama bin Laden. "First message to the People of Iraq, and to All Muslims", on 10 Dhu al-Hijjah 1423 AH/ 11 February 2003 Comprehensive Archive of the Speeches of the Leader of the Mujahideen Shaykh Osama Bin Mohamed Bin Laden, first collection, first edition, 3 June 2006.

Paula Astih. "Inshiqaqat fi Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham wa-Hashim al-Shaykh yastaqilmin al-qiyada". *Asharq al-Awsat.* https://tinyurl.com/2ehz4ae6

Paul-Marie de La Gorce. "Preemptive War: A Dangerous Strategic Concept".
https://tinyurl.com/5skwsw2d.

Peter Neumann. "Jihadiyu fi Suriya: La yalum al-Assad ilanafsihi" ("Suspects into Collaborators: Peter Neumann Argues that Assad Has Himself to Blame"). Translated by Yasser al-Zayyat. *Aljumhurriya.net,*
https://tinyurl.com/266f37pp.

Phyllis Bennis. *A Failed Transition: The Mounting Costs of the Iraq War*. Translated as "Intiqalfashil li-l-sulta, al-nafaqat al-mutasa'ida li-Harb al-Iraq" in *al-Mustaqbalal-Arabi* 30. Beirut.

RadwanMortada. "al-Qa'ida: Tariq al-QudsyamurrfiSuriya". *al-Akhbar.*
https://tinyurl.com/4bc87h9p

Raphaël Lefèvre. "The Syrian Brotherhood's Armed Struggle". *Carnegie Middle East Center*. https://tinyurl.com/ygq4ug7h.

Razan Zaitouneh. "al-Islamiyyun al-Suriyyunwa-ghawayat al-jihad fi al-Iraq". In *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun fi Suriya* (multiple authors): 271. al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research. Book no. 32. August 2009.

Richard Barrett. "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees".

Soufan Center. Translated by Amal Washman for *Idrak Center for Studies and Consulting* at https://tinyurl.com/yhllwjp

Saif al-Adel. "Tajribatima'a Abu Musab al-Zarqawi". Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad,
https://tinyurl.com/yzlxvu3d.

Saleh al-Hamawi. "Sira' Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham wa-Hurras al-Din, min al-shirakaila al-'ada'!" ("İdlib'de HTS – Hurrasü'd-Din Rekabeti: İdeolojik Ortaklıktan Düşmanlığa"). Translated by Ali Kamakh. *Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies*: https://tinyurl.com/9vy8p9zu

Sam Heller. "Leak Reveals Jihadists' Weaking Grip in Syria's Idlib". *War on The Rocks,*
https://tinyurl.com/huh9du94

Sami al-Aridi. "Silsilat Allah thamma li-l-tarikh: Shahadat hawlafakk al-irtibatbayna Jabhat al-Nusra wa-Tanzim al-Qaeda". https://tinyurl.com/4jt48x95.

Thomas Hegghammer. "On the 30th Anniversary of the Mysterious Death of the 'Imam ofJihad': Who Killed Shaykh Azzam?" *Aljazeera.net.*
https://tinyurl.com/t4eds7cn

Thomas Pickering, James Scheslinger, and Eric Schwartz. *Iraq: The Day After.* Translated as "al-Iraq ba'd'am wahid" in *al-Mustaqbalal-Arabi* 302. Beirut.

William Polk. *Understanding Iraq: The Whole Sweep of Iraqi History, from Genghis Khan's Mongols to the Ottoman Turks to the British Mandate to the American Occupation.* Translated as "al-Waqi' wa-l-khiyarat fi-Harb al-Iraq" in *al-Mustaqbalal-Arabi* 311. Beirut.

Reports

Abu Julaybibal-Urduni li-l-Julani. "Hakadhaasa'at Tahrir al-Sham li-zawjati". *Arabi 21*. https://tinyurl.com/wtau327f

"Afdal al-khiyarat al-sayyi'a li-Idlib al-Suriyya". *International Crisis Group*. Middle East Report no. 197. 14 March 2019. https://tinyurl.com/cc89vz4

"Alarabiya.net tanfarid bi-hiwar ma'a ahamm qadat Da'ish fi al-Iraq (Abdel Nasser Qardash). *Alarabiya.net.* https://tinyurl.com/ya3dmyu5

"al-'Amil al-Jihadi fi Idlib al-Suriyya: Hadith ma'a Abu Muhammad al-Julani" International Crisis Group in cooperation with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva, https://tinyurl.com/yhuyh26r

"'Alwiyat Abdullah Azzam' tahullnafsiha fi Suriya" ("Abdullah Azzam Brigades dissolves itself in Syria). *Long War Journal*. Translated by the Nedaa Post (Syria), https://tinyurl.com/yjbmf3a4.

"Amrika lam taqtul 'Abu Umar Saraqeb', wa-l-arjah anna ghara Rusiyyaqatalathu fi Halab". *France 24.* https://tinyurl.com/5bjshenn

"Amrikata'abirJabhat al-Nusra al-Suriyya al-mu'aridamunazzamairhabiyya". *Reuters*. https://tinyurl.com/yh6kctww

Announcement of the formation of al-Nusra Front in the Levant. https://tinyurl.com/yg2fvase

"Bayan min Tanzim al-Qaeda wa-nubashshirkum al-shaykh hayy yarzuq wa-lillah al-hamd. Risala min Qa'idat al-Jihad ila Ummatina al-Muslimawa-Sha'buna al-batalfiFilastin". https://tinyurl.com/tw9xcsxx

Collected communications between the two shaykhs Atiyatallah al-Libi and Majid al-Majid. *Nukhbat al-Fikr*. https://tinyurl.com/ygzrgpkq

al-Fajr Media's interview with Saleh al-Qaraawi, field commander of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades. https://tinyurl.com/yfemuan2

"Fi Idlib al-Suriya, fursat Washington li-i'adat tasawwur mukafahat al-irhab" ("In Syria's Idlib, Washington's Chance to Reimagine Counter-terrorism"). *International Crisis Group*. https://tinyurl.com/3s8kerme

"Gharalil-tahaluftaqtul 25 'ansar-an min Jabhat Fatah al-Sham". *Aljazeera.net.* https://tinyurl.com/eundp25h

"Hal fara' al-Qaeda bi-Idlib fi tariqihiila al-zawal? ("Is al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria's Idlib on its way to demise?") *al-Monitor.* Translated by the Nedaa Post. https://tinyurl.com/4yzemwnr

"Hal huwa al-Jihad? al-Mu'arida al-Asuliyya fi Suriya". *International Crisis Group.* Middle East Report no 131. 12 October 2012. https://tinyurl.com/yzq96sn6

"Hal tamtalik Amrika 'Bank Ightiyalat" li-darb Fatah al-Sham?:al-Gharat al-akhiratu'id li-l-adhan ittifaq Muskuwa-Washintun li-tasfiyatiha". *Alsouria Net*. https://tinyurl.com/e7ysz9u2

"Hal tatahawwal Idlib al-Suriyyaila Qita' Ghazzajadid?"*Euronews*.
https://tinyurl.com/3nnrvhxd

"Al-Hay'awa-i'adattashkil al-fada' al-jihadi: Tartibat dakhliyya wa-rasa'il kharijiyya",
Omran Center for Strategic Studies. https://tinyurl.com/279y9xm8

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. "Wa-li-l-qada' kalimat al-fasl". https://tinyurl.com/635n9dd.

"Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Takattul al-Rafidin li-Astana". *Aljazeera.net*.
https://tinyurl.com/y6jkbjbx

"Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham tastakmal saytarataha 'ala Idlib ba'd tard khasmiha Ahrar al-
Sham". *al-Quds al-Arabi*. https://tinyurl.com/26s3dncj

Interview with Bin Laden conducted by Abdel Bari Atwan, editor-in-chief of the *Al
Quds Al Arabi* newspaper. Published in London in November 1996.

"Jabhat al-Nusra al-Suriyyatubayi' al-Zawahiri za'im al-Qaeda". *Reuters*.
https://tinyurl.com/yeusg4yn

"Jeffrey yashrahsi yasatbil adihi fi Suriya wa-yuqaddim wasfan mufaja'an li-Hay'at
Tahrir al-Sham". *Syria TV*. https://tinyurl.com/4a72j658

Kata'ib Abdullah Azzam". *Aljazeera.net*. https://tinyurl.com/ye8zhku9

"Li-madhaaqdamat Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham 'ala khatwat al-tawqif al-akhira li-ba'd al-
ikhwa". Document published by Radeef Media (Tahrir al-Sham).
https://tinyurl.com/ap6hf3ab.

"Madha bi-imkan al-Wilayat al-Muttahida an taf'al fi al-Iraq". *International Crisis
Group,* in al-Mustaqbalal-Arabi 312. Beirut.

"Mahammat Britanniya fi ghayat al-sirriya li-qatlnajil bin Laden fi Suriya*". RT*.
https://tinyurl.com/42sh5d53

Majid al-Majid yamut 'ala sariri'tiqalihi bi-l-mustashfa al-'askari fi Bayrut" *France 24,*
https://tinyurl.com/yf9fh8nt.

"Maqtal al-'asharatmin al-Nusra fi rif Halab al-gharbi bi-gharat li-l-tahalluf". *Al
Mayadeen.* https://tinyurl.com/wspkyd4m

"Muzamjar yakshif ma'lumat muthira'an al-Qaeda wa-l-Urduniyyinwa-al-Julani".
Arabi 21. https://tinyurl.com/ffcaxrsx

"New York Times: 'Amaliyat tabadul asra bayna Iran wa-al-Qaeda". *Arabi 21*.
https://tinyurl.com/ygv4xqqd

"al-Nusra tanfasil'an al-Qaeda wa-taghayyarismaha". *Aljazeera.net.*
https://tinyurl.com/2t2kwhj2

"Osama bin Laden, rahmamahu Allah". *al-Fajr Media.* Tuesday 29 Jumada al-Awwal
1432 AH/ 3 May 2011. https://archive.org/details/Qaeda_BenLaden2

Risala Maftuhaila al-Shaykh ibn Baz bi-Butlan Fatwahi bi-l-Sulh ma'a al-Yahud". Ad-
vice and Reform Committee, Statement no. 11, 29 December 1994.

Statement of Allegiance of the Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad to Qa'idat al-Jihad. *Min-
bar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad*. https://tinyurl.com/yzw95596.

Statement of the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders: https://tinyurl.com/ja25ustf

Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad (al-Qiyada al-'amma). Bayan bi-sha'n khilafat al-shaykh Osama bin Laden fi imaratjama'at Qai'dat al-jihad. *al-Fajr Media*. https://archive.org/details/nvbdspocez

Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad (al-Qiyada al-'amma). "Ishta hamidanwa-muttashahidan", Bayan bi-sha'nmalhamat al-iba' wa-ishtihad al-shaykh Osama bin Laden, rah-hamahu Allah. *al-Fajr Media,* Tuesday 29 Jumada al-Awwal 1432 AH/ 3 May 2011, https://archive.org/details/Qaeda_BenLaden2

Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad (al-Qiyada al-'amma)."Kalimat shahid al-Islam, kamanahsu-buhu, li-ummatihi al-Muslima". *As-Sahab Media.* 17 Jumada al-Thani 1432/ 20 May 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkiGwWG3xuw

"Turkiyatasif Idlib bi-Qita' Ghaza al-jadid, ma awjah al-shibh?" *EnabBaladi*. https://tinyurl.com/rs9exp3k

"al-Qaeda tuwafiq dimniyyan' ala infisalal-Nusra'anha". *Arabi 21*. https://tinyurl.com/5f8n3w4k

"Qiyadifi Tahriral-Sham yakshif 'anittijahfasilihi li-l-tatbi' wa-tawdih 'ajil min al-Hay'a". *El Dorar El Shamia.* https://tinyurl.com/jtd5fzht

Text of the ceasefire agreement in Syria, with signatories. *Alhurra.* https://tinyurl.com/4s5uunbt.

"Wathiqa takshif khulafa' al-Zawahiri fi qiyadatal-Qaeda". *France 24*. https://tinyurl.com/stab7dbr

"al-Zawahiriy ulghi damaj 'jihadiyyi' Suriyawa-l-Iraq". *Aljazeera.net*. https://tinyurl.com/yjzma9x6

Audio and Video Sources

Abdel Rahim Atoun, Response to al-Zawahiri's speech. "Sa-nuqatilukumhata la ta-kunfitna". https://tinyurl.com/8cxp2955

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Audio recording entitled "Wa-bashr al-mu'minin". *Furqan Media*. https://tinyurl.com/yer2gyuq

Abu Humam al-Shami. "Ya Ahl al-Sham al-thabat al-thabat". Audio recording by Sham al-Ribat Media. https://tinyurl.com/2f76k3p9

Abu Maria al-Qahtani. "Ayyuha al-Mutaraddid". Audio recording. https://tinyurl.com/266kd8x9

Abu Muhammad al-Adnani. Audiorecording. "'Adhra Amir al-Qaeda". *Furqan Media.* https://tinyurl.com/ymhu43st

Aymanal-Zawahiri. "Fal-nuqatilhum bunyanan marsusan". *As-Sahab Media*. https://tinyurl.com/2hzt3wyp

Ayman al-Zawahiri. "Ila al-amamyausud al-Sham". *As-Sahab Media*. 12 February
2012. https://tinyurl.com/ygqgwso6

Ayman al-Zawahiri. "Sa-nuqatilukum hata la takun fitna". *As-Sahab Media.*
https://tinyurl.com/2ajfvahc

Aymanal-Zawahiri. "Shahadat li-haqndima' al-mujahideenbi-Sham". *As-Sahab Media.*
https://tinyurl.com/9kd2pbc8

Aymanal-Zawahiri. "al-Sham lantarka' ila li-llah". *As-Sahab Media*.
https://tinyurl.com/2n9w4hdc

Aymanal-Zawahiri. "Al-waqi' baynaal-alamwa-l-amal". Audio interview with As-
Sahab 7 May 2014. https://tinyurl.com/ye69hgbb

Ayman al-Zawahiri. Videorecording entitled "'Izz al-sharqawwalahu Dimashq". 28
July 2011. *As-Sahab Media.* https://tinyurl.com/yg46ekm2

"Bila hudud: Abu Muhammad al-Julani, Amir Jabhat al-Nusra". *Aljazeera.net.*
https://tinyurl.com/2myx5a4c

Interview with Bin Laden on CNN. 1997. https://tinyurl.com/khyurauf.

Interview with Bin Laden on ABC. December 1998. https://tinyurl.com/38vcdt8z.

"Liqa' al-Julani bi-'ilamiyyin Gharbiyyin: al-dalalatwa-l-ahdaf". *Jusoor Center for Stu-
dies.* https://tinyurl.com/4zyb86j2

Osama bin Laden. Audio recording. "al-Sabil li-khalas Filastin*". As-Sahab Media.*
https://tinyurl.com/yhysjb8x

"al-Tasjil al-musarrib al-kamil li-l-qiyadiwa-l-shar'i Abu Fatah al-Farghali".
https://tinyurl.com/36447tz4.

"Wilayat al-Yemen: Ma'dhiraila Rabbikum: Watha'iqiyusallit al-daw' 'ala musiratin-
hiraftanzimal-Qaeda ba'd ma 'urifa (bi-thawrat al-rabi' al-'Arabi)". Video re-
cording. https://tinyurl.com/26p546v2

Why the Guardians of Religion? This is an important question that merits an answer, since it is a relatively small organization compared to al-Qaeda, ISIS, or al-Nusra Front, and has dealt with major crises from the outset. However, the case of the Guardians of Religion sheds light on what happened to al-Qaeda in the Arab Mashriq

This book examines the ideological and organizational dimensions of al-Qaeda's efforts to penetrate the Levant. This is a history marked by moments of transformation, beginning with the shift from local jihad against the "near enemy" towards a globalized jihad against the "far enemy." This later evolved into al-Zarqawi's project in Iraq, which combined both approaches. The book traces the progression of the Syrian crisis, including the rise of al-Nusra and the ensuing ideological conflicts, critiques from the central branch of al-Qaeda, political conditions, and foreign policy that have all contributed to the rise and fall of al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations

It is of the utmost importance that al-Qaeda's trajectory in general, and its project in the Mashriq (Iraq and the Levant) in particular, be understood within its local, regional, and international contexts. Al-Qaeda's ideology developed within specific historical, strategic, and political conditions that help account for the shifts it underwent, as well as the diverse networks and branches that emerged. This began with local jihadist groups that saw fighting local regimes as the "neglected duty" (al-farida al-gha'iba), in the words of Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj. The formation of the Guardians of Religion was the culmination of all the ups and downs of al-Qaeda's project in the region since the occupation of Iraq in 2003