

THE RESURGENCE OF AL-QAEDA IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Azeem Ibrahim

By 2010, there was a strong case to make that al-Qaeda, as an organization, was effectively beaten. Its leaders were under severe pressure in their final bastions of northwest Pakistan, and their ability to influence events seemed limited. The Arab Spring appeared to be the final blow. A wave of revolt across the Islamic world owed nothing to their actions and seemed an explicit repudiation of their emphasis on terrorism and violence. Where al-Qaeda affiliates were still important, such as Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and the Maghreb, there was a strong case to make that these groups were fighting a local conflict and only paying lip service to al-Qaeda's notional aim of a universal caliphate.

The early phases of the revolt in Syria were typical of events elsewhere in the Arab Spring. This was a civil revolt against a regime widely seen to be corrupt and brutal, and drew a range of opinions from secular to religiously devout but presented very little space for al-Qaeda to exploit. Over time, the regime responded with increasing brutality, and a steady stream of defectors from the Syrian army joined the rebellion. As the revolt became increasingly militarized, a range of groups from the Free Syrian Army to more Islamist movements took up arms.

By 2012, al-Qaeda inspired the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and expanded its operations from northwestern Iraq to Syria. It brought the same terrorist tactics as it used in Iraq with no concern for how many deaths it caused, and imposed its own strict version of Sharia law on the areas it controlled. Its arrival in the war allowed the Assad regime to stress they were fighting the same Islamist enemy as

the West. However, ISIS failed to gain support, mainly due to its excessive brutality, and had already been repudiated by al-Qaeda's central leadership. In effect, the ISIS failure fits with the original narrative that al-Qaeda, for all its threat and brutality, faces strict limits in its ability to build support. Even in the middle of a brutal civil war, ISIS's ideology was too much for the local, religiously devout Sunni population to accept.

However, the formal al-Qaeda subsidiary in Syria is now the Al Nusra Front. The Al Nusra Front seems to have learned lessons from the brutality and sectarianism of ISIS. It has forged alliances with other salafist-jihadist groups and taken a more moderate line on the issue of Sharia law in regions it controls. This approach indicates an important shift in al-Qaeda's tactics. It seems to be looking for wider alliances and prepared to moderate (relatively) its violence and sectarianism. This, of course, does not extend to embrace Shia, Christian, or secular communities and groups, but is less divisive to other Sunnis.

The Syrian civil war has become a stalemate. Neither the regime nor the rebels seems to have the capacity to take ground from the other side. The result is massive human misery, exemplified by both the number who have fled the country and all those displaced from their homes or living under siege. It has also become a test for the revised al-Qaeda strategy.

A fusion of its notionally global aims with a local conflict and a willingness to cooperate with those who do not share its narrow ideology may offer the group the means to recover from its losses up to 2010. For the West, this creates two threats. One is that it may carve out enough space in northern and eastern Syria

to allow the creation of a safe haven for its fighters. Second is that the various Western educated fighters who travel to Syria to fight the regime may be absorbed into its ranks and return to their home countries ready to carry out acts of terrorism.

On the other hand, Al Nusrah may show the limits even of this revised strategy. It clearly cannot, nor does it wish to, reach out beyond the Sunni community. Equally, most of those fighting in Syria are doing so to bring down the Assad regime. They are not seeking to use victory in Syria as a springboard to building a global caliphate based on the sectarian Wahhabist tradition of Islam.

The response of the West in the coming year will play an important part in determining whether Al Nusrah is successful, or if this is further indication of the real limits to al-Qaeda's ability to influence events and reach its goals.

More information about the programs of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and U.S. Army War College (USAWC) Press may be found on the Institute's homepage at www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press executive summaries should contact the Editor for Production via e-mail at SSI_Publishing@conus.army.mil. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College."



This Publication



SSI Website



USAWC Website