

## Al-Qaeda or Isis? The Arab states have chosen the devil they know

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After plunging Syria into five years of a bloody civil war that has killed 300,000 and displaced 10 million, Bashar al-Assad is preparing for the endgame. He has been digging a bunker for himself, creating an enclave in the mountains around the coastal city of Latakia where his community, the Alawites, are in a majority. The Iranians are helping him set up this new retreat, but his hope of hanging on to Syria is dying. The question being asked in the region is not whether he'll survive, but who will run Damascus once he falls – and what will happen should the country be split along ethnic and sectarian lines.

When considering the future, Syrian moderate rebel groups don't feature much in the equation. They have little standing in the pecking order because the US and the Arabs have failed to support them. Ash Carter, the US defence secretary, stunned the Senate last week when he admitted that the Pentagon had trained just 60 moderate Syrians to fight Isis – a far cry from the planned 5,400 announced last year. Meanwhile, in Iraq, the contingent of 3,500 American soldiers dispatched to train the Iraqi army have ended up training only 2,600 Iraqi soldiers. This is clearly no way to win a war – either against Isis, or the Assad regime.

The Arab world, which has been anxiously watching all of this for years now, is coming to some hard conclusions. Assad is finished – this much is clear. So who's next? If the answer is not the five-dozen moderates trained by the Pentagon, it will be one of the two extremist militias who control the most territory in Syria: Isis and al-Qa'eda (called by its local name Jabhat al-Nusra). A horrible choice, you might argue, but for many it's the only choice. The Arab Gulf states and Turkey have already made up their mind. They are heavily arming, funding and talking to al-Qa'eda, regarding it as a safer bet than Isis. It might once have seemed unimaginable but Isis has surpassed even al-Qa'eda in the brutal horrors it inflicts on its victims.

So could al-Qa'eda, once considered the most deadly terrorist organisation in the world, end up with their own state; as masters of the caliphate, with the support of their neighbours? And if so, how on earth did we reach such a surreal and sorry state of affairs?

The first thing to note is that neither Washington nor London have any enthusiasm for backing al-Qa'eda. Its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, remains on the USA hit list and there's a \$25 million reward for information leading to his capture. Backing al-Qa'eda is too bitter a pill for the West, with the memories of 9/11 and 7/7 so vivid. So it's easy to see why US diplomats are appalled by the turn of events in Syria. But if the Obama administration is not prepared to deploy troops on the ground to tackle Isis, it cannot criticise its own allies (such as Saudi Arabia) if they want to cosy up to al-Qa'eda.

The West offers no decent alternative plan. Its policy on the Middle East has been riven by contradictions, and characterised by a lack of commitment and a state of denial. So it's the Middle Eastern states that have started calling the shots (as arguably they must do) and it's they who have chosen al-Qa'eda as their new ally. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Gulf Emirates are supporting al-Qa'eda with arms, money and a strategic dialogue. While the Gulf states are following Saudi Arabia's lead and are also petrified of Isis terrorist hits in their vulnerable city states, such as the recent beach attack in Tunisia and the several Isis bomb blasts in Saudi Arabia, the Turks are deeply concerned that Syrian Kurds will carve out a separate state for themselves and draw Turkey's own Kurds in.

But it's not just al-Qa'eda in Syria; other al-Qa'eda offshoots are also being redefined as friends, not foes. In Yemen, Washington has long pursued a drone campaign against the group known as al-Qa'eda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which has included the recent killing of Nasir al-Wuhayshi, its leader. Washington believes that AQAP is still trying to target the US mainland. Yet many of America's Arab allies are now essentially siding with AQAP in a Saudi-led war against Iran. Why? Because, as so many countries learn in wartime, the enemy of one's enemy can become one's ally. No matter how ugly the enemy. These Arab states consider Iran as a larger national security threat than AQAP.

So, on the battlefields of Syria and Yemen, the Arab states are not only opposing American attacks on al-Qa'eda but actively offering support to its leader, al-Zawahiri. So two quite separate super-wars are now being fought. The first is the war waged by the US and its western allies in an attempt to defeat al-Qa'eda and Isis in Syria and Yemen.

Significantly the Arab states are taking no part in this war and providing the Americans with no intelligence. The second war is being fought by all the regional Arab states and Turkey – against Assad and other Iranian-backed forces in the region, as well as Isis. In this war, the Arab states openly avoid bombing or attacking al-Qa'eda in Syria and AQAP – and, indeed, provide both with logistical support. This is because both al-Qa'eda offshoots have now declared aims which are shared by the Arab states: they want to topple the Assad regime and oppose Iran.

Things have been moving so fast that any western policy forged more than a year ago is now hopelessly out of date. Not only has Isis come from nowhere to run a chunk of territory the size of Great Britain – in both Iraq and Syria – but it can claim to have terrorist hit squads in a dozen countries stretching from Tunisia to Pakistan. Isis now has affiliated militant groups in at least 11 countries, including Nigeria and Russia. As the newspapers document daily, Isis is also adept at grooming and recruiting young western Muslims – from Luton to Lagos – and persuading them to join the jihad. It is succeeding in its state-building project and rapidly adapting to change.

But while the world's focus has been on Isis and its stunning transformation, the equally dramatic changes in al-Qa'eda have barely been scrutinised. Although depleted by years of drone strikes, it is still a major presence in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. It continues to inspire Afghan and Pakistani militants, who provide sanctuaries to keep its leadership alive. And unlike Isis, which demands absolute subjugation of the inhabitants of any territory it conquers ('surrender or be executed'), it is cooperating with other anti-Assad groups. Al-Qa'eda recently joined the 'Army of Conquest', an Islamist alliance of rebel militias in northern Syria.

While Isis depends on foreign recruits, fighters for al-Nusra, al-Qa'eda's Syrian arm, are almost wholly Syrian – making them more committed to Syria's future. They have toned down their aims of implementing a brutal version of Islamic law. Most significantly, in recent interviews, al-Nusra leaders have vowed not to attack targets in the West. This is quite a departure from Osama bin Laden's concept of 'global jihad', and a new leaning towards more 'nationalist jihadism'.

Some reports suggest that al-Zawahiri has even called off attacks on the US. If true, this shows a very un-Isis-like ability to put vendetta and revenge to one side for the sake of a more enticing goal. It's true that al-Zawahiri loathes America, all the more because his wife and two children were killed in a drone strike. Yet he is proving able to play the long game. Al-Nusra's leader, Abu Mohammed al-Julani, recently told Al Jazeera that 'the instructions that we have are not to use al-Sham [Syria] as a base to launch attacks on the West or Europe – so as not to muddy the current war'.

It's not just talk. Al-Qa'eda most dramatically demonstrated its new soft line when AQAP seized the Yemeni province of Hadramut this spring. It inflicted little damage, executed nobody, declined to run the local government and instead installed a council of elders to govern.

How long would this new less violent attitude last? Nobody knows. Perhaps it is just tactics to win support on the ground. It might only become really clear when it's too late. The Arabs may be right to conclude that there are at least some grounds for thinking that al-Qa'eda is evolving.

However the real test will be whether al-Qa'eda will truly tolerate minorities and let other sorts of Muslims exist, as and when they gain power? One indicator is Afghanistan, where al-Qa'eda and their Taliban allies have not attacked or massacred Afghan Shias since 11 September 2001. Before the US invasion they did so openly.

But it is too early to say what al-Qa'eda's long-term attitude to minorities will be. Meanwhile, Arab states have shown little sympathy for non-Muslim minorities and Shias when they are being attacked by Isis.

Things are now moving fast. A relationship is evolving and formal talks between the Arab states and al-Qa'eda may soon take place without the West at the table. It's a strategic decision: the Arabs regard an extremist victory in Syria as inevitable so they have decided to go with al-Qa'eda as the lesser of the two evils – especially if that evil is willing to resist Iran. Saudi Arabia's King Salman, since he came to the throne in January, has pursued a far more aggressive policy toward Iran and Syria. For the US and Europe it will be extremely difficult in terms of domestic politics and national security to strike a relationship with al-Qa'eda, but ultimately that may be the only choice, especially if the West's Arab allies are going ahead.

Just a few years ago, the 'war on terror' was defined as extinguishing al-Qa'eda. Now, for many of our Arab allies, it means shoring up al-Qa'eda and praying that they're not as bad as had once been believed. One thing in all this murky double-dealing is clear: the US and Britain are paying a bitter price for refusing to remove Assad when they genuinely had the chance four years ago. Acting has its risks, but failing to act has its consequences too – as we will all now find out.