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Waking up to the New al-Qaeda. January 12, 2015.

By Ahmed Rashid

Almost from the moment the massacre at *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris was first reported last week, there was speculation that the attack might have been tied to ISIS, the extremist group whose rise in Syria and Iraq has preoccupied Western officials for months. But the main influence behind Said and Cherif Kouachi, the two brothers who committed the Paris attacks, came from a quite different organization, one that has gotten all too little attention in the West in recent months: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which is based in Yemen.

During his standoff with police after the initial attack last week, Cherif Kouachi [told](#) a French television station that he was “sent by Yemen’s al-Qaeda” and that he had been “financed” by the Yemen-based American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in a drone attack in 2011. Though it has not been confirmed, US officials also now say they believe AQAP may have [ordered](#) the attack. (Although a third terrorist, Amedy Coulibaly, who was killed at a Kosher supermarket in Paris on Friday, declared his allegiance to ISIS in a video released after his death, there has not been evidence that ISIS had any part in the attacks.) This should not come as a surprise.

For some years it has been well known in jihadist and Western intelligence circles that the most effective branch of al-Qaeda was in Yemen, where the group trained sophisticated bomb makers, recruited mules or suicide bombers of many nationalities, controlled considerable territory, and—unlike ISIS—specifically aimed at attacking the West. It was also known that al-Qaeda had placed *Charlie Hebdo* editor Stéphane Charbonnier on its “most wanted” list. French intelligence officials were further aware that the Kouachis, who were French citizens of Algerian background, were deeply involved in AQAP and suspected of having received jihadist training in Yemen in 2011.

Yet French intelligence [ended its surveillance](#) of the brothers over the past year because they were no longer deemed to pose a threat at a time when most attention was being devoted to ISIS. The lack of attention to the Yemen connections of the Kouachis is a devastating intelligence failure.

The Yemen branch of al-Qaeda should be a particular concern to the West. AQAP is almost as old as the original al-Qaeda organization formed in Afghanistan and Pakistan by Osama bin Laden in the early 1980s. Bin Laden’s family was from Yemen and it was always his aim to maintain an organization in that country, where territory was fairly easy to acquire, in order to provide permanent bases from which to eventually seize power there. It never happened in bin Laden’s own lifetime, but now the Yemeni state is in chaos and the possibility that AQAP could gain control of a significant part of the country cannot be ruled out.

Moreover, in its fundamental aims, AQAP poses a more direct threat to Western targets than ISIS. From its initial rise to power in Iraq and Syria, ISIS has given top priority to the “near enemy,” what it views as the corrupt secular Arab regimes of the Middle East. Thus, while there have been some attacks in the West by supporters of ISIS, the group itself has set out to seize Arab territory, destroy borders, and establish a unitary Islamic state or Caliphate stretching from Morocco to India. By contrast, AQAP has maintained the original al-Qaeda aim of attacking the “far enemy”—Western countries and Western capitalism—in order to bring about the collapse of Arab regimes.

Despite a sustained US drone campaign and a brutal civil war in Yemen, AQAP continues to have a strong organization and is far from being annihilated. Unlike other branches of al-Qaeda, AQAP has never picked a fight with ISIS, despite rivalry between the two groups. ISIS may have ambitions in Yemen but the country is far from ISIS’s heartland in Iraq and Syria, and the group has decided for the moment to leave AQAP alone. All of this should make Western intelligence agencies particularly vigilant about further AQAP attacks in the West.

However, the phenomenal growth of ISIS in the past twelve months has distracted Western intelligence from the continued threat of al-Qaeda. ISIS battlefield successes have helped draw some 18,000 foreign jihadists from ninety 90 countries to join and fight for the movement in Syria and Iraq. The original al-Qaeda never managed to recruit such large numbers of followers, and ISIS’s success has provided inspiration and ideological clarity to many extremists in Europe and around the world. It also has overwhelmed Western intelligence agencies. In numerous reports, we have been told that the European intelligence agencies had far too many leads to follow, too many returning fighters from Syria and Iraq to keep tabs on, and not enough manpower to do all the tasks required. There is now little doubt that the first beneficiary of this de-facto switch in Western intelligence priorities was AQAP.

The attacks in France killed seventeen people—far fewer than the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11—but they seem to have had nearly as powerful an effect, terrifying governments across Europe, turning security protocols and precautions upside down, and even provoking demands by some leaders that the Schengen open-border policy be revised. Doubtless, in the weeks ahead we will see even greater social, political, and economic repercussions in France and other European countries, including a change in security practices at airports and train stations, and possibly in laws and detention rules by the courts. Worst of all, it may draw new support to right wing, anti-migrant, anti-Muslim political parties, making them more likely to win elections in several countries, including France.

In other words, the Paris attacks could dramatically change the way Western governments operate, which is exactly what the old al-Qaeda tried to do when it attacked the twin towers in New York. AQAP will continue to make this its strategic aim—to bring Western capitalism to its knees. ISIS represents an extraordinary threat of its own, but the Paris attacks have demonstrated that the greatest danger to the West is still al-Qaeda.