

Why We Need al-Qaeda

The New York Review of Books. June 16, 2015.

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Could the group long considered the most lethal terrorist organization in the world be the best option left in the Middle East for the US and its allies?

In Washington and other Western capitals there is rampant confusion about the status and future of al-Qaeda. Some Western diplomats and commentators claim that al-Qaeda has been largely surpassed by the much more popular and brutal ISIS. Others insist that it is expanding in Syria and Yemen, remains strong in Pakistan and Afghanistan where its present leadership is based, and continues to pose the most significant terrorist threat to the West.

Meanwhile, events in the Middle East suggest growing contradictions in Western policy. In Syria, the United States has been bombing Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's local affiliate, alongside ISIS. But Arab members of the US-led coalition against ISIS, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, are actively supporting al-Nusra with arms and money. In Yemen, the US has pursued a years-long drone campaign against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a campaign that has included, most recently, the [reported](#) (though still unconfirmed) killing on Friday of AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi. But much of the Arab world is now essentially siding with AQAP in a Saudi-led war against Houthi rebels in that country. And while ISIS commands overwhelming attention for its ability to gain and hold territory and draw thousands of Western recruits, there has been little scrutiny of the dramatic effect it has had on al-Qaeda itself.

The truth is that al-Qaeda has evolved in profound ways since the death of Osama bin Laden and the emergence of ISIS. Despite a concerted campaign against it by the US and its coalition of more than sixty countries, ISIS can now claim to have ground forces in more than a dozen countries stretching from Tunisia to Central Asia and Pakistan, and it is implementing a state-building project—the Caliphate—that al-Qaeda could only dream of. The most dangerous long-term consequence of ISIS's growth is the unleashing of a general war between Sunni and Shia that could divide the Muslim world for decades.

Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, is much depleted. However, it still has a major presence in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen through its affiliates, and it continues to inspire Afghan, Central Asian, and Pakistani militants, who provide the group with sanctuaries and manpower in order to keep its leadership under Ayman al-Zawahiri alive. It also has increasingly set itself apart from ISIS in strategy and aims on battlefields in both Syria and Yemen. So the question has become urgent: if al-Qaeda is changing, what is it changing to? Is it for the better or the worse? And what part might it have in the crucial confrontation with ISIS?

Partly as a result of al-Qaeda's ambiguous presence in the Middle East's expanding conflicts, there is now a dramatic divergence between the US and the Arab states about how the war against ISIS should be conducted. In fact, amid the chaos of simultaneous conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, two quite separate super-wars are now being fought. The first war is being fought by the US and its Western allies, who are seeking to defeat Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and AQAP in Yemen alongside the campaign against ISIS. Significantly, however, the Arab states are taking no part in the war against al-Qaeda and are providing no intelligence support to the American forces leading it.

The second war, by contrast, is being fought by the regional Arab states—primarily Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Egypt—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-Nusra and AQAP, and in fact now provide both with financial support and weapons. This is because both groups have now declared aims that are shared by the Arab states. Al-Nusra has set as its primary objectives toppling the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, defeating the pro-Iran Hezbollah militia, and eliminating Iranian support for Assad. AQAP, meanwhile, is resisting the Houthi uprising and also wants to eliminate Iranian influence in Yemen. So al-Nusra and AQAP have become allies and not enemies of the Arab states, despite the fact that al-Qaeda itself once sought to overthrow these same regimes.

All of this is completely at odds with longstanding US aims and purposes. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry continue to insist that there is no difference between ISIS and the two al-Qaeda groups. It also remains true that both groups are lethal; AQAP in particular has in past years shown its ability to plan ambitious attacks against Western targets. Yet the Arabs are justified in concluding that al-Qaeda may be evolving. Both groups have now taken over cities and towns in their respective states, marking the first time that al-Qaeda has sought to control territory. And both have set out policies of local control that differ markedly from those of ISIS.

Consider al-Nusra, ISIS's primary rival in Syria. Unlike ISIS, which demands absolute subjugation of the inhabitants of any territory it conquers (surrender or be executed), al-Nusra is cooperating with other anti-Assad groups and recently joined the "Army of Conquest" alliance of rebel militias in northern Syria. Moreover, in contrast to ISIS's largely international and non-Syrian fighting force, al-Nusra's fighters are almost wholly Syrian, making them both more reliable and more committed to Syria's future. Meanwhile, in interviews with Al Jazeera, al-Nusra leaders have vowed not to attack targets in the West, promoting an ideology that might be called "nationalist jihadism" rather than global jihad. In recent months, al-Nusra's leaders have toned down the implementation of their own brutal version of Islamic law, while putting on hold their own plans of building a caliphate.

Many of these same changes have been evident with AQAP in Yemen. The al-Qaeda affiliate's takeover of the southeastern Yemeni province of Hadramut this spring was a remarkably tame affair. The group seized the capital Mukallah, robbed the bank, and then retreated, declining to run the government themselves or impose sharia law and installing a council of elders instead. They have urged the council to focus on governance and providing services to the people.

For Arab leaders, determining whether al-Qaeda has really changed will depend on the group's long-term attitude toward Shias. Both ISIS and al-Qaeda detest Shias, but al-Qaeda has tried in the past to moderate its views and stave off the kind of large-scale sectarian war that ISIS is now advocating. As long ago as 1998, Osama bin Laden warned his Arab fighters and the Taliban to stop excessive killing of Shias in Afghanistan, and during the height of the war in Iraq, when the leader of al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch Abu Musab al-Zarqawi launched an exceptionally brutal campaign against Shias, both Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri warned him to desist. For the moment, al-Nusra and AQAP seem to be avoiding anti-Shia fanaticism, viewing it as an impediment to gaining more territory. What is unknown is whether this moderation toward minority groups such as the Alawites in Syria or the Yazidis in Iraq will continue if they gain total control. Also unknown is their attitude to an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq.

But just as important in the Arab rapprochement with al-Qaeda is the reality that US policies have failed. Both the US effort to build up a so-called moderate front in Syria and to bring Sunni and Shia together in Iraq through the auspices of a failed Iraqi Shia elite have become doomed strategies. And as the US enters the final stages of a nuclear deal with Iran, many Arab leaders view Washington as abandoning them.

With Arab money and persuasion, both al-Nusra and AQAP are gaining capacity for local governance and state building. However distasteful the jihadist ideology behind both groups, these efforts suggest an outcome that may be considerably less threatening than that of the Islamic State. According to some reports, al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri has issued advice that attacks on the US should stop for the time being in order to allow al-Qaeda and its affiliates to concentrate on the Middle East. Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the AQAP leader who was reportedly killed in a drone strike last week, took orders directly from al-Zawahiri; so does Abu Mohammed al-Julani, the leader of al-Nusra, who recently told Al Jazeera, "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."

With 230,000 killed and 7.6 million people uprooted in Syria alone, the Arab states want a quick end to the Assad regime and a viable solution for Syria. They know that solution will never come from the weak moderate opposition, and that any lasting peace will require support by the strong and ruthless Islamist groups fighting there. Saudi Arabia's King Salman, since he came to the throne in January 2015, has pursued a far more aggressive policy toward both Iran and Syria, and is prepared to sup with the devil, including al-Qaeda itself, to achieve his aims. Turkey too has been humiliated by its loss of dominance in the region and has now set up a command and control center for al-Nusra on its own soil.

The West must recognize that the ground is shifting quickly across the region and the Arab Spring is now on the verge of turning into an Islamic fundamentalist winter, whether we like it or not. The US has paid a bitter price for declining to back the Arab states in removing Assad four years ago when there was a viable moderate opposition. In the months ahead, we should not be surprised if formal talks between al-Qaeda and these Arab states begin. The only one not at the table could be the United States.
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