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Al-Qaeda's Resurrection

With the demise of the Islamic State, a revived al-Qaeda and its affiliates should now be considered the world's top terrorist threat.

Expert Brief *by* Bruce Hoffman

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Members of al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra in Idlib Province, Syria. Ammar Abdullah/Reuters

While the self-proclaimed Islamic State has dominated the headlines and preoccupied national security officials for the past four years, al-Qaeda has been quietly rebuilding. Its announcement last summer of another affiliate—this one dedicated to the liberation of Kashmir—coupled with the resurrection of its presence in Afghanistan and the solidification of its influence in Syria, Yemen, and Somalia, underscores the resiliency and continued vitality of the United States' preeminent terrorist enemy.

Although al-Qaeda's rebuilding and reorganization predates the 2011 Arab Spring, the upheaval that followed helped

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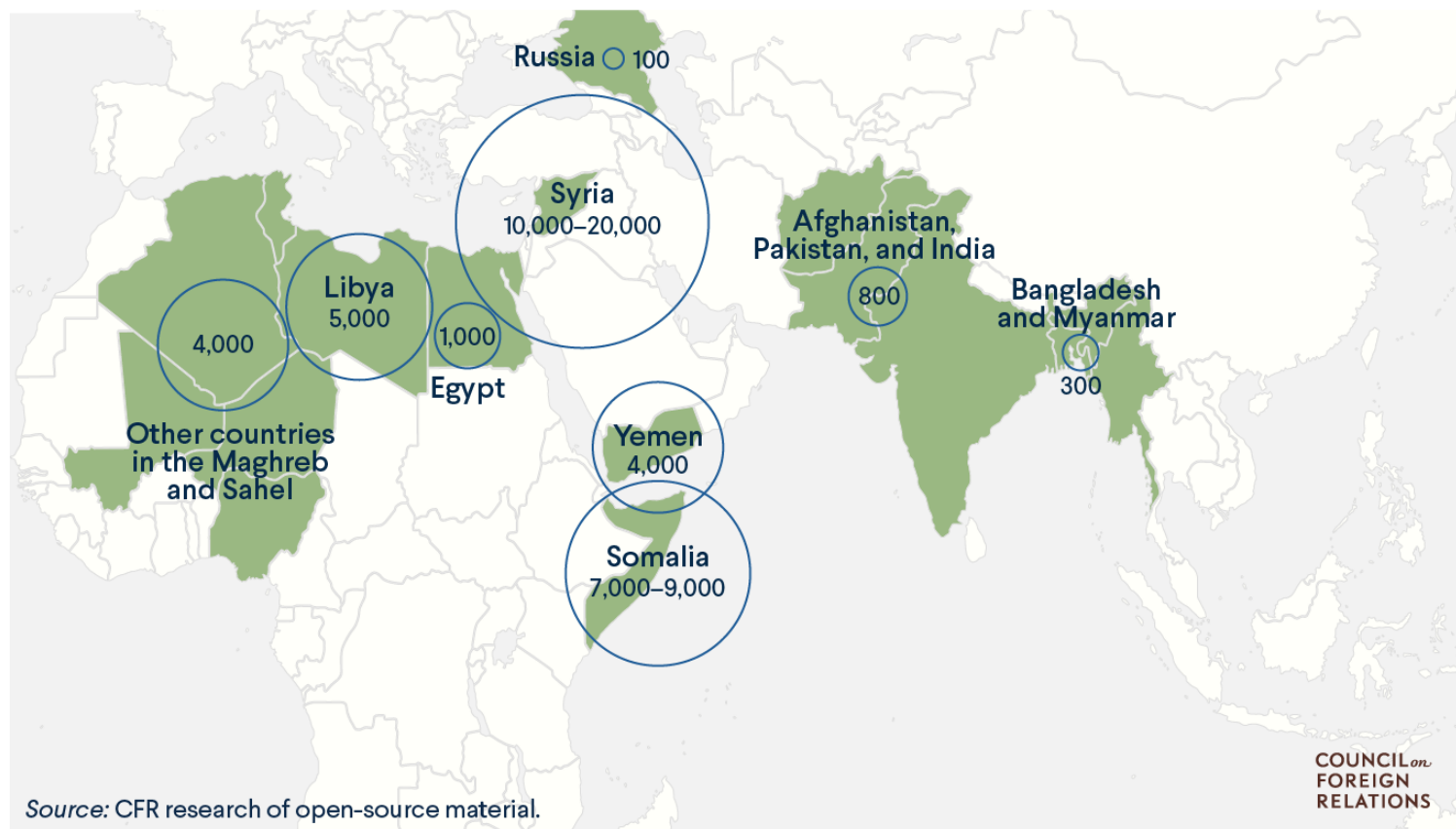
optimism among local and regional rights activists and Western governments held that a combination of popular protest, civil disobedience, and social media had rendered terrorism an irrelevant anachronism. The longing for democracy and economic reform, it was argued, had decisively trumped repression and violence. However, where the optimists saw irreversible positive change, al-Qaeda discerned new and inviting opportunities.

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The successive killings in 2011 and 2012 of Osama bin Laden; Anwar al-Awlaki, the movement's chief propagandist; and Abu Yahya al-Libi, its second-in-command, lent new weight to the optimists' predictions that al-Qaeda was a spent force. In retrospect, however, it appears that al-Qaeda was among the regional forces that benefited most from the Arab Spring's tumult. Seven years later, Ayman al-Zawahiri has emerged as a powerful leader, with a strategic vision that he has systematically implemented. Forces loyal to al-Qaeda and its affiliates now number in the tens of thousands, with a capacity to disrupt local and regional stability, as well as launch attacks against their declared enemies in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Russia. Indeed, from northwestern Africa to South Asia, al-Qaeda has knit together a global movement of more than two dozen franchises.* In Syria alone, al-Qaeda now has upwards of twenty thousand men under arms, and it has perhaps another four thousand in Yemen and about seven thousand in Somalia.

Selected Locations Where al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates Operate

○ Number of terrorists, estimated



The Arab Spring's Big Winner

The thousands of hardened al-Qaeda fighters freed from Egyptian prisons in 2012–2013 by President Mohammed Morsi galvanized the movement at a critical moment, when instability reigned and a handful of men well-versed in terrorism and subversion could plunge a country or a region into chaos. Whether in Libya, Turkey, Syria, or Yemen, their arrival was providential in terms of advancing al-Qaeda's interests or increasing its influence. The military coup that subsequently toppled Morsi validated Zawahiri's repeated warnings not to believe Western promises about either the fruits of democracy or the sanctity of free and fair elections.

It was Syria where al-Qaeda's intervention proved most consequential. One of Zawahiri's first official acts after succeeding bin Laden as emir was to order a Syrian veteran of the Iraqi insurgency named Abu Mohammad al-Julani to return home and establish the al-Qaeda franchise that would eventually become Jabhat al-Nusra.

Al-Qaeda's

blatantly sectarian

messaging over

social media

further sharpened

the historical

frictions between

Sunnis and Shias

and gave the

movement the

entrée into internal Syrian politics that it needed to solidify its presence in that country. Al-Qaeda's chosen instrument was Jabhat al-Nusra, the product of a joint initiative with al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch, which had rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). But as Nusra grew in both strength and impact, a dispute erupted between ISI and al-Qaeda over control of the group. In a bold power grab, ISI's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced the forcible amalgamation of al-Nusra with ISI in a new organization to be called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Julani refused to accede to the unilateral merger and appealed to Zawahiri. The quarrel intensified, and after Zawahiri's attempts to mediate it collapsed, he expelled ISIS from the al-Qaeda network.

Although ISIS—which has since rebranded itself the Islamic State—has commanded the world's attention since then, al-Qaeda has been quietly rebuilding and fortifying its various branches. Al-Qaeda has systematically implemented an ambitious strategy designed to protect its remaining senior leadership and discreetly consolidate its influence wherever the movement has a significant presence. Accordingly, its leaders have been dispersed to Syria, Iran, Turkey, Libya, and Yemen, with only a hard-core remnant of top commanders still in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Advances in commercial digital communication tools, alongside successive public revelations of U.S. and allied intelligence services' eavesdropping capabilities, have enabled al-Qaeda's leaders and commanders to maintain contact via secure end-to-end encryption technology.

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The Importance of Syria

The number of top al-Qaeda leaders sent to Syria over the past half-dozen years underscores the high priority that the movement attaches to that country. Among them was Muhsin al-Fadhli, a bin Laden intimate who, until his death in a 2015 U.S. air strike, commanded the movement's elite forward-based operational arm in that country, known as the Khorasan Group. He also functioned as Zawahiri's local emissary, charged with attempting to heal the rift between al-Qaeda and ISIS. Haydar Kirkan, a Turkish national and long-standing senior operative, was sent by bin Laden himself to Turkey in 2010 to lay the groundwork for the movement's expansion into the Levant, before the Arab Spring created precisely that opportunity. Kirkan was also responsible for facilitating the movement of other senior al-Qaeda personnel from Pakistan to Syria to escape the escalating drone strike campaign ordered by President Barack Obama. He was killed in 2016 in a U.S. bombing raid.

The previous fall marked the arrival of Saif al-Adl, who is arguably the movement's most battle-hardened commander. Adl is a former Egyptian Army commando whose terrorist pedigree, dating to the late 1970s, includes assassination plots against Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat, the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and al-Qaeda's post-9/11 terrorist campaigns in Saudi Arabia and South Asia. He also served as mentor to bin Laden's presumptive heir, his son Hamza, after both Adl and the boy sought sanctuary in Iran following the commencement of U.S. and coalition military operations in Afghanistan in late 2001. The younger bin Laden's own reported appearance in Syria this past summer provides fresh evidence of the movement's fixation with a country that has become the most popular venue to wage holy war since the seminal Afghan jihad of the 1980s.

Indeed, al-Qaeda's presence in Syria is far more pernicious than that of ISIS. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the latest name adopted by al-Qaeda's local affiliate, is now the largest rebel group in the country, having extended its control last year over all of Idlib Province, along the Syrian-Turkish border. This is the culmination of a process al-Qaeda began more than three years ago to annihilate the Free Syrian Army and any other group that challenges al-Qaeda's regional aspirations.

Filling the ISIS Vacuum

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ISIS can no longer compete with al-Qaeda in terms of influence, reach, manpower, or cohesion. In only two domains is ISIS currently stronger than its rival: the power of its brand and its presumed ability to mount spectacular terrorist strikes in Europe. But the latter is a product of Zawahiri's strategic decision to prohibit external operations in the West so that al-Qaeda's rebuilding can continue without interference. The handful of exceptions to this policy — such as the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris and the 2017 St. Petersburg Metro bombing in Russia—provide compelling evidence that al-Qaeda's external operations capabilities can easily be reanimated. Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's capacity to commit acts of international terrorism—especially the targeting of commercial aviation—was recently the subject of a revealing *New York Times* story.

Al-Qaeda's success in resurrecting its global network is the result of three strategic moves made by Zawahiri. The first was to strengthen the decentralized franchise approach that has facilitated the movement's survival. Over the years, the leaders and deputies of al-Qaeda's far-flung franchises have been integrated into the movement's deliberative and consultative processes. Today, al-Qaeda is truly “glocal,” having effectively incorporated local grievances and concerns into a global narrative that forms the foundation of an all-encompassing grand strategy.

The second major move was the order issued by Zawahiri in 2013 to avoid mass casualty operations, especially those that might kill Muslim civilians. Al-Qaeda has thus been able to present itself through social media, paradoxically, as “moderate extremists,” ostensibly more

palatable than ISIS.

This development reflects Zawahiri's third strategic decision, letting ISIS absorb all the blows from the coalition arrayed against it while al-Qaeda unobtrusively rebuilds its military strength. Anyone inclined to be taken in by this ruse would do well to heed the admonition of Theo Padnos (née Peter Theo Curtis), the American journalist who spent two years in Syria as a Nusra hostage. Padnos related in 2014 how the group's senior commanders "were inviting Westerners to the jihad in Syria not so much because they needed more foot soldiers—they didn't—but because they want to teach the Westerners to take the struggle into every neighborhood and subway station back home."

A parallel thus exists between the U.S. director of national intelligence's depiction of the al-Qaeda threat today [PDF] as mainly limited to its affiliates and the so-called Phoney War in western Europe between September 1939 and May 1940, when there was a strange lull in serious fighting following the German invasion of Poland and the British and French declarations of war against Germany. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain visited British forces arrayed along the Franco-Belgian border that Christmas. "I don't think the Germans have any intention of attacking us, do you?" he asked Lieutenant General Bernard Law Montgomery, the commander of an infantry division defending the front. The Germans would attack when it suited them, Montgomery brusquely replied. It is a point worth keeping in mind as al-Qaeda busily rebuilds and marshals its forces to continue the war against the United States it declared twenty-two years ago.

Editor's note: A previous version of the map incorrectly included Indonesia with three thousand affiliated members of al-Qaeda.

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