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From Al-Qaeda to ISIS: The  
Changing Structure of the Global  
Jihad and the Implications for Israel

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Friends of Israel Initiative

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# From Al-Qaeda to ISIS: The Changing Structure of the Global Jihad and the Implications for Israel

During the last five years, there has been an ongoing debate over the present global status of al-Qaeda. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee this past February, James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence, provided the most updated understanding in Washington about how the original al-Qaeda had changed since the 9/11 attacks more than ten years ago. According to Clapper al-Qaeda had “morphed” in an organization based mostly on local “franchises.” Al-Qaeda “central” was not the same.<sup>1</sup>

The question of whether al-Qaeda was a global organization directed by a central command along the Afghan-Pakistani border, or a decentralized network of local jihadist groups was not just an academic matter. It influenced how the West should look at al-Qaeda in 2014 and whether it represented the same order of threat that it posed when it was under the leadership of Osama bin Laden.

A change in the structure of al-Qaeda had potentially profound implications for Israel as well. Three critical aspects of the al-Qaeda threat are important to examine from the perspective of whether it was still a global organization or only local in focus: (a.) what have been the goals of al-Qaeda, (b.) from where does al-Qaeda obtain its resources and manpower, and (c.) where was the main sanctuary of al-Qaeda and its training camps.

Presumably, a franchised al-Qaeda would have a largely local agenda, focusing on achieving political goals in its area of operation. The manpower it recruited was expected to be based on the area in which it was located, and finally it would be expected to rely on a local infrastructure for any training camps, as well. For Israel these issues would be expected to influence whether the new al-Qaeda represented the same challenge to Israel as the older organization.

## The Key Characteristics of the Original al-Qaeda

The original al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, had certain distinct characteristics that are important to identify in order to see whether, or what extent al-Qaeda in 2014, has fundamentally changed, so that the threat it poses globally and to Israel, in particular, can be gauged. What characterized al-Qaeda in the late 1990's until the 9/11 attack was its adoption of a global outreach--its decision to focus on attacking the "far enemy" and not just overthrowing the local Arab regimes in the Middle East, whom it regarded as apostates.

This global orientation came out of the fact that al-Qaeda itself was a product of the jihadist effort to defeat a superpower right from the start---namely, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Bin Laden then shifted this mission to the US presence in Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the first Gulf War and also targeted US forces in Somalia in 1993.

True, in its early days, al-Qaeda involved itself in a number of jihadist struggles and contributed manpower or resources to allies in Bosnia or Kashmir. The war over Algeria in the early 1990's put it in conflict with France. It also saw itself resisting Russian power in formerly Soviet Central Asia. But from the standpoint of its leader, it never altered its focus on its principally anti-American mission.<sup>2</sup>

In its early years, the top command of al-Qaeda was made up by mostly Arab fighters from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, nonetheless its cadres included many Muslim volunteers from Central Asia, including Chechnya, Dagestan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. There was also a contingent from Western China. An Arab Affairs commentator for the Lebanese newspaper *as-Safir*, Hisham Melhem, noted in late 2001 that bin Laden in his early days was principally focused on this area—on Afghanistan and Chechnya—but not on the heartland of the Middle East.<sup>3</sup>

In the aftermath of the first Gulf War in 1991, al-Qaeda used Sudan as its first sanctuary for roughly five years and then Osama bin Laden moved his operations to Afghanistan. That meant al-Qaeda's training camps where it brought its recruits were there.

Whether by examining the history of its development, the nationalities of its manpower, or the location of its training centers and headquarters,

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Israel was not a high priority for the original al-Qaeda. There were plenty of commentators in the West who nonetheless asserted that the rage that motivated al-Qaeda's attack on 9/11 was a product of the Israeli-Palestinian issue: for example, Caryle Murphy used this line of argument in the *Washington Post* on September 16, 2001 while Jim Muir contended that this was an underlying motive for 9/11 on the BBC in a segment entitled "Explaining Arab Anger" on September 19, 2001.

This idea became popularized at the time and entered into the argumentation of leading Western officials. Thus, Jack Straw, Britain's Foreign Secretary at the time also attributed one of the sources of the new jihadi terrorism to the "anger" in the Middle East over the Palestinian issue.<sup>4</sup>

But there was little empirical evidence for this case no matter how adamant its defenders have been. The great Middle East expert, Professor Bernard Lewis, closely examined al-Qaeda's strategic outlook in 1998, when Osama bin Laden issued his Declaration of War against the West. Lewis concluded that the top priority of al-Qaeda was forcing the US to withdraw from the Arabian Peninsula.

Bin Laden placed Iraq as a second priority for his organization. The Israeli-Palestinian issue was only a distant third in the hierarchy of al-Qaeda's interests. In 2001, it was Hisham Melhem who also confirmed this very point: "He never served the Palestinian cause. He never did anything to help the Palestinian people." In the 1990's al-Qaeda central in Afghanistan was not making Israel into one of its primary targets. Its focus was elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

From bin Laden's public declarations it became evident that as it was formed, al-Qaeda was dependent on the input of other pre-existing movements. His "Declaration of Jihad against the Americans," issued on August 23, 1996, invoked jihadist authorities from around the world: his mentor, Abdullah Azzam, the imprisoned Egyptian "blind Sheikh", Omar Abdel Rahman, two Saudi clerics, and Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the founder of Hamas.

By 1998, when bin Laden created the International Islamic Front against Jews and Crusaders, he brought it Ayman al-Zawahiri of the Egyptian Al-Jihad group, Abu-Yasir Rifa'i Ahmad Taha, from the Egyptian Islamic Group, Shaykh Mir Hamzah, secretary of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan, and Fazlur Rahman, Emir of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh. Thus, al-Qaeda was a consortium of organizations, but it was clear that bin Laden stood at the apex of its power structure.<sup>6</sup>

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In the years that followed a number of organizations decided to affiliate with al-Qaeda for different reasons. The Egyptian Islamic Jihad in the mid-1990's turned to al-Qaeda for financial backing. Khattab's group that waged war against the Russians in Chechnya was initially dependent on money that came from bin Laden. Khattab, who commanded the Arab volunteers in the Caucasus against the Russian Army remained focused on his war with Moscow and did not join al-Qaeda's battle with the US.

While the Groupe Islamique Arme (GIA) was not originally interested in aligning with al-Qaeda, after it splintered, and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat was formed, the latter was formally brought into the al-Qaeda network in 2006, and renamed al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>7</sup>

Flush with funds from al-Qaeda, AQIM escalated its attacks in North Africa. AQIM appeared to be focused on building a position of strength in the Maghreb and Sahel countries. While experts knew that AQIM's primary overseas targets were France and Spain, its emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel, warned in a confidential letter that drawing attention to its international intentions would only invite a Western intervention against it. This discourse demonstrated why it was difficult to get al-Qaeda affiliates to admit their true aims.<sup>8</sup>

The connection with bin Laden provided these organizations with a safe haven for training which many groups lacked. When these organizations sent volunteers to Afghanistan or later to Iraq, they acquired valuable combat experience, as well. These were tangible benefits jihadist groups acquired, beyond money, by associating themselves with the al-Qaeda network.

## Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the First Iraqi al-Qaeda Franchise

How al-Qaeda might change with the growth of its franchises was demonstrated with the growth of al-Qaeda in Iraq, under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who, as his name suggests, was a Jordanian from the town of al-Zarqa, northeast of Amman. He was from one of the Transjordanian Bedouin tribes, the al-Khalailah tribe, a branch of the Banu Hassan.

Al-Zarqa had been radicalized in the early 1990's when over 100,000 Palestinians evicted from Kuwait after the first Gulf War brought to the

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Jordanian town ultra conservative traditions from the Arabian Peninsula which contributed to the transformation of parts of the local population.

Zarqawi first went off to Afghanistan in 1989 after the Soviets had been defeated. He was imprisoned by the Jordanian authorities after returning home, and during his prison term he joined forces with a Palestinian Kuwaiti, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdasi. After Zarqawi was released in a general amnesty, he returned to Afghanistan, where he took an oath to bin Laden in 2001.

However Zarqawisoon broke with al-Qaeda over the question of its priorities. Bin Laden still supported global jihad against the “Far Enemy,” while Zarqawi wanted to wage war against the “Near Enemy”—in the Middle East, especially the Jordanian regime. The Taliban allowed Zarqawi to set up his own training camp, far from the al-Qaeda camps, which he established near the Iranian border.

Unlike bin Laden’s manpower, Zarqawi’s recruits came mostly from the Levant, namely from Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and from the Palestinians. After the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, al-Qaeda bifurcated: part of the organization ran for Pakistan, while the other part, like Zarqawi, moved into Iran and later into Iraq.

In his writings, Zarqawi took great pride in bringing jihad to “the Arab heartland.” His military successes, when he joined the Iraqi Sunni insurgency against the US, led al-Qaeda along the Afghan-Pakistani border to adopt his movement. The head of Israeli military intelligence at the time Maj.-General Aharon Zeevi (Farkash) concluded that in the past Israel was not a high priority for al-Qaeda, “but our prioritization for them is increasing.”<sup>9</sup>

It was noteworthy that operationally, Zarqawi did not confine himself to the Iraqi insurgency. He repeatedly launched attacks within Jordan, his country of birth. To support his campaign against the Hashemite Kingdom, he built up certain capabilities within Syria as well. He tried to recruit Palestinians for operations against Israel, but did not succeed. It appeared that he hoped that his area of influence would cover the whole of the historic Levant—al-Sham—in Arabic, which would undoubtedly influence his successors, like the leaders of ISIS, a decade later.

What is remarkable about Zarqawi’s relationship with bin Laden and al-Qaeda central in Afghanistan/Pakistan, is that instead of acting as a subsidiary

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organization that simply follows instructions from his superiors, Zarqawi found that the strategy of his al-Qaeda franchise had been embraced by al-Qaeda's commanders. Thus on July 9, 2005, bin Laden's deputy (and eventual successor), Ayman al-Zawahiri, wrote a letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi praising the relocation of the global jihad to the Arab heartland.

Zawahiri appeared to be following the lead of his Iraqi franchise. He then laid out the next stages of the war he wanted Zarqawi to follow: 1.) defeating the US in Iraq, 2.) extending the jihad to secular countries bordering Iraq, namely Syria and Jordan, and 3.) entering into a "clash with Israel." The Zawahiri letter was intercepted by US intelligence bodies and made public by the Director of National Intelligence, Ambassador John D. Negroponte.<sup>10</sup>

## The ISIS Shift Away from al-Qaeda

Perhaps the most important development in the structure of al-Qaeda is the emergence of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) in the context of the Syrian civil war and the organizations dramatic successes on the battlefield in Western Iraq. The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) alone was a successor organization to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda of Iraq (AQI).

In late 2011, ISI created a front organization for operations in the Syrian Civil War, called Jabhat al-Nusra, or the Nusra Front. On April 8, 2013, the head of ISI, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, confirmed that Jabhat al-Nusra was an extension of his own movement and funded by it as well. In light of its broader mandate, he renamed his own organization the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

By early February 2014, Ayman al-Zawahiri rejected Baghdadi's move and made Jabhat al-Nusra an al-Qaeda affiliate on its own, expelling ISIS from the al-Qaeda network. This break was not based on ideological differences but rather on a political clash between an al-Qaeda franchise, which was gaining power, and al-Qaeda central, that was losing authority and control, after the killing of bin Laden in 2011.

One unique feature of ISIS was its territorial dimension. By virtue of its name, its focus was directed towards the struggle for power in Syria and Iraq. In various social media, its supporters showed a map of ISIS' territorial domain based on 16 provinces (7 in Iraq and 9 in Syria). It did not rule

out a more universalistic agenda, but until it consolidated its control over the areas that it militarily vanquished in 2014, it was unlikely that it could pursue a global agenda like al-Qaeda.<sup>11</sup>

Thus ISIS was not distracted by other jihadist campaigns in the Balkans, the Caucasus, Kashmir, and places where there were Islamist insurgencies. It could devote all its energies to the core of the Arab world. Its training areas were close to its front lines. It also had its own resources from the oil fields it took over. Its situation was very different from al-Qaeda.

Another opportunity for understanding the geographic scope of ISIS came on June 29, 2014, when ISIS yet again reinvented itself and declared that it from now on constituted a caliphate, which is to be called the Islamic State. In a statement released by its spokesman in the name of its caliph, it asserted that with the declaration of the caliphate, “it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance” to the Caliph.<sup>12</sup>

The new caliphate was to replace all existing states wherever it seized control: “The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the khlilafah’s (caliph’s) authority and arrival of its troops to their areas.” But the present authority of the caliph, according to the document, “has expanded over wide areas of in Iraq and Sham.” The document added: “The land now submits to his order and authority from Aleppo to Diyala.”

What precisely was meant by ISIS and its successor organization, the Islamic State, by the term al-Sham requires some analysis. Al-Sham is the name for the entire Levant—the area that includes the present states and geographic areas of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.

By definition, use of the term al-Sham put the organization in direct conflict with existing states beyond Syria. It should not have come as any surprise that international observers were suggesting in June, 2014, that Jordan was next in line to be the target of an ISIS offensive. This was in large part due to the growing internal support for ISIS within Jordan itself, which could be seen by demonstrations in cities like Maan.<sup>13</sup>

The same could be said for the Palestinians as well. One of the names for the territory that would become British Mandatory Palestine after the First World War was Bilad al-Sham. The rise of a caliphate that invoked

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the original names of the territories which it claimed would have enormous resonance with their populations.

Indeed, many of the Islamist movements in the Arab world from the Muslim Brotherhood (including Hamas) to Hizbut-Tahrir, envisioned the establishment of caliphate to replace the Ottoman caliphate that was disbanded in 1922. By invoking the idea of a new caliphate, the Islamic State was operating on fertile ground.

Despite its demand for the loyalty of all Muslims, the Islamic State still remained mostly a regional Islamist organization. Seizing Baghdad was more important than attacking New York at present. Ironically, because of its local focus, it posed a far greater challenge to Israel. For of all Israel's neighbors, Jordan has the longest common border with the Jewish state. Any threat to the security of Jordan can become quickly a threat to the security of Israel itself.

## Notes

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- 2 Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).
- 3 Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) pp. 57-59. Hisham Melham appearance, CNN, October 8, 2001.
- 4 James Bennet, "Arafat and Peres Agree to Meet Today in Gaza in First High Level Talks Since July," *New York Times*, September 26, 2001.
- 5 Bernard Lewis, "License to Kill: Usama bin Ladin's Declaration of Jihad," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 1998)
- 6 <http://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>
- 7 Daniel L. Byman, "Breaking the bonds Between al-Qa'ida and Its Affiliate Organizations," Saban Center at Brookings, Analysis Paper Number 27, August, 2012
- 8 Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda in Mali Sought to Hide Foreign Designs," *Longwar Journal*, February 15, 2013.
- 9 "IDF Intelligence: Al-Qaeda Already Operating in Gaza," *Maariv* (Hebrew), October 17, 2005.
- 10 [http://www.dni.gov/release\\_letter\\_101105.html](http://www.dni.gov/release_letter_101105.html)
- 11 The Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham's 16 wilayats:  
 In Iraq:  
 Southern Division  
 Diyala Division  
 Baghdad Division  
 Kirkuk Division  
 Salahuddin Division  
 Anbar Division  
 Ninewa Division  
 In Syria: Al Barakah Division (Hasaka) Al Kheir Division (Deir al Zour) Al Raqqah Division Al Badiya Division Halab [Aleppo] Division Idlib Division Hama Division Damascus Division Coast [Al Sahel] Division  
 Read more: [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/04/isis-southern-division.php?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=isis-southern-division-praises-foreign-suicide-bombers##ixzz365fthKok](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/04/isis-southern-division.php?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=isis-southern-division-praises-foreign-suicide-bombers##ixzz365fthKok)
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[http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/jordan-fears-homegrown-isis-more-than-invasion-from-iraq/2014/06/27/1534a4ee-f48a-492a-99b3-b6cd3ffe9e41\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/jordan-fears-homegrown-isis-more-than-invasion-from-iraq/2014/06/27/1534a4ee-f48a-492a-99b3-b6cd3ffe9e41_story.html)

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