

Is Al Qaeda in Decline?

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Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.

A conversation about the current status of ISIS and al-Qaeda, including their differing strategic approaches, shifting territorial reach, and Arabic- and Twitter-focused propaganda efforts.

Since the rise of the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria, al-Qaeda, the global terrorist network behind the attacks of 9/11 and the U.S. embassy bombing in Nairobi, has experienced fierce competition in the battle for the hearts and minds of radical Islamists.

The WorldPost's Eline Gordt spoke with Aaron Zelin about Al Qaeda's evolution since the rise of the Islamic State group. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute and the Rena and Sami David Fellow at the International Center for the Study of Radicalisation. He recently published [a briefing on the state of the terrorist network \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-state-of-al-qaeda\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-state-of-al-qaeda).

Since its spectacular rise last year, the Islamic State group has made headlines around the world. Al Qaeda has seemingly moved into the background. Is that same dynamic visible in both groups' operational strength?

It depends how one frames it, if one is solely looking at Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, then yes, its operational strength is diminished and has been in decline for years. But if one is looking at the broader Al Qaeda network -- which I think is more apt since the number two in the network, Nasir al-Wihayshi, also the leader of AQAP, is based in Yemen and many senior Al Qaeda operatives from the AfPak region and Iran are now in Syria with Jabhat al-Nusra -- then Al Qaeda's operational strength is good. In many ways, the center of gravity for Al Qaeda has shifted from the AfPak region more to Yemen, Syria, and even Libya, where Ansar al-Sharia serves as an Al Qaeda branch even if it is not publicly pronounced.

Therefore, while the Islamic State controls territory in Iraq and Syria, while its other "wilayat" (provinces) control spaces in Nigeria, Libya, and Sinai (albeit small in the latter two), Al Qaeda's network controls territory in Syria, Yemen and Libya. As the situation deteriorates in Yemen, Al Qaeda could be back on par with IS in terms of strength

very soon.

That said, in terms of Al Qaeda, there is also the question of whether we should be thinking about Jabhat al-Nusra, AQAP, and Ansar al-Shariah in Libya as part of a singular organization at this point, or whether they are now, or are heading toward, being like-minded but independent groups for most intents and purposes. I'm agnostic about this latter issue.

One of the fields in which the Islamic State group has been particularly active is propaganda. Has Al Qaeda's outreach kept up with IS' efforts?

Al Qaeda's network has not been as flashy as IS, though Al Qaeda's network does have a presence both still in the classical forums as well as on Twitter, which has more or less become the headquarters of Sunni jihadi propaganda dissemination in the past two years or so.

It appears that AQAP, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya are attempting to innovate and become more sophisticated in branding and pushing its content. The reality is, though, if none of these Al Qaeda network organizations are killing Americans or Westerners or publishing its content in English, the mainstream media won't follow or act as a megaphone with the propaganda. The vast majority of propaganda put out by the Islamic State is in Arabic and therefore does not get much coverage -- maybe five percent of all their propaganda is reported on. Since Al Qaeda focuses more on its Arab audience too, it gets less attention in the West.

Further, the conflict in Syria resonates with individuals in the Muslim world in a way the conflicts in Yemen, Libya, or elsewhere do not. Plus because of the easy access to Syria via Turkey, it allows the capacity for more Westerners to then go off to the conflict. Because the vast majority of Westerners now are in the Islamic State versus Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State gets more mainstream media attention since they can follow the tweets and messages of their own countrymen fighting.

This in turn provides a greater megaphone and begins a cycle that feeds off of itself, especially since members of the Islamic State know how to get the attention of Western journalists. It's not a coincidence you hear so many stories about Nutella and kittens, among other red herrings.

Has Al Qaeda changed its tactics since the rise of the Islamic State, or are they expected to change their tactics?

Al Qaeda has more or less remained resolute in its methodology, even codifying its rules of engagement/guidelines authored in September 2013 by Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al Qaeda is more about patience, biding time, and exploiting the right opportunities. Defensive in a way, but nimble and pragmatic at the same time. Whereas the Islamic State is more an offensive type of organization. IS does not let the feasibility of something get in the way of what it is trying to accomplish. By taking such risks though, it has gotten a lot more rewards. Time will tell which model will have more staying power.

How much does the difference in leadership style between Al Qaeda's Zawahiri vs. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State play a role in the current state and strength of both organizations?

It is difficult to compare them since their situations are completely different. One, Zawahiri, is hiding from drones in Pakistan and therefore has to keenly worry about personal security on a minute-by-minute basis and as a result is limited, while Baghdadi has the open freedom of the territory he controls.

That said, Zawahiri provides strategic advice and directives, which are then used by the leaders of the branches in Yemen, Syria, North Africa, Somalia, and elsewhere to implement tactics and operations based on the local dynamics that those in that particular conflict zone would have a better understanding and appreciation of.

Additionally, Zawahiri is the fountainhead of a vanguard, whereas Baghdadi is a self-styled Caliph, meaning he views himself and is viewed by his followers as the leader of the entire Muslim world as well as a particular government

structure being implemented in the areas his so-called Caliphate controls.

Therefore, he is attempting a nation-building and state-building project, while Zawahiri is attempting to awaken the masses and conduct terror attacks on the West, while allowing his local branches to facilitate the conditions on the ground for a future Islamic State when he or his successor(s) feel it is ripe.

You write in your briefing that "the Al Qaeda organization now looks more similar to its pre-9/11 iteration." Could you explain that more in detail?

I simply meant that the leadership of the organization is more spread out in many areas of the Islamicate, whereas for years after 9/11, the vast majority of the leadership was based in the AfPak region. ❖

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