

The Khorasan Group Should Scare Us

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Sep 25, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Targeting Khorasan's leader is important, but what makes the group so frightening is its presence in Syria, where al-Qaeda explosives experts can mingle with radicalized foreign fighters carrying Western passports.

It seems the United States might have gotten its man. Earlier today a U.S. official told a news outlet that Mohsen al-Fadhli, a longtime al Qaeda operative and head of its shadowy Khorasan Group, was killed in this week's airstrikes in Syria. Fadhli's death is already being heralded as a tremendous counterterrorism success: "We've killed the world's most wanted terrorist," an anonymous official boasted to the press. But what was it about Fadhli that made him so dangerous? And how did this previously unknown group suddenly appear on the world scene and become, as the director of national intelligence recently testified, at least as much of threat to the U.S. homeland as ISIL -- the terrorist group that President Obama called a "network of death" in his speech before the United Nations on Wednesday.

Many Americans are rightly wondering, given all they've heard about ISIL in recent months, why U.S. officials are suddenly declaring that an entirely separate and little-known group is the real threat to their security. After all, only in the last couple of weeks did U.S. officials even reveal the existence of the Khorasan Group (a term coined by U.S. officialdom, as it is not known how the group refers to itself), let alone warn that they would be striking it in Syria along with ISIL. But there was no intent to mislead -- only the usual fog of war.

So what is the Khorasan Group? More of a cell or network than a distinct group, Khorasan operates in Syria under the umbrella of the local al Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, but it appears to function independently of Nusra and report back to al Qaeda senior leadership in Pakistan. Embedded within Nusra's sphere of influence on the ground in Syria, Khorasan reportedly operates out of buildings within Nusra-controlled areas. (At least, that is, until this week's airstrikes, the effectiveness of which remains to be seen.)

According to Attorney General Eric Holder, the United States has known about Khorasan "for two years." But other U.S. officials say the network only emerged on the ground in Syria over the past year, its members dispatched there

by al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri not to fight the Assad regime, but for the express purpose of using the vacuum created by the war in Syria to "develop external attacks, construct and test improvised explosive devices and recruit Westerners to conduct operations," according to a BBC report. Fadhli and his associates kept a low profile, leading some terrorism-watchers to speculate for a period of time that they were more part of Nusra than something of their own. But with the passage of time, and better intelligence, the network's independent mission and direct line of communication back to al Qaeda senior leaders became apparent.

There is some speculation that the group's arrival in Syria may have originally been part of Zawahiri's effort to mediate the dispute between Nusra and ISIL, which began around the same time in the spring of 2013 when the two groups had a falling out over tactics and strategy. Whatever the case -- whether Fadhli and the other al Qaeda operatives, as many as a few dozen, originally arrived as mediators or came for the express purpose of preparing attacks against the West -- U.S. officials now see the Khorasan Group as the primary al Qaeda entity plotting near-term attacks against the West. In Syria, the group enjoyed a safe haven in Nusra-controlled areas, in which they could do everything from develop and test new, hard-to-detect explosives to recruit operatives from the thousands of foreign fighters flocking to Syria to battle the Assad regime. By September, a Pentagon spokesman said this week, intelligence reports indicated the Khorasan Group was "in the final stages of plans to execute major attacks."

Anonymous officials have questioned the imminence of the threat in some news reports, but the primary reason officials are so concerned about the Khorasan Group is the makeup of its membership. The network reportedly includes as many as several dozen operatives from Afghanistan and Pakistan (Khorasan, in jihadist terminology), South Asia, North Africa and the Middle East. Its leader, Fadhli -- if he is still alive -- is uniquely positioned to lead a group of al Qaeda operatives from around the world, having had direct experience fighting with and/or organizing and raising funds for al Qaeda affiliates from Afghanistan, Yemen, Kuwait and even Iran.

That's right: Before moving to Syria last spring, Fadhli had been living in Iran, where he served as al Qaeda's "senior facilitator" overseeing a network who were "working to move fighters and money through Turkey to support al Qaeda-affiliated elements in Syria," according to the State Department. Previously, he raised money for al Qaeda in his native Kuwait and other Gulf countries. He was tied to the October 2002 bombing of the French ship *MV Limburg* and was suspected of having a connection to the attack on U.S. Marines on Kuwait's Faylaka Island two days later. In 2003, he was sentenced to a five-year jail term there for funding terrorism and undergoing military training in Afghanistan for terrorist purposes.

Fadhli was a "major facilitator" in Iraq for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi at one point, according to the Treasury Department, demanding videotapes be made of successful attacks so he could use them to raise more funds for Zarqawi's Islamic State of Iraq, the predecessor to ISIL, among major donors in the Gulf. Earlier in his career, Fadhli fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan, was a bodyguard to a senior al Qaeda leader, and fought and trained in Chechnya as well. He may have been among the few al Qaeda operatives to have been forewarned of the 9/11 attacks, according to the U.S. Treasury Department. That history gave him unique credibility and trust with al Qaeda's top leaders.

Especially disconcerting for intelligence officials were reports that Fadhli's network includes bomb-making experts from al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, most notably Ibrahim al-Asiri. U.S. officials believe Asiri engineered the underwear bomb that Umar Farouk Abdulmatallab tried to detonate in an aircraft over Detroit in December 2009, among other plots. His bomb-making ingenuity -- from underwear bombs to toner cartridge bombs to an explosive prototype and more -- make Asiri one of the terrorists most wanted by Western intelligence services. On top of being a creative bomb-maker, Asiri is also a highly committed jihadist who dispatched his own brother in a suicide bombing targeting the Saudi deputy minister of interior in 2009.

U.S. officials may now say they were generally "aware" of the al Qaeda network they've termed the Khorasan Group

as long as two years ago, but it appears they did not realize the group was something more than another part of the jihadi spectrum in Syria until much more recently. The fact that a senior al Qaeda hand like Fadhli was in Syria would not have been surprising, but the arrival of someone like Asiri -- apparently a fairly recent discovery -- would. That may explain the sudden public statements by top intelligence officials -- including not-for-attribution interviews with the media -- revealing the existence of this previously unknown al Qaeda cell or network operating under Nusra's umbrella. According to the first AP story revealing Khorasan's existence, classified reports found that the group was working with AQAP to "test new ways to slip explosives past airport security." That's the type of information that always sets off alarm bells in the counterterrorism world.

In fact, it was intelligence that Asiri was involved with this network that prompted the Transportation Security Administration to ban uncharged mobile phones and laptops on flights coming to the United States from Europe or the Middle East, a decision that was widely mocked at the time. Within weeks, intelligence indicated the network was "in the final stages of plans to execute major attacks," according to a Pentagon spokesman. The network had reportedly tested new explosive devices that could be smuggled onto airplanes. While there was no information of an "imminent" attack against any specific flight, the U.S. had "information on specific, concrete plotting" against aviation targets by members of this network, the Pentagon said. As a result, airstrikes earlier this week hit reported Khorasan training and command and control facilities, as well as "a facility producing explosives and munitions."

So what is -- or was -- the Khorasan Group up to? With ISIL commanding all the attention, al Qaeda appears especially keen on carrying out an attack to prove its continued relevance. Taking down an airplane or two would certainly fit that bill, but the Khorasan Group also appears to be pursuing low-tech plots intended to terrorize Western society. American and British sources are now whispering to the press about British and Australian intelligence suggesting "the real possibility" of a "knife and gun" attack by Western foreign fighters fresh from the battlefield in Syria.

In the larger scheme of things, it is certainly a good thing if a seasoned and trusted al Qaeda operative like Fadhli were removed from the battlefield. But his death alone presents no "mission accomplished" moment. Fadhli has several highly skilled deputies, including Sanafi al-Nasr, who are believed to be active members of the Khorasan Group as well. Moreover, these operatives -- for all their experience, connections, access to Gulf funding and more -- are not what makes this network so scary. The frightening part is having AQAP and its bomb-maker on the ground in Syria, linking al Qaeda's most ingenious explosives expert with a pool of radicalized foreign fighters carrying Western passports. Now that's scary.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. ❖

Político

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)