

Israel vs. al-Qaeda: Emerging Challenges on Two Fronts

by [Ehud Yaari \(/experts/ehud-yaari\)](#), [Michael Morell \(/experts/michael-morell\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ehud Yaari \(/experts/ehud-yaari\)](#)

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[Michael Morell \(/experts/michael-morell\)](#)

Michael Morell is senior security correspondent for CBS News and previously served for 33 years in the CIA.



Brief Analysis

A CIA veteran and an Israeli security expert discuss the growing presence of al-Qaeda affiliates in Sinai and Syria.

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On April 29, 2014, Ehud Yaari and Michael Morell addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Yaari is a Middle East correspondent for Israel's Channel Two television and a Lafer International Fellow with the Institute. Morell, who retired from the CIA last year after serving as deputy director of central intelligence, is the senior security correspondent for CBS.

EHUD YAARI

Until recently, Israel's Syrian and Egyptian fronts had been largely quiet since the end of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Because of the Arab Spring uprisings, however, al-Qaeda-affiliated militias have now emerged on both fronts, in addition to their presence in Lebanon and nascent involvement with Palestinian factions. Never before has Israel faced a situation in which its border towns were in such easy range of al-Qaeda militias. Israel has always been at the core of the organization's ideology, but not an immediate target or main focus of al-Qaeda attacks.

The question of how to handle these emerging threats has spurred a fierce but quiet debate within the Israeli defense establishment and at the highest political levels. So far, Israel has decided to go with defensive preparations. Two new territorial military divisions have been created on the Sinai and Syrian fronts; fences have been constructed along the Egyptian front; troop deployments have been increased; and new intelligence equipment and resources have been allocated for Sinai and the Golan Heights.

In Syria, Israelis may prefer the devil they do not know (the rebels) to the devil they do know (Bashar al-Assad), but they may end up with both. The portion of the country lying south of Damascus is strategic and may be the key to the war's outcome. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), a major jihadist group, has not yet penetrated the south, but the officially recognized Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, is already on Israel's front line. There, JN is mainly a local organization with local characteristics. Unlike in other areas of Syria, many southern militias are headed by young leaders who accept the political authority of their elders. Israel, Jordan, and these local militias have a shared interest in preventing a full jihadist takeover or allowing the Syrian army to recapture this territory.

Against this backdrop, over 800 wounded and sick Syrians have been treated in Israel during the war, including Col. Abdullah al-Bashir, the new commander of the Free Syrian Army. One would not be incorrect in assuming that Israel has a system of coordination and cooperation with at least some rebel militias. Israel is extending significant amounts of humanitarian aid and perhaps other types of aid, but there is a quiet debate on how far to go to ensure that local rebel militias control areas close to the border. Recently, for example, a leader of a local JN group declared that his fighters were now in range of the "Zionist crusader."

In Sinai, two organizations pose the most significant threat: Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM) and Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin Fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis. Both have ties to the southern Gaza Strip but are also stretching into mainland Egypt. Altogether, these groups include about three to four thousand Bedouin and foreign fighters. This is due to a transformation in Bedouin society in which younger men are abandoning their tribal traditions for a fundamentalist, Salafi jihadist version of Islam. Yet so far al-Qaeda has no official affiliation with ABM.

Meanwhile, Egyptian-Israeli military cooperation is at a level never seen before. Ten Egyptian battalions are now operating in central and eastern Sinai via the Agreed Activities Mechanism (AAM), through which Israel gives its consent for temporary Egyptian deployments in forbidden areas. In fact, Israel wants to see even more Egyptian personnel deployed, with such forces likely becoming a permanent feature in Sinai. In this manner, a de facto revision of the Military Annex to the 1979 peace treaty has been effected.

Currently, Egypt claims to have full control over Sinai, but it does not control the main militant safe havens in Jabal Halal and Wadi Amr. Until it does, militant groups will continue to pose a threat. They are already equipped with antitank and anti-aircraft missiles, allowing them to easily threaten shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba and the Suez Canal, as well as commercial airline traffic and Israeli border towns. These groups also have a tacit understanding with Hamas that they can carry out any operations they wish in Sinai but not in Gaza.

MICHAEL MORELL

The United States is still at war with al-Qaeda, and each side has registered a significant victory thus far. America's great victory in this war has been the degradation, decimation, and near defeat of al-Qaeda core in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda's great victory has been the spread of its ideology across a vast area -- in northern Nigeria, north into the Sahel, across all of North Africa, in Somalia and Kenya in East Africa, and in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. There are probably more al-Qaeda fighters today in Syria than in the rest of the world combined.

The spread of this ideology started before the Arab Spring, but the regional turmoil that unfolded after 2011 gave it a huge boost. The uprisings were a boon to al-Qaeda because they undercut each affected state's willingness or ability to deal with extremism inside its borders. Egypt is the best example of a country that had the capability to deal with extremism but lost the political will under President Muhammad Morsi. The security services, intelligence services, and military were all willing to deal with the al-Qaeda threat but did not believe they had the political coverage to do so. Now Egypt is finding it very difficult to root out al-Qaeda in Sinai and the mainland. In contrast, the Libyan government is more than willing to work against extremism but has zero capability because it lost its military, security, and intelligence services. Tripoli must now rebuild its capability from scratch.

Currently, the threat to the U.S. homeland and Western Europe is less than it was on 9/11. Only two organizations have the capability to launch major attacks against the United States: al-Qaeda in Pakistan and the Yemen-based group al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Neither of them is capable of multiple simultaneous attacks that kill thousands, but both can conduct individual attacks in the United States that could kill hundreds. Of the two, AQAP is of more concern. The past three attempted attacks against the homeland -- the 2009 Christmas Day bomb plot, the 2010 printer cartridge bomb plot, and the 2012 plan to use a nonmetallic suicide device to bring down an airplane -- all originated from AQAP.

At the same time, the al-Qaeda threat has skyrocketed in areas where the group now finds safe haven. Incidents like the Benghazi attack, the Nairobi mall attack, and the storming of the In Amenas gas plant in Algeria are likely to continue in the months and years ahead. Some of these

local attacks will be against Israeli interests, and al-Qaeda could eventually regain the ability to conduct 9/11-style attacks in the United States and Western Europe.

Currently, Syria is the number-one international terrorism concern. Finding a solution to the Syria crisis is one of Washington's most difficult policy challenges, especially since the war may well result in a failed state. If that happens, local powerbrokers will be running different parts of the country, and al-Qaeda will have a safe haven in Syria. Al-Qaeda elements in Syria and Pakistan are already planning on how to attack the U.S. homeland, Western Europe, and Israel via this new haven. The organization has long been interested in establishing a presence in the Levant but has had a difficult time doing so until now. A strong presence in Syria means that for the first time, Israel will need to think about al-Qaeda as a significant threat to its territory.

Post-2014 Afghanistan is another area of concern. If al-Qaeda is not defeated in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), it will move back across the border into Afghanistan and find safe haven with the Taliban. In that scenario, the group would once again pose a 9/11-type threat.

Winning the war against al-Qaeda requires intelligence coverage for all of its affiliates throughout the globe. In addition to building the capabilities of governments that are willing to fight, the United States should give a more intensive diplomatic push to governments that already have these capabilities. Washington should also support countries that want to intervene against al-Qaeda, just as France intervened in Mali. Finally, the United States needs to be willing to use its own capabilities when there is no one else.

This summary was prepared by Jonathan Prohov. ❖

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