Al Qaeda’s Struggling Campaign in Syria
Past, Present, and Future

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A Report of the
CSIS TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT

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Acknowledgments

This report is made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship has contributed to its publication.

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Introduction

As the Islamic State’s control of territory in Iraq, Syria, and other countries declines, al Qaeda has attempted to resurge and reposition itself at the center of global Salafi-jihadist activity. Syria has been perhaps its most important prize. Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri argued that Syria is a cornerstone in establishing an Islamic government in the heart of the Middle East: “I warn our brothers and our people in Sham that their battle is very serious, for it is a battle in the heart of the Arab and Islamic world, and a battle right outside Jerusalem.” Some U.S. officials, such as former director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center Nicholas Rasmussen, warned that al Qaeda’s largest global presence could be in Syria: “In terms of raw numbers, al-Qaeda in Syria could well be the network’s largest affiliate, or at least its most capable in terms of the threat it ultimately represents to U.S. interests.”

The importance of Syria for al Qaeda’s leadership raises several questions. How has al Qaeda fared in Syria? What have been its most significant challenges? What do answers to these questions suggest about al Qaeda’s future in Syria and the region?

For some, al Qaeda’s cunning and concerted efforts in Syria and other countries highlight the group’s resilience and indicate its potential to resurge and rejuvenate. To allow this to happen, al Qaeda has moderated its brand, attempted to hide its ties to Syrian affiliates, limited violence against civilians, and established close relationships with local Syrian opposition groups to appear more locally focused and superficially unconcerned with a global agenda. Ayman al-Zawahiri is deliberately playing a steady “long game,” while Western militaries and intelligence agencies focus on the Islamic State. Al Qaeda’s approach, according to one account, suggests that it is “flying below the radar,” which has allowed the group “to be the strongest it has been since 9/11” and “the dominant military force in significant swaths of territory in Syria.” As former FBI supervisory special agent Ali Soufan noted: “In Syria, more than 20,000 militants . . . follow the banner” of an al Qaeda-affiliated group. This reality has helped the group transform “itself from a close-knit terrorist outfit

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1 We define Salafi-jihadist based on two criteria. First, the individual or group emphasizes the importance of returning to a “pure” Islam, that of the Salaf, the pious ancestors. Second, the group believes that violent jihad is fard ‘ayn (a personal religious duty).
6 Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, “How Al-Qaeda Survived the Islamic State Challenge.”
with a handful of struggling affiliates into a vast network of insurgent groups spread from Southeast Asia to northwest Africa.”

Yet a growing body of evidence suggests that al Qaeda has largely failed to take advantage of the Syrian war. Al Qaeda’s evolution from Jabhat al-Nusrah to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and then Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham has been characterized by substantial discord. Confusion and finger-pointing have been rampant as individuals have clashed over ideology, territorial control, personalities, loyalty to Ayman al-Zawahiri, and command-and-control relationships. Al Qaeda’s struggles in Syria have also highlighted al-Zawahiri’s deficiencies. The al Qaeda leader has had difficulty communicating with local groups in Syria, been slow to respond to debates in the field, and discovered that some Salafi-jihadist fighters have brazenly disobeyed his guidance. What’s more, Bashar al-Assad’s regime and local groups are slowly strangling al Qaeda fighters and allied organizations in northwestern Syria. As one Salafi-jihadist leader remarked, “The situation in Syria for the jihad is extremely dire.”

Looking forward, the most significant challenge may be assessing what happens next in Syria and the region. There are still a substantial number of Salafi-jihadists from al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other organizations that exist in Syria, which operate more as fluid networks rather than as formal groups. These networks are likely to scatter to local sanctuaries in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq in the face of aggressive campaigns. Some may also leave for other battlefields like Libya and Yemen, attempt to return to their countries of origin, or head to regions like the Caucasus or the Balkans to conduct attacks or establish sanctuaries. Many will likely be battle-hardened, religiously zealous, and have improved skills in combat, bombmaking, and counterintelligence. The military campaign by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russia in northwestern Syria may push additional extremists into Turkey, threatening its stability. Turkey’s aid to Salafi-jihadist groups operating in areas like Idlib, such as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, may also increase the possibility of blowback, as the Syrian regime discovered following its support to militants in Iraq after the U.S. invasion.

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7 Soufan, “The Resurgent Threat of al Qaeda.”
The rest of this report is divided into five sections. The first outlines the origins of al Qaeda in Syria, including its internal fissures. The second and third section highlight the series of splits and divisions following the creation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. The fourth summarizes al Qaeda’s main challenges in Syria since 2011. The fifth section highlights future implications for al Qaeda and other Salafi-jihadist networks. This report relies on primary source statements and accounts from al-Zawahiri and others, including current or former members of Jabhat al-Nusrah, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. But trying to gauge the accuracy and fidelity of discussions and internal debates in clandestine organizations is full of methodological and empirical challenges, making it important to caveat any conclusions.10

10 The primary source documents consulted for this report range from statements and letters by leaders like Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, to leaked or otherwise released accounts by Sami al-Oraidi, Abd al-Rahim
Al Qaeda’s Initial Foothold

While al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri harbored ambitions in Syria from the war’s outset in 2011, his organization’s initial foray into Syria was problematic even as al Qaeda-linked groups like Jabhat al-Nusrah established an influential presence in the war. Internal divisions culminated in 2014 with a bitter break between al-Zawahiri and the Islamic State in Iraq’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which eventually led to the creation of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in June 2014.

In 2011, however, al-Zawahiri saw an opportunity. In July 2011, he urged Syrians to help overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad and establish an Islamic emirate, though he wanted al Qaeda’s role to be clandestine. “Our blessed fury and mighty uprising will not calm, with permission from Allah, until we raise the victorious banners of jihad,” al-Zawahiri remarked in a speech titled “Glory of the East Starts in Damascus” and released by al Qaeda’s media arm. Syria’s location in “al-Sham,” a reference to the broader Levant region, placed it in one of Islam’s most important areas. Syria was the central hub of the Umayyad Caliphate, which was established after the death of the Prophet Muhammad and lasted from the mid-seventh to the mid-eighth century AD. Some of Islam’s most sacred sites—such as the city of Jerusalem, al-Aqsa Mosque, and Dome of the Rock (where the Prophet Muhammad is reputed to have ascended to heaven)—are situated in al-Sham. Additionally, the Syrian town of Dabiq and the Umayyad mosque in Damascus have significant eschatological relevance for Salafi-jihadist groups.

In a later message to rebel fighters that appeared to have little or no impact, al-Zawahiri urged them to consider the Syrian struggle as part of a broader global campaign to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate: “You are those who have taken up the path of jihad in the way of Allah to raise the flag of Islam and jihad,” he said. “Unite and close your ranks with your Muslim brothers and mujahidin not just in Sham, but the entire world, for it is a single Crusader campaign being waged against Muslims the world over.” For al Qaeda leaders, the war in Syria was part of a struggle across multiple regions designed to ultimately institute an extreme version of sharia (or Islamic law) and to overthrow existing regimes.

When the war in Syria began in 2011, al-Baghdadi, who had taken over as Islamic State of Iraq emir the year before, moved swiftly to establish a foothold. The Islamic State of Iraq was an affiliate of al Qaeda at the time. Al-Baghdadi clandestinely sent Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani and other

Attoun, Abu al-Harith al-Masri, Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni, and others that participated in jihadist debates. We have supplemented these accounts by secondary literature and interviews with subject-matter experts and U.S. government analysts.

operatives to Syria to join the insurgency and help overthrow the Syrian regime. Al-Jawlani was born in Syria, joined the insurgency in Iraq following the 2003 U.S. invasion, and was later captured—and released—by U.S. forces. As al-Jawlani recalled, al-Baghdadi “approved our plan to support the oppressed in al-Sham, and gave us money . . . and sent us a few brethren.” Over time, al-Jawlani’s organization, Jabhat al-Nusrah, became increasingly capable and self-sufficient. It secured its own donors and funding from sources in the Persian Gulf and Levant, became adept at conducting insurgent attacks, and attracted a growing number of fighters. Jabhat al-Nusrah also received support when Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad released extremists from Adra, Sednaya, and other prisons. Al-Assad played a double game with extremists. He fought some on the battlefield but released others from prison in an apparent effort to support his narrative that the Syrian opposition was riddled with terrorists.

The Islamic State of Iraq’s relationship with al Qaeda soon deteriorated, creating perhaps al Qaeda’s most significant internal struggle up to that point. Al-Baghdadi wanted Jabhat al-Nusrah to continue under his umbrella. In April 2013, al-Baghdadi publicly announced: “It’s now time to declare in front of the people of the Levant and world that Jabhat al-Nusrah is but an extension of the Islamic State of Iraq and part of it.” He continued by clarifying what that meant: “So we declare while relying on Allah: The cancellation of the name ‘Islamic State of Iraq,’ and the cancellation of the name, ‘Jabhat al-Nusrah,’ and gathering them under one name, the ‘Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham.’” Al-Baghdadi had not informed al-Jawlani of the announcement and, besides, al-Jawlani opposed coming under the command and control of al-Baghdadi. Al-Jawlani strongly disagreed, and he soon rejected the announcement and pledged allegiance directly to Ayman al-Zawahiri, publicly confirming Jabhat al-Nusrah’s affiliation with al Qaeda.

Over the next month, tensions escalated between Jabhat al-Nusrah and Islamic State of Iraq leaders, forcing al-Zawahiri to step in and adjudicate. In May of 2013, al-Zawahiri sent a note to al-Baghdadi and al-Jawlani to resolve an escalating dispute between them. In the private letter, al-Zawahiri thanked both for their persistent work. More importantly, al-Zawahiri expressed his frustration with the public nature of the dispute, as it had confirmed the group’s ties to al Qaeda, something he had sought to hide. Al-Zawahiri stated: “Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani was wrong in his declaration of the rejection of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and showing

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17 Al-Baghdadi, “And Give Glad Tidings to the Believers”; SITE Intelligence Group, “ISI Leader Rebrands ISI and al-Nusra Front as ‘Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.’”
19 Al-Jawlani, “About the Levant Front”; SITE Intelligence Group, “Al-Nusra Front Leader Confirms Link to ISI, Pledges to Zawahiri.”
his relationship to al-Qaeda without our command or consulting us, and indeed, without even informing us.”

Al-Zawahiri also expressed dismay about the dissension and acknowledged that he first heard about their disagreements in the news—an indication that he was out of the loop. “All the people of jihad were irked by the dispute that had occurred and appeared in the media between the beloved brothers in the Islamic State of Iraq and the al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant,” he said, reinforcing that “unfortunately, like others, we heard of it from the media.” Al-Zawahiri then explained that he had listened to both sides, consulted with al-Qaeda leaders, and adjudicated in favor of al-Jawlani. Al-Zawahiri announced the formation of Jabhat al-Nusrah as “an independent branch of Qaedat al-Jihad [or al-Qaeda] that follows the general command.” But in a stunning display of insubordination, al-Baghdadi rejected al-Zawahiri’s decision, arguing that he had “several shariah and method-based issues,” or objections, with the ruling. He promised that the “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant remains as long as we have a pulse or an eye that blinks.” In January 2014, al-Zawahiri again urged the Islamic State of Iraq and Jabhat al-Nusrah to end factional fighting in Syria, but with little success. When his mediation efforts failed, al-Zawahiri dismissed al-Baghdadi from al-Qaeda in February 2014. The Islamic State was thus born as an independent group and became a rival of al-Qaeda, competing over ideological legitimacy, recruits, funding, and geographic control.

Jabhat al-Nusrah remained in Syria as an al-Qaeda affiliate, operating in western Syria and—at least for a limited time—in such eastern provinces as Deir Azzour and Raqqah. The Islamic State’s stronghold was in eastern Syria, though the group did control some territory in the west. What’s more, al-Zawahiri alerted Abu Khayr al-Masri, a longtime member of al-Qaeda living in Iran who would later travel to Syria, that he would be unavailable for communication for an extended period of time. As a result, Abu Khayr al-Masri helped create a tripartite committee with two leaders located in Iran, Saif al-Adel (or Mohammed Salah al-Din Zaidan) and Abu Mohammed al-Masri (or

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21 Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani; SITE Intelligence Group, “Zawahiri Reportedly Settles Dispute between ISI, al-Nusra Front.”
22 Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani; SITE Intelligence Group, “Zawahiri Reportedly Settles Dispute between ISI, al-Nusra Front.”
26 Jabhat al-Nusrah had a presence in such eastern areas as Deir Azzour, where it established a relationship with other insurgent groups and tribes, such as the Shai’tat and al-Shuheil branches of the Oqaidat tribe. But its presence declined with the Islamic State’s break with al-Qaeda and emergence in eastern Syria. On Jabhat al-Nusrah’s historical geographic presence, see, for example, Charles Lister, Profiling Jabhat al-Nusrah (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, July 2016).
Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah), that would run the organization until communication was restored again with al-Zawahiri.28

28 Attun, “A Comprehensive History.”
More Fissures and Discord

Throughout 2016, five years into the Syrian war, Jabhat al-Nusrah and other rebel groups discussed possible organizational arrangements, including a merger. Previous efforts had failed for a variety of reasons, including Jabhat al-Nusrah’s connection to al Qaeda. The imminent loss of Aleppo, which occurred at the end of the year, also spurred merger discussions. For some Syrian rebel groups, uniting with an organization affiliated with al Qaeda—one of the world’s most wanted terrorist groups—was risky and would likely bring unwanted attention from Western and Middle Eastern governments. Some of these groups also received lethal and nonlethal material aid—such as tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missiles; small arms; ammunition; food; vehicles; and medical supplies—from foreign governments that did not want ties to an al Qaeda-affiliated organization. Some groups were also concerned that a merger with an al Qaeda organization would alienate them from the local populations that they wished to co-opt. As one former member of Jabhat al-Nusrah noted, the question before Jabhat al-Nusrah leaders was to “either disengage [from al-Qaeda] and merge with major Islamic factions, or face isolation socially, politically and militarily.”

Jabhat al-Nusrah representatives, led by Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, eventually agreed to break external ties with al Qaeda to improve their chances of achieving the Islamic government that al Qaeda had long wanted in Syria. In late July 2016, al-Jawlani and two others, Abdulrahim Attoun and Abu al-Faraj, appeared on a video announcing the dissolution of Jabhat al-Nusrah and establishing a new group, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. Al-Jawlani explained that the decision was made to “expose the deception of the international community, namely the United States and Russia, in their relentless bombardment and displacement of the Muslim masses of Syria under the pretext of bombing al-Nusrah Front.” The group no longer had “external ties,” which suggested that al-Jawlani had formally severed its public relationship with al Qaeda. But the group would, in theory, continue to have a secret relationship with al Qaeda and receive strategic and operational guidance.

Abu Khayr al-Masri, who was directly involved in the discussions, apparently assumed that al-Zawahiri would approve of the rebranding based on the al Qaeda leader’s prior statements. In 2013, for example, al-Zawahiri had suggested the idea of changing al Qaeda’s name to allow

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29 See al-Tamimi, “The Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (II).”
30 Lister, “How al-Qa’ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story.”
32 As used by Jabhat al-Nusrah leaders, breaking “external” ties meant that the group would publicly sever their relationship with core al Qaeda leaders like Ayman al-Zawahiri, but would continue to have a secret relationship.
34 See, for example, Hassan Hassan, “Jabhat Al Nusra and Al Qaeda: The Riddle, the Ruse and the Reality,” The National, November 1, 2017; Attun, “A Comprehensive History.”
Jabhat al-Nusrah to integrate with other Syrian groups.\textsuperscript{35} In an audio speech, al-Masri said he had instructed “the leadership of the Nusrah Front to go ahead with what protects the interests of Islam and Muslims and what protects jihad” in Syria.\textsuperscript{36}

But the decision to establish Jabhat Fatah al-Sham was explosive in extremist circles in Syria and abroad.\textsuperscript{37} Some senior members of Jabhat al-Nusrah, such as Abu Julaybib (or Iyad al Tubaysi) and Abu Hamman al-Shami, angrily quit and refused to participate in Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.\textsuperscript{38} A private message from al-Zawahiri then surfaced in late 2016. He admonished al-Jawlani, claimed that the rebranding was done without his approval and was a "violation and act of disobedience."\textsuperscript{39} Al-Zawahiri demanded "a return to the previous situation before the announcement."\textsuperscript{40} Prior to this, in support of al-Zawahiri, the two senior al Qaeda leaders living in Iran—Saif al-Adel and Abu Mohammed al-Masri—had rejected the rebranding when asked by Abu Kahyr al-Masri about the issue.\textsuperscript{41} However, Jabhat al-Nusrah felt reluctant to listen to the advice of two deputies because they were being harbored in "an enemy country."\textsuperscript{42} Ultimately, al-Jawlani refused to reverse the creation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and its break from al Qaeda, and several of its leaders sent letters to al-Zawahiri attempting to explain their decision and motivations. Abdulrahim Attoun, one of al-Jawlani’s chief aides and a senior religious official, remarked that "a wrong image has reached Shaykh Ayman about the project, we must write a clear explanation in which we tell the Shaykh about the nature of the project, its realities and motives."\textsuperscript{43}

Tensions escalated into late 2016 as the United States continued an aggressive campaign targeting senior al Qaeda leaders in Syria. Not only was al-Jawlani undeterred, but he further infuriated al Qaeda leaders by agreeing to another rebrand and, this time, a merger. In late January 2017, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham merged with several other groups—Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haq, Jaysh al-Sunna, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din—to establish Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. At this point, al Qaeda’s leadership viewed Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham as an independent Salafi-jihadist organization that had illegally broken away from al Qaeda and shattered its oath of allegiance. Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, a leading Salafi-jihadist figure in Syria, criticized their “disavowal of wicked coalitions . . . disavowal of conferences and conspiracies . . . [and views on] secular regimes providing foreign backing.” Then two prominent Salafi-jihadists, Sami al-Oraidi and Abu Hajar al-Shami, quit Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. Some within Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham responded that the group did not intentionally disobey al-Zawahiri’s orders, but rather was hindered by communication difficulties and made decisions they thought al-Zawahiri would approve.

Debates continued to rage with the Salafi-jihadist community over the next few months, highlighting extraordinary fissures within al Qaeda and broader networks in Syria and the region. Several former members of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham criticized the group for sowing division (or fitna), supporting Syrian nationalism rather than global jihad, and breaking their bayat to al-Zawahiri. In April 2017, al-Zawahiri released a statement, almost certainly directed at Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, which noted: “The enemy seeks to transform the jihad in Sham from a cause of the Muslim Ummah to an exclusively nationalist Syrian cause, then turn the nationalist cause to an issue of specific regions and localities, and finally reduce this to an issue of a few cities, villages and neighborhoods.” Consequently, he argued that it was “incumbent upon us to confront this evil strategy by declaring that the jihad in Sham is the jihad of the Muslim Ummah aimed at establishing the rule of Allah in the land of Allah.”

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44 The United States killed such individuals as Abu Omar Saraqeb in September 2016; Abu al-Faraj al-Masri in October 2016; Haydar Kirkan in November 2016; Abu Khattab al-Qahtani in January 2017; and Younes Shoeyb in January 2017.
46 On Sami al-Oraidi’s comments, see his testimony in Al-Tamimi, “The Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (II).”
In November 2017, al-Zawahiri released another statement and acknowledged significant discord among Salafi-jihadist ranks. "In the past year," he noted in a remarkable display of candor, "there have been many changes regarding the mujahideen in general and those of Qaedat al-Jihad in Sham in particular, and the deterioration of the internal situation of the mujahideen, to the extent of being torn up, confused, filled with hesitation animosity, and suffering internal disputes." Al-Zawahiri then chastised al-Jawlani and others in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham for the merger, which he said was "a violation of the covenant" that "did not achieve what they sought of unity" and was never sanctioned by al Qaeda’s leadership.50

Today, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has roughly 10,000 to 14,000 members.51 It is predominantly located in Syria’s Idlib province, though also appears to be active in Syria’s Damascus, Dera’a, and Quneitra provinces. While Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is one of the most powerful opposition group in Syria, it has struggled recently and lost control of territory in northwestern Syria. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s losses were mostly at the hands of the Turkish government-backed Jabhat Tahrir al-Souria, a group formed by the merger of Ahrar al-Sham and Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki.

Figure 2: The Evolution of Al Qaeda and Its Affiliated Groups in Syria

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Al Qaeda’s Troubling Leadership Challenges in Syria

Al Qaeda’s troubled history in Syria highlights several themes. First, Ayman al-Zawahiri faced significant leadership challenges and struggled to adjudicate disputes. Al-Zawahiri’s security situation made it virtually impossible to provide responsive guidance to extremist networks trying to make decisions in a stressful, complex, and rapidly changing environment. As one Salafi-jihadist remarked, “Zawahiri means well when he offers criticisms but the problem is that his isolation and the poor communication channels mean that he frequently receives outdated news devoid of proper context and thus liable to distortion. He may also be influenced by the fact that most if not all the news reaches him from one party.” Al-Zawahiri was slow to respond to debates involving Jabhat al-Nusrah and other Salafi-jihadists, which meant that leaders on the ground had to make decisions based on incomplete information and self-interest amidst a rapidly changing Syrian war. The buildup of tactical and operational decisions made by Jabhat al-Nusrah’s commanders culminated in a strategic quandary for al Qaeda.

To make matters worse, several other al Qaeda leaders participating in the debates were based in countries like Iran, such as Saif al-Adel, compounding delays and communications challenges. Abdulrahim Attoun acknowledged “the lack of communication” as a core reason for the misunderstandings and fissures between Syrian Salafi-jihadists and core al Qaeda. And even when al-Zawahiri objected to decisions by Salafi-jihadists in Syria, such as the creation of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham in 2017 or al-Baghdadi’s establishment of the Islamic State in 2014, local commanders sometimes blatantly disobeyed his guidance. The Islamic State of Iraq’s break with al Qaeda was perhaps the most important rupture in al Qaeda’s history up to that point. Al-Zawahiri was also furious about the creation of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, lamenting that “animosity and division and assaults on the rights and sanctities” had become prevalent.

Furthermore, disorganization and uncertainty were common themes among al Qaeda’s project in Syria. Al Qaeda operatives were apparently confused when Abu Khayr al-Masri arrived in Syria with a letter detailing his position as al-Zawahiri’s number two, as they thought Nasir al-Wuhayshi in Yemen occupied that position. Moreover, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani was unclear whether he was still the leader of Jabhat al-Nusrah following the arrival of al-Masri, who was a higher-ranking member. There also appeared to be general confusion about al-Masri’s role in al Qaeda. Was he a successor to al-Zawahiri, or was he temporarily substituting for him with the authority to make decisions in al-Zawahiri’s place? When al-Zawahiri restored more frequent communications with Salafi-jihadists in Syria, he criticized al-Masri for supporting Jabhat al-Nusrah’s rebranding and

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53 Attun, “A Comprehensive History.”

allowing the organization to publicly break with al Qaeda. Al-Zawahiri remarked that al-Masri was not al-Zawahiri’s deputy at the time, but rather his “successor,” and was thus not permitted to take such action.\footnote{Attun, “A Comprehensive History.”} Attoun summarized the challenges:

The most important problems being the organizational problems in the structure of the organization, delays in decision making due to the lack of communication, and the presence of a few individuals who cause chaos and confusion in every decision we take and they cast doubts on it and defame them, as they interpret them in a way which contradict our goal and intention. And they find attentive ears from some of the leaders, and this is the most important factor in the problem.\footnote{Ibid.}


Second, al Qaeda lacked significant popular support in Syria. The creation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham occurred, in part, because of concerns that an overt relationship with al Qaeda undermined local support among the Syrian population and other insurgent groups. One former Jabhat al-Nusrah commander indicated that affiliation with al Qaeda decreased their local appeal, undermined prospects for outside aid from state backers, increased the likelihood of counterterrorism targeting by foreign governments, and risked ostracization by other groups.\footnote{Lister, “Under Pressure, Syria’s Rebels Face al-Nusra Quandary.”} In addition, while some al Qaeda operatives wanted to break ties with the organization in appearance only—and to continue communicating with al Qaeda leaders clandestinely—it is apparent that any links to al Qaeda were controversial. The merger discussions were characterized by substantial friction, heated debates, and defections because several Syrian insurgent groups were deeply concerned about tying themselves to al Qaeda, either overtly or covertly.
Third, al Qaeda’s challenges indicated that networks in Syria and outside the country are extremely fluid. The constant rebranding, fissures between Salafi-jihadists, splintering, defections, and creation of new groups indicate that there is a pool of Salafi-jihadists in Syria willing to alter their affiliations and organizational structures based on changing leaders, popular support, foreign assistance, paychecks, and the state of the war in Syria—all of which rapidly evolved. Several al Qaeda-affiliated factions have surfaced following the fissure—with names like Jama’at Ansar al-Furqan bi Bilad al-Sham and Tandeem Hiras al-Deen—promising to be faithful to al Qaeda and its leadership.60

Jama’at Ansar al-Furqan bi Bilad al-Sham, for example, was composed of al Qaeda veterans and committed to “reviving the Caliphate . . . through jihad and preparation.”61 Tanzeem Hiras al-Deen acquired a number of loyalist al Qaeda battalions that had previously split off from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, with indications that the group includes between 2,500 and 3,000 fighters and is led by senior al Qaeda leaders such as Abu Hammam al-Shami, Sami al-Oraidi, and Abu Qassam al-Urdani.62 In addition, Syrian rebels often joined multiple groups over several years. In some cases, opposition fighters served for various periods within either Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusrah, the Islamic State, or other groups, only to move to more “moderate” organizations, or vice versa.

While policymakers and terrorism analysts often find it easier to categorize terrorists and insurgents by groups, the fluid nature of the Syrian Salafi-jihadist community suggests that it is also important to look at evolving micro-level networks.

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60 See, for example, SITE Intelligence Group, “Pro-AQ Groups in Syria Distribute Group’s Call to Help Those in Besieged Eastern Ghouta,” February 27, 2018.
61 Statement by Jama’at Ansar al-Furqan bi Bilad al-Sham, Posted on Twitter, released on October 9, 2017; SITE Intelligence Group, “‘Ansar al Furqan In the Land of Sham’ Announces Establishment, Opposition to IS and Multi-National Agreements,” October 11, 2017.
62 See, for example, “جواز الدين حجر جديد بتريبيكسان إدلب,” Aleppo24, March 11, 2018.
Future Evolution

Looking forward, there are several questions about Syria, the region, and al Qaeda’s evolution that are worth monitoring.

**Instability in Turkey:** How will Turkey be impacted by near-term battlefield efforts against al Qaeda, Salafi-jihadist groups like Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, and other insurgent groups in Syria like the Islamic State? In western Syria, insurgent groups are losing territory around cities like Idlib and Damascus (including eastern Ghouta). Over the next several months, fighters from al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other groups are likely to scatter to sanctuaries in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and other countries in the face of aggressive counterinsurgency campaigns. Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts in northwestern Syria could push Salafi-jihadist networks and other rebel fighters into Turkey, further threatening its stability. Additionally, Turkey may face the same problem that the Syrian regime encountered when it supported Salafi-jihadist groups after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Turkey’s connections to Salafi-jihadist insurgent groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, and even Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, could also create blowback within Turkey.  

**Shift to External Operations:** Will al-Zawahiri and other al Qaeda leaders, such as Hamza bin Laden, focus more on external operations in the West rather than on fighting in local wars? Al Qaeda’s affiliates such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, al-Shabaab, and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb are largely focused on fighting local wars and the “near enemy,” or al-Adou al-Qarib. Abu Khayr al-Masri, for instance, told al Qaeda-affiliated militants in Syria to focus on internal wars, noting that he “did not see benefit in foreign operations launched from Shaam and was keen on convincing the Mujahideen in Yemen to leave foreign operations and preoccupy themselves with repelling the transgression of the Houthis.” Muhammad al-Jawlani also acknowledged that Ayman al-Zawahiri had urged him to avoid using Syria to launch attacks on the West. But Hamza bin Laden has called for attacks against the United States at home and abroad. In addition, al Qaeda continues to publish its magazine

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65 Attun, “A Comprehensive History.”


Inspire, with a recently released edition that provides step-by-step instructions about how to derail trains in the United States.

Groups like Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham could serve as a host for al Qaeda operatives plotting attacks against the "far enemy," or al-Adou al-Ba’eed. There is some historical precedence. Jabhat al-Nusra allowed al Qaeda-linked individuals such as Muhsin al-Fadli and Abdul Mohsen Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh, which U.S. officials designated as part of the “Khorasan Group” (different from the Islamic State-Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan) to plot attacks in the West from its sanctuaries. In response, the United States and its allies conducted a series of air strikes against Khorasan targets in northwestern Syria, killing al-Fadli and others.

**Governance Challenges:** Will the Syrian government be able to successfully reconquer, rebuild, and govern territory, denying groups like al Qaeda the ability to resurge? Probably not, at least for the foreseeable future. At the moment, Bashar al-Assad is gaining battlefield momentum against rebel groups through a combination of Syrian government efforts and support from state and nonstate allies. In eastern Syria, where groups currently or formerly linked with al Qaeda have been prevalent, the Syrian government and its proxies have increased control of territory around Idlib and Damascus. There is also significant fighting among groups, most recently exemplified by Jabhat Tahrir al-Souria capturing dozens of cities, towns, villages, and military positions in Idlib and western Aleppo from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham.

But the political and governance challenges in Syria are immense, and a scorched-earth campaign by the regime could exacerbate local grievances against the government, as it did in Aleppo. Alawi Ba’athist Arabs have dominated the Syrian government at the expense of other groups, notably Sunni Arabs. Syrian Kurds have a long-standing history of opposition to the regime. Some Kurdish political and military groups also have close ties with the radical anti-Turkish Kurdistan Workers’ Party (or PKK), placing them in opposition to the government of Turkey. The Syrian civil war has been manipulated and perpetuated by outside actors. Historically, such conflicts end when one side wins or when participants find themselves in a stalemate, leading to a negotiated settlement. But outside actors can sustain this conflict indefinitely at relatively little cost to themselves and may therefore not feel compelled to accept such an outcome soon. As long as external actors like Turkey are willing to continue funding groups or engage directly in the war, the war will likely persist.

A continuing war and a regime that is viewed as illegitimate by significant portions of its population could allow al Qaeda-linked groups to resurge in the future. While al Qaeda has faced significant challenges in Syria, the potential weakness of the Syrian government and the substantial number of Salafi-jihadist networks in the region suggest that Syria will remain an important battlefield for the foreseeable future. In addition, there are still roughly 30,000 to 50,000 Salafi-jihadist fighters in Syria. Many of these fighters have improved their combat, bomb-making, and counterintelligence

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68 As Ayman al-Zawahiri noted in his “General Guidelines for Jihad,” published in 2013, al-Qaeda’s “military work firstly targets the head of (international) disbelief, America and its ally Israel, and secondly its local allies that rule our countries.” He explained that the “purpose of targeting America is to exhaust her and bleed her to death. See Ayman al-Zawahiri, “General Guidelines for Jihad,” Al-Sahab Media Establishment, 2013.


70 The numbers are CSIS estimates, based on an analysis of Salafi-jihadist groups and fighters across the globe—including in Syria.
capabilities. While some Salafi-jihadists have broken ties with al Qaeda for the moment, the fluid nature of these networks suggests that they could reestablish links with al Qaeda based on changing leaders, paychecks, fluctuations in outside support, control of territory, command-and-control relationships, and other factors.

The British diplomat and prime minister Lord Palmerston once noted that “nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests.”71 In a constantly evolving battlefield, this reality is just as true for extremist groups as it is for states. While Salafi-jihadist networks and names may change over time, their extremist ideology and battle-hardened capabilities make them a significant long-term threat.

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