

YOUNG PROFESSIONALS IN FOREIGN POLICY

COMBATING TERRORISM WORKING GROUP



NEXTGEN PERSPECTIVE ON - AL-QA'IDA'S ECLIPSE OF ISIL

Combating Terrorism Working Group Brief 1.0
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INTRODUCTION

With nearly two decades having passed since al-Qa'ida attacked the US homeland on 9/11, its threat to the US seems to have faded from purview. As the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL) claim to a caliphate continues to spill past Iraq and Syria, manifesting in directed, enabled, and inspired acts of terror around the globe, policy makers and the news media claim that it is ISIL—not al-Qa'ida—that poses the greater threat to the US.

While ISIL continues to pose a significant threat to the US and its allies—especially in light of its external operations branch known as the *Emni*—the durability and adaptive proclivity of al-Qa'ida as both a structured organization and an ideology cannot be underestimated. Its dedication to combating the “near enemy” in Yemen has allowed al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to infiltrate and coopt local populations. In Syria, al-Qa'ida has once again proved its prowess at exploiting power vacuums; its rebranded, de-facto affiliate Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) holds a majority in Idlib province and has attracted the largest contingency of foreign fighters to Syria after ISIL. With ISIL's relevancy in the region beginning to fade, JFS is poised to eclipse it. Hauntingly reminiscent of Afghanistan in the 1990s, when al-Qa'ida found a safe haven in the power vacuum left in the civil war's wake, Syria threatens to nurture the resurgence of al-Qa'ida's transnational terrorism ambitions.

The NextGen Perspective:

Given that what we're reading in the news is inherently responsive in nature, the NextGen is striving to turn the status quo on its head and be both preventive and preemptive by **preparing for tomorrow's threats today**. Despite ISIL's increasingly global reach, we assess al-Qa'ida to pose the greater long-term threat to US interests. Al-Qa'ida has steadily built both the organizational and ideological infrastructure to eclipse ISIL as the more durable, sophisticated, and US-focused terrorist actor. Air strikes against al-Qa'ida affiliates in Yemen and Syria are helpful in containing the threat, but they will not eliminate it. In order for the US to truly get ahead of al-Qa'ida, it must dedicate resources to denying—rather than simply managing—sanctuary to its cells around the world. This brief will examine AQAP and JFS as case studies to highlight how these al-Qa'ida affiliates are adapting and evolving in a post-ISIL world. While ISIL currently dominates the spotlight of the international community's attention, their longevity rests upon their ability to hold and govern territory, which is declining daily. Al-Qa'ida, conversely, is playing the long game, and has shaped the resiliency of its brand, expansion strategy, and recruitment tactics accordingly. If we do not recognize and prepare for the magnitude of the al-Qa'ida threat today, we risk bearing witness to another major attack on the US homeland.

CASE STUDY: AL-QA'IDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Fighting for Hearts & Minds

Seizing upon the weakness of Yemen's institutions, al-Qa'ida established an affiliate and effectively capitalized upon this vulnerability. Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formally established in January 2009. Consisting primarily of al-Qa'ida members from the Gulf, predominantly Yemen and Saudi Arabia, AQAP quickly surpassed al-Qa'ida “Central” (AQC) as the more significant terrorism threat against the US homeland. AQAP has since served as a safe haven to project the soft power of al-Qa'ida's propaganda and messaging, especially in light of the unparalleled efforts of Anwar al-Awlaki. As both an American citizen and recognized Yemeni cleric, al-Awlaki used his blog to target English-speakers with radical online lectures encouraging terrorist attacks against the US. Most notably, al-Awlaki influenced [Nidal Hasan](#) and [Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab](#). AQAP's recruitment efforts, along with its ideological exportation capabilities, were taken a step further with al-Awlaki's creation of *Inspire*, al-Qa'ida's online English-language magazine. *Inspire* sought to attract vulnerable recruits to join al-Qa'ida's “heroic struggle” against the Western “Crusaders,” and encouraged sympathizers to commit attacks on their own through the inclusion of instruction manuals detailing “how to make a bomb in your mom's kitchen.” While al-Awlaki was killed by a US drone strike in September 2011, his legacy has lived on through *Inspire*. Several

high-profile terrorist actors have cited his influence as a central component of their radicalization, including the perpetrators of the Boston bombings, Charlie Hebdo attack, and Ohio State University attack.

AQAP has continued to further its strategic goals and influence in Yemeni politics with help from the power vacuum stemming from the [Yemeni Civil War](#) between the Houthis and Yemeni National Government. Hailing from the Zaidi Shia minority group, Yemen's Houthis are predominantly located in the country's north. In light of their minority status, they have lobbied for autonomy and equal representation from the Central Government in Sana'a. This has sparked persistent rebellions since the 1990s against the former President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was forced to resign as the Arab Spring arrived to Yemen in 2011. Saleh's replacement, President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, has struggled to adequately address the complexity of issues facing Yemen, including AQAP, water scarcity, corruption, separatist movements, and a restless military. In 2014, the Houthis capitalized upon this weakness and seized control of their heartland in the north before heading south to Sana'a. This forced Hadi to resign and the military to fracture. Fearing the unknown influence of Shia Iran on the Houthis, Saudi Arabia deployed troops and formed a coalition to fight the Houthis and their allies. Fighting has since been at a stalemate.

AQAP has seized upon this unstable political environment to claim more territory and co-opt local communities under its guise of offering "Sunni protection" against the Shia Houthis. AQAP has worked carefully to integrate into and garner influence along with support from local populaces by tempering their fundamentalist messaging. Additionally, the shared Yemeni identity of the majority of its cadre has aided AQAP in its ability to relate and speak to local grievances, such as jobs, services, and security. Recognizing the failure of the Yemeni Government to provide services in several parts of the country, AQAP has filled this gap and delivered [welfare services](#) to local communities, along with security.

NextGen Recommendations for Countering AQAP

In order to best counter AQAP, the diplomatic issues between Yemen's two warring sides must first be addressed. The Hadi/Saudi side are giving AQAP a backseat to their perceived greater threat, the Houthis. AQAP is benefitting from the Houthis' penetration into Sunni areas because it allows them the ability to insert themselves into the anti-Houthi Sunni resistance as a much needed ally. The Houthis previously indicated willingness to make significant concessions in exchange for the creation of a National Unity Government providing proportional representation. That has been seriously stalled by a Houthi court sentencing Hadi and other leaders to death for "[high treason](#)". With a stable and operating government, Yemenis would be far less incentivized to support AQAP as they will have alternative avenues for gaining basic services. With the prospect of peace delayed by recent actions, it is critical that the coalition comprised of the Hadi government, Saudi Arabia, and their allies work to provide basic government services during this time of crisis in order to mitigate AQAP's local influence.

As the Yemeni Government and other regional allies ignore AQAP to focus on the Houthis, the US should continue its light-footprint campaign against them with Special Forces raids and airstrikes. The US raid on [January 29](#), 2017 was heralded as a success due to its elimination of more than a dozen AQAP fighters and the capturing of high-level intelligence. It did, however, cost the life of a US SEAL and the lives of at least 23 civilians. In the near to long-term, this incident could prove more damaging than beneficial, with unintended consequences outweighing the value of the retrieved intelligence. This lesson should be applied to airstrikes aimed at AQAP, for while effective in taking out AQAP's senior leadership, they can also come at the cost of local communities. The US and its allies should be mindful while executing counterterrorism missions in Yemen, and must be careful to not further alienate the local population and push them closer to AQAP.

The light-footprint strategies do have the possibility to create anti-American sentiment but they are still necessary to degrade and slow down the operational tempo of group's like AQAP. They also are needed when the local or national governments are unable or unwilling to act. These operations can create the time and space needed for improving local capacities in the security and governance building spectrums. They must be done in conjunction with other ongoing strategies aimed at uplifting the population and returning stability. A balance between caution and action must be found when determining the risks of conducting or not conducting such operations.

CASE STUDY: JABHAT FATEH AL-SHAM

Building the Infrastructure to Target the “Far Enemy”

In late 2011, al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI; the predecessor of ISIL) emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi deployed AQI operative Abu Muhammad al-Julani to Syria in order to lead a budding jihadist cell tasked with usurping the Assad regime and establishing an Islamic State. By January 2012, the cell was fully operational and declared its allegiance as al-Qa’ida’s Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra (also known as the al-Nusra Front). Operating in the theater of a burgeoning civil war, al-Nusra quickly attracted a steady supply of funding, weapons, and fighters to gain prominence on the battlefield. It also gained international recognition for being the first Syrian opposition group to conduct [suicide attacks](#) against civilians. By the fall of 2012, former Secretary of State John Kerry [credited](#) it with having the best-trained and most experienced fighters among the Syrian opposition.

Paralleling the success of AQAP in infiltrating and coopting local populaces, al-Nusra began to sew an expansive network of partnerships with rebel groups. Exploiting personal and factional grievances within rival opposition groups—including the prominent Ahrar al-Sham—al-Nusra co-opted defection and secured the allegiance of thousands of fighters trained in the intricacies of Syria’s geographic, cultural, and linguistic context. Further, its use of bribery to draw fighters to its cause also facilitated al-Nusra’s ability to garner allegiance from Islamist militants previously aligned with other groups. Through these tactics, the al-Nusra Front fostered the narrative that the success of the Syrian revolution was contingent upon military coordination with its leadership. By mid-2016, the al-Qa’ida affiliate had built a paramilitary force of 10,000 fighters, and [expanded](#) its operations into 11 of Syria’s 13 governorates, controlling territory in northern, western, and southern Syria, and holding a majority in the strategic Idlib province.

While the al-Nusra Front branded its organization as Syrian-centric, its actions have proven otherwise. Not only has the organization conducted operations in Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley, but it has harbored the [Khorasan Group](#), a rebranded cell of al-Qa’ida’s top officials who are committed to using Syria as a base to facilitate transnational attacks aimed at the West. In July 2014, there were reports that Ibrahim Hassan Tali al-Asiri, the premier bomb maker for AQAP, was working with al-Nusra to create devices undetectable to Western airport security technology.

In 2015, rumors surfaced that al-Nusra was considering severing ties with al-Qa’ida in order to more directly receive financial support from Gulf states such as Qatar. In July 2016, this rumor manifested when al-Qa’ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri released an audio statement calling on al-Nusra to abandon its links with al-Qa’ida and coordinate with other Syrian jihadist factions to form a Sunni Islamist government. Hours later, al-Golani declared a formal split from its parent organization and renamed itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (“Front for the Consequent of the Levant”).

Despite al-Nusra’s rebranding campaign, the United States still classifies it as a terrorist organization and views it as al-Qa’ida’s de facto affiliate. However, other than persistent air strikes, the US has yet to theorize or actionize a pragmatic strategy to combat them.

NextGen Recommendations for Countering JFS

The fight against JFS is complicated by the chaos created by the lack of governance, and sheer number of actors operating within the Syrian theater. On the ground, the lack of political stability, economic opportunity, and rule of law can make allegiance to JFS attractive for the sole purpose of survival. For the US to effectively combat it, it will have to invest in both soft and hard power resources.

First, while enhancing partner nation capabilities and using the tactics of targeted drone strikes and special operations raids have helped mitigate the risks posed by Syria’s various actors, there must be attempts to deny JFS sanctuary in Syria. The original post-911 approach was to deny terror groups sanctuary by depriving them of both the time and space to train and plot. Syria’s ongoing civil war and JFS’s increasing capabilities have demonstrated that the reduced expectation of sanctuary management is far from a sufficient approach to combating terrorism.

Second, given JFS's success in infiltrating and co-opting local populaces, the US can help stem the attractiveness of its organizational brand by helping publicize its high number of civilian casualties. While JFS currently dominates Syria's revolutionary narrative along with ISIL, the high number of other Sunni jihadist factions with the backing of powerful state-actors makes the opposition hierarchy a competitive game. In addition to materially aiding moderate rebel groups, the US should promote a counter-narrative that promotes these groups while minimizing and delegitimizing JFS.

Third, JFS's harboring of the Khorasan Group makes the US decapitation strategy of precision air strikes both necessary and effective for degrading their operational tempo. This centralized cell of al-Qa'ida's senior leadership remains one of the most pressing threats to US national security. Considering that very little is known about the membership roster, internal hierarchy, and external operations of the Khorasan Group, the US should prioritize intelligence gathering and information sharing about this group with its allies, and target it in air strikes as the most imminent arm of JFS.

Finally, as JFS continues to distance itself from al-Qai'da, it will likely attempt to increase its nation building activities and administration of welfare services, not dissimilar to ISIL, in the attempt to demonstrate to both the international community and local populaces that it has detached from al-Qa'ida. As the leadership within the US' key institutions changes, the US must maintain a long-term memory as to the origin of the al-Nusra Front—now JFS—threat. It must not be forgotten that JFS is likely playing the long-game with the eventual goal of terrorizing the US on its own soil. Additionally, the US should encourage its Gulf allies and partners to refrain from aiding JFS with financial support and hostage negotiation assistance.

CONCLUSION

Al-Qa'ida has identified the US as its ultimate target of terror since its founding in 1988. However, given the degree to which al-Qai'da's organizational infrastructure, along with its coordination and execution of attacks, has evolved over the past three decades, the US's counterterrorism strategy must similarly adapt to address these changing threat vectors. This brief's identification of both tactical and strategic recommendations seek to go beyond simply mitigating the risks posed by AQAP and JFS; they aim to establish the hard and soft power defense capabilities for the US to eliminate them as both organizations and ideologies. While not specifically addressed in this brief, al-Qa'ida Central and its other affiliates, such as al-Shabaab and al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, are also gaining strength while pursuing similar strategies in their respective areas of operation.

In its effort to combat al-Qa'ida along with ISIL, the US needs to ensure that it is administering its counterterrorism efforts as part of a broader, multi-pronged strategy. In the complex and war-plagued countries of Yemen and Syria, counterterrorism initiatives cannot be effective nor sustainable unless they are accompanied by strengthened governance, improved education, and infrastructure investment campaigns. President Trump's proposal to severely cut the State Department and USAID budget threatens to significantly undermine these efforts. While the White House has attempted to qualify these proposed cuts on the grounds that the defense budget will be fortified by a \$54 billion increase, an exclusively hard power counterterrorism strategy—without the long-term nation-building initiatives of soft power along with follow through—will ultimately fail to deny sanctuary to al-Qa'ida's metastasizing affiliates. The US and its allies cannot simply kill their way to a counterterrorism victory.

For the foreseeable future, al-Qa'ida and its affiliates will continue to play the long-game and pose a significant threat to the security of the United States. With the ultimate goal of attacking the US homeland, it will incrementally work to undermine local governments and destabilize regions in order to gain strength and build its army with new members. With ISIL's relevancy largely tied to its territorial claim to a caliphate, al-Qa'ida will continue to prey upon power vacuums in order to execute its battle-plan for the long game.

ABOUT YOUNG PROFESSIONALS IN FOREIGN POLICY (YPFP)

Young Professionals in Foreign Policy (YPFP) is committed to fostering the next generation of foreign policy leaders by providing its members with the knowledge, skills, exposure, and relationships they will need to tackle critical global challenges over the course of their careers. YPFP is a dynamic, global, nonpartisan, non-profit organization with 10,000+ selected members around the world who work in all fields of international affairs. It was established in 2004, and is headquartered in Washington, DC, with branches in Brussels, London, and New York. YPFP is supported by around 150 volunteer staff members worldwide, for whom the leadership and management of a global NGO supplements their daytime careers or graduate studies.

ABOUT THE COMBATING TERRORISM WORKING GROUP (CTWG)

The Combating Terrorism Working Group (CTWG) reorganized in early 2017 from the Combating Terrorism Discussion Group in order to better facilitate the development of future counterterrorism leaders and policymakers. The central goals of the CTWG are to increase NextGen engagement through policy paper production, focused discussion meetings, and YPFP membership-wide events. The CTWG explores and assesses methods that the United States and our allies can use to effectively respond to and proactively prepare for emerging and evolving terrorist threats. The working group leverages cross-disciplinary approaches in order to define holistic solutions to fight terrorism. Follow the CTWG on [Twitter](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Ryan is the Chair of YPFP's Combating Terrorism Working Group; he led the first transition of an YPFP Discussion Group into a Working Group. He has led multiple stand up/down projects with YPFP, including leading a nine-week education module focused on international security policy. Responsibilities included creating curriculum; directing staff; speaker recruitment; applicant selection; and organizing sessions. He works as a Watch Officer & Intelligence Analyst in the 24/7 Security Operations Center of the World Bank Group (WBG) as a contractor through iJET International. In this position, he monitors global events in real-time for issues that could impact WBG staff and/or their operations. In this role he has had the opportunity to focus on a wide variety of security threats from coups to protests to terrorist attacks. Ryan earned a Master of Science in International Affairs from Florida State University and a Bachelor of Arts in Criminology & Criminal Justice from University of Maryland, College Park.

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Jacqueline serves as the Associate Director of YPFP's Combating Terrorism Working Group, and YPFP's Terrorism & Asymmetric Warfare Fellow, through which she has been published in *The National Interest* and *Real Clear World*. In addition to her work at YPFP, Jacqueline serves as a security-focused Senior Analyst at The Chertoff Group, a premier global advisory firm, where she advises clients on how to best protect and fortify their security architecture from physical and cyber threats. She also serves as a non-resident Counterterrorism Fellow at the London-based Asia-Pacific Foundation, through which she is regularly interviewed as a counterterrorism expert on international news, and has authored numerous reports in the aftermath of terrorist attacks that have been used to brief high-ranking officials in government, military, and law enforcement. Jacqueline holds a Master's with highest honors from The London School of Economics, and a Bachelor's with Phi Beta Kappa honors from Wake Forest University, where she served as the President of the Student Body.