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# Vanguards No Longer: Challenges to al Qaeda Leadership of the Jihadist Community

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# Vanguards No Longer: Challenges to al Qaeda Leadership of the Jihadist Community

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# Abstract

2014 marks the first time that al Qaeda's supremacy in the Jihadist community has been challenged. al Qaeda's former franchise in Iraq, now called the "Islamic State," has declared the organization responsible for 9/11 "Tyrants" and "Apostates." The Islamic State has begun openly attacking al Qaeda's official franchise in Syria, Jabhat al Nusra. These events are a consequence of the strategy of franchising that al Qaeda undertook following 9/11. The root of the issue between al Qaeda and its former Iraqi franchise is over a difference over the importance placed on popular support as a key ingredient in achieving the larger objectives of Global Jihad. This schism in the jihadist community will have a large impact on al Qaeda, as well as implications for United States security policy.

**<u>Introduction</u>**

2014 has brought a series of events that will fundamentally change the way the world views the terrorist organization known as Al Qaeda. In January, 2014, Al Qaeda Central's (AQC) subsidiary group in Iraq, now known as the "Islamic State," or "al Dawla," entered into a state of open conflict with the organization's official Syrian group, Jabhat al Nusra. The leader of the central al Qaeda organization, Ayman al Zawahiri, subsequently released a series of audio statements that commanded an end to the infighting, as well as designating an al Qaeda operative already in Syria as the leadership's official representative that would mediate any future disputes. Instead of bowing to the leader of the global terrorist group's orders, the Iraqi-based faction assassinated the representative AQC had sent to Syria and stepped up attacks on the central group's subsidiary in the country. As a result, the central group disavowed its old Iraqi franchise. al Dawla responded by publicly announcing that al Qaeda, and all who align with its leadership, are apostates. The divide between al Qaeda and al Dawla arises out of a disagreement over methodology.

Since 9/11, al Qaeda Central has remained the leaders of the jihadist community by using franchising as the means by which it can shape the larger jihadist movement. The ejection of al Dawla from the al Qaeda brand shows that al Qaeda Central has come to the conclusion that if any of its larger strategic goals are to be achieved, it has to temper its message to appeal to a wider base of people. This can be seen in examining Jabhat al Nusra's actions on the ground, as well as public statements by Jabhat al Nusra and al Qaeda Central. This emphasis on public support is eschewed by al Dawla, which argues that local support is unnecessary to achieve the larger objective of Global Jihad, which is the reestablishment of the Islamic Caliphate. What does this mean for the Global Jihadist movement? Do these events in Syria mark an end to al

Qaeda's place at the head of Global Jihad? In order to answer this question, an in depth analysis of al Qaeda's origins, strategic development, and current influence is necessary. This will be conducted in the form of four distinct chapters. The first chapter will deal with al Qaeda's roots as the first global jihadist organization, beginning in Afghanistan.

Al Qaeda came about as an evolution of the "Support Bureau," or "Makhtab al Khadimat," formed by veteran Palestinian Jihadist Abdullah Azzam during the Afghan Soviet war for foreign fighters who had heralded the calls for "defensive Jihad." Along with his deputy and part financier, Osama bin Laden, Azzam established a strong network amongst the non-Afghan fighters who had come to Afghanistan to participate in the Jihad. His group was later dubbed the "Afghan Arabs," and contained many of the men that would later make up the highest echelons of the group responsible for 9/11.[i] The Afghan-Soviet war, also known as the "Afghan Jihad," brought thousands of young men to Afghanistan to fight for their fellow Muslims against the godless communists. These determined fighters, along with the huge amount of material and monetary support from the U.S., Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, compelled the USSR to withdraw its troops.[ii] By the time the Taliban swept into Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, the Afghan-Arabs who had remained connected to the concept of Global Jihad had formed al Qaeda, (literally, "the base" in Arabic) as a central hub from which other jihads against unjust rulers of Muslims could be launched.

Unlike other jihadist groups, al Qaeda's leaders- Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri- decided that the most efficient way to bring about their group's larger geostrategic goals of re-establishing the Islamic Caliphate was to direct their efforts at causing Western nations to withdraw from Islam's historic heartland - the Arab world. After their group drew the United States into intractable, unwinnable conflicts in the Middle East, the U.S. would lose the

interest and the will to interfere in Muslim lands. The removal of foreign powers from Muslim affairs would pave the way for the implementation of al Qaeda's interpretation of Islamic law, as well as a larger Islamic state that could reclaim the glory of Islam that had been stolen through colonization.

Al Qaeda Central first made a name for itself in bombing the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, followed by orchestrating the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000. This rise towards becoming the preeminent jihadist group culminated in the attacks on September 11, 2001. 9/11 was the capstone on al Qaeda's bid to assume the title of "Vanguards of Jihad," a term coined by Jihadist scholar Sayyid Qutb. Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, al Qaeda Central – those responsible for carrying out the attacks up until 9/11 – has been driven underground by the constant worldwide hunt for the death or capture of those individuals that managed to escape Afghanistan during the U.S. invasion. In the words of scholar Marc Sageman, "Al Qaeda's bench is shrinking."[iii] This has compelled the central organization to engage in what has been labeled a strategy of "franchising," which is the topic of the second chapter.

Franchising in the context of terrorism is the process by which a central "hub" or node lends out its name through oaths of loyalty given by leaders of local factions that wish to become part of the al Qaeda "brand." That brand status as the world leaders in terrorism comes with support, usually monetary but sometimes material, from the central organization as well as from other, independent sources. In return for this support, franchise groups keep the al Qaeda name active worldwide, giving the impression that the central group remains extremely active despite its leadership having to remain in hiding. Having franchises referred to as "al Qaeda militants" in the Western press and al Qaeda's internet presence[iv] keeps al Qaeda relevant, and gives the central leadership some semblance of power on the global scale. In theory, franchising would

also provide al Qaeda with a sort of "farm system" whereby the ranks of the central organization's leadership can be replenished by new recruits from subsidiary groups, but as will be shown in Chapters 2,3, and 4, this has not been the case. In addition, franchising serves the larger strategic goals of the central organization by spreading its ideology and inspiring attacks of "lone wolf" terrorists such as those who conducted the Boston Bombings last year. This discussion of franchising will touch briefly upon al Qaeda's many franchises, but al Qaeda's experience in Iraq is the most important to examine. It is in Iraq that the downfalls of franchising are showcased most evidently in that al Qaeda supported and cultured the growth of the group now known as "al Dawla," which has come to challenge al Qaeda for the title of "Vanguards of Jihad." al Qaeda's experience in Iraq makes up the basis for the third chapter.

al Qaeda's leadership first realized its role as a central hub of a group of franchises in Iraq, where the central organization allied itself with a group run by an old ally from Afghanistan, Abu Musab al Zarqawi. Zarqawi formed al Qaeda in Iraq, and that group later transformed into al Dawla al Islamiyya - the organization that has come to challenge AQC for its position of leadership within the Jihadist community. In focusing on franchising al Qaeda's global brand, the central group has experienced some positive effects, but is now feeling the negative impacts in handing out the al Qaeda name to others. After years as one of the most dangerous insurgent groups in Iraq, Zarqawi's organization was driven out of major population centers by a movement known as the Sunni Awakening. There exist a variety of theories on why the Awakening movement occurred, which will be discussed in this chapter. These theories have broad implications for al Qaeda's current approach to Syria, which is the topic of Chapter 4.

A close reading of communiques and internal messages, particularly those released during the Syrian Civil War, reveal two things. First, that in Jabhat al-Nusra, al Qaeda's local

franchise, AQC has a model for the future of franchised jihadist groups. Second, that its errant Iraq franchise now poses an existential threat to the central organization and its coveted place at the head of the Global Jihadist movement. In 2013, al Qaeda's Iraqi franchise, now calling itself al Dawla, or the "Islamic State" began taking territory and clashing with Jabhat al Nusra among other Syrian militant groups. In comparing the public and private statements of AQC/Jabhat al Nusra to those released by al Dawla, a distinct shift is revealed regarding approaches to jihad. As will be seen in this chapter, these differences are based around the importance given to the role of public support for jihadist movements. Both AQC/Jabhat al Nusra and al Dawla desire the end goal of establishing an Islamic State in the Muslim heartlands. The key difference between them is that while AQC/Jabhat al Nusra's current objective is to establish the correct preconditions for an Islamic State, al Dawla argues that the preconditions have been met, and that the soldiers of Islam must focus primarily on acquiring and defending territory. This difference has proven to be the root cause of the current conflict between the two organizations, and has led to the first existential threat to al Qaeda's dominance of the jihadist landscape.

After exploring this important schism in Global Jihad, I will conclude by summarizing key aspects of this discussion as well as its implications for the United States and the larger world. Finally, points for further research will be examined. To properly understand how this threat to al Qaeda's supremacy arose, is it necessary first to examine al Qaeda's origins as an organization.

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[i] Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 30 .
[ii] George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003).
[iii] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 131.
[iv] Ibid, 130.

## Chapter 1 – Climb to the Top

**Overview**

To understand how al Qaeda climbed to the top of Jihadist world, the group's ideological development and history must be dissected. This is not only to establish what makes al Qaeda different from other Jihadist groups, but how it achieved the mantle of "Vanguards of Jihad," the title now under attack in Syria. In this first chapter, al Qaeda's ideological roots will be examined through the writings of Sayyid Qutb, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt commonly referred to as the "grandfather of modern jihad." Within Qutb's writing is the basis for the jihadist struggle against the "near enemy" of local regimes and the "far enemy" of the West. It is the focus on the "far enemy" that helped al Qaeda become the top jihadist organization. Qutb also lays out the need for a "vanguard of the believers," a hardcore group that will lead Islam back to its days of glory through the reestablishment of the Islamic Caliphate. Following this discourse, we will then establish when and how al Qaeda was born as a product of the "Afghan Jihad" of the 1980s and the inter-jihadist debates of the 1990s. Finally, this chapter will take a look just at how al Qaeda went from a startup splinter group to the undisputed "Vanguards of Jihad" through attacks against the West.

**A Product of History**

Author Michael Ryan describes al Qaeda as "a marriage of Egyptian Islamic radicalism and the tribal fanaticism of the Wahhabi homeland in the Arabian Peninsula."[i] al Qaeda's reliance upon tribal fanaticism is built around the concept of "bay-ah," or the swearing of allegiance. This concept is key to understanding al Qaeda's current strategy of franchising, and will be discussed in Chapter 2. The "Egyptian Islamic radicalism" aspect of al Qaeda is based

around the writings of Sayyid Qutb, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the mid-20th century.

**Sayyid Qutb and The False Leadership of Secular Muslims**

  Al Qaeda and other Jihadist groups nominally base their actions in modern Jihadist philosophy, particularly in the writings of a 20th century Muslim Brotherhood leader named Sayyid Qutb. It is within Qutb's writings that the modern rationale for offensive actions against forces labeled "oppressive" to Muslims and Islam is found. Within Qutb's writing is the basis for modern jihadist thought and the debate over targeting the "near enemy" of local regimes, as well as the "far enemy" of the West. Michael Ryan, in his work, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America*, describes Qutb as "crucial for the development of the ideological base for revolutionary Salafist thinkers who came after him."[ii]

  In Qutb's seminal writing, *Milestones*, the Egyptian jihadist reflects upon his disgust with Western society after having lived in Michigan for several years.[iii] Qutb argues that Islam and the West are in binary opposition to each other. As a counterbalance to the corrupting influences of the West, an Islamic state must be established in Muslim lands that upholds the values and traditions found in the Quran and the collection of accounts and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad known as the Hadith.  Qutb advocates that the central aim of Muslims everywhere, their struggle, or "jihad," must be to create "a distinct and permanent society based on the Divine Authority and submission to the One God."[iv] In Qutb's view, the central obstacles to the establishment of such a community are the secular regimes of Arab and Muslim lands. Qutb refers to these regimes as the "Jahili leadership" - referencing the rulers of Mecca during the pre-islamic "jahiliyya"or "time of ignorance." The true Islamic community, Qutb writes, no

matter at what stage in its development, "must prepare itself for defense."[v] This "defense" may go beyond reactionary action, but may be preemptive in order to protect and spread the liberating nature of Islam. It is essential, for Qutb, to strive towards driving out all threats to Islam, the most immediate of which are the secular rulers of Muslims.

Though the secular rulers of Qutb's time, such as Nasser, were nominally Muslim, Qutb reminds his readers of a 13th century Islamic scholar, Ibn Taymiyya, who advocated for armed revolt against rulers who did not conduct the state within Taymiyya's interpretation of Islamic laws. Qutb draws parallels between the modern rulers of Egypt and elsewhere with the Mongols that ruled during Ibn Taymiyya's time. As Michael Doran notes in *Political Science Quarterly*, "Qutb's importance lies in having translated the logic of Ibn Taymiyya's rulings on apostasy into a comprehensive perspective on the problems of Islam in the modern world."[vi] Just as Ibn Taymiyya advocated that there was a duty to revolt against the newly-converted Mongol rulers of Muslim lands in the 13th century, so too does Qutb reject secular Arab regimes, and argue that revolt against this near enemy is a duty. As S.K. Burki writes in *Defense and Security Analysis,* "Qutb argues that because the coercive apparatus of the modern authoritarian state protects and even fosters this state of [oppression towards Islam], a dedicated vanguard of believers was needed who would resort to force to protect their cause against such Muslim states."[vii]

**The Need for the Vanguard**

Writing in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, author Kenneth Payne explains that "Qutb stressed the separateness of the hard-core, militant believers: the vanguard of the people, who could radicalize the masses. The idea of the vanguard permeates militant Islamist writing."[viii] The mantle of "vanguard of the believers" referenced by Qutb would eventually be assumed by

al Qaeda because it disagreed with other jihadist groups on how best to make the "near enemy"

of repressive states fall and adopted different tactics as a result.

Most jihadist groups have historically focused on dismantling these local regimes directly

in the countries in which they are based. al Qaeda is first jihadist group of its kind in that it is the

first to focus specifically on carrying out operations against countries and forces outside of the

country it is based. While al Qaeda Central's most important leaders, Osama bin Laden and

Ayman Al Zawahiri, agreed with the vast majority of Jihadist groups in that the most significant

obstacle to the creation of their vision of an Islamic Caliphate was local regimes, they disagreed

on the means to make those regimes fall. As followers of Qutb were locked up by the thousands

in Egypt following a failed campaign of terrorist attacks against state and tourist-based targets in

the 1990s, a debate arose in the jihadist community over why these efforts against the "near

enemy" had failed to bring about change. According to Sageman in *Leaderless Jihad*,

> one faction argued that the 'far enemy' - in this case the West… was propping up the 'near enemy'… a very small faction advocated a switch in strategy, name to expel the 'far enemy' from the Middle East, so they could then overrun the 'near enemy,' their government. The vast majority of Islamist terrorists rejected this approach, claiming that they needed to focus their energies on toppling their own government without the extra burden of taking on a Western power.[ix]

For al Qaeda Central, the most effective means to topple the regimes of Egypt and

elsewhere, was not to directly attack local regimes, but to attack the powerful backers of said

regimes. In the case of the Arab world, this was the United States and Europe. Al Qaeda means

"the base" in Arabic. After the attacks of 9/11 and the assuming of the mantle of "vanguards of

Jihad," al Qaeda was structured to be a base akin to a corporate headquarters, meaning that its

central focuses became, up until the Syrian situation, to organize and execute operations against

foreign, non-Muslim forces. In Afghanistan and Iraq, this targeting was expanded to include

Muslims who were seen as aiding the non-Muslim oppressors. According to Bruce Riedel in his

book, *The Search for Al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future*, a core aspect within this

larger strategy is to provoke the backers of corrupt target regimes into "bleeding wars" that will ultimately defeat the U.S. and other Western powers into withdrawing their support, leaving the puppet dictators vulnerable to attack.[x] This strategy did not appear out of thin air. Rather, such a series of events is exactly what occurred in Afghanistan in the 1980s and '90s and led to the birth as the group that came to be known as "Al Qaeda."

**The Birth of Al Qaeda**

In December, 1979,[xi] The 6th Army of the Soviet Union rolled into Afghanistan in an attempt to save the communist government from falling to a burgeoning insurgency. Rather than alleviate pressure on the local government, the large presence and heavy handed tactics of the Soviets led to widespread calls for Muslim volunteers to go to Afghanistan and fight the godless communists who were slaughtering Afghan civilians by the hundreds of thousands.[xii] Among the ranks of these foreign volunteers who had heeded the call of jihad included a group led by Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian militant who led a group of international volunteers that came to be known as the "Afghan Arabs." The Afghan Arabs attracted wealthy members, such as Osama Bin Laden, who financed the group and helped form a "services bureau," or "Makhtab al Khadimat." The purpose of this organization was to create a bureaucracy around organizing and administrating services such as food, shelter, and weapons for foreign fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[xiii] The concept of the Makhtab al Khadimat remains a central aspect of Al Qaeda today. Through significant funding and training from the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, anti-Soviet forces were eventually able to compel the USSR to withdraw its troops. Afghan President Mohammed Najibullah's Soviet-backed government fell not long after.

To the Afghan Arabs, they had completed the impossible task of routing a superpower and paving the way for the establishment of a true Islamic state in Afghanistan. While some figures, including Osama Bin Laden, are not remembered as having been particularly noteworthy fighters, others were made into battle hardened commanders with extensive experience and know-how. After the Soviets withdrew on February 15, 1989,[xiv] most foreign fighters returned to their home countries. Some of these veterans, however, remained abroad; their activities in Afghanistan had marked them for arrest in their respective homelands.[xv] According to Sageman, "Azzam wanted to use this group of forced expatriates to continue the jihad abroad to liberate former Muslim lands occupied by non-Muslim governments."[xvi] Others, including bin Laden and Zawahiri, wanted to focus on freeing their homelands from regimes they saw as Muslim in name-only.[xvii] They formed a splinter group of Azzam's Afghan Arabs that called itself "the base," or Al Qaeda, on February 23rd, 1988.[xviii] Little more than a year later, in November of 1989, Azzam was assassinated by a car bomb in Pakistan.[xix] According to Ryan, Azzam's assassination "altered the balance of power within the Afghan Arab community… in effect, Azzam's death left the field clear for al-Qaeda to develop a strong global agenda as opposed to a nationalistic, localized jihad as represented by Hamas," which Azzam had helped found.

The experience of war and the technical expertise gained by many of the Afghan Arabs would prove to be invaluable when some of their number joined Osama bin Laden's group in his fight against the far enemy in later years. It is as much the tactical expertise gained by these future Al Qaeda leaders as well as the ideological inspiration gained by bin Laden and others in Afghanistan that would make AQC into the most infamous jihadist group to date. It is in recognizing the formative influence of these experiences that compels AQC to focus on Syria today.

For the newly formed organization, the 1991 Gulf War, subsequent establishment of U.S. bases in Saudi Arabia, and economic sanctions on Iraq were proof-positive that the leaders of the Arab world were no real Muslims, but, in the words of bin Laden, were leaders of "paper statelets whose disunity and weakness guarantees Israel's survival and perpetuates the brutal crusader occupation of the [Arabian] peninsula."[xx] Thusly, the conclusion was to focus on "going after the "head of the snake"[xxi] - Western countries - in order to most efficiently achieve the jihadist movement's larger strategic goals.[xxii]

**Becoming the Vanguards of Jihad**

The focus on the far enemy for AQC would play an indispensable role in the organization's meteoric rise. It is only by focusing on the far enemy that al Qaeda became the preeminent Jihadist group worldwide; the nominal "Vanguards of Jihad."

In the early years of Al Qaeda, a string of spectacular attacks against the United States began in 1998 with the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and culminated in the attacks of September 11, 2001.  In his work, "Al-Qa'ida Central and Local Affiliates," Vahid Brown argues that al Qaeda remains the name most closely associated with Islamic extremism in the minds of those both outside and inside the jihadist community. The establishment of the al Qaeda "brand" was the product of al Qaeda's direct attacks in the 90s and early 2000s on U.S. targets, which served to secure its place as vanguard of the global jihadist movement. In the words of Brown, "al-Qaeda had achieved worldwide notoriety as the only jihadi group that not only dared but also succeeded in directly confronting American hegemony in the heartlands of the Arab world."[xxiii] Once this place of notoriety was achieved, the core members of Al Qaeda

Central shifted from being an organization that individually carries out spectacular operations into directors of a variety of subsidiary groups.

Memories of 9/11 and the sheer number of groups associated with al Qaeda Central has allowed the group to remain, up until mid-April 2014, the uncontested leaders of the Global Jihadist movement. Until this year, no other group had ever attempted to assume the role of leaders of "Global Jihad." The reason that Al Qaeda has been able to survive for so long at the top of the Jihadist community has been because of its reliance upon a strategy of franchising its "brand." After the attacks of 9/11, the members of Al Qaeda known the world over (bin Laden, Zawahiri, and others) had to go underground for the coming U.S. retaliation. After surviving the initial US response and (presumably) finding safe refuge in Pakistan, Al Qaeda remained a presence in the years following 9/11 by lending the al Qaeda name to groups in Yemen, the Maghreb, Iraq, and now Syria. In becoming an al Qaeda franchise, the leaders of an affiliate group swear bay'ah (fealty) to al Qaeda Central. This allows al Qaeda to present itself as monolith; its franchises, led by the leaders who have pledged loyalty to the larger heads of AQC, operate largely independently in their separate fiefdoms across the world with al Qaeda support. Occasional clashes with Western force reaffirm AQC's role as the "vanguard" referenced by Qutb and allows the leadership to keep their market share of the Jihadist economy. Scholars Awan and al-Lami, writing in *The Rusi Journal,* explain that "[al Qaeda's] goal is to communicate a meta-narrative – a prism through which they require the Muslim masses to view contemporary conflicts as part of a wider global attack on Islam…in response to which they claim to serve as the crucial vanguard."[xxiv] The more fronts to the war between al Qaeda and those who wish to destroy Islam exist, the more persuasive al Qaeda's narrative becomes.  In reality, these franchise groups have a varying degrees of connectivity to the central organization.

Quarrels arise between subsidiaries and the central leadership. In recent years, directives to attack Western targets have been general, rather than specific.[xxv] Franchising has allowed Al Qaeda to remain within a "sweet spot" in the relationship between operational effectiveness and group security that all terrorist groups deal with, but not without cost. As will be explained in Chapter 2, franchising has, up until now, allowed for al Qaeda Central to remain at the top of Jihadist lexicon by allowing it to claim credit for operations it had very little to do with. This all changed in April 2014 when the gaps between the AQC and one former franchise resulted in the first direct challenge to the central organization's leadership within the Jihadist community.

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[i] Michael W. S. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America* (Columbia University Press, 2013), 55.

[ii] Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy, 26*.

[iii] Michael Doran, "The Pragmatic Fanaticism of Al Qaeda: An Anatomy of Extremism in Middle Eastern Politics," *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 177–90; Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy, 26*.

[iv] Sayyid Quṭb, *Milestones* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2005), 73.

[v] Ibid, 73.

[vi] Doran, "The Pragmatic Fanaticism of Al Qaeda," 26.

[vii] Shireen K. Burki, "Jihad or Qatal? Examining Al Qaeda's Modus Operandi," *Defense & Security Analysis* 29, no. 3 (2013): 234–52, doi:10.1080/14751798.2013.820965, 241.

[viii] Kenneth Payne, "Building the Base: Al Qaeda's Focoist Strategy," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 2 (2011): 124–43, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2011.538832, 127.

[ix] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 28.

[x] Bruce Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future*, Revised Edition edition (Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 11.

[xi] "Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia," accessed April 19, 2014, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1499983/Soviet-invasion-of-Afghanistan.

[xii] Steve Galster, *Afghanistan: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1973-1990* (Washington: National Security Archive: National Security Archive, October 9, 2001), http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/essay.html.
Sayyid Quṭb, *Milestones* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2005).
[xiii] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*. P.40
[xiv] "Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia."
[xv] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad, 40*.
[xvi] Ibid, 40.
[xvii] Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy, 53*.
[xviii] Ibid, 55.
[xix] Ibid, 52.
[xx] Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 54.
[xxi] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad, 42*.
[xxii] Ibid, 53.
[xxiii] Vahid Brown, "Al-Qa'ida Central and Local Affiliates," in *Self Inflicted Wounds Debates and Divisions within Al-Qa'ida's and Its Periphery*, 1st ed., Harmony Project (Center For Combating Terrorism, 2010), http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/self-inflicted-wounds.
[xxiv] Akil N Awan and Mina Al-Lami, "Al-Qa'ida's Virtual Crisis," *The RUSI Journal* 154, no. 1 (2009): 56–64, doi:10.1080/03071840902818605, 62.
[xxv] "Source: Al Qaeda Leader Urged Affiliate to 'Do Something,'" August 5, 2013, http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2013/08/05/source-al-qaeda-leader-urged-affiliate-to-do-something/.

**Chapter 2: Franchising**

**Overview**

Post 9/11, al Qaeda Central has shifted from organizing direct attacks against Western targets to a strategy of "franchising," wherein al Qaeda utilizes its notoriety and expertise to germinate and cultivate semi-independent groups around the world, particularly within the Middle East and North Africa region. This chapter will examine the theory of franchising and its broad implications as a strategy for terrorist groups. Following a section on franchising as theory, al Qaeda's experiences with franchising in Yemen as well as the region known as the "Islamic Maghreb" will be discussed in order to give an impression of the wide range of relationships that "franchising" can entail. This chapter will conclude by detailing some of the dangers that franchising poses as a strategy, as well as introducing Iraq, where those dangers are showcased most clearly.

**Franchising as Theory**

al Qaeda Central's success in franchising has been varied. As the split between the group formerly known as al Qaeda in Iraq (al Dawla) and al Qaeda Central has illustrated, the bonds between the central organization and the franchise can be tenuous indeed. Despite these dangers, the allures of franchising as a long-term strategy are seductive for an organization seeking to remain as the preeminent jihadist organization.

Following 9/11, al Qaeda Central shifted in focus from directly organizing and carrying out attacks to maintaining its brand and "franchising" for both tactical and strategic advantages. According to Ryan, al Qaeda post 9/11 "morphed into three separate parts of a new al-Qaeda system: al Qaeda central, containing the leadership cadre and its immediate advisors to provide

guidance and propaganda; the system of affiliates or franchises that engage in regional overt

guerilla warfare in the service of the global war waged against the United States and its allies,"

and individuals inspired to commit acts of violence by al Qaeda's propaganda.[i] This strategy of

franchising is a direct result of the relationship between what terrorist groups aim to achieve, and

the difficulty in doing so without being destroyed. In his paper, "Terrorist Decision Making,"

Gordon McCormick argues that "a fundamental tension exists between terrorist influence

objectives and their basic security requirements."[ii] The basic tactical objectives for any terrorist

organization is to have influence over worldly events. McCormick argues that the more influence

a terrorist group has, the less security it is able to maintain. Actions that grant an organization

more influence (attacks, production of propaganda, etc.) increase the group's visibility and leave

it open to attack. This relationship between security and influence is illustrated in the graph

below:
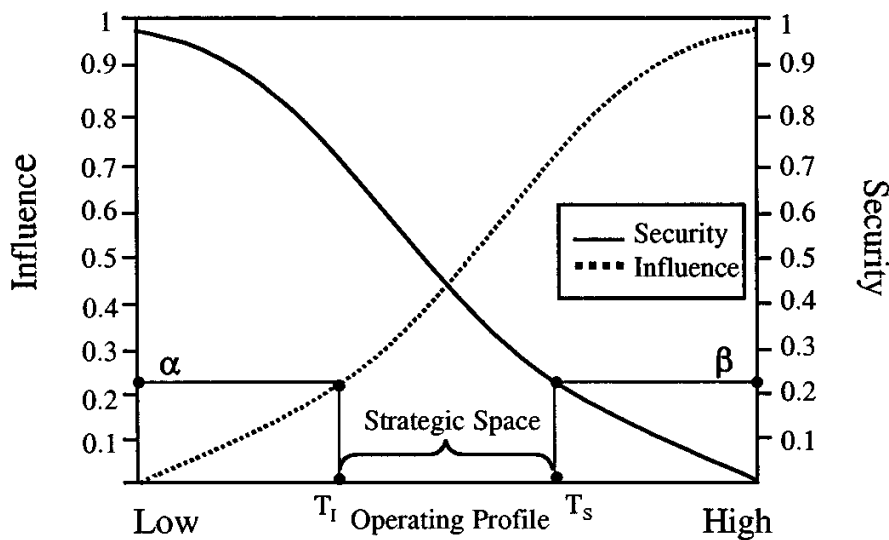


Figure 1[iii]

Under this model, groups like al Qaeda must sacrifice organizational security in order to

maintain influence in the world and amongst their peer groups. Clearly, the operations carried

out by al Qaeda up to and including 9/11 were risky. Such operations clearly inhabited the "β"

sector of the graph above, as al Qaeda took enormous risks in carrying out spectacular operations with the hopes of equally enormous returns in the form of influence. Post 9/11, al Qaeda has attempted to cheat the relationship presented above by McCormick. In directing franchises and subsidiaries from afar, al Qaeda hopes to hold on to as much influence as possible while maintaining extremely high security as a central organization. The notion of keeping the central organization safe, while also being able to claim credit for operations in several regions, presents a seductive tactical solution to a group hounded at every turn by the world's largest security apparatus.

Ideally, each franchise that al Qaeda Central brings into the fold of the larger "brand" contributes to the notion that the central group constitutes the leaders of the Jihadist community. Furthermore, in pledging allegiance to the central organization, each new franchise nominally takes on al Qaeda's global aims. This is regardless of whether the franchises' actual aims are global, regional, or even local. Continuous addition of franchises into the al Qaeda brand contributes to the group's assertions regarding the nature of the worldwide community of Muslims and its "inherent desire" to rise up against colonial or secular powers. Particularly with regards to areas where subsidiary groups may have the freedom to actually put into practice al Qaeda's harsh version sharia and other tenets of the central group's strategic objectives, al Qaeda Central can claim significant strategic victories despite maintaining a low operating profile. As argued by Gerges in his book, *The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda*,

> Local factions give a false impression that al-Qaeda [sic] central possesses the reach and capability to wage a borderless, global war despite exercising little operational control over [the franchises]… They are an effective public relations tool that reaffirms the existence and relevance of AQ's transnational jihad.[iv]

These factions are managed by "unwritten pledges of allegiance" or "bay'ah" that leaders of local franchises give to the leaders of al Qaeda Central.

**The Pledge of Allegiance**

The concept of bay'ah has a long tradition in Islamic history, beginning with the companions of the prophet Muhammad pledging their allegiance to him. As defined by *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam,* bay'ah is "[an] unwritten pact given on behalf of the subjects by leading members of the tribe with the understanding that, as long as the leader abides by certain responsibilities toward his subjects, they are to maintain their allegiance to him." In the context of al Qaeda, this concept of bay'ah is the foundation upon which franchising is built. In return for being granted the al Qaeda "brand," local subsidiaries pledge to follow the orders of al Qaeda's leadership in al Qaeda Central. In Syria today, the most serious charge - from a jihadist perspective at least- levied against al Dawla is that the Iraqi group has broken the bay'ah it swore to al Qaeda's leadership when it became an official franchise in 2004. al Dawla has responded on two counts. First, that it swore allegiance to Osama bin Laden, not to the current leader of al Qaeda, Ayman al Zawahiri. Second, al Dawla writes at length how, even if its bay'ah still applied, it can be broken because al Qaeda has failed to abide by the "responsibilities toward its subjects," referenced above. As such, al Dawla is no longer required to maintain their allegiance to the group. Up until the public debacle with al Dawla, al Qaeda's adoption of franchising as its main strategy has had some positive results. To date, al Qaeda Central has a relationship with active franchises in Somalia, al Maghreb, Yemen, Iraq, and, most recently, Syria. As the Iraqi and Syrian experiences with franchises are the focus of this study, they will be detailed in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. It is useful to briefly cover some aspects of these other franchises in order to properly understand the different ways in which franchising been applied by al Qaeda.

**Distant Friends: Somalia and al Maghreb**

al Qaeda's franchises in Africa have met moderate success, and any issues between affiliates there and al Qaeda Central seem to be more similar to the problems found between the central organization in Yemen than the glaring issues the plagued the franchise arrangement in Iraq.

In *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Alex Wilner points out that that "of the many and varied violent non-state African groups that share some of Al-Qaeda's [sic] ideological principles and practical goals, two currently stand out: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Al Shabaab."[v] Of the two, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is far more developed and has far stronger connections to al Qaeda Central. Al Shabaab, while deserving of its own analysis, has not received the Al Qaeda brand name or significant amounts of support as of this writing. In the Islamic Maghreb, the boosts to a local group that becomes part of the al Qaeda "brand" are clear.

**The Algerians Approach al Qaeda**

AQIM was birthed out of "Le Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat"(GPSC), an Algerian Salafist group that had risen to prominence in the 90s before losing most of its significance, influence and territory post 9/11.[vi] As GPSC began to lose ground, it reached out to al Qaeda's leaders in Pakistan in 2003. Not excited at attaching the brand name to a dying group, and having "doubts about the GSPC's commitment to the global agenda given its prioritization of the struggle in Algeria,"[vii] al Qaeda Central's leaders refused. It was only after GPSC proved itself to al Qaeda's leadership by sending a portion of its force to Iraq that was it adopted as an official franchise by al Qaeda Central in 2006, and the group remodeled itself as AQIM.[viii] As Pham notes in his article, "Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,"

> The association [between GPSC and AQ] made sense for both sides. The expansion into a new theater of operations was consistent both with al Qaeda's global ideology and with its operational interest potentially gaining access to an extensive network among the North African immigrant communities in France, Spain, and other Western European countries which the GSPC had inherited from its precursors. The Algerian group gained the prestige of the al Qaeda ''brand name'' which, within the year, had actually brought to it ''a considerable number of Mauritanians, Libyans, Moroccans, Tunisians, Malians, and Nigerians,'' according to the statements made by its emir in a wide-ranging interview he gave the New York Times.[ix]

Becoming an official franchise had considerable boosting effects on the once floundering organization. In addition to new international recruits, "GSPC/AQIM changed its modus operandi, placing emphasis on large scale terrorist attacks using explosive devices within a much wider and expanding field of operation spanning parts of Mauritania, Mali, Southern Algeria, Niger, and Chad."[x] In early 2013, France invaded Mali to directly combat AQIM, illustrating just how far the group has come.

Reflecting the perception that the al Qaeda brand represents the "Vanguards" in the Jihadist world, AQIM then began sponsoring its own subsidiaries, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria. This event was analyzed by the Combating Terrorism Center as particularly significant, arguing that "AQIM's support may have helped Boko Haram evolve from a Taliban-inspired religious movement… into a full-fledged militant movement."[xi] So large is the effect of franchising on AQIM that some analysts have suggested "that Saharan [subsections] within AQIM have stepped up activities to demonstrate to al-Qa`ida's [sic] core leadership that they are the true carriers of the AQIM mantle, opposed to AQIM's leader[ship]…in northern Algeria" in order to procure the perks that comes from direct contact to al Qaeda Central.[xii] The case of AQIM showcases some of the benefits of franchising in terrorism for both the franchise and central organization. Granting the al Qaeda brand to AQIM resulted in yet another "bleeding war" that drew in the "far enemy." As Rollins and other scholars note, at the moment, a nominal link is mutually beneficial to both groups, and seems to suffice them both for now. Looking back

to the Middle East, another example of what franchising can offer AQC is found in Yemen, where despite some disagreements between the local leaders and AQC, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula can be viewed as a near-perfect franchise.

**Franchising Pays Off: al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula**

On February 3, 2006, nearly two dozen men escaped from a prison in Sana'a, Yemen. According to the Combating Terrorism Center at West point, "The escape would prove a pivotal moment in the rise of Yemen's first durable al-Qa`ida [sic] presence."[xiii] The escaped men mentioned above would go on to form al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), one of the most successful franchises of al Qaeda to date.

Ever since the reunification of Yemen in 1990, the central government in Sana'a has had difficulty providing security countrywide. Since reunification, vast geographic areas with little to no government oversight and have subsequently been taken advantage of by local and foreign jihadi groups. Writing for West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, author Koehler-Derrick explains that for years, "jihadist strategists have frequently debated the benefits of maintaining Yemen as a 'reserve' force for the global jihad" or whether it was in Yemen that the preconditions for establishing a Qutubian Islamic state had been set – that rather than a reserve force, it should be the focal point of global jihad.[xiv] In the wake of the Arab Spring, this debate became particularly relevant as security forces withdrew from formerly "secure" regions to support the ailing regime in Sana'a deal with popular uprisings there, leaving AQAP to take control of entire cities. al Qaeda Central decided that Yemen was to be maintained as a staging ground for raids against the "far enemy." In contrast to the behavior of other al Qaeda franchises, the Yemeni branch largely obeyed al Qaeda Central. Whether due to Al Qaeda Central's close

parenting, or due to the fertile situation that AQAP found itself, the franchise grew in influence and numbers, even going so far as to control portions of the country nearly entirely. After establishing the AQAP franchise, AQ Central appears to have had constant contact with its Yemeni subsidiary where it attempted to impose the view that AQAP should maintain Yemen as a staging area for international attacks; as a "jihadist reserve," and that AQAP should resist expanding operations further in country. Much of AQ Central's advice appears to be taken seriously and is centered on not making the same mistakes as al Dawla. For example, AQAP seems acutely "aware of the importance of maintaining control of its brand," going so far as to "repeatedly den[y] responsibility for terrorist attacks and… reject[ing] interviews given by Yemenis purporting to speak for the group."[xv] Furthermore, in a copy of a letter sent to Yemen by Bin Laden, the late AQC head noted that, "The animosity of the world and its siege against the mujahidin is well known to the people, so no matter how much they love the mujahidin, the few amongst them will not stand beside the mujahidin under these circumstances."[xvi] This emphasis on the importance of local support compelled AQAP to rebrand themselves in an attempt to dissipate some of the infamy of the actual "al Qaeda" name. AQAP rebranded as "Ansar al Sharia," a group that initially purported only to support al Qaeda but is now recognized as one and the same.[xvii] From an outside perspective, Yemen seems the al Qaeda franchise success story; AQAP/Ansar al Sharia is blossoming in power, influence, and al Qaeda-styled sharia is being implemented in several small "emirates" that AQAP has set up in the areas it controls. This is not to say that some friction does not exist between the mother organization and its franchise. In the above-mentioned letter to the leaders of AQAP in Yemen, Bin Laden urges the group to avoid expanding operations in the current political climate, declaring such actions "irresponsible and risked precipitating a worse outcome than the status quo."[xviii] Despite these

orders having come from Bin Laden himself, the group continued to expand operations, prompting harsh responses from Yemeni and U.S. governments in the form of airstrikes, special operations and conventional troop actions.  Despite not heeding AQ Central's orders in their entirety, al Qaeda franchises in Yemen have adopted one of their most distinct orders: maintaining Yemen as a foundation from which to launch international attacks at Western targets. Unlike al Qaeda's franchise in Iraq which will be detailed below, or al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQAP is the only al Qaeda franchise that has at maintained at least a minimal focus on the so-called "far enemy" of the United States. While disregarding some orders from al Qaeda Central, AQAP/Ansar Al Sharia demonstrate the power of close coordination between the veteran jihadists holed up in Pakistan and franchise groups elsewhere. As will be seen particularly in the cases of Iraq and Syria, franchising as a strategy for terrorist groups is still very much a work in progress. First, it is necessary to explore how exactly this strategy came about. History shows us that franchising is not part of some master plan maintained by al Qaeda's leadership since its origins, but a direct response to the pressure placed on it by pursuant security forces following its rise to the place of "Vanguards" within the jihadist community. As explained above by McCormick's  "Terrorist Strategic Space," with great influence comes great pressure on a terrorist group's security. While franchising is an attempt to cheat the negative relationship between influence and security, it is not without its own dangers.

**A Strategy of Necessity**

The shift from a direct-action organization to one of franchising came in the aftermath of 9/11, as the U.S. began the so-called "War on Terror."

Writing in 2008, Sageman argued that the War on Terror had taken its toll on al Qaeda Central. "The rapid succession of al Qaeda military commanders since 9/11… indicates that the operational leaders of AQC are still members of the first wave. Their number is rapidly dwindling because of capture or death. There is no indication that members of the second wave are stepping up to leadership positions."[xix] In theory, franchising would create dozens or even hundreds of leadership candidates for al Qaeda, as young recruits in franchises make their way up the ranks. This has not been the case. As will be discussed below, as well as in Chapter 3, this may be less because of flaws in the theory of franchising in terrorist groups, but because of existent friction between al Qaeda Central and many of its franchises. Syria may end up being the showcase for the larger potential benefits of franchising, but in the years between 9/11 and today, there have been other calculable benefits to franchising for al Qaeda.

As leader after leader of Al Qaeda's core became captured or killed by U.S. or allied forces following 9/11, it has become clear to the group's surviving cadre that high-profile operations are increasingly difficult to organize and execute. How to maintain influence without becoming exposed?  In franchising, AQC has been able to find for itself a niche where it is perceived as being very active, while at the same time it is maintaining strict security for its own central members. A Dutch fighter in Syria proclaims "half of jihad is in the media" on his Instagram account.[xx] No jihadist group knows this better than al Qaeda. Writing in 2008, Marc Sageman, in *Leaderless Jihad*, wrote that despite the constant rumors regarding the group's capabilities, "the growth of al Qaeda propaganda operations is real enough." He continues on to explain that "if there is one major improvement of al Qaeda since 2003, it is its use of the internet. Its production arm, As Sahab, is of very high quality."[xxi] Having operations tagged in the media as being carried out by "al Qaeda," even if AQC had little to do with it, is a tactic

designed to keep the central organization relevant and influential. In her report entitled, "Organizational forms of terrorism: hierarchy, network, or a type sui generis?" Renate Mayntze analogizes franchising in terrorist groups to business behavior, saying, "By outsourcing, large firms can establish a network in which they play the role of the central node (or 'hub'). In this process, the creation of a network and the transformation of what is becoming the focal organization go hand in hand." [xxii] While AQC may not be a "large firm" in terms of numbers, its brand is the most famous of all modern terrorist organizations. One of the boons about being the "central" or "original" node in such the networks referenced by Mayntze is that AQC has some control over where the brand goes. The characterization of AQC as a group of terrorist masterminds micromanaging entire global campaigns from hiding in Pakistan is unrealistic. The limits of franchising must be recognized.

For all of the potential benefits of franchising, the strategy is not without its drawbacks. As shown by the way in which bin Laden's orders were ignored by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al Qaeda Central has limited control over commanders in franchise groups. Al Qaeda subsidiaries can easily refuse orders from Al Qaeda Central with little or no substantial repercussions. This means that Al Qaeda takes a leap of faith each time it grants a group permission to use its name. The double edged sword of franchising is no clearer represented than in al Qaeda's experience in Iraq, which has gone from being al Qaeda Central's flagship franchise to an existential threat to the organization.

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[iii] Ibid.

[iv] Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* (Oxford University Press, 2011),129

[v] Alex S. Wilner, "Opportunity Costs or Costly Opportunities? The Arab Spring, Osama Bin Laden, and Al-Qaeda's African Affiliates," *Perspectives on Terrorism; Vol 5, No 3-4 (2011): Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2011, http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/155.

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[viii] Ibid.

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[x] Wilner, "Opportunity Costs or Costly Opportunities? The Arab Spring, Osama Bin Laden, and Al-Qaeda's African Affiliates."

[xi] Jacob Zenn, "Cooperation or Competition: Boko Haram and Ansaru After the Mali Intervention," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 3 (March 2013): 1–9.

[xii] Geoff Porter, "AQIM's Objectives in North Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 4, no. 3 (February 2011): 6–9.

[xiii] Combating Terrorism Center, *A False Foundation? AQAP, Tribes and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen*, Harmony Project (US Military Academy, Combating Terrorism Center, 2011), http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-false-foundation-aqap-tribes-and-ungoverned-spaces-in-yemen.

[xiv] Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, "The Abbottabad Documents: Bin Ladin's Cautious Strategy in Yemen," *CTC Sentinel*, Harmony Project, 5, no. 5 (May 2012): 15–19.

[xv] *A False Foundation? AQAP, Tribes and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen*.

[xvi] Koehler-Derrick, "The Abbottabad Documents: Bin Ladin's Cautious Strategy in Yemen."

[xvii] "Transcript – Al Qaeda In Yemen - FRONTLINE," *FRONTLINE*, accessed April 17, 2013, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/al-qaeda-in-yemen/transcript-22/.

[xviii] Koehler-Derrick, "The Abbottabad Documents: Bin Ladin's Cautious Strategy in Yemen."

[xix] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 131.

[xx] "A Dutch Jihadist in Syria Speaks, and Blogs," *The Lede*, January 29, 2014, http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/29/a-dutch-jihadist-in-syria-speaks-and-blogs/.

[xxi] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad, 130*.

[xxii] Renate Mayntz, *Organizational Forms of Terrorism: Hierarchy, Network, or a Type Sui Generis?* (MPIfG Discussion Paper, 2004), http://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/19906. P 17

## <u>Chapter 3: Franchising's Dangers</u>

**Overview:**

As a strategic option, franchising is in many ways an ideal route for terrorist groups like al Qaeda that are under large amounts of pressure. Ideally, franchising allows the central group to remain relevant and influence world events while maintaining the security of its most important members. One of the costs of this tactic comes in the risks associated with indirect command or control of the central organization over its franchises. In Iraq, al Qaeda Central established its first major franchise in granting its brand and support to a jihadist group run by an old ally from Afghanistan, Abu Musab al Zarqawi. While Zarqawi's group would keep al Qaeda's name in the news for years to come, the actions of the group would eventually erupt into the Jihadi civil war currently ongoing in Syria, where the late Zarqawi's group is in open war against another al Qaeda affiliate. The public debacle in Syria is not the first time the Iraqi group has caused problems for al Qaeda Central. Following several successful years as the official al Qaeda franchise in Iraq, the actions of Zarqawi's group would eventually lead to the creation of a movement which, for a time, would drive al Qaeda out of all major Iraqi population centers. This in turn provided American forces enough breathing room to withdraw from the country in 2011. From 2003 to 2007 however, Iraq was a dangerously effective example of what is possible through marrying the concept of franchising to terrorism. At the same time, the case of Iraq, and later Syria, highlight the differences in what "franchising" means to the central organization, versus what it means for the subsidiary groups.

In plotting how the Iraq group has gone from al Qaeda's flagship franchise to the first group that would challenge al Qaeda's supremacy in the jihadi world, this chapter will first examine the origins of the Iraqi group's founder and most important leader, Abu Musab al

Zarqawi. After examining Zarqawi's personal history and the creation of his group, a study of how it became al Qaeda's Iraq franchise and how it clashed with al Qaeda leadership will be undertaken. Following the group's rise, three competing theories on why Zarqawi's group was suppressed will be detailed as well as the implications that those theories have in Syria today. Finally, the group's reemergence and entrance into the Syrian Civil War will be explored.

**The Rise of Zarqawi**

The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States was a godsend for Al Qaeda Central. In the words of Sageman, it "poured oil on a fire that was in the process of being extinguished."[i] With Iraq's important place in Islamic history, it was easy for Bin Laden to frame Iraq as the newest front for the Global Jihad, and that the war was a plan to "occupy a former capital of Islam, loot Muslims' wealth, and install an agent government which would be a satellite for its masters in Washington and Tel Aviv." [ii] Contrary to the Bush administration's assertion that Al Qaeda was active in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion,[iii] so unprepared was AQC for a fight in Iraq that it had no official presence in the country[iv] until after it formalized its relationship with a former ally, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, whose group, Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, had become the most notorious Sunni insurgent group fighting the Americans. It was under Zarqawi that AQC would experience many of the major benefits of franchising before realizing the substantial damage such a strategy can inflict on the central organization if and when a franchise goes astray. As al Qaeda Central's experience in Iraq illustrates, a group that is al Qaeda in name might only be so for its own advantage, and may put aside al Qaeda Central's larger goals or ideology in order to pursue its own local goals. As the group's recent challenge of al Qaeda's

leadership in Syria illustrates, having a relationship go sour with a franchise can prove disastrous for the central organization.

Before becoming the most wanted insurgent in Iraq,[v] Abu Musab al Zarqawi began as petty criminal in Zarqa, a Jordanian town that had been flooded with Palestinian refugees by the time Abu Musab was born in 1966.[vi] Despite travelling to Afghanistan to join the Afghan Jihad, Zarqawi arrived just as the Soviets were withdrawing, and returned home to Jordan after establishing contacts within Abdullah Azzam's Makhtab al Khadimat[vii] and among the Afghan Arabs.  After being arrested on weapons charges in 1992, Zarqawi became close to Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi, a Palestinian militant preacher who remains a pillar in the jihadist scholarship community today. Though Maqdisi became Zarqawi's first spiritual mentor while he was in prison, the two later had a falling out over the tactics Zarqawi later employed in Iraq.[viii] Today, Maqdisi issues statements declaring his former student's group, now called al Dawla, as "unaware of reality" in its conflict with other jihadist groups in Syria.[ix]

Upon being released from prison in 1999, the newly radicalized Zarqawi attempted to carry out what became known as the "millennium plot" – a proposed series of bombings that would target popular tourist sites and hotels in Amman, Jordan. Upon the plan's discovery, Zarqawi fled to Pakistan, and then to Afghanistan where he set up a jihadist camp parallel to Al Qaeda's in Afghanistan, reportedly with seed money from bin Laden.[x] It was here that he founded "Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad" (the Group for Monotheism and Jihad). After 9/11, Zarqawi and his new group engaged U.S. forces alongside the Taliban and al Qaeda until he was injured, and subsequently fled to Iran, and then eventually back to Jordan.[xi] While Zarqawi was an ally of bin Laden and Zawahiri's organization and had similar goals, Zarqawi was not considered part of al Qaeda until after the Iraq War began in 2003.[xii]

According to M.J. Kirdar in their work, "Al Qaeda in Iraq," prior to the United States invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi spent "14 months moving between Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and the Kurdish-controlled areas of northern Iraq to lay the groundwork for Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad" to effectively fight the Americans when they arrived. [xiii] Once the U.S. invasion commenced, Zarqawi initiated what Kirdar describes as "a carefully prepared…strategy to defeat the American-led coalition."[xiv] The objectives of Jamaat al Tawhid were to isolate America in Iraq by targeting elements in Iraq that directly or incidentally supported the U.S. mission there. This included countries part of the "Coalition of The Willing," which contributed troops to the invasion and occupation, as well as NGOs and international institutions like the UN that were aiding the Iraqi populace in a way that advanced the goal of the U.S. to create a stable and democratic Iraq.[xv] Zarqawi's group hoped that by driving out these complements to the U.S. mission, as well as carrying out attacks that contributed to widening the Sunni/Shi'ia divide, the U.S. would be ensnared in a long, bloody war that would erode the American public's willingness to support its ever increasing stake in maintaining armies in Arab lands.[xvi] So effective was Jamaat al-Tawhid in the initial stages of the insurgency that scholars such as Farall even argue that, by 2006, Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad "had eclipsed al Qaeda" as the preeminent jihadist organization fighting Americans. [xvii] Before he was killed, a 25 million dollar bounty was placed on Zarqawi – the same figure placed on bin Laden.[xviii] Despite being more active against America than al Qaeda itself, "Zarqawi willingly merged his group with the weaker al Qaeda and swore an oath to bin Laden, creating Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)." [xix]

**al Qaeda in Iraq**

A letter that Zarqawi penned to the AQC leadership in February of 2004 suggests that Zarqawi's desire to acquire the AQ brand name was out of a desire to become the leader of the preeminent jihadist organization in Iraq. Zarqawi's letter to the al Qaeda Central leadership in 2004 reveals a plea for the central organization to send resources and particularly experienced fighters to the Iraqi theatre. Zarqawi's letter is lengthy, containing multiple sections that attempt to "remov[e] the veil and [lift] the curtain from the good and bad [that are] hidden in the arena of Iraq"[xx] from the al Qaeda leadership. Among the chief concerns that Zarqawi relays to his old associates in AQC are the threat posed by the Shi'ia, as well as increased amounts of disarray amongst Sunni fighters, particularly foreign fighters travelling to Iraq. Zarqawi laments that as currently arrayed, the situation for his group is tenuous, that, "Training the green newcomers [is] like wearing bonds and shackles."[xxi] Furthermore, Zarqawi notes that the "numbers [of foreign fighters] continue to be negligible as compared to the enormity of the expected battle… Only confusion over the banner and a muffled reality keep many of them from [answering] the call to battle."[xxii] Zarqawi's argument, while implied rather than explicit, suggests that Zarqawi believes that a united jihadist front in Iraq under the banner of al Qaeda, the "Vanguards of Global Jihad," will give his organization the tools necessary for victory in Iraq. As Zarqawi notes at the end of his letter, "You, gracious brothers, [in AQC] are the leaders, guides, and symbolic figures of jihad and battle."[xxiii] The "symbolic" aspect attributed to al Qaeda Central in Zarqawi's letter would prove a pivotal distinction in later years as the relationship between AQC and Zarqawi's group fell apart. In 2004, however, the merger was necessary for both groups, with Zarqawi writing in his letter that if AQC agreed to accept Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad into its brand, "we will be your readied soldiers, working under your banner, complying with your orders, and

indeed swearing fealty to you publicly and in the news media."[xxiv] As mentioned in Chapter 2, this swearing of allegiance, or "bay'ah," would prove crucial in the later disagreements between Zarqawi's group and al Qaeda Central. In the context of franchising, Brown notes, "Zarqawi's decision to lead the classical jihad resistance in Iraq in the name of the al-Qa'ida [sic]" as well as AQ Central's continued contact and management from afar, "should have been a boon for al-Qa'ida [sic]." But, as Brown and other scholars point out, "it turned out to be an unmitigated disaster for the organization." [xxv] As Zarqawi's group lost any semblance of popular support in Iraq, it did incalculable damage to the al Qaeda brand worldwide. As disagreements widened between al Qaeda Central and its Iraqi franchise, the seeds for the conflict between the two groups in Syria were sown.

The official announcement of the merger between al Qaeda Central and Zarqawi's Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad was released on October 17, 2004 and served as an announcement of a united jihadist front in Iraq.[xxvi] Zarqawi's group official assumed the name of "Tanzim Qai'dat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn" (al Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers) and is referred to in the literature primarily as al Qaeda in Iraq. From this point in 2004 until 2007, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was al Qaeda's flagship franchise. Zarqawi's group was increasingly effective at fighting American forces, and its call for fighting "classical jihad" in Iraq was met with a steady stream of fighters and funds. Despite initially seeming like an ideal opportunity for al Qaeda Central to inhabit the previously mentioned "sweet spot" in the terrorist strategic space, al Qaeda Central overestimated its influence with the commander it had granted its brand – Zarqawi – and had not anticipated that the group's tactics would backfire so badly.

**Franchising in Iraq Goes Sour**

There have emerged three schools of thought regarding what went wrong for Al Qaeda in Iraq (and in turn for AQC). The most simplistic of these theories posits that the "surge" of American troops into the country in 2007 were successful in implementing the new counter-insurgency strategy found in the now famous field manual, FM 3-24, attributed to David Petraus.[xxvii] As evidence by the state of Iraq today, the "surge" did little to Iraq's entrenched militant groups. The new counterinsurgency strategy of FM 3-24 called for a significant influx of American troops run by a mantra of "clear, hold, and build" with respect to civilian areas in Iraq. This surge of American boots on the ground was combined with an increased reliance upon special operations forces to conduct raids against insurgent leaders. While theories that attribute the U.S. "victory" in Iraq to this new strategy (and have thus applied it to Afghanistan), such thinking does not take into account important events that happened to coincide with the "Surge" in Iraq. Most relevant to this study is the movement known as the "Awakening."

**The Awakening**

Two theories that attempt to explain the temporary suppression of Zarqawi's group in Iraq rest upon the movement known as the "Sunni Awakening" or "Sahwa." One of the Sahwa-focused theories, led by Brown, argues that it was the brutal violence of Zarqawi's group against that led to its temporary suppression. The other theory, led by Long, asserts that al Qaeda in Iraq lost its hold on Iraqi cities because it interfered with the revenue streams of powerful Sunni tribes.

Sunnis make up 32-37% of the Iraqi population.[xxviii] After the fall of Saddam Hussein's government, Iraqi Sunnis feared the rise of the long-suppressed Shi'ia majority. Their fears were realized with a Shiite dominated government coming to power following the U.S. invasion. As sectarian tensions brought the country into the depths of a bloody civil war, the occupying U.S. forces found that their largely Shi'ia allies in the Maliki government had little to no power in the predominately Sunni areas of Iraq, particularly in Anbar province, which became the heart of the Sunni aspect of the anti-U.S. insurgency.[1] Faced with entire cities that neither the U.S. nor the majority of its Iraqi allies could expect to control, the U.S. was at a loss at how to proceed. With respect to cities like Fallujah, a "Stalingrad-like approach"[xxix] was employed to dislodge the powerful militant groups, including AQI, that had taken root there. This strategy had minimal long term results.[xxx] Nothing seemed to work in pacifying these areas until, in a move that surprised the American military, the Sunni tribes of Anbar - the traditional power brokers of Sunni areas- approached the Americans and Maliki government on their own. For reasons that are still being debated, large Sunni tribes decided that allowing groups like Al Qaeda in Iraq to operate freely was not in their best interests; the Sunni tribes announced that if the Americans and Iraqi national government would provide them with enough resources, the tribes would kick out al Qaeda themselves.

To the United States, this was a chance to pry itself out of the quagmire that Iraq had quickly become. It was the coveted "Iraqi solution to an Iraqi Problem."[xxxi] Dubbed the "Sunni Awakening" or "Sahwa" in Arabic, these militia, some of whose members had only recently stopped being insurgents themselves, began pacifying areas previously unconquerable by U.S. or Iraqi national forces. By 2010, these deputized paramilitary forces had aided the U.S. and Iraqi

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[1] This is not to say that the Shi'ia population did not have its own effective, well trained, and well equipped insurgent groups.

government in bringing the country to its lowest levels of violence since the year the invasion began.[xxxii]  In order to properly examine Al Qaeda Central's current strategy of franchising in Syria, it is essential to examine the reasons behind the decision of the Sunni tribes of Iraq to turn against Al Qaeda in Iraq.

## Rejection of Terrorism vs. Economics

One theory championed by Vahid Brown argues that the brutal tactics of AQI antagonized so many Iraqis that the Sunni population turned against them, forming militias and working together with American forces to drive the insurgents out of their neighborhoods. Another theory, argued by John McCary and Austin Long, suggests that what drove Sunni tribes to turn against the terrorist groups they formerly harbored was that AQI had begun to take over smuggling routes and other avenues of revenue that held had been held by the tribes for generations. This theory rejects the notion that there was some sort of moral rejection of AQI by the Sunni tribal leaders that had previously tolerated or even supported the organization. Rather, this theory favors the idea that the sheikhs of the powerful Sunni tribes only cared enough to kick out Al Qaeda in Iraq when it began to intimidate local sheikhs out of their traditionally held revenue streams.

## Rejecting Terrorism

The first narrative, focusing on the disgust and eventual rejection of AQI by Iraqi civilians, has significant evidence behind it. With gruesome beheadings, the bombing of mosques, and general slaughter of Shi'a civilians, scholars like Brown argue that Zarqawi "did

incalculable damage to the Al Qaeda brand, which came to represent not just resistance to American imperialism in the Muslim world, but also the mass murder of (Shi'a) Muslim civilians." Simply put, "to the millions of Muslims still forming an opinion of al-Qa'ida's goals and ideology, it simply does not look good when jihadis wav[e] the al-Qa'ida banner [while] systematically and enthusiastically kill other Muslims, especially civilians."[xxxiii]

Faced with such a blight on its brand in the eyes of the general Muslim population, (then) Al Qaeda deputy leader Zawahiri penned a letter to Zarqawi, attempting to provide guidance and steer the bloodthirsty commander away from actions that did not serve Al Qaeda Central's goals. As Zawahiri notes, "many of your Muslim admirers amongst the common folk are wondering about your attacks on the Shia. The sharpness of [these questions increase] when the attacks are on one of their mosques, and it increases more when the attacks are on [a Shi'a mausoleum]. "[xxxiv] As Riedel notes, three quarters of Zarqawi's attacks were on Iraqis, and while his group only accounted for 14% of all insurgent attacks, they were the most devastating in terms of casualties.[xxxv] Further in the letter, Zawahiri questions the tactics of Zarqawi outright, asking,

> Why were there attacks on ordinary Shia?... why kill ordinary Shia considering that they are forgiven because of their ignorance?... And even if we attack the Shia out of necessity, then why do you announce this matter and make it public, which compels the Iranians to take counter measures?... [Do you] forget that both we and the Iranians need to refrain from harming each other at this time in which the Americans are targeting us? [xxxvi]

Though filled with multiple instances of flattery and repeated assertions that, "we [in AQ central] do not know the full truth as you know it," Zawahiri firmly states that "this matter [regarding the killing of Shi'a] won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue." The leader also reiterates several times that "popular support [will] be a decisive factor between victory and defeat [in Iraq] ."[xxxvii] Despite the letter from Zawahiri and other attempts at control over Zarqawi and AQI, Al Qaeda Central was unsuccessful in influencing Zarqawi, a failure that had "grav[e] consequences in Zarqawi's

case, as he claimed to be acting in al-Qa'ida's name."[xxxviii] With a different commander at the

helm that had established popular support, Al Qaeda might have been able to make significant

strides with regards to its long-term strategic goals in Iraq. Instead, despite vast reserves of

money, weapons, fighters and other boons from AQ Central, "in late 2006… Sunni tribes in Iraq

turned against AQ-I and helped the U.S. military reduce AQ-I's activities and influence

substantially. "[xxxix]

Fawaz Gerges, in his book, *The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda*, argues that "In Iraq, AQ lost

"a historic opportunity to integrate itself with an aggrieved Sunni community that had initially

tolerated its presence…Al Qaeda could have become a legitimate wing of the Sunni-dominated

insurgency had Zarqawi and his men exercised restraint and respected local culture and

tradition."[xl] Even though Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. airstrike in June of 2006,[xli] his strategies

were continued by AQI, and, according to Brown, sparked the movement now known as the

"Sunni Awakening" that drove AQI out of major population centers until 2013, when the group

would take advantage of a spike in sectarian tensions, as well as the neighboring civil war in

Syria to retake the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi. An alternative theory rejects the notion that it

was the tactics of AQI that antagonized it within the Sunni community, but rather its souring

relationship with tribal leaders that led to its temporary defeat.


**Stepping on Tribal Revenues**

Austin Longs argue that AQI was not suppressed by Sunni Iraqis who took up arms once

they realized the evils of terrorism, but rather that the Sunni Awakening occurred because al

Qaeda in Iraq fell out of favor with tribal leaders.  Long argues that the Sahwa movement was

not the result of former AQI supporters having a change of heart, but a predictable consequence

of AQI's failure to maintain good relations with the leaders of Sunni tribes that held enormous

amounts of power even before the collapse of Saddam's Baathist government.[xlii] As Long details

in his work, the rulers of Iraq have always had to deal with Sunni tribal authorities. Under

Saddam, this meant giving tribal leaders a great deal of autonomy in their respective areas of

control, and turning a blind eye to any illicit activity, including the use of smuggling routes so

long used that they had carved innumerable paths in the deserts around Fallujah and other

cities.[xliii] As al Qaeda is a Sunni militant group, Sunni strongholds like Fallujah, Ramadi, and

others were natural places to set up camp. At first, there was little friction between Al Qaeda

elements and the tribes. In addition to jihadist groups, many tribal leaders were using their own

private militias to attack the occupying U.S. forces and the new Shi'ia regime as well. As the

insurgency progressed and the country became embroiled deeper and deeper into civil war, Al

Qaeda in Iraq began to attempt to acquire for itself some of the revenue streams that belonged to

the tribes. Al Qaeda in Iraq declared those who resisted as apostates. It was decided by AQI that

in order to stop these sheikhs from compelling their "thousands of people from renouncing their

religion," that is, to resist AQI domination, the best solution was "to cut the heads of the Sheiks

of infidelity." This meant a protracted campaign of intimidation and assassination against tribal

leaders.[xliv]  Long argues that as the 2005 national elections drew near,

> Many tribal leaders began to conclude that the political process might hold more benefit than
> continued fighting. Further, [Al Qaeda's] transnational and fundamentalist goals were at odds with
> the local or national goals of the tribes. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, [AQI] was
> competing for control of revenue sources – such as banditry and smuggling – that had long been
> the province of the tribes.[xlv]

This economic-based approach creates a framework that is far more applicable to the situation

that can be observed in Iraq today. As Long prophetically wrote in 2008, reliance upon the

Sahwa movement "highlights tension between the means and ends of Iraq strategy. The tribal

strategy is a means to achieve one strategic end, fighting [AQI], but is antithetical to another, the creation of a stable, unified and democratic Iraq."[xlvi] While empowering Sunni tribes drove suppressed AQI, the U.S. and Maliki government also gave the tribes the means to resist government domination if and when they decided to reject the national government's authority. In part, the power maintained by Sunni tribes in Iraq today only exacerbated the tensions, and eventually the violence, that would occur in 2013 between Sunnis and Shi'ias. Whichever theory holds true with regards to the Sahwa movement has serious implications for Syria, where AQC is attempting to avoid the mistakes regarding popular support in its new franchise, Jabhat al Nusra.

Faced with a sharp decrease in popularity amongst the Sunni Muslims it purported to represent as the Awakening movement took hold, AQI underwent significant attempts at rebranding following Zarqawi's death, al Qaeda's Iraqi franchise joined together with local Sunni Islamist militants and changed its name and leadership multiple times, finally settling on the title "Al Dawla al-Islamiyya fi Iraq," referred to here simply as "al Dawla."[2] In an attempt to downplay the foreign nature of the group, it has placed local-born militants at the head of the organization.[xlvii] Despite remaining labeled an "al Qaeda" group, this period of multiple instances at rebranding marks the beginning of the effort by al Dawla to separate itself from the al Qaeda brand. Under its current leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, al Dawla has taken advantage of  recent events in Iraq to reestablish itself as a major player in the region. In the process, the group has

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[2] To avoid confusion, the only ways that I have chosen to refer to the group founded by Abu Musab al Zarqawi are "al Qaeda in Iraq" and later as "Al Dawla" once it became the head of a larger Jihadist coalition in Iraq. Despite the group going through numerous other name changes, these two are the most important.
Jamaat al tawhid wal jihad was the first name of the group founded by Abu Musab al Zarqawi in (date). After it became an official al Qaeda franchise, it assumed the name of "Tanzim Qai'dat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn" and was referred to by outside observers alternatively as "Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia" and "al Qaeda in Iraq."  Shortly after Zarqawi's death in 2006, AQI joined the "Mujahideen Shura Council." AQI leaders became leaders of this group. The Committee of the Mujahideen rebranded themselves "the Islamic State of Iraq" in 2008 and in 2013, "The Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham." The declaration of the Islamic State to expand in al Sham (Syria) is what sparked the conflict between it and AQC/Jabhat al Nusra.

become increasingly independent from its former "commanders" in AQC, which culminated this year in the Iraqi group's official ejection from the al Qaeda brand when it disobeyed the central group's orders in Syria.

**2013: The Comeback**

When the United States withdrew its last soldiers from Iraq on December 19, 2011, *The New York Times* heralded the moment as one "marked neither [by] victory, nor defeat, but a kind of stalemate."[xlviii] In the time since America withdrew its troops and attention from public from Iraq, the stalemate has been broken, as Jihadists have dragged the country back to the brink of civil war. The hope for a "stable, unified, and democratic" Iraq remains unrealized. While parliamentary elections were held in 2013[xlix] and the 2014 presidential race officially began on April 1st of this year,[l] 2013 was the bloodiest year for Iraq in five years with nearly 10,000 civilians killed.[li] The violence of 2013 was sparked when Maliki's government began to crack down on Sunni protest movements that had sprung up across the country, and has blossomed as al Dawla has taken advantage of the ensuing discontent amongst civilians in the "Sunni Triangle" in Anbar province.

In late 2012, Sunni civilians of cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi, and Mosul, began protesting what they perceived as sectarian discrimination in the Maliki government. These protests eventually evolve into sit-ins wherein largely Sunni sit-ins were being policed by largely Shi'ia dominated security forces. By May 5, 2013, Prime Minister Maliki began declaring that the sit-ins were "safe havens for terrorists."[lii] Regardless of whether this accusation was a pretext or a justification for the various uses of force by Iraqi security forces against protesters, al Dawla

took advantage of the government's use of force to stoke fears of Sunni repression. These events, along with simultaneous developments in Syria, allowed for Al Qaeda Central's errant franchise to gain power once again. Within the chaotic environment of 2013, Zarqawi's organization made a comeback that has subsequently had significant repercussions for both Iraq and Syria.

The gains trumpeted by the U.S. against the group known today as al Dawla have largely been reversed. The group has near-complete control over the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi.[liii] The Iraqi national government, still led by Nuri al Maliki, mirrored their former American counterparts' old tactics by surrounding the cities. At the behest of American advisors and local factions, the Iraqi national forces avoided using heavy weapons, and instead have re-activated (re-hired) local Sahwa forces to rout the forces of al Dawla[liv] and have attempted  Despite four months of siege, the militant groups retain control of the city, openly exhibiting shows of force in the form of city-wide parades,[lv] and an increase in bombings across the wider nation. The group founded by Zarqawi has expanded its area of operations into Syria, where it has conquered significant amounts of territory. It is this expansion that has given the militant movement new life, and consequently created an increasingly wide rift between it and its (now former) mother organization, Al Qaeda Central.

Examining the two divergent theories discussed here regarding the Sahwa movement is essential to studying Al Qaeda Central's strategy and its application in Syria in two ways. First, with regards to the way in which the central organization attempts to cultivate and maintain successful franchises, the "moral rejection" theory of Brown could mean that lessons learned by AQC from that experience might help explain the markedly different language and behavior of Al Qaeda Central's official subsidiary in Syria, Jabhat al Nusra. If the economic option was the impetus in the movement that proved most successful in AQI's temporary suppression, then a

study of economics becomes essential to decoding the increasingly chaotic situation in Syria. Second, it is important to remember that the Sahwa movement, for all of its benefits, has not dislodged Zarqawi's organization from Iraq, nor has it prevented its spread into neighboring Syria.

Exploring the revival of Al Qaeda Central's rogue franchise leads towards Syria, where a blossoming civil war of an increasingly sectarian nature provided significant opportunities for al Dawla and its current leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi to reclaim some of its former power. Sectarian warfare has become the Iraqi group's bread and butter. After taking control of parts of the Iraqi border with Syria, al Dawla made itself increasingly relevant on the jihadist scene once again, this time without touting the al Qaeda brand. As will be seen in later chapters, al Dawla's expansion into Syria has not been without significant hurdles; as of writing, it is at war with forces from the Assad government, Syrian rebels (including Islamist factions), the Iraqi national government, the Sahwa (Awakening) movement, and the preeminent fighting group in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, which itself began as a franchise of al Dawla. In Fallujah and Ramadi – the two Iraqi cities under its control – the main adversary or Zarqawi's brainchild are Sahwa elements that have been reactivated or redeployed by the Iraqi national government. Whether these groups will be effective in routing al Dawla forces is yet to be seen, but will likely depend on whichever theory regarding the group's original rejection by Sunnis in Iraq lies closer to the truth.

With al Dawla rising in 2014 to become al Qaeda Central's first challenger for the title of "vanguards of Jihad," the process by which a jihadist organization is accepted or rejected by local Sunni communities will prove to be essential for the future of the Global Jihadist movement. In looking to Syria, the debate over the importance of local support in jihadist groups is being played out.

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## **Chapter 4 – Syria**

**Overview**

In Syria, there have been two recent and noteworthy developments regarding al Qaeda Central, the implications of its strategy of franchising, and the central organization's place at the head of the jihadist movement. First, on June 9th, 2013, al Qaeda Central recognized jihadist group Jabhat al Nusra as AQC's official franchise in Syria.[i] Jabhat al Nusra represents the next stage in al Qaeda franchise development. Since it arrived on the scene in 2012, Nusra has taken great pains to avoid the mistakes that have plagued al Qaeda in Iraq. In addition to presenting itself as the premier anti-Assad fighters, the group and its leader, Mohamed al Golani, have untaken large efforts to maintain the support of the Syrian citizens living in the areas under its control, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Second, the expansion of al Qaeda's old franchise in Iraq, now calling itself the "Dawla al Islamiyya" (Islamic State), has attempted to expand into Syria. A public debacle unfolded, with the Dawla demanding that Jabhat al Nusra be subsumed under al Dawla, and Jabhat al Nusra refusing, instead asking for Ayman al Zawahiri – the purported leader of both groups – to mediate. These efforts failed, and the two groups are now openly attacking each other. al Dawla has come out with a statement declaring that al Qaeda Central and its affiliates are "deviants" from Islam and should be removed from their place at the head of the jihadist community. These two entities, al-Nusra/AQC and al Dawla, represent two distinct futures for the Global Jihadist movement. Beyond the issue of which group represents the "vanguards of jihad," the two competing entities each have distinct approaches to Jihadist ideology and the importance placed on local Sunni support. The actions of both sides of the inter-jihadist conflict in Syria must be examined in depth. This chapter will first explain why Syria has been selected by al Qaeda Central as the new forefront in Global Jihad. This will entail

a brief history of the Syrian conflict and how it arrived at its current state. Following this short introduction to the civil war, al Qaeda's newest and most powerful franchise, Jabhat al Nusra, will be examined as the next evolution in al Qaeda's franchising efforts. Finally, an in depth analysis of the conflict between AQC/Jabhat al Nusra and al Dawla, focusing on primary source documents, will be undertaken in an attempt to shine some light on what this conflict within a conflict means for the future of Global Jihad. While the Global Jihadist movement will undoubtedly survive whatever happens in Syria, the same cannot be said for al Qaeda Central's position as the Vanguards of Jihad.

**Why Syria?**

The ongoing civil war in Syria appeared to be another ideal area of expansion for al Qaeda Central. Like Iraq, it has a significant place in Islamic history, its geographic location places it in within the center of the Arab world, and the Assad government can be painted in terms of the same historical Sunni enemy fought by Sayyid Qutb's inspiration, Ibn Taymiyya. The extended length and brutality of the conflict has led scholars like Hoffman to declare it akin to the ""perfect jihadi storm that Afghanistan possessed three decades ago."[ii] Unlike the Iraq invasion of 2003 or the Afghan Jihad, there is not a single common enemy Salafi-jihadists can unite against. Amongst all rebellious groups, the baseline enemy is the Assad government. From a jihadist perspective, however, the enemies become more numerous depending on its ideology. As of writing, there are hundreds of different militant groups in Syria all fighting for a variety of objectives. Who is considered an adversary by Islamist or Jihadist groups depends on the individual groups' ideology and desired end-result of the conflict. There are large Islamist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, or even al Qaeda's official franchise in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, that fight

alongside secular groups because of their shared goal of removing the Assad government from power. While these hardline groups may clash occasionally with more secular rebels (and occasionally each other), these groups' visions for the future of Syria is something they have decided can be debated after the Assad regime has been deposed. At the other end of the spectrum is al Dawla al Islamiyya, "the Islamic State," which, in addition to fighting the regime, attacks any rebel group that does not immediately swear allegiance to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In early 2014, the Islamic State began openly attacking Al Qaeda Central's official franchise, Jabhat al Nusra. One of the reasons it has provided for these attacks is that al-Nusra occasionally fights alongside, and governs its territory with secular or non-Muslim groups.[iii]

As thousands of young men from around the world travel to Syria to fight for Jabhat al Nusra or other Jihadist groups, Syria has quickly assumed the role as the forefront in the Global Jihad. Since his assumption of power following Osama bin Laden's death, Ayman al Zawahiri has issued more statements regarding Syria than any other issue. These statements in both print and audio have had variety of objectives, from encouraging more "muhajireen" (foreigners) to travel to Syria to fight, to more recent communiques that have attempted to stem the infighting between al Dawla and Jabhat al Nusra. al Qaeda Central has a significant opportunity in Syria. As Bruce Hoffman explained in his 2014 article, "Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future:"

> Today, AQ can still do several things: preserve a still compelling brand, replenish its ranks (including those of its key leaders); project a message that still finds an audience and adherents in disparate parts of the globe, however modest that audience may perhaps be; and, pursue a strategy that continues to inform both the movement's and the core's operations and activities.[iv]

Opportunities to conduct all these operations are present in Syria today. Its brand is now led by Jabhat al Nusra, a jihadist group that conducts itself very differently than previous al Qaeda franchises- it places a specific focus on building support within the communities over which it

has military control. In acquiring Jabhat al Nusra as a franchise, it is clear that the central al

Qaeda leaders not only want to avoid repeating the mistakes of Iraq, but to use Syria as a training

and proving ground for a new generation of capable jihadists that can replenish al Qaeda's

ageing and pressured leadership. In order to understand how Syria transformed from a bloody

theater of the Arab Spring into the forefront for Global Jihad, it is necessary to detail how the

uprising arrived at its current state of affairs.


**Getting to Global Jihad**

At the beginning of the uprisings of 2011 that led to the Syrian Civil War, al Qaeda

Central had no official Syrian franchise, though fighters linked to it and AQI have long used the

country as a transit point in an out of Iraq. In at least one of the fighting groups that arose early in

the rebellion, veterans of the Afghan and Iraqi jihads were prominent, but this phenomenon was

not widespread.[v] Despite the small presence of jihadist elements since the beginning of the war,

the larger Syrian conflict began as an extension of the Arab Spring.

On March 17, 2011, Syria officially began its own version of the revolts known

collectively as the Arab Spring. Protests soon gave way to open war between regime supporters

and those seeking to depose the Assad government. Casualty estimates range widely, from the

"100,000+" given by the United Nations before it stopped counting,[vi] to 130,000.[vii]

A sectarian nature began to characterize the conflict as Sunni and Shi'ia ideologues

increasingly framed the conflict as the majority Sunni population against Syria's many

minorities. The first reported suicide bombing took place on December 23, 2011, in downtown

Damascus. The 44 killed and 150 injured in those blasts finally gave the regime some tangible

evidence for their account of the conflict – that the Assad government was fighting terrorism,

specifically al Qaeda.[viii] The BBC noted that "within 20 minutes, the government had ascertained that the blasts were the results of al-Qaeda attacks.[ix]"

Regardless of the truth behind the bombings, this event served to bolster an argument was already persuasive – that the jihadists that Syria supported in the conflict against the Americans in Iraq had turned their sights on Syria. Extremist militant groups, including Al Qaeda in Iraq and its subsequent iterations, had used Syria as a pipeline to funnel foreign volunteers, weapons, and money in and out of Iraq. Syria's proximity and role in the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq has proved increasingly important in the conflict, particularly with the recent developments involving al Qaeda Central/Jabhat al Nusra, and the Islamic State. Like Iraq, Syria did not have an active al Qaeda presence before the war began, but it certainly came to have one after hostilities broke out.

As the struggle between regime forces and the rebels became to resemble more and more of an insurgency/counterinsurgency, with increased use of heavy weapons and guerilla tactics, Islamist groups rose to the fore as the rebel groups receiving the most amount of support from both inside and outside the country. As in the Afghan Jihad of the 1980s, citizens in the Gulf were quickly discovered to have deep pockets in providing money to these Islamist groups. It is the disjointed nature of the non-Islamist groups, as well as their lack of support, that has allowed for the Islamists to dominate the opposition.

One of the major factors that compelled al Qaeda Central to look towards Syria as the forefront in Islamic militancy is the sorry state of the Syrian rebellion to date. Despite being three years into the conflict, the Syrian rebellion remains without any unifying mission beyond the broad goal of ousting Bashar al-Assad. Though they remain as a significant challenge to the

regime,[x] the widening disunity amongst non-Islamist rebel forces are prolonging the conflict indefinitely, as well as increasing its sectarian and extremist elements.

The most effective fighting group that existed in Syria prior to the introduction of al Dawla into the conflict was Jabhat al Nusra li-Ahli al Sham, or "Front for the Victory of the Levantine People," which later became al Qaeda Central's official affiliate in the country. It is this group's status as the "elite" amongst anti-Assad fighters, as well as its extensive attempts at securing public support that make it a clear evolution in the concept of al Qaeda franchising efforts and the very idea of what an effective "jihadist group" looks like.

## Jabhat al Nusra

After its creation was announced on January 23, 2012, Jabhat al Nusra quickly acquired a name for itself by conducting a number of car bombings against Syrian government targets in Aleppo and Dera'a.[xi] Hoffman, writing in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism,* noted "Al Nusra's emerging role as the spearhead of the most bloody and spectacular opposition attacks," writing that it increased its operations by "nearly tenfold…between March and June 2012."[xii] Soon it had groups of armed men conducting raids on government military positions, and quickly blossomed into the most effective anti-regime fighting group the conflict had yet seen, taking and holding towns and military bases. The group's leader, known by his nom de guerre, Mohamed al-Golani, has taken great pains to mark a balance in the relationship between influence and security discussed by McCormick in Chapter 1. While his group is increasingly visible across Syria's rebel-held countryside, the leader maintains tight security. To avoid detection by the group's foes, he blurs his face, uses a voice modulator, and otherwise conceals his identity in everything from meetings to press releases to interviews. [xiii] Golani refuses the title of sheikh or emir but

refers to himself only as "General Officer" of the group.[xiv] This contrasts sharply with the

leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in al Dawla, who critics say has styled himself a caliph.  In a

report for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, authors White, Tabler, and Zelin note

that other than the fact that below Golani rests a council of veteran jihadist leaders, very little is

known regarding al Nusra's structure or decision making process. Regardless, the group has

created "one of the opposition's best fighting forces," and a group that locals view "as fair

arbiters when dealing with corruption and social services."[xv] At least at the time that the White

report was written in the fall of 2013, Jabhat al Nusra had also refrained from carrying out

"hudud" - the harsh, fixed punishments (such as amputations for stealing) long highlighted as

one of the most barbarous tendencies of jihadist groups.[xvi]  In attempting to win over support of

the local population, the group has even held town meetings in the areas it controls so that the

group might hear and address any concerns the local population may have. In a translated article

from the newspaper *al-Haytat,* it was reported that in one of these meetings, in Maarrat al-

Nu'man in Idlib,

> al-Nusra invited the inhabitants… to attend a meeting to which activists and journalists were
> allowed access. The gathering took place in one of the city's mosques, where one of the region's
> religious leaders spoke about 'the approach and doctrine espoused by members of Jabhat al-
> Nusra.' An audiovisual presentation of the faction's most important military operations against the
> Syrian regime's forces was also shown.[xvii]

It must be noted here that despite these public outreach programs within areas it controls

militarily, al Nusra is still very much a jihadist organization. It carries out suicide bombings, car

bombings, assassinations, and summary executions against regime targets in other areas of the

country. The differences between Jabhat al Nusra from other al Qaeda franchises and al Dawla

have compelled some observers to declare it the next development in al Qaeda ideology.

Researchers Abdulaziz Alhies and Hamza Mustafa, in an opinion piece for Al Jazeera

titled "Al Qaeda 3.0" see Syria as the showcase for a new, strategically viable version of Al

Qaeda. They argue that new Al Qaeda franchises, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra, represent a new nation-specific flavor of Al Qaeda that is focused on Syria and Syria alone. Unlike AQC or earlier subsidiaries, Jabhat al-Nusra does not outwardly focus on any regional or global ambitions.

Alhies and Mustafa argue that Jabhat al Nusra is the end-product in a steady strategic development led by Ayman Al-Zawahiri over a period of years. Osama bin Laden, they argue, led the organization in the "classic" model of jihad, with a set hierarchical structure and unified set of objectives against the "far enemy." As a result of the Global War on Terror, Al Zawahiri and his recently-deceased deputy Al Suri led an initiative within AQC to create a "decentralized model" where the central organization's role is to encourage "local culture[s] to generate its own convenient al-Qaeda structures and fighting tactics and strategies."[xviii] As Alhies and Mustafa note, the conflict al Dawla and Jabhat al-Nusra/AQC is likely a result of these theories clashing with each other. As evidenced in communiques released by al Dawla, it is an organization that is seeking to establish the Islamic Caliphate in our time, and attempts to do so regardless of public support for such a project. This conflicts with the views of the AQC leadership, which, in its shift towards this new strategy, does not see the present as the time in which the caliphate should be established.  As argued by Ryan in his work, *Decoding Al Qaeda's Strategy: the Deep Battle Against America*, "they believe that time is on their side."[xix]

**Al Dawla Enters the Scene, AQC Gets Rebuffed**

The recent conflict between al Dawla al Islamiyya and other anti-regime elements has been bloody. Estimates regarding casualties hover around 12,000 fighters from all sides killed

since January 2013.[xx] These estimates do not account for fighters killed in fighting the Assad regime, but only the amount killed from infighting. The conflict within a conflict began as a disagreement when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, head of al Dawla, revealed on April 9, 2013[xxi] that Jabhat al-Nusra was begun as an extension of al Dawla, and that Golani was a former member of al Dawla who had started Jabhat al Nusra with seed money from al Dawla. Baghdadi had decided that the time was right for the connection to be made public, and that his organization was now formally expanding into "al Sham," the traditional Islamic name for Syria, and assuming control of its franchise, al Nusra. The new group would now be referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Jabhat al Nusra's response was immediate. In a public statement released a day later, Golani refused the merger.[xxii] Soon, even al Qaeda Central was avowing that it "is not responsible for [al Dawla's] actions."[xxiii]

In Golani's announcement, the Nusra leader responded that he was indeed a former Dawla lieutenant. However, the Nusra leader proclaimed that loyalties of him and his group lay not with the regional command of al-Baghdadi but with the head of Al Qaeda Central, Ayman Al Zawahiri. Only Zawahiri could announce such a merger between groups, Golani argued. The Central Organization's time had come to step in and mediate the dispute. On June 9, 2013, Al Jazeera received a copy of the letter that the al Qaeda chief sent to the leaders of its two belligerent subsidiaries. The letter's content gives the impression that Zawahiri and the remaining AQC leadership is appalled at the infighting, particularly its public nature. After the standard pleasantries, the letter opens with the AQ leader noting that, "the proponents of Jihad were all dismayed by the dispute that occurred on the media between our beloved brothers in the Islamic state of Iraq and Jabhat al-Nusra in al-Sham."[xxiv] The emphasis that this dispute happened in the media is notable, and may suggest that while such arguments may occur with

any degree of frequency, it has been policy to keep them out of the public view. More important than parsing this statement, however, is the following lines of the letter, which works against any notion that AQC is effectively directing the on-the-ground operations of its affiliates in Syria or Iraq:

> We have neither been asked for authorisation [sic] or advice, nor have we been notified of what had occurred between both sides. Regrettably, we have heard the news from the media.[xxv]

al Qaeda Central, far from merely regretting that the disagreement between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra was public, admits in this statement that it was is so far removed from both group's decision making processes that the central organization learned about the outbreak of war between the two groups just like everybody else - through "the media." Other statements such as "Sheikh Abou Bakr al-Baghdadi [sic] was wrong when he announced the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant without asking permission or receiving advice from us and even without notifying us" and "Sheikh Abu Mohamed al-Joulani [sic] was wrong by announcing his rejection to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, and by showing his links to al-Qaeda without having our permission or advice, even without notifying us,"[xxvi] are meant to reassert Zawahiri's role as head of a central organization. Instead, they only compound the characterization of AQC being lost and alarmed by its apparent lack of influence on the fast-moving Syrian situation.

Zawahiri concludes his letter by attempting to assert al Qaeda Central's will on the other groups, commanding that "The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is to be dissolved, while Islamic State in Iraq is to continue its work"[xxvii] - that the al-Baghdadi's Iraq-based organization should stay in Iraq. Furthermore, Zawahiri announces that both leaders have been "approved" for another year of command of their respective organizations. Zawahiri then identifies al-Suri as Al Qaeda Central's delegate in future disputes, and calls upon all parties "to stop arguing over this

dispute and to stop sedition among the Mujahidin and to seek harmony and unity, along with winning hearts and uniting ranks among Muslims and the Mujahidin."[xxviii]

This admission of a lack of control over situations on the ground is illustrative of al Qaeda Central's precarious situation in Syria and likely elsewhere in the world. Franchising has kept the al Qaeda name alive, and may even thrive under the Nusra model, yet the dangers in relying upon it as a strategy are illustrated no clearer than the supposed leader of the entire al Qaeda movement finding out through the news that two of his subsidiaries were publicly arguing with each other. Al Zawahiri's statement was meant to put an end to the embarrassing conflict, yet just six days later a series of incidents would illustrate just how far the central organization's influence has fallen.

Upon receipt of Zawahiri's letter, al-Baghdadi shocked the Jihadist community by publicly refusing Zawahiri's orders. In an audio message released on June 15, 2013, al-Baghdadi declared that "When it comes to the letter of Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri - may God protect him - we have many legal and methodological reservations."[xxix] The leader described the decision as a choice for Baghdadi "between the rule of God and the rule of Zawahri, and I choose the rule of God."[xxx] Following Zawahiri's June 9 communique, a "great confusion" arose among the Syrian and foreign members of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, as each group has jihadists hailing from outside either Iraq or Syria in its ranks. According to the newspaper al Hayat, Zawahiri's command that Baghdadi's forces retreat back to Iraq "forced [jihadists] to decide between heading to Iraq through the Syrian border, or joining the ranks of al-Nusra and other opposition factions."[xxxi] Baghdadi's public rejection of al Qaeda Central and public bickering between Jabhat al Nusra and al Dawla ideologues have only worsened this disorganization amongst jihadists in Syria, eventually led to the jihadi civil war witnessed today and culminated in the

statement released by al Dawla on April 17, 2014 which formally challenged the supremacy of al Qaeda in the jihadist world. The war currently ongoing between al Dawla and other anti-regime elements in Syria was slow to begin, and even know al Nusra is apparently holding back for fear of killing some of its foreign members who switched sides in the chaos.

According to Lahoud and al-Ubaydi in their article, "The War of Jihadists Against Jihadists in Syria," while minor skirmishes had occasionally occurred between the Islamic State and Jabhat al Nusra, two events seem to have pushed the fight from a disagreement into the state of open war that exists between the two jihadist groups today.[xxxii] The first was when al Dawla abducted and killed the JN leader of the town of al-Raqqa in early January, 2014.[xxxiii] The second was the assassination of Abu Khalid al Suri on February 24th by two suicide bombers, widely suspected as being from the Islamic State.[xxxiv] The impact of al Suri's assassination must not be understated. In addition to being part of a failed Islamist uprising in Syria in the 1980s, al Suri is reported to have played a role in the Madrid train bombings in 2004, as well as being a close associate of Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in the 1990s.[xxxv] According to Alhies, Mustafa, as well as Ryan, al Suri had risen to a position at the forefront of AQC strategic development under Zawahiri. His contributions to Jihadist ideology, as well as his position as official representative of Zawahiri and al Qaeda Central, meant that his assassination sent "shock waves in the jihadist world,"[xxxvi] compelling veteran jihadist scholars like Abu Qatada to declare that Abu Khalid al Suri's death was the single worst event "that has devastated us [the jihadist community] since [the killing] of Bin Ladin."[xxxvii] It is one thing to have a franchise of a terrorist organization disobey or disregard orders from the central organization. It is entirely another thing to actively hunt down its leadership. Despite these incidents, the eventual split between al Dawla and the al Qaeda establishment is revolutionary in its implications for the larger jihadist

movement. The war was impending, but first al Nusra released several video statements of some of its commanders attempting to detail how hard al Nusra tried to prevent it.

**Approaches to the Conflict: Al Nusra vs. Al Dawla**

A day after al Suri's death and the subsequent setback in reconciliation efforts between Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State, Golani issued an ultimatum to the rival group – accept arbitration by an Islamic court, or be driven from Syria.[xxxviii] According to Lahoud and al-Ubaydi, it was al Suri's pedigree that compelled Golani to attempt to force the Islamic State's hand. Faced with the possibility open war between two powerful jihadist groups, pillars of Jihadist thought, such as the previously mentioned Abu Qatada, as well as Zarqawi's old mentor, al Maqdisi, successfully convinced Jabhat al Nusra to "limit its actions to reclaiming the territory the [Islamic State] usurped from JN and 'to repelling the aggression of the [Islamic State].'"[xxxix] Whether it is entirely possible that al Nusra has taken the advice of these scholars due to restrictions on its resources as a result of fighting on so many fronts and against so many enemies at once, there is significant evidence, gathered through a close reading of Nusra statements, that suggests that the group adhered to the guidance of these staples of jihadist philosophy because, like al Qaeda Central, it actually attempts to base itself in the scholarship of the Jihadist tradition. These statements, especially when compared to responses and communiques from al Dawla, reveal the breadth of the differences in the two group's methodologies as Jihadist groups.

**Al Nusra Follows The Vanguards**

On March 5, 2014, Abu Abdullah al Shami, a member of the "Majlis Shura," the council that sits directly underneath Golani in the leadership of Jabhat al Nusra, released a statement about the Islamic state. He begins by quoting a hadith, "Peace and blessings upon he who said 'Beware of extremism in religion for it has destroyed those that came before you.'"[xl] It was to be the first in several statements detailing the transgressions of al Dawla against Jabhat al Nusra by members of the Majlis Shura. All of which include at some point assertions that "we [Jabhat al Nusra] must declare that we are innocent of [al Dawla's] ideology/idea."[xli] In attempting to discredit al Dawla, all of these statements made by Maglis Shura members highlight the fact that Ayman al Zawahiri, head of al Qaeda Central and head of the "Vanguards of Jihad," has ordered the groups to settle their differences in a court of Islamic law, which al Dawla refused. It is upon the breaking of this violation of bay'ah that Jabhat al Nusra attempts to lay its case against the Islamic State. One aspect common to all jihadist groups except al Dawla is the emphasis placed on respecting the "intellectual" leadership of the movement. In refusing to accept AQC's orders, al Dawla began to officially break away from al Qaeda.

Other members of the Jabhat al Nusra's Majlis Shura made statements of their own that detailed the various instances where al Dawla has transgressed, from being "liars" and "thugs" to committing taboos like using messengers as suicide bombers.[xlii] These statements are rife with long explanations that al Nusra attempted on many occasions to reason with al Dawla, to make peace among all of the mujahideen in Syria by settling their differences in an Islamic court. So much has al Nusra tried to settle things peacefully, that, according to these statements it ignored the assassination of one of its commanders by al Dawla and even pleaded with them not to release the news of the assassination publicly so as not to derail the peace process further. In

these statements, Jabhat al Nusra furthers its attempts at rallying both the larger jihadist and the larger Islamic community around it. Through these statements al Nusra has attempted to portray itself as a more mature group that basis itself in the philosophy of the jihadist tradition, while al Dawla is portrayed as a group of irrational thugs who behead first and ask questions later.[xliii] These characterizations are only compounded when examining the most significant statement from al Dawla since its entry into the conflict in Syria, in which it formally breaks the organization away from the al Qaeda brand and attempts to assert itself as the "vanguards" of the jihadist movement in the present day.

**Vanguards No Longer: The Islamic State attacks AQC**

On April 17, 2014, the official spokesman for the Islamic State, Abu Muḥammad Al-Adnani, released a thirteen minute audio message that announced that the Islamic State had official designated al Qaeda Central a "tyranny" that should be actively fought against by true jihadists.[xliv] In the explosive audio message, Adnani attempts to explain in quasi-Islamic legalese why its conduct towards AQC and Jabhat al Nusra is allowable because Zawahiri has "deviated" from the path set by Osama bin Laden. In addition to this groundbreaking development, Adnani's letter is crucial in that it elaborates upon the key differences between Al Qaeda Central/Jabhat al Nusra and the organization now referring to itself as the "Islamic State," particularly, the very concept of establishing an Islamic State within the current state of affairs.

Adnani opens his letter by recounting the different paths that "those walking upon the path of jihad have taken." There are those who refused to walk the path, those who walked halfway and gave up because of the difficulty, and, in reference to al Qaeda/Jabhat al Nusra, those who "who arrived at the ends of the path and then lost patience and turned around."[xlv] Regardless of how far each of these groups made it on the path of Jihad, "all of these share the

same judgment of the one who did not walk upon this path, not even a single step, and among them are ones who Shayṭān has seduced with desire or suspicion." Adnani reveals that those who have reached the ends of the path and "turned around" are Zawahiri's Al Qaeda Central. Before explaining just how Zawahiri and AQC has "deviated" from the right path of Jihad, Adnani gives a version of the group's history that attempts to clearly demarcate Osama bin Laden's AQC from the group under Zawahiri.

Once the "dream" of establishing an Islamic State in Iraq began to grow, Adnani writes, "Shaykh Abu Musab al Zarqawi hastened in giving the bay'ah [pledging allegiance] to Shaykh Osama… in an effort to unite the world of the Muslims [and] to enrage the disbelievers and to raise the morale of the Mujahideen (holy warriors)."[xlvi] In specifying that it was to Osama bin Laden, and not Zawahiri or al Qaeda as a whole, that Zarqawi and his group pledged allegiance is an essential differentiation in attempting to parse the al Qaeda system of franchising. Many of the Islamic State's opponents within the Jihadist community have levied charges that the group is breaking the oath that its creator swore to al Qaeda - a serious charge. In explaining the exact nature of the group's bay'ah, Adnani is attempting to dismiss these charges. In the following paragraphs, Adnani explains the evolution of Zarqawi's group from a franchise of al Qaeda Central into the "Islamic State" of Iraq, an event that, as far as Jihadist scholarship is concerned is an essential distinction.

The difference between a true "Islamic State" and a jihadist fighting group is essential to understanding the root causes of the conflict between the Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's Islamic State and AQC. While both entities are concerned with waging "jihad" against opponents of Islam, a "state" necessarily entails other aspects, namely, providing complete governance over Muslims and providing for their day to day needs. A clear distinction can be drawn between the governing

capabilities of states that hold themselves to Islamic in nature, such as Iran, and those of the Islamic State of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. In simple terms, the Islamic State that bases itself in Iraq and parts of Syria today has no state institutions other than a war council and an Islamic court that primarily dispenses battlefield justice. While the ultimate goal of al Qaeda is to establish an Islamic state in the form of the Caliphate, it is widely understood in Islamic scholarship both extremist and mainstream that a long list of particular conditions must be met before such a state can be established, such as providing for the general welfare of the common people, providing basic services like water, etc. Despite clear evidence that al-Baghdadi's group has not met these requirements within the areas that it controls, Adnani relates in his letter that some time after Zarqawi's death, "the Mujāhidīn became steadfast and Allah granted them victory and the Mujāhidīn Shura Council was founded. It was only a matter of months until Allah enabled them to do so, and they then declared the Islamic State, they declared it with a high resonance and the dream became a reality."[xlvii] The failure of al Qaeda Central and other Jihadist entities to immediately attempt to disband the so-called "Islamic State" would lead to great confusion in the Jihadist community when faced with the eventual split between al Dawla and al Qaeda. Zawahiri's leadership has come under fire in "unprecedented level of public criticism against him on jihadist forums."[xlviii] This is particularly damaging for an al Qaeda leader who, according to Ryan, has placed significant emphasis on public relations, even going so far as "telling his followers to avoid al-Qaeda's Qutbist slogans." Ryan argues that "al Zawahiri is not rejecting those slogans and concepts. He is simply acknowledging that public relations are different from Theory."[xlix] Despite al Qaeda's preference to talk about broader Islamic issues such as the Palestinian cause, or more recently, events in Egypt and Syria, jihadist theory has come front and center in the new questioning of al Qaeda's leadership. As supporters of al Dawla have pointed

out, jihadist fighting groups are meant to be subsidiaries to an Islamic State, whose leader is considered "amir al-mulimeen" or "leader of the Muslims." According to this interpretation, al Qaeda should bend to al-Baghdadi's wishes, as it tacitly approved his status as leader of the true Muslim state. This conflict over leadership is the result of the long simmering disagreements over tactics discussed in Chapter 3, as well as the events of the last year in Syria.

With the outset of the disagreement between AQC/Jabhat al Nusra and al Dawla, Adnani notes that the group was "patient and persevered… until we began to see a deviation."[l] What exactly this deviation was is not made clear in this statement, but could be the result of any of the number of disagreements AQC has had with its (now former) franchise over the years, from its targeting of the Shi'ia in Iraq to, most recently, the public disowning of al Dawla by al Qaeda Central.[li]

In response to these "deviations," Adnani then announces that al Dawla has determined that "the leaders of Al-Qāʿidah deviated from the right manhaj [methodology]. That Al-Qāʿidah today is no longer the Qā'idah of Jihad, and so it is not the base of Jihad, the one praising it is of the lowest, and the tyrants flirt with it, and the deviants and the misguided attempt to woo it."[lii] Adnani continues linking al Qaeda to its foes by highlighting that al Qaeda's official franchise in Syria, Jabhat al Nusra, has "entrenched itself among the ranks of the sahawat [awakening forces] and the secularists;" That in releasing the legal verdicts and statements mentioned above, all of al Qaeda (including al Nusra) "fight against the Mujāhidīn."[liii] Thus, Adnani concludes, al Qaeda's leadership "has become an axe supporting the destruction of the project of the Islamic State and the coming [Caliphate]."[liv]

Adnani spends the remainder of his letter establishing the way in which al Qaeda's methodology has been corrupted, saying that they have replaced the correct methodology of

> Declaring the Religion of Ibrāhim, disbelieving in [tyranny]" with a methodology that "believes in pacifism and runs after majorities... a [methodology] that is shy from mentioning Jihad and declaring Tawḥīd [monotheism], and replaces it with...revolution, popularity, uprising, striving, struggle, republicanism, secularism, and that the filthy Rāfiḍah [Shi'ia] polytheists are only but accused and they should be preached to, not fought![iv]

These words are levied against some of the men who helped carry out 9/11.

AQC's failure to deal with the establishment of an "Islamic State" means that some commentators are now saying that, technically, AQC must obey the state and al-Baghdadi, not the other way around. The Islamic state is supposedly let by an irrefutable Islamic leader, someone who is the ruler of the community who has ultimate say in all matters, even over "sheikhs" like Zawahiri. These and other challenges have exacerbated the problem that al Dawla poses for al Qaeda Central. No longer just an unruly franchise, al Dawla has emerged as a direct challenger to al Qaeda Central's supremacy in the jihadist landscape. In throwing its weight behind Jabhat al Nusra, al Qaeda Central has placed its hopes on an organization that appears to take a more nuanced approach to militancy by focusing on securing local support and avoiding the mistakes that plagued other elements within the larger al Qaeda brand. If reports that an increasing majority of the foreign jihadists in Syria align with al Dawla are to be believed, then theories regarding franchising and terrorism must be reevaluated. If al Qaeda Central and al Nusra, with their (relatively) moderate approach and basis in Jihadist scholarship lose their place as the Vanguards of Jihad, much of the literature regarding the reasons and means by which Jihadist groups gain and retain power will have to be re-examined as well.

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## **Conclusion**

For the first time in history, al Qaeda's position at the head of the jihadist community has been challenged. The Islamic State, a former franchise of al Qaeda, has declared the group that carried out the attacks of September 11 as no longer fit to be the "base" of Jihad. In examining al Qaeda's development as an organization, from its beginnings in Afghanistan to one that carries out direct attacks, to one that focuses on creating and maintain franchises, the origins of this split within the jihadist community are made clear. al Qaeda's experience with franchising, particularly in Iraq and Syria, point towards significant shifts within the extremist Islamic community and as a result bear significant implications for the future of Global Jihad, as well as raising a multitude of other research questions.

### **From Origins to Jihadi Civil War**

From its Qutubist origins, Global Jihad had its first modern application in the Afghan-Soviet war of the 1980s and 90s. After defeating the Soviet army, the "Afghan Arabs" under Abdullah Azzam underwent a division that separated those who wished to wage jihad against non-Muslim governments and those who sought to fight against nominally Muslim governments and their powerful Western backers. The latter group became al Qaeda under the leadership of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, and assumed Qutb's mantle of the "Vanguards of Jihad" by undertaking high-profile operations that culminated in the attacks on 9/11.

After securing its place at the head of the jihadist community, al Qaeda shifted its strategy from directly conducting attacks to a strategy that relied on creating and sustaining franchises that perpetuated the Central group's position. This strategy continued the life of al Qaeda Central despite enormous pressure on the group that resulted from what is referred to

today as the "Global War on Terror." Despite the benefits of franchising as exhibited by subsidiary groups in the Islamic Maghreb, Yemen, and to a degree, Syria, al Qaeda Central inadvertently created its first and only challenger to its position at the head of the jihadist community in Iraq.

In Iraq, al Qaeda Central's franchise paid dividends for the central organization in that it expanded and continued the "al Qaeda" brand as the preeminent name in jihad. As "al Qaeda in Iraq" began to lose popular support, the central organization discovered the limits of franchising in having its directives rebuffed by the Iraqi organization. In Syria, al Qaeda Central has attempted to apply the lessons learned in Iraq with regards to the importance of public support, but its efforts are at the risk of being discounted by the challenge to its authority raised by its errant Iraqi franchise, which itself is now a player in the Syrian conflict.

In Syria, al Qaeda's official local franchise, Jabhat al Nusra is in open conflict with al Qaeda's old Iraqi franchise, now calling itself "The Islamic State," referred to here as "al Dawla." The groups defame each other in publicly released statements that blast the other side as "extremists"[i] or "unbelievers."[ii] The Islamic State has publicly rebuffed direct orders from AQC to withdraw back into Iraq, forcing Zawahiri to expel the group. In response, the Islamic State declared its superiority to al Qaeda Central, challenging for the first time al Qaeda's place at the head of the Jihadist community. This challenge comes about as a direct conflict over the importance of public support and the role of the Jihadist scholarship community, and has resulting in an increasing divide between the jihadist establishment and the Islamic State.

Syria remains key to the future of al Qaeda both as a central organization and as a "brand." In Syria today, Zawahiri and Al Qaeda Central are attempting to implement lessons learned from its experience with franchising in order to revitalize itself as a jihadist organization.

In his book titled, *The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda*, Fawaz Gergez argues that one of the reasons that al Qaeda Central was in decline was because it "lacked a durable social base in an increasingly social world."[iii] As explained in Chapter 1, one of the reasons al Qaeda formed at all was because of the shared experiences and bonds created amongst the Afghan Arabs of the jihad in Afghanistan. While pressure from the United States has dampened this social base to the point of near destruction for al Qaeda Central, the notion that the organization (or some version of it) to emerge with a renewed base from the ashes of Syria remains a possibility.

**Implications**

The implications of this study are centered on the importance of the role of Jihadist philosophy and tradition. What is the proper way to achieve the goals of Global Jihad, meaning the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate? Within the conflict between Jabhat al Nusra/AQC and the Islamic State lies an important difference in methodology. AQC and its Syrian franchise rely on the Jihadist tradition that emphasizes that the primary objective of Global Jihad should be on striving towards establishing the <u>preconditions</u> necessary for the establishment of an Islamic State. al Dawla argues that those preconditions have already been met; that the time for winning over popular support for an Islamic State has passed, and now is the time for the implementation of the Caliphate. From an American standpoint, the possibility of al Dawla assuming the mantle of "vanguard of Jihad" means a far more local focus for jihadist activities. al Dawla is interested more in conquering territory and consolidating its gains than attacking the "far enemy" of the United States. In this context, Jabhat al Nusra represents a far greater threat to American interests in the region in that it remains very much a part of the al Qaeda establishment, which holds attacking the "far enemy" as a central tenet in establishing the preconditions necessary for the

establishment of an Islamic caliphate. Furthermore, Jabhat al Nusra may come to represent a strategically viable version of al Qaeda. As a jihadist group and an al Qaeda franchise, al Nusra is unpalatable to most Muslims. That does not mean that over time its public relations efforts won't pay dividends. One of the most staggering issues in studying the Syrian conflict today is the lack of good on-the-ground reporting from sources with established journalistic credentials. Such a lack of reliable data makes the conflict even more susceptible to propaganda and misinformation, and leads to points of future research that must be undertaken.

**Points for Further Research**

While Jabhat al Nusra may represent a strategically viable version of al Qaeda, the importance it places on continued local support raises questions around just how that support is maintained. How is it that al Nusra is able to maintain the resources it requires to operate while avoiding antagonizing the local population? How does it avoid the mistakes of Iraq? How does it avoid the creation of another "sahwa" movement? In the midst of the chaos that is the Syrian Civil War, does it still run the risk of antagonizing local power brokers, or have those systems already been dismantled by the effects of sustained war on Syrian society? Is the AQC/Nusra system capable of maintaining continuous popular support even after the fighting against Assad ends? The gaps in information regarding Jabhat al Nusra means that at this time such questions cannot be addressed. Only through continued study of the events in Syria will the future of Global Jihad be discerned.

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