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**Does Zawahiri Control al-Qaeda in Syria and Beyond?**

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**Recent months have witnessed ongoing internal rifts and conflicts among the factions identified with al-Qaeda in Syria. The friction and rivalries have been linked to the question of loyalty to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and to the ideology of the organization, and stand out against a background of reversals and upsets of recent years in the network of al-Qaeda's alliances with partners throughout the Middle East. Events in Syria raise question marks regarding the unity of the al-Qaeda "camp" and the extent of al-Zawahiri's control of his partners in Syria and his affiliates elsewhere in the world. Israel must follow the developments relating to the Salafi jihadist stream – whether they belong to Islamic State/ISIS or to the al-Qaeda camp – because in spite of the harsh enmities and struggles within and among them, these groups all see Israel and the Jews as a supreme enemy. This common denominator could push aside their quarrels in favor of the struggle against their bitter enemy, to be attacked when the opportunity arises.**

Recent months have witnessed ongoing internal rifts and conflicts among the factions identified with al-Qaeda in Syria. The friction and rivalries have been linked to the question of loyalty to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and to the ideology of the organization, and stand out against a background of reversals and upsets of recent years in the network of al-Qaeda's alliances with partners throughout the Middle East. Events in Syria raise question marks regarding the unity of the al-Qaeda "camp" and the extent of al-Zawahiri's control of his partners in Syria and his affiliates elsewhere in the world.

Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri was appointed by the al-Qaeda Shura Council to lead the organization a short time after Bin Laden was killed in May 2011. Bin Laden's prestige derived from his record of fighting in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation and from his responsibility for a string of showcase terror attacks by the organization on the United States, the sworn enemy of al-Qaeda and its supporters, culminating in the September 11, 2001 attacks. Although he was wanted by many intelligence services worldwide, forcing him to hide in an isolated estate in Abbottabad, Pakistan for a decade, Bin Laden managed to continue leading his organization, and even influence allied organizations throughout the world. Evidence of this lies in documents found in the Pakistani hiding place where he was killed.

Replacing a legendary leader who enjoyed a singular status and global reputation within the organization and among its partners is never a simple task. Indeed, al-Zawahiri found it difficult to step into his predecessor's shoes and reach his status in the organization, which found itself in a deep crisis after losing many of its senior leaders in drone attacks by the United States; at the same time, he himself was wanted and hunted all over the world. Other hurdles facing al-Zawahiri in his attempt to control the system of globally deployed alliances that sought a charismatic, unifying leader were his absence of battle experience and his controversial personality.

The turbulence of the Arab Spring, which brought about the departure of prominent Arab leaders who were virulently opposed to al-Qaeda, such as Husni Mubarak of Egypt, Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, helped al-Zawahiri and his organization emerge from the crisis. The upheavals brought new blood into the organization and its allied factions, which increased their ranks when many of their members escaped from prisons in their respective countries. The ongoing civil war in Syria, which attracted thousands of Muslim volunteers from all over the world, gave Zawahiri and his organization a golden opportunity to declare Syria the "arena of jihad," designed to reawaken mass recruitment and promote the idea of global jihad through participation in the fighting there.

However, at the same time, the upheavals in the Middle East marked a negative turning point in relations between al-Qaeda and its partners. Al-Qaeda in Iraq, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, turned its back on the parent organization. Al-Baghdadi ignored the senior status of al-Zawahiri and set up a new organization, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), unilaterally taking control of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch, without consulting al-Zawahiri or obtaining his approval. Jabhat al-Nusra, under the leadership of Abu Mohammad al-Julani, refused an appeal from Iraq to swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi and expressed support and loyalty to al-Zawahiri. Yet from then on, there were a series of twists and splits among the al-Qaeda faithful in Syria, which jeopardized al-Zawahiri's ability to lead the al-Qaeda "camp."

The same Jabhat al-Nusra led by al-Julani that was quick to express loyalty to al-Zawahiri in 2014 during the tension with al-Baghdadi announced in July 2016 that it was leaving al-Qaeda due to internal and external pressures to renounce its ties to the organization, and changed its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Victorious Front in Greater Syria). This step was ostensibly made with the blessing of al-Zawahiri, although it later emerged that the person who approved this separation, without obtaining al-Zawahiri's approval, was his deputy, Abu Khayr al-Masri, who was later killed by United States forces. Senior religious leaders who supported al-Qaeda, foremost among them the

Jordanian Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, also took exception to the move, and even presented it as a challenge to the al-Qaeda leadership and a breach of their oath of loyalty to al-Zawahiri. They expressed concern over a possible split and additional internal strife ("fitna") among al-Qaeda supporters, as happened following the split from al-Qaeda led by al-Baghdadi.

In January 2017, out of internal Syrian considerations, what remained of Jabhat al-Nusra continued its efforts to blur its ties to al-Qaeda and changed its name again to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Greater Syria Liberation Committee). This step aroused further divisions in the organization's ranks, between those who supported highlighting the Syrian aspect and the supporters of global al-Qaeda. Prominent members of the organization from al-Qaeda supporters threatened to leave and tried to involve other members in their revolt. They were arrested in late 2017 on the instructions of the leaders of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Following the failure of the talks between the hawks and attempts to mediate between them, in order to settle the disputes and prevent a further internal split in the organization in Syria, a new organization was established in Syria in early 2018 comprising 11 factions that had left Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, under the name Horas al-Din (Guardians of the Religion). Its senior members are nominally supporters of al-Qaeda, but the extent of al-Zawahiri's control of this new organization is not clear.

The Salafi jihadist organizations, past and present al-Qaeda loyalists, are now fighting a host of enemies in Syria, including on the one hand, the forces of Syria, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, and on the other hand rebel forces, including ISIS and a new local alliance called Jabhat Tahrir Sirya, led by the Ahrar al-Sham group. Some of the disputes between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and al-Qaeda and its supporters in Syria broke out around the subject of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's relations with Turkey. Although it has had contacts with Turkey, due to severe constraints and Turkish pressure and even threats of attacks, al-Qaeda and its supporters in Syria adamantly reject such contacts and see them as serious ideological deviance as well as a strategic error. This approach is reflected by al-Zawahiri, who sees the ties between Salafi jihadist groups and countries that cooperate with the Syrian regime, including Turkey, as a honey trap, with a predictably disastrous conclusion, that must be avoided at all costs.

The al-Qaeda camp in Syria is in the throes of serious internal hostility that threatens its survival and plays into the hands of its enemies from all sides. The test case of Syria raises a question mark of the ability of al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda to control what happens in arenas where their partners and allies are deployed, and therefore the prevalent view among academic researchers and global commentators is that notwithstanding its

numerical increase and presence in many countries worldwide, the growing strength of the al-Qaeda "camp" must be examined in light of the organization's tenuous cohesion and the questionable readiness of its members to accept al-Zawahiri's leadership and embrace devout al-Qaeda ideology.

Israel too must follow the developments relating to the organizations identified with the Salafi jihadist stream – whether they belong to Islamic State/ISIS or to the al-Qaeda camp – because in spite of the harsh enmities and struggles within and among them, these groups all see Israel and the Jews as a supreme enemy. This common denominator could push aside their quarrels in favor of the struggle against their bitter enemy, to be attacked when the opportunity arises. On the other hand, Israel and other elements fighting against global jihad can and must exploit these internal conflicts among the Salafi jihadists for their own benefit, at the intelligence operational level and in the cognitive arena.

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