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## **What Remains of al-Qaeda's Ambitious Vision for Syria?**

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The “Arab Spring” found al-Qaeda at its lowest point since the organization’s founding, a result of the global war on terrorism, which focused primarily on al-Qaeda. Yet the reverberations of the upheavals in the Arab world, which many thought would sound the organization’s death knell, actually proved to be its lifeline, because they led to regime destabilization and the toppling of national leaders who were among al-Qaeda’s worst enemies. In response to the civil war in Syria, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri identified Syria as the major arena of the next global jihad and set several ambitious strategic objectives. But his far-reaching plans were derailed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of the al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq, who challenged al-Zawahiri’s leadership and his hegemony as the most senior global jihadist. Today, when one examines al-Zawahiri’s successes and compares them to his vast ambitions vis-à-vis Syria, one concludes that the mountain was just a molehill, and nothing of his plans for Syria came to pass. Still, one cannot dismiss the future risk, nor can one ignore the possibility that individuals and organizations intend to carry out terrorist acts internationally. Given the calls by jihadist leaders to followers in the West to launch terrorist attacks, immigrants from the Middle East, as well as Western citizens who are veterans of the combat in Syria (and even some who did not take part in actual fighting), might try to fulfill their directives.

In a rare public statement at the February 2019 Munich Security Conference, MI6 Chief Alex Younger warned of the revival of the al-Qaeda threat in those areas of Syria suffering from a governance vacuum. According to Younger, events in Idlib, dominated by al-Qaeda satellites with many increasingly radical Europeans, should greatly worry the West. His statement touches on a frequent topic of the last few years in intelligence circles and among researchers and analysts, namely: are al-Qaeda and its affiliates throughout the world gaining or losing strength, especially since the rise of the Islamic State? A partial answer may be found in the organization’s situation in Syria, given, according to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, Syria’s importance as the central global jihadist arena and global jihad’s stated ambitions to make Syria the key axis in reviving the camp, which reached a nadir early in the decade. In this context, the interrelations and the affinity between al-Qaeda and the Salafist jihadist organization Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham are highly significant.

The elimination of the vast majority of Islamic State strongholds in Syria and the weakening of most opposition organizations in the country left Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, numbering several thousand fighters (estimates vary from 20,000 to 30,000), as the dominant military force in the Idlib province, where it is primarily located. Since starting its operations in 2012 as al-Qaeda's extension in Iraq, where it was called Jabhat al-Nusra, this organization, which in the past was identified as al-Qaeda's representative in Syria, underwent a series of transformations in terms of ideological and political alliances during the course of the Syrian civil war.

The Arab Spring upheavals found al-Qaeda at its nadir since the organization's founding, a result of the global war on terrorism, which focused primarily on al-Qaeda. As a result, most of its commanders – including legendary leader Osama bin Laden – were either arrested or killed. The reverberations of the upheavals in the Arab world, which many thought would sound the organization's death knell, actually proved to be its lifeline, because they led to regime destabilization and the toppling of national leaders who were among al-Qaeda's worst enemies. In response to the civil war in Syria, al-Zawahiri identified Syria as the major arena of the next global jihad and set several ambitious strategic objectives: liberating Syria from the heretical Bashar Assad and turning the nation into a state ruled by Islamic religious law; liberating Jerusalem from Israeli occupation; and training thousands of jihadist fighters who volunteered to fight in Syria and molding them into an Islamic army that would continue to wage a war of global jihad. But his far-reaching plans were derailed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of the al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq, who challenged al-Zawahiri's leadership and his hegemony as the most senior global jihadist. In 2013, al-Baghdadi broke off from al-Qaeda, founded ISIS, and went on to declare the founding of the Islamic State.

When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the founding of ISIS, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, chose to swear allegiance to al-Zawahiri and identify fully with al-Qaeda. But after a few years of fighting, relations cooled between Jabhat al-Nusra, with its local Syrian orientation, and al-Qaeda. The growing distance between the two organizations was made obvious by the former's 2016 change of name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (the Victory Front of Greater Syria) and later, in 2017, to its current name – Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (the Authority for the Liberation of Greater Syria). It was also manifested by public disagreements over strategy and potential allies. While it first seemed that the blurring of the official connection between the two organizations was a decision that al-Julani made with al-Zawahiri's blessing, it later emerged that the two – and their supporters and spokesmen, including influential religious leaders – had essential differences of opinion. Therefore, it is doubtful if it would be appropriate to include Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham among the global al-Qaeda camp.

The crux of the split between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and al-Qaeda was the desire of the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham leadership to conduct a pragmatic policy suitable to the dynamic circumstances of the Syrian civil war. Al-Julani began to blur his organization's link to al-Qaeda while engaging in contact with rebel groups of other ideological bents and even with nations active in the arena, first and foremost Turkey. Al-Zawahiri warned Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's leaders against these relations, which he viewed as a honey trap – Turkey is a NATO member with inextricable ties to the United States and the West that also cooperates closely with both Russia and China, and is therefore a sworn enemy of Muslims. But Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham chose not to listen to his advice and continued working with Turkey, though this led to disputes within the organization between al-Julani loyalists and al-Qaeda stalwarts. The latter demanded to maintain the oath of loyalty to al-Zawahiri and remain subject to him and his organization, while avoiding partnerships with locals and external entities not part of the Salafist jihadist mindset. By contrast, the leaders of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham opted to conduct a pragmatic policy that would allow them to survive and promote their main fight, i.e., the war on Assad's regime, while raising a heavy fist against the rebels.

These disagreements led to a split among Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's ranks. Those who opposed the separation from al-Qaeda founded Ḥurrās ad-Dīn, identified with al-Zawahiri's organization. The ideological differences between the organizations deepened and led to violent clashes. Beside relations with Turkey, the dispute focused on the scope of Ḥurrās ad-Dīn's autonomy in Idlib, where Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham has undisputed control and suppresses dissenters violently, thereby greatly reducing Ḥurrās ad-Dīn's scope of action. Ḥurrās ad-Dīn demanded the weapons Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham members had confiscated during the split. Periodic arrests of Ḥurrās ad-Dīn leaders have worsened the tension between the sides.

The tension between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the remaining Syrian extension identified with al-Qaeda and the disagreements between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and al-Zawahiri reflect the tension existing within Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham itself on a range of topics. It is therefore clear that although the organization is clearly of a Salafist jihadist orientation, it is not – indeed, cannot be counted – among global jihadist organizations that belong to a network of al-Qaeda affiliates.

When one examines Ayman al-Zawahiri's successes and compares them to his vision and vast ambitions vis-à-vis Syria, one concludes that the mountain was just a molehill. Nothing of his plans for Syria or Israel came to pass. The only open question is if and to what extent he can persuade fighters from the Salafist jihadist camp in Syria, especially from Ḥurrās ad-Dīn and in particular the foreigners among its ranks, to move from Syria and operate abroad to advance the global jihad agenda. To be sure, following the upheavals

in the Arab world and behind the smokescreen of the Islamic State, the al-Qaeda "camp" managed to spread to new regions and increase its membership. However, the connection of the new recruits to the al-Qaeda worldview on international jihad and their subordination to al-Qaeda and its leader's orders is questionable or fairly low down on their list of priorities.

Concerning the warnings made by MI6 Chief Alex Younger, one cannot dismiss the future risk posed by organizations and individuals who identify themselves as Salafist jihadists, whether they are affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, nor can one ignore the possibility that some intend to carry out terrorist acts internationally. Given the calls by leaders to their followers in the West to do all they can to harm the states in which they live, immigrants from the Middle East, as well as Western citizens who are veterans of the combat in Syria (and even some who did not take part in actual fighting) and are inspired by their leaders' calls, might try to fulfill their directives.