Refugees fleeing from Aleppo, Syria, toward the Turkish border. Photo: Rodi Said/Reuters

Salafi-Jihadism in the Decade following the Arab Spring: Down and Up and Down Again

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Early in the decade that began with the Arab Spring, the Salafi-jihadist camp led by al-Qaeda was at a low point following the killing of Osama bin Laden and most of the senior leadership. However, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, who succeeded bin Laden, was able to exploit the events of the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria, which he transformed into a new "jihad arena." The establishment of the Islamic State in 2014 split the Salafi-jihadist bloc into two competing camps; by the end of the decade, after the Islamic State was defeated militarily, the two-headed Salafi-jihadist bloc reached a new low point. Now, however, at its disposal are reservoirs of manpower with combat experience and significant economic assets. Despite the prevalent sense of victory in the West, hundreds of terrorist attacks around the world in 2020 by elements that identify with Salafi-jihadism prove that the camp is alive and functioning. The three decades since the establishment of al-Qaeda, which have seen successive ups and downs in the organization, demonstrate that future Salafi-jihadi activity is eminently possible.

Keywords: Salafi-jihadism, ISIS, al-Qaeda, terrorism, low intensity conflict, Arab Spring

Decade of Vacillation

The years since the outbreak of the Arab Spring events allow us to gain some perspective as to the trends and turning points in the camp identified with Salafi-jihadism. Overall, the camp led by al-Qaeda began the decade of the Arab upheaval at a low point, which stemmed from cumulative damage to the organization's leadership in targeted killings by the United States—first and foremost the killing of its founder and legendary leader Osama bin Laden, as well as a series of senior commanders. Al-Qaeda, along with its network of alliances, succeeded in recovering from its bleak situation thanks to the upheaval of the Arab Spring, which undermined the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and led to the fall of the leaders who had waged all-out war against them. In Syria, where a civil war broke out in 2011 and intensified over the years, the Salafi-jihadist camp found a new jihad arena to reawaken the "jihadi spirit" and launch a mass recruitment of numerous volunteers, who flocked to Syria from around the world to experience a holy war. The developing social media played a central role in their recruitment process, and later also in strengthening the power of Salafi-jihadist organizations.

However, the path to revival was far from smooth. Surrounding the camp's involvement in the war in Syria, al-Qaeda in Iraq (Islamic State in Iraq, or ISI), one of the senior organizations in the alliances that al-Qaeda established over the years, pursued an independent policy, rebelled against the hegemonic standing of al-Qaeda, and rejected the leadership of Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, who succeeded bin Laden. These actions led to the division of the bloc into two competing and hostile camps: one headed by the Islamic State and its allies/subordinates, and the other led by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Thus, from the end of the first half of the decade, Salafi-jihadism, this time under the hegemony of the Islamic State, became a significant and threatening force that influenced international relations in a way that went beyond previous dynamics, when al-Qaeda headed the camp.

Under the cover of the smokescreen created by the Islamic State and the targeted campaign to combat it, which diverted the attention of leaders, publics, resources, and fighting forces, al-Qaeda and its affiliates continued to operate below the radar.

The Islamic State's capture of extensive territory, the assets that it accumulated, and the danger that it projected due to its territorial expansion and its extreme brutality all led to the establishment of an international coalition in September 2014 intended to defeat it militarily, end its control of the territories it had seized, and prevent the continued existence of a Salafi-jihadist entity in the heart of the Middle East. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and its affiliates took advantage of the temporary respite, after they had been the main target of the international campaign against terrorism—from the September 11 attacks until the establishment of the Islamic State. Under the cover of the smokescreen created by the Islamic State and the targeted campaign to combat it, which diverted the attention of leaders, publics, resources, and fighting forces, al-Qaeda and its affiliates continued to operate below the radar, mainly in peripheral areas in Africa, the Sahel, and Southern Asia, as well as in the Middle East. The overriding goal was to recover, gain strength, and recruit manpower, in order to reestablish their standing and expand their activities to additional theaters of activity (Hoffman, 2018).

At the end of the second decade, the United States and its allies again accelerated their pursuit to eliminate the remainders of the veteran leadership of al-Qaeda and its affiliates who had survived despite the global manhunt. This joined the pursuit of the leaders of the Islamic State and its partners, which led to the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on October 26, 2019 and other senior members of its leadership.

Thus, one decade after the onset of the Arab Spring, the Salafi-jihadist camp, with its bifurcated leadership and its bipolar operational strategy, is again at what appears to be a low point. At the same time, the Salafi-jihadist camp, composed of a wide variety of organizations and activists in different geographical arenas, is inherently dynamic—as it has been, since it appeared at the end of the 1980s and left its mark on the world of terrorism from the end of the 1990s onwards. The camp, which from its beginning was led by al-Qaeda for over two decades, has vacillated between low points and high points over the course of its more than 30 years of existence.[1] The fact that the Salafi-jihadist organizations are currently at a relatively low point has led senior government figures in various countries, especially the United States, to proclaim the defeat of the organizations leading the Salafi-jihadist camp.[2] However, past experience instructs that eulogizing prematurely is dangerous and potentially disastrous.

It seems that the split and the current condition of the two-headed Salafi-jihadist camp does not necessarily indicate its ruin or annul the threat posed by it, its leaders, and its affiliates. Despite the recurrent declines and the current low point of the Salafi-jihadi camp, organizations identified with it have continued to carry out many hundreds of terrorist attacks around the world. The Salafi-jihadi vision and doctrine constitute a conceptual ideological stream that has existed for a long time and reflects the desire of many Muslims to restore the glory of Islam. Nevertheless, their number of operatives among the overall Muslim population in the world is marginal, and they have not succeeded in galvanizing the majority of young Muslims, because of the violent and extreme jihad that they contend is the sole legitimate path to realize the vision.

A Decade of Salafi-jihadism

The events of the Arab Spring found the Salafi-jihadist camp, with al-Qaeda seen as its undisputed leader and its representative symbol, subject to a global manhunt. Over the course of the decade, after the 9/11 attacks, the United States launched a targeted campaign with the help of its allies that led to the detention and killing of most of the prominent members of the leadership of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The majority were struck by armed unmanned aerial vehicles, usually in their hiding places in the tribal region of Waziristan and in raids and periodic ground operations in various places in the world. Al-Qaeda reached its nadir with the targeted killing of its legendary leader, Osama bin Laden, in May 2011, in a raid by US special forces on his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The death of bin Laden left the organization under the leadership of Zawahiri, who was selected by the organization's Shura Council. Unlike the charismatic bin Laden, who relied on his unique standing as someone who had taken part in the fighting in Afghanistan, Zawahiri's leadership was based mainly on his standing as the leader's deputy, and on his being an Islamic orator.

The conventional wisdom in the West regarding the future of al-Qaeda and the Salafi-jihadi camp was that the upheaval in the Arab world would serve as another serious blow to the organization and its affiliates, and would blunt their power and influence in the Arab and Muslim world: the revolutions in several Arab states that occurred without much bloodshed, and with demands for more democratization, human rights, and equal rights for women, in practice represented ideas and methods opposite of Salafi-jihadist principles. However, the overthrow of autocratic leaders in several key Arab states such as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen, which was long an al-Qaeda goal, was met with satisfaction among the organization's leaders, even though these events occurred without violent jihad. Bin Laden welcomed these developments, as did Zawahiri, due to their belief that "the work of the righteous is done by others" (Schweitzer & Stern, 2011; Soufan, 2017), and in any case, all is part of a divine plan.

Zawahiri inherited a weakened camp, and sought a way to consolidate his leadership and extricate al-Qaeda and its allies from the crisis that beset them, in context of the revolutionary events in the Middle East. Zawahiri identified that not only were his sworn enemies among the leaders of the Arab states removed in the upheaval, but many of the leaders and activists of veteran Salafi-jihad organizations had fled or were released from imprisonment and found their way back to their organizations, which consequently received significant high-quality reinforcement of their ranks. Furthermore, Zawahiri perceived Syria, where a civil war began in 2011 between Assad and the opposition to his rule, as a country worthy of being the next jihad battlefield. Because it suited his needs, he used it as a lifeline to revive the weakened global jihad camp.

Zawahiri chose to capitalize on the new circumstances that emerged following the upheaval of the Arab Spring. In a speech of July 31, 2013, entitled "46 Years Since the Defeat of the Arab Armies in the 1967 War," Zawahiri called on young Muslims to come to Syria and fight against Assad, whom he described as a heretic, and promised to liberate Syria and afterwards turn toward Jerusalem to liberate the holy places of occupied Palestine. Thus, al-Qaeda, under its new leader Zawahiri, diverted the organization's attention and resources toward Syria; senior and veteran operatives were sent there in order to oversee the emerging central jihad arena. This reflected Zawahiri's fundamental preference of focusing on the "near enemy" in the heart of the Levant over bin Laden's choice, which was made in the face of the constraints of the bitter reality before him and led him to adhere to a strategy of focusing on the "distant enemy" (Bergen, 2006). But the middle of 2013 saw a watershed, with the greatest impact on the Salafi-jihadist camp over the rest of the decade, and led to a rift in al-Qaeda's system of alliances and to the division of the camp.

The organization al-Qaeda in Iraq, which in 2006 changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), continued the independent and autonomous tradition instilled in it by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, its founding leader, who to a large extent ignored the policy outlined by bin Laden and Zawahiri. Zarqawi was killed in 2006. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was named head of the organization in 2010 after Zarqawi's successors were killed, also pursued an independent and autonomous policy vis-à-vis Zawahiri. This policy was encouraged by senior and veteran members of Saddam Hussein's Baath regime, who were imprisoned with him in the Bucca detainment camp when the United States was in Iraq, and later joined the organization (Reuter, 2015).

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Against the backdrop of the consolidation of a Shiite government in Baghdad, especially under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who adopted a particularly discriminatory policy toward the Sunni minority and its government representatives following the United States withdrawal in 2011, ISI exploited the weakness of the Shiite regime and the alienation of the Sunni population to consolidate its standing in the tribal regions in western Iraq. Alongside events in Iraq, the organization also capitalized on the Assad regime's weakened control in northeastern Syria to send its people to entrench itself in Syria. Thus, al-Baghdadi decided on his own to unify al-Nusra Front, the branch of al-Qaeda in Syria—led by Mohammad al-Julani, a Syrian who had fought with Baghdadi in Iraq and was sent to lead the branch in Syria—with his organization in Iraq, and called the unified organization ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, the name of "Greater Syria"). Because this action was not done with the agreement and prior approval of Zawahiri, cracks developed in

the relations between the two, which expanded into a rift and reached the point of a complete divorce between the men and the organizations, and led to the Iraqi organization's removal from the ranks of al-Qaeda's system of alliances. This rift, which quickly became an open and bitter conflict between the camps, split the global jihad current into a bifurcated stream.

And so, in June 2014, ISIS's spokesperson announced the establishment of the Islamic State (this time without identifying its name with a specific territory) and the appointment of al-Baghdadi as caliph. This ostensibly determined al-Baghdadi's standing as hegemon not only in the Salafi-jihadist camp, thus also above Zawahiri, but in the entire Muslim world, as the successor of the Prophet Muhammad.

Under Caliph al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State aimed to consolidate an independent state that would lead to the establishment of a global Islamic caliphate, and worked to consolidate its control of the territory that it had seized and where it imposed *sharia* law (*tamkin*). The Islamic State's promise of immediate realization of the Islamic caliphate in the heart of the Arab Levant and the restoration of Islam's former glory attracted tens of thousands of volunteers to its ranks. These new recruits came from over 100 countries (Clapper, 2016), including Arab countries, led by Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, and over 5,000 volunteers from Western countries, especially France, the UK, Germany, Belgium, Scandinavian countries (primarily Sweden and Denmark), and Turkey, as well as from central Asia—Chechens (especially from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) and Uyghurs from China (Soufan Group, 2015). The Islamic State took over important cities like Mosul in Iraq (2014-2017) and Raqqa (2014-2017) and Deir ez-Zor (2014-2019) in Syria, along with many other towns and villages. At its prime, it controlled a territory the size of England, with 8 million residents. The Islamic State was characterized by unusual cruelty, and diffused horror and terror among its population and enemies in war around the world with acute acts of terrorism. Under the slogan "alive and expanding," Salafi-jihadism led by the Islamic State became a clear and present danger to the regional order in the Middle East, and even a global threat. It made sophisticated and professional use of social media to build up its image of strength, in order to attract new volunteers into its ranks and instill fear and trembling in the hearts of its adversaries. Later it also used social media for the recruitment, training, and encouragement of self-initiated terrorist activities under its inspiration.

The increasing threat and danger posed by the Islamic State prompted the mobilization of an international coalition in September 2014 led by the United States, which included over 70 countries.[3] The purpose of the coalition was to obstruct the group's progress and defeat it militarily, and liberate the extensive territory it had seized and the populations subjected to a regime of terrorism and *sharia*-inspired coercion. After a bloody five-year campaign, the Islamic State was militarily defeated and lost its control and its governance in the heart of the Arab Levant with the fall of its last military stronghold in Baghuz in northeastern Syria.

Despite the military defeat of the Islamic State, the ISIS organization, which was the backbone and the basis for the establishment of the caliphate, remains, with an estimated 14-18 thousand fighters in the Middle East,[4] and thousands more fighters that belong to its allies around the world. They have renewed their oath of allegiance to the new leader of ISIS, Amir Mohammed Saeed Abdul Rahman al-Mawli, known as Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, who was appointed after the assassination of al-Baghdadi on October 26, 2019 in the village of Barisha, north of the city of Idlib.

Thus, notwithstanding the shock of the military defeat and the shattering of the promised dream professed by Caliph al-Baghdadi of imminently establishing a new Islamic empire, since the collapse of the Islamic State, twelve "provinces" of the camp remain and continue to operate as partners of ISIS and carry out hundreds of attacks each year around the world, especially in Syria and Iraq as well as

in Afghanistan, Sinai, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The organization retains enormous monetary reserves from its time in power, as a result of the Islamic State's trade in oil and raw materials, bank robberies and thefts of archaeological treasures, taxes and extortion, and ransom payments that it received from the kidnapping of both foreigners and locals.

Al-Qaeda has also succeeded in strengthening its ranks with new recruits. Early in the previous decade, al-Qaeda enjoyed a foothold in the Middle East, especially in Syria, through its offshoot organization, al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra), which swore allegiance to Zawahiri, but over the years distanced itself from al-Qaeda and changed its name twice, to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and later to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. The goal was to express its separation from the Salafi-jihadist camp and the international terrorist image that clings to al-Qaeda's partners, and it preferred to wage a local campaign with Syrian national characteristics against the Assad regime. Thus, the organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham separated from the al-Qaeda network, and today the organization retains a local ally in Syria named Hurras ad-Din. Al-Qaeda's main power is now in the Middle East outskirts, the Sahel and the Maghreb, northern Africa, eastern Africa, and Afghanistan.

The veteran leadership of al-Qaeda, which was based on those who participated in the campaign against Russia in Afghanistan, has dwindled over the past two years due to the renewal of the United States' targeted campaign against its leaders. The status of Zawahiri, the organization's leader, is unclear. There are reports, not confirmed by the organization, that he died recently from a serious illness, or that he is in his final days for health reasons. The elimination of the senior leadership, especially in Syria and Iran (the last of which, Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, who was considered one of the organization's three leaders, was killed in Tehran in November 2020) has left Saif al-Adel, a former Egyptian officer and explosives expert who held a series of senior positions in al-Qaeda and is a member of the Shura Council, as the natural candidate to lead the organization after the departure of Zawahiri, in order to maintain unity and retain hegemony in its system of alliances.[5] Al-Qaeda's ability to continue to lead the decentralized and autonomous camp lies to a large extent in experienced leadership that is accepted by the organization's members and partners, especially given the fact that al-Qaeda, which relies to a great extent on its allies and affiliates, has suffered two revolts over the past decade, from al-Qaeda in Iraq (ISI) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, and given the challenges of the coming decade.

Conclusion

In the current unfolding decade, the Salafi-jihadist organizations are in a challenging period of decline under a leadership that is divided, dwindling, hostile, and competing for hegemony in the global jihadist camp. They remain with the trauma of the stinging military defeat inflicted by the West and their Arab coalition partners, and the shattered dream of establishing the Islamic caliphate that will not be realized in the near future. At the same time, the organizations have new reserves of manpower at their disposal, many imbued with Salafi-jihadist indoctrination and with a wealth of combat experience. Possible additional reinforcement lies with the thousands of potential fighters and their family members who remain in the Idlib area, in the detainment camps, and in the al-Hol refugee camp in northeastern Syria. There has also been an increase in the economic resources at their disposal, their infrastructure in peripheral areas has been expanded, and the terrorist activity that they undertake regularly in various places in the world has not ceased.[6] Each year saw hundreds of terrorist and guerrilla actions around the world, including mass-casualty suicide attacks in which the Salafi-jihadist organizations play a dominant role. For example, in 2020 alone, Salafi-jihadists carried out over 120 suicide attacks in 16 countries that took the lives of

over 700 people (Schweitzer, Mendelboim, & Hebder-Bloom, 2021). Two al-Qaeda partners, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Somalian al-Shabaab, planned lethal attacks in the United States in 2019: the first was a shooting attack at an airbase in Pensacola carried out on December 6, 2019 by a Saudi cadet a few months before he completed flight school, which led to the death of three and the injury of eight. The cadet was recruited and sent on his mission in the United States by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (FBI National Press Office, 2020). The Somalian organization al-Shabaab also sent an operative to be trained as a pilot, which he completed in 2019 in the Philippines, with the purpose of carrying out an airborne terrorist attack in the United States. The indictment against the operative, who was extradited to the United States, was announced in December 2020 (Weiser, 2020).

It appears that the recurring rise and fall of the Salafi-jihadist organizations over the past few decades shows that the West's victory proclamations, along with its dismissal of Salafi-jihadism, are premature and overly optimistic.

Despite the victory rhetoric by senior government officials, mainly Americans, regarding the imminent defeat of al-Qaeda, along with completing the mission of defeating the Islamic State and continuing the campaign against ISIS, it appears that the recurring rise and fall of the Salafi-jihadist organizations over the past few decades shows that the West's victory proclamations, along with its dismissal of Salafi-jihadism, are premature and overly optimistic. This is especially true when the Salafi-jihadist organizations and individuals acting under their inspiration see their struggle as an ongoing campaign in which the periodic setbacks are a divine attempt to test their faith and their perseverance, and believe that their certain victory will ultimately come—as declared in al-Baghdadi's last speech on September 16, 2019, a month before he was killed, "And he said: you shall do!" The COVID-19 pandemic has even strengthened and consolidated their belief that their adversaries, who considered themselves invincible, have felt the heavy hand of God and proven to be a paper tiger,[7] and their defeat is inevitable.

From the standpoint of the new decade, it is difficult to foresee the rise of a new Salafi-jihadist entity in the near future on a scale that the Islamic State reached at its prime. The possibility of the return of a new and threatening Salafi-jihadist challenge on a global level depends to a great extent on the existence of geopolitical circumstances, internal weakness of failed regimes that are unable to govern portions of their territory, acute economic crises, severe ethnic and religious discrimination, and the growth of charismatic leaders, which could—all or some of these factors—converge to ignite a chain of events that could give rise to another jihad campaign. The basic conditions in the areas where the Salafi-jihadist organizations operate are difficult, ruled by oppressive authoritarian regimes in ungovernable areas rife with bribery and poverty. These conditions have worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and presumably there is a potential for the recruitment of new volunteers to continue the jihad against their heretical enemies.

Among the public in the West, there is apparently a sense of relief following the defeat of the Islamic State and the declarations that al-Qaeda has been vanquished. While the scope and intensity of attacks in Western countries has decreased in recent years, and those that have been carried out have been the actions of individuals and small cells operating under the inspiration of the Salafi-jihadist idea and mainly at their own initiative, and only in a few cases under direct guidance, this does not indicate the complete abandonment of the campaign against the "distant enemy." The West remains a hated adversary that is malevolent toward the Muslims and the Salafi-jihadist organizations,

regardless of which camp they belong to. The term "loyalty and renunciation" (*al-wala' wa-l-bara'*) is a guiding order to harm everyone who is not Muslim, in other words, an enemy that must be attacked (Wagemakers, 2009).

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Notes

1 The high and low points of Salafi-jihadism: Al-Qaeda appeared in the late 1980s, and early in the 1990s was an unknown organization that operated anonymously as an accomplice and funder of terrorism. By the end of the 1990s, it gained momentum with the attacks on the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998) and on the *USS Cole* in Yemen (2000), and achieved its "crowning glory" with the September 11, 2001 attacks. This decade began at an apex and ended with the low point that al-Qaeda reached in 2011; the second decade, which began at a low point, peaked in the middle of the decade and ultimately descended to its current nadir.

2 In an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Christopher Miller, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, declared that the war against al-Qaeda was close to completion (Miller, 2020). See also a discussion between Peter Bergen and Ambassador Nathan Sales, who serves as the counterterrorism coordinator in the State Department, at a conference held by the Soufan Center on November 16-19, 2020. For the conference, see https://globalsecurityforum.com/#. To view the discussion between the two, see also: Global Security Forum. Fireside Chat 'An Overview of the Global Terrorist Threat' Amb. Nathan Sales, Peter Bergen. *YouTube*, November 17, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu389Mdf-JY.

3 There are 78 members of the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS led by the United States. See https://www.state.gov/the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-partners/.

4 This estimate appears in the report by the Lead Inspector General submitted to the US Congress in August 2019 (Schmitt et al., 2019). For more information, see https://bit.ly/2YEvwZf.

5 There are five official members of al-Qaeda's network of alliances: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS); al-Shabaab in Somalia; and Hurras ad-Din in Syria.

6 As part of the global expansion, the Islamic State declared its presence beyond its activity base in Iraq and Syria in the form of "provinces." ISIS's official provinces today are: Iraq, Syria, Khorasan, Sinai, West Africa, Central Africa, East Asia, Algeria, Pakistan, India, Somalia, and Turkey.

7 Editorial from ISIS's weekly propaganda newspaper, *al-Naba*, Issue 227, published on March 26, 2020.