

## Zawahiri's General Guidelines and the Collapse of Al Qaeda's Levant Network

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### Abstract

This article addresses the factors leading to Al Qaeda's continued fragmentation and the collapse of its efforts to create a jihadi state in the Levant. It does so in two parts. First, we look at Al Qaeda's development of its *far enemy* strategy that deviated from past jihadi warfare strategies. Second, we examine Al Qaeda's dysfunctional response to the Arab Spring. The protests untethering of Mideast states and its inflammation of sectarian tensions accelerated Al Qaeda's transformation into a fractured network committed to localized (increasingly sectarian) insurgencies. After bin Laden's 2011 killing, Zawahiri in September 2013 released his *General Guidelines for the Work of Jihad* to tie Al Qaeda's branches localized insurgencies to a wider struggle against the *Zionist-Crusader* dominated world order.<sup>1</sup> He failed to do so. Upon exploring jihadism's splintering into three discordant factions represented by Al Qaeda's *far enemy* focus, ISIS *sectarianism* and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) *localized* insurgencies, this article concludes that this development has led to an ineffective but dangerously resilient global jihadi movement.

**Key words:** Jihadism, extremism, sectarianism, and insurgency

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<sup>1</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri, "The General Guidelines in the Work of Jihad" (September 2013)" in Donald Holbrook, *ibid*, 181-186.

## Introduction

Ayman al-Zawahiri's killing in Kabul in late July 2022 in a U.S. air strike has elicited very little academic discussion or commentary. An event so insignificant that it is rarely mentioned. Zawahiri's unimportance among today's jihadis reflects his problematic legacy. The movement that he and Osama bin-Laden (OBL) created in 1998 (known as Al Qaeda-AQ) is fractured and dysfunctional (Celso, 2014; Mendelsohn, 2016).

This article addresses the factors leading to Al Qaeda's fragmentation and the collapse of its efforts to create a jihadi network in the Levant. During his post 9-11 management of the group OBL recognized that the agendas of AQ's regional chapters deviated from his priorities (Ressler, Koehler-Derrick et al., 2011). Bin Laden in 2010-2011 wanted to recentralize AQ's control over his regional branches. The discordant tendencies that OBL saw before his 2011 killing by US Special Forces expanded under his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri's leadership.

Zawahiri's ineffectual stewardship of Al Qaeda furthered the network's disintegration across the globe and proved particularly damaging in the Levant. Here we examine AQ's fragmented evolution in two parts. First, we look at Al Qaeda's development of its *far enemy* strategy that deviated from past jihadi warfare strategies. Even within the organization, bin Laden's targeting of US interests was controversial and divisive (Moghadam & Fishman, 2010). It was his execution of the 9-11 attacks that transformed Al Qaeda from a centralized terror organization centered in Taliban protected Afghanistan to an unwieldy regionally dispersed global network (Hoffman, 2007).

Though jihadists coalesced around bin-Laden's organization after American military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq began, jihadi unification proved short lived. *Al Qaeda in Iraq's* (AQI) leadership rejected Zawahiri's management of its military strategy. Despite AQ's central command's criticism of its Iraqi branches slaughter of Shi'a civilians and its Sunni opponents, AQI never relented in its bloodletting.

AQI's rejection of its parent's counsel was followed by its other branches, that chiefly targeted *near* and *sectarian* enemies. Despite bin-Laden's insistence that his network's regional franchises prioritize attacking American interests, only his Yemeni affiliate *Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula* (AQAP) complied (Moghadam, 2017).

The network's inability to execute its *far enemy* strategy is also a consequence of US special forces and air strike operations against its external operation branch that killed hundreds of commanders committed to bin Laden war against *Zionist-Crusaders*. Al Qaeda's angst-ridden correspondence eulogizing its fallen

commanders (Combatting Terrorism Center [CTC], 2012e) is testimony to the effectiveness of America's targeted killing program.

Second, we examine Al Qaeda's dysfunctional response to the Arab Spring. The protests untethering of Mideast states and its inflammation of sectarian tensions accelerated AQ's transformation into fractured network committed to localized (increasingly sectarian) insurgencies. After bin Laden's 2011 killing, Zawahiri in September 2013 released his *General Guidelines for the Work of Jihad* ((Holbrook, 2018,) to tie Al Qaeda's regional insurgencies to a wider struggle against the *Zionist-Crusader* dominated world order. He failed.

Having authorized the expansion of Al Qaeda to the Maghreb, Yemen and Somalia, Zawahiri's later *General Guidelines* provided contradictory advice that navigated ambiguously across the *far*, *near*, and *sectarian enemy* spectrum. His 2015 *Islamic Spring Series* of lectures (Holbrook, 2018) enlarged Al Qaeda's enemies to include Iran and Shia militias whom he argued conspired with *Zionist-Crusaders* and their Sunni *apostate* lackies to destroy Islam.

Zawahiri's problematic direction of AQ's network moreover exacerbated intra-organizational schisms. His February 2014 expulsion of his Iraqi branch catalyzed a power struggle between the *Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* (ISIS) and Al Qaeda globally (Lister, 2016a; Zelin, 2014 a). Hoping to control Al Qaeda's then Syrian affiliate *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JN), Zawahiri was unable to prevent its break from his organization.

Rebranded in 2017 as *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) in defiance of Zawahiri's directives, Al Qaeda's former Syrian branch has charted a nationalistic insurgency (Drevon & Haeinni, 2021) removed from global jihadist ambitions. Not only has HTS repudiated its former Al Qaeda's connections, but it represses AQ's remaining loyalists in Syria.

We conclude by exploring jihadism's splintering into three discordant factions represented by Al Qaeda's *far enemy* focus, ISIS *sectarianism* and HYT *localized* insurgencies. This development has led to an ineffective but dangerously resilient global jihadi movement.

### **The Jihadi War against the Near Enemy**

Jihadi groups have historically prioritized attacks against *near enemy* [apostate] post-colonial Arab states. The origins of the modern jihadist movement lay in the Egyptian *Muslim Brotherhood* (MB) (Calvert, 2009). The Brotherhood's growth in the 1920's was based upon hatred of the colonial West and a desire to return to an Islamic state that would restore the religion's dynamism that had regressed under Western domination.

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*Muslim Brotherhood* theorist Sayyid Qutb and Egyptian *Islamic Jihad* thinker Mohammad Faraj decried the *apostacy* of post-colonial governments across the Arab world. They argued colonial and post-colonial secular rule after the caliphate's demise led to *jahiliyyah* (a state of pre-Islamic moral and martial atrophy) that denied Allah's rightful *hakimiyyah* (sovereignty) over Muslim lands (Ryan, 2013, p. 26-44).

Building upon Qutb's theories, Mohammad Faraj (2000) argued that successful jihadist insurrection in Egypt was a precondition for Middle Eastern Islamic renewal. Faraj saw the *near enemy's* overthrow as a necessary condition for the caliphate's resurrection and Israel's destruction.

Throughout the Cold War Egyptian jihadi groups launched terror campaigns against the Pan Arabist enemy that jihadi strategist Abu Musab al-Suri described as a "total failure" (Lia, 2008, p. 352-353). Reviewing the 1978-1982 Muslim Brotherhood Syrian rebellion, Abu Musab al-Suri (CTC, 2002b) argued that the MB were weakened by their lack of support, their external financial dependence and by a military policy of open confrontation that facilitated the government's capacity to destroy their organization. Meanwhile, the Algerian *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA) suffered similar setbacks. Having promoted this group in the 1990's, Suri withdrew his support (Lia, a, p.141-158), condemning the group's extremist deviation from the supposedly correct jihadist path. Weakened by infighting, government pressure and diminished support, the GIA collapsed a few years later.

### Al Qaeda's Far Enemy Strategy

Failed Islamist insurgencies in the Arab Mideast prompted jihadi theorists to reflect on the utility of insurrection against a resilient *near enemy*. Flummoxed by their inability to overthrow *apostate* regimes, jihadis increasingly vented their rage against the Western *far enemy*.

The failures of nationalist jihadist movements were blamed on a *Zionist-Crusader* order and their *apostate* servants who were accused by jihadis of plundering the region's wealth and the destroying its religious traditions. The geopolitical environment of the 1990's was moreover conducive to such a doctrinal reformulation.

The Cold War's end witnessed American global economic and military hegemony. After returning to Saudi Arabia from Afghanistan, OBL planned an Islamist insurgency against the communist regime in South Yemen (Bergin, 2011). His ambition was scuttled by larger geo-military events.

Iraq's 1990 seizure of Kuwait threatened Saudi Arabia that saw a significant Iraqi force develop next to its poorly defended frontier. Expecting the Kingdom's backing, OBL hoped to raise an Arab volunteer force to drive Iraqi forces from Kuwait. To bin-Laden's disbelief, his entreaties were rebuffed by Saudi intelligence that viewed his proposal as unrealistic. The Kingdom's granting of basing rights to American led forces in Saudi Arabia as a precursor for their military offensive against Saddam's forces in Kuwait enraged bin-Laden.

Bin Laden's anger against the regime built as the Kingdom's religious scholars sanctified the royal family's decision granting permission to foreign forces to enter the *land of the two sanctuaries*. By December 1990 more than a half million foreign forces were poised to strike at Saddam's army in Kuwait. For OBL, King Fahd's decision violated Mohammad's injunction that forbade foreign military forces from entering the *lands of the twin sanctuaries*.

Within the context of the Kingdom's fifty year financial and military relationship with Washington, bin-Laden arrived at one fateful conclusion. Namely that the Kingdom was run by *apostates* whose relationship with *crusader* forces 'defiled' Islam. Saddam Hussein's 1991 crushing defeat during the First Gulf War and the continued basing of American troops underscored the Kingdom's reliance on American military protection.

Failed jihadist insurrections in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Algeria were attributed by OBL to American economic and military support for *apostate* governments. *Near enemy* endurance led to a refocus on fighting the non-Muslim *far enemy*. This development was furthered by U.S. military interventions in the Persian Gulf, American support for Israel and globalization's spread of Western culture and economic influence.

Bin-Laden believed the American power rested upon a weak foundation that could be overcome with ruthless determination. In the post-Vietnam era America's military durability and the courage of its soldiers were questionable for OBL. As a result of attacks by jihadist forces, American military disengagements from Lebanon in 1983 and Somalia in 1993 underscored America's lack of resilience.

OBL reckoned a sustained terror campaign against American interests across the globe and a decisive strike against its homeland could force the Americans to end their economic and military patronage of *apostate* forces. In his words:

Al Qaeda concentrates on its external big enemy before its internal enemy. Even though the internal enemy is considered to be the greater non-believer, the external enemy is more clearly defined as a non-believer is the more dangerous at this stage in our life. America is the head of the non-believers. If God cut it off, the wings would weaken... (CTC, 2002a).

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Protected by the Afghan Taliban regime, OBL's *far enemy* strategy led to 'declarations of war' against *Zionists* and *Crusaders*. After its terror attacks against U.S. interests in Africa and Yemen, Al Qaeda planned to strike the American homeland. Al Qaeda's *far enemy* strategy was fiercely opposed within the organization and criticized by his Taliban hosts. Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Khalid al-Suri objected to bin-Laden's risky attacks against the Americans and to his resistance to Taliban direction. Both jihadis believed OBL and Zawahiri's *far enemy* strategy risked American military retaliation against the Taliban jeopardizing Afghanistan pivotal role in protecting jihadi groups.

Bin-Laden's anti-American focus generated divisions within the network with a majority faction opposing OBL's policy. Based upon testimony by 9-11 architect Khalid Sheik Mohammad (captured in Pakistan in a 2002 security services raid), it appears that Al Qaeda's Shura Council refused to support OBL's plans to attack the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Bin-Laden's unsanctioned pursuit of his 9-11 *Holy Tuesday* operation bred further discord within the movement. Though militants were forced to rally behind Al Qaeda after the US counterattack, prominent jihadists reproached bin Laden's stewardship of the network.

Reflecting upon the Taliban/Al Qaeda defeat at the hands of US forces, Abu Musab al-Suri blamed OBL's centralized command structure for the network's inability to counter American military and technological superiority. By Suri's account (Lia, 2008) Al Qaeda and the Taliban lost some 80% of its fighting force in the US counterstrike.

Al Qaeda leader Saif al-Adl in a letter to a bin Laden associate wrote that Al Qaeda's network was in a state of disarray confiding that: "... today we are experiencing one setback after another and have gone from misfortune to disaster....in the last six months [referring to the aftermath of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks] we have lost that what we had built in years" (CTC, 2013b).

In the short-term, however, America's overthrow of the Taliban and its removal of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq reinforced Al Qaeda's *far enemy* agenda. Shortly after the Iraq war began, analysts argued President George W. Bush's *War on Terror* rediverted the jihadi war against the US *far enemy* (Gerges, 2007).

### **Al Qaeda's Takes its War to Europe**

Al Qaeda-inspired attacks in Europe reinforced this argument. Migrations of Arab Gulf, European Muslim and North African foreign fighters to the Iraq jihad offered evidence of an evolving jihadi war against the West. Al Qaeda in Iraq's

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(AQI) filmed beheadings of Western hostages and the network's spectacular attacks against American troops were proffered as evidence of the success of bin Laden's *far enemy* strategy.

Fawaz Gerges (2007) argument that the *War on Terror* created a global jihadi movement primarily committed to an anti-Western crusade proved unfounded. Instead, Hegghammer (2009) argued that jihadi enemy hierarchies hybridized across the *near, far, and sectarian* spectrum. The hybridization of jihadi adversaries was driven by the sectarian configuration of the Iraq conflict and later by the Arab Spring's weakening of the Mideast regional order.

Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al- Zarqawi moved his AQ-supported, though unaligned, terror organization from Afghanistan to Iraq hoping to capitalize on Sunni grievances caused by America's overthrow of the Baathist regime. Al Qaeda sensed that the Iraq war gave it an opportunity to rejuvenate its weakened post 9-11 network. AQ's leaders brought Zarqawi into AQ's organizational fold culminating in the Jordanian's 2004 allegiance to bin Laden's organization.

Zarqawi eventually realized that attacking American forces would be insufficient to force them to leave Iraq. He therefore opted for a strategy of extreme violence against the Shi'a majority aimed at inflaming sectarian fissures to point of civil war and state implosion.

Such a policy fit well within Zarqawi's anti-Shi'ite world view that he expressed in a 2004 letter to Al Qaeda's high command, in which he describes the Shi'a as "the insurmountable obstacle, the prowling serpent, the crafty, evil scorpion, the enemy lying in wait, and biting poison" (Brisard, 2005, p. 233). Zarqawi describes them as "the enemy" and claims they conspire with the Americans against the Sunnis.

AQI's attacks on Shi'ite religious leaders, shrines, processions, and mosques were unrelenting. Thousands of Shi'ites perished in AQI's operations. One AQI attack in 2006 on the *al-Askari* Shi'ite shrine in Samarra drove Iraq to the precipice of sectarian civil war when the Shi'ite militias attacked dozens of Sunni mosques.

Zarqawi's sectarian strategy alarmed Al Qaeda's high command. Al Qaeda's unease with the strategy is contained in correspondences where Zarqawi is warned against targeting Muslim civilians. Fearing a loss of popular support for the AQI insurgency, Al Qaeda Central urged Zarqawi to prioritize killing Americans and Iraqi security personnel.

In a 2005 letter (Bar and Minzelli, 2006), Zawahiri asks Zarqawi to *forgive* ordinary Shi'ites for their *ignorance* and refrain from massacring them. After

AQI's later decline, Zawahiri's counsel was interpreted as a sign of the network's moderation and prescience.

AQI's attacks against Sunni opponents also aroused the ire of the central command's operational commander Atiyya Abd al-Rahman, who warned Zarqawi that his attacks against Muslim civilians in Iraq and Jordan were undermining support for the Iraqi jihad. In his 2005 letter (CTC, 2013a), he advised Zarqawi to prioritize attacks against coalition troops and urges him to send a junior commander to Waziristan to seek AQ Central's counsel.

Despite their strategic reservations, bin Laden and Zawahiri never repudiated Zarqawi's stewardship of his network. Al Qaeda eulogized him as a "*martyr*" after his June 2006 killing by US forces. In a July 2006 letter, Abu Yahya al-Libi (2013) describes Zarqawi as "lion of Islam" a "hero of *Tawhid* [indivisibility of God]", and one who "dignifies Islam" and "humiliates polytheism." Zawahiri in *The Islamic Spring Part 5* lecture praises Zarqawi's fealty to Al Qaeda as "an exemplar for mujahidin [displaying] high morals and behavior" (Holbrook, 2018).

Irrespective of their objections to AQI's sectarian warfare strategy, AQ Central continued to work with Zarqawi's successors. Al Qaeda's ambiguous messages regarding AQI strategy had an impact on the behavior of aligned groups in the Maghreb, Somalia, and Yemen who, to the lamentation of the high command, warred principally against *near* and *sectarian* enemies.

The near enemy focus of Al Qaeda's Somali, Iraqi, Yemeni, and Maghrebi franchises were criticized by bin Laden, Adam Gadahn (the network's American born communication advisor), and its operational commander Atiyya Abd al-Rahman (CTC, 2012b). Bin-Laden was concerned that the targeting of Muslim civilians in suicide operations was undermining Al Qaeda's global reputation. AQ's media advisor Adam Gadahn presciently advocated the expulsion of AQI and urged the leadership to reexamine its connections to other regional branches (Dodwell, 2012).

Al Qaeda's inability to direct its decentralized network also reflected forces beyond its control. US special forces and drone strikes against its Waziristan network devastated its ability to attack Western interests. Between 2009 and 2013 the *Long War Journal* claims some 2,492 al-Qaeda, Taliban and aligned commanders were killed in unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) strikes in Pakistan (Roggio, 2017). Among those senior commanders responsible for external operations killed were Abu Yahya al-Libi (in 2012), Abu Mqdad al-Masri (in 2011), Atiyya Abd al-Rahman (in 2011), Saleh el-Somali (in 2009), Abu Musab al-Masri (in 2009), Abu Hamza (in 2008), and Abu Sulayman Jaziri (in 2008, as well).



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The assassination of Al Qaeda external operators in the Pakistan tribal region was intense enough that a convulsed bin Laden pondered relocating operations. The devastation of Al Qaeda's network in Waziristan resulted in a shift of external operations planning to the Yemeni branch *Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula* (AQAP).

Briefly revitalizing AQ *far enemy* strategy was American born AQAP ideologue Anwar al- Awlaki (Meleagrou- Hitchens, 2020) whose English language magazine *Inspire* encouraged attacks by Al Qaeda sympathizers against the US homeland. Awlaki was implicated in the failed AQAP directed 2009 Christmas Day Plot to bring down a Detroit bound passenger and he successfully inspired Major Nidal Hassan's killing of thirteen fellow service men at Fort Hood, Texas army base. Since Awlaki's death in a 2012 predator drone strike, AQAP has been loosely connected to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, the 2015 Paris Charlie Hebdo attack, and a 2020 Pensacola naval base assault (Clark, 2020). Though AQAP has claimed responsibility for the attacks, its role in each case appears inspirational.

AQAP has orchestrated some *far enemy* attacks, but its violence is largely directed against *near* and *sectarian* opponents. Bin Laden moreover was suspicious of its state building efforts and was unenthusiastic about Awlaki's leadership skills (CTC, 2012c). Even if AQAP wanted to prioritize the struggle against the United States, the pace of US air strikes directed at its operations (over 300 since 2009), and the deaths of senior leaders Nasser al-Wuhayyshi (in 2015) and Qasim al- Raymi (in 2020) have disrupted its external operations (Joscelyn, 2020).

Al Qaeda's inability to direct its decentralized network was exacerbated by the Arab Spring's political upheaval and the sectarian tensions generated by Iran's expanded influence across the Mideast. Geo-political necessity shifted Al Qaeda's attention toward combating Muslim *apostate* regimes and Iranian backed Shi'a militias.

### **Al Qaeda's Dysfunctional Response to the Arab Spring**

Though analysts have argued that Al Qaeda was surprised by the Arab Spring, the network's communications (Lynch, 2013) contradict this assertion. In a letter, OBL argued that the jihadist campaign in Afghanistan against US forces had weakened America's military standing in the world, incentivizing the protests. In order to take advantage of this situation, he argued that the organization should "guide" (CTC, 2012d) the insurrections.

Al Qaeda's network moreover was well positioned to capitalize on the region's political turmoil. With Zawahiri's endorsement, Al Qaeda's regional franchise network expanded to the Maghreb in 2007, and Yemen in 2009. Despite bin Laden previous reservations about the Somali group, Zawahiri in 2012 blessed Al Shabab's merger into Al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda's interest in exploiting the Arab Spring's volatility increased as the protests bred chaos and autocratic rule returned in Egypt. Zawahiri saw the military's overthrow of the democratically elected *Muslim Brotherhood* as vindicating his violent jihadist vision. The demise of the Muamar Qaddafi regime in Libya, the toppling of then President Ali Abdullah Saleh's government in Yemen and the Syrian civil war were viewed by Al Qaeda as opportunities to expand the network's influence (Gartenstein-Ross, 2012).

Political turmoil in the Mideast is the most pronounced in sectarian stratified societies like Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. The weakening of regimes and the expansion of Iranian influence since the 2003 Iraq war forced Zawahiri to refashion Al Qaeda's strategic and ideological outlook. An imperative made pressing by the rejuvenation of its Iraqi affiliate after the 2011 US military departure.

Al Qaeda's capacity to exploit regional disorder was complicated by the network's need to harmonize its *far enemy* strategy with indigenous insurgencies that were driven by sectarian tensions. Failure to provide direction to its affiliates threatened the cohesion of AQ's franchise network that, prior to the Arab Spring, was already strained. This process evolved over years reaching fruition in Zawahiri's 2013 *General Guidelines* and his September-October 2015 multi-part *Islamic Spring* lecture series (Holbrook, 2018) that sought to tie localized insurgencies with Al Qaeda's war against the *Zionist-Crusaders*.

In his *General Guidelines for the Work of Jihad* Zawahiri writes:

The targeting of America's regional pawns will be different from one place to another, but the general rule is to avoid confrontation with them, except in those countries in which confrontation with them is unavoidable (Holbrook, 2018, p.52).

Zawahiri then identifies Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Egypt, Jordan, the Arabian Peninsula, the Maghreb, and the Sahel as major conflict zones where confrontation with Muslim regimes is "unavoidable" (Holbrook, 2018, p.52-53). He furthermore supports jihadist warfare against America's Safavid (Shi'a) allies in Iraq, against Zionists in Palestine, against "Hindu criminals" in Kashmir, against "Chinese oppressors" in East Turkistan, against Russians in the Caucasus, and expresses support for Islamist rebels fighting the Philippine and Burmese governments.

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Zawahiri's *Guidelines* are often inconsistent, justifying sectarian targeting when jihadists are attacked by Iranian backed Shi'a militias. This reflects Zawahiri's ambivalent position on attacking the Shi'ites. Though he criticized Zarqawi's attacks on Shi'ite communities in a 2005 letter he goes on to argue in the same correspondence that once the jihadists have secured victory over the Crusaders in Iraq, that conflict with the Shi'a is inevitable.

His sectarian ambivalence is underscored in his September 2015 *Islamic Spring Part 6* lecture where he argues that a powerful "secular-crusader-Safavid-Alawite alliance" (Holbrook, 2018) wages war against Islam and concludes that Al Qaeda and the Islamic State should reconcile their differences. Given such formidable adversaries, Zawahiri feared that divisions within mujahidin ranks will impair the realization of the jihadist project in Syria.

Gohel (2017) argues moreover that Zawahiri has prioritized insurgency against a weakened *near enemy* and is increasingly anti-Shi'ite in his ideology. Zawahiri's 2015-2016 *Islamic Spring* lectures condemn Iran, the Assad regime, Iraqi Shi'ite militias, Yemeni Houthi rebels, and Lebanese Hezbollah as part of a "secular-crusader-Safavid-Alawite" (Holbrook, 2018) military alliance against Sunni jihadists.

AQ's emir is equally disingenuous when discussing Christian minorities in the Mideast. Though he cautions jihadis not to attack Christians, his rejection of anti-Christian violence, however, is categorical. He advises Christian Copts against supporting the Egyptian government and warns them of the ominous consequences of doing so. Zawahiri is especially critical of Coptic Pope Shenouda for his opposition to Sharia, urging Christians against being led to by unscrupulous amoral leaders. Throughout his *Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People of Egypt*, Zawahiri resurrects past Christian persecution of Muslims in Spain and decries the Copts' anti-Muslim "separatist" (Holbrook, 2018) agenda.

Zawahiri's 'advice' to Christians should be viewed within the context of past Al Qaeda linked bombings against Coptic churches in Egypt. Al Qaeda aligned groups have also attacked churches in Nigeria, Iraq, and Indonesia. Claiming fidelity to Zawahiri's *Guidelines*, Al Shabab has engaged in widespread massacres of Christians in Kenya.

Zawahiri's contextual advocacy of sectarian based violence comes within an incendiary political context infused with religious tensions. Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon for example have armed Christian militias engaged in combat with Sunni jihadist forces (Jahanbani & Weeden-Levy, 2022). The *Guidelines* moreover cross over the *near, far, and sectarian enemy* spectrum, often evoking a diabolical *Crusader-Zionist-Rafidah* conspiracy.

Even if Zawahiri is sincere in discouraging sectarian bloodshed, his lack of control over his regional branches makes this effort problematic. AQ's regional emirs were incapable of controlling the anti-Sufi violence of their militants in Somalia and Mali (Seigel, 2013). Zawahiri's lack of clear guidance on sectarian violence invites multiple interpretations.

Parts of Zawahiri's *Guidelines* are a reaction to the rise of the *Islamic State of Iraq* (ISI) that capitalized on sectarian tensions after the Arab Spring. ISI's expansion into Syria set the stage for further fracturing of Al Qaeda's network. Having extended ISI's control over the Iraq-Syria border, ISI emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi formed Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) as a front organization (Lister, 2016b). Baghdadi entrusted junior commander Syrian Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani with development of ISI's operations in Syria to overthrow the Assad regime. JN grew based upon its formidable military exploits against regime forces.

Eyeing Syria as the basis for a future jihadi state and as a pathway to Israel's destruction, Zawahiri sent senior commanders serving in Waziristan to Syria. These veteran leaders referred to as the "Khorasan group" (Fishman, 2014) were to assist JN in directing insurgent activities. This faction was also believed by western intelligence officials to be planning external actions against the West.

JN, by 2014, had established territorial control in parts of northern Syria and had consolidated its military position within the anti-Assad insurgent movement. Hoping to formalize its association with JN, Baghdadi merged his Iraqi and Syrian operations into a rebranded *Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham* (ISIS), a policy rejected by Jawlani who pledged fidelity to Zawahiri. Faced with an opportunity to exert control over Al Qaeda's Levant project, Zawahiri intervened.

His 2014 letter annulled Baghdadi's merger decreeing:

First, it is inevitable that I remind all the mujahideen and Muslims of the role of the Islamic State of Iraq in resisting the Crusader plan for making an alliance with and dividing the heart of the Muslim world, and their resistance of the aggressive Safavid-Rafidite expansionism into Iraq, ash-Sham and the Arabian Peninsula.... It is also inevitable that I remind all of the mujahideen and Muslims of the role of Jabhat al-Nusra li Ahl ash-Sham in their reviving of the obligation of Jihad in Sham ar-Rabat and the Jihad; and their reviving the hope of the Muslim Ummah in liberating Al-Aqsa and the establishment of the guiding Khilafa with God's Likewise, [it is inevitable that I mention] their resistance to the Safavid, Rafidite, Batinite and secular enemy on the harbour of Islam in beloved Sham (Holbrook, 2018, p. 211).

Zawahiri abrogation of Baghdadi's merger was driven by a desire to maximize Al Qaeda's direction over *Jabhat al Nusra* (JN) in Syria and not by ideological opposition to ISI's sectarian strategy.

Baghdadi brazenly rejected Zawahiri's ruling setting the stage for his movement's ejection from Al Qaeda. In the wake of the leadership dispute, JN fractured into rival camps. Fighting between pro ISIS and Al Qaeda militants left over a thousand dead. Despite some initial defeats ISIS recovered its position in Syria establishing territorial control over eastern Syria with Raqqa as its administrative center.

Alarmed that the infighting could derail his plans for the Levant, Zawahiri entrusted Al Qaeda veteran Abu Khalid al-Suri to negotiate a resolution of the JN-ISIS dispute. Suri's subsequent assassination by suspected ISIS agents forced Zawahiri in February 2014 to expel ISIS from Al Qaeda's network.

ISIS's rapid military conquest of northern Iraq (highlighted by the capture of Mosul) became the foundation for the organization declaration of the caliphate. Formally announced in a July 2014 sermon at Mosul's Grand Mosque, Baghdadi's caliphate proclamation (a rebranded *Islamic State-IS*) set off fractures within Al Qaeda's regional franchises. Factions supportive of IS' caliphate bolted from Al Qaeda aligned groups in Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Algeria and Nigeria (Zelin, 2014 b). Within the span of a year, IS had announced some 10 provinces across the globe carved out from AQ's network.

Zawahiri was forced to react to IS' dramatic growth. Al Qaeda's emir devotes part of his *Islamic Spring Series* to condemning Baghdadi's caliphate. His critique is multi-pronged. Among the most salient points are: (1) Baghdadi violated past loyalty oaths [*bay'ah*] that he and his predecessors made to Al Qaeda; (2) IS' caliphate is invalid for its formation lacked consensus within the jihadist movement straying from the *prophetic methodology* employed by past caliphs; (3) IS's *takfirist* slaughter of Muslim civilian populations violates religious principles; and (4) IS' failed to demonstrate that its territorial conquests and the theological credentials of its leader warrant a caliphate proclamation (Holbrook, 2018).

Having rejected IS' claim of leadership over the jihadist movement, Zawahiri attempted to reassert dominance over his damaged network. Hoping to derail IS' momentum, AQ's emir announced a new regional branch (Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent-AQIS) and attempted to guide his remaining organization to the *correct* jihadist path (Mendelsohn, 2016).

Zawahiri wanted to establish a JN as a critical node within the Syrian insurgent movement. His May 2016 *March Forth to Sham [Syria]* video message calls for

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“unity of mujahidin in Syria” (Holbrook, 2018, p.256) divorced from organization ties. By preaching encompassing coalitions and consensus building, Zawahiri created a second fracture within his Levant network. His strategy of embedding Al Qaeda front groups within broad based insurgencies backfired (Lister, 2018).

His policy had disastrous repercussions in Syria. Zawahiri’s control over JN began to unravel as the network embedded into the larger Syrian rebel opposition. The remoteness of AQ’s central command from its regional operations forced Zawahiri to rely on the Al Qaeda surrogates he sent to Syria to influence JN’s evolution. They faced formidable challenges.

By 2016 Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah intervention had secured Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian regime’s survival allowing its forces later in the year to capture the strategic city of Aleppo. Faced with reversals jihadist groups were forced to re-consolidate. Being an important force within Syria’s rebel movement JN found its association with AQ a liability.

JN’s Al Qaeda affiliation had negative consequences that prevented it from exerting control over other jihadist groups (Devron, 2017). First, JN’s organizational alignment with Al Qaeda prevented jihadi forces from receiving aid from Gulf Arab States and Turkey. Second, the powerful Islamist insurgent force Ahrar al Sham demanded JN break from AQ as a merger precondition. Third, JN was the target of Western and Russian airstrikes intended to degrade the network’s capacity to launch Al Qaeda inspired external operations.

Having to overcome these obstacles proved untenable. JN’s July 2016 rebranding into Jabhat Fath al-Sham (JFS) where it announced its dealignment with AQ was interpreted as an organizational ruse (al-Tamimi, 2017). The fact that AQ veteran Abu Khayr al-Masri in Syria sanctioned the decoupling was viewed as a Zawahiri’s ploy to conceal his network’s control over JFS.

This interpretation proved unfounded (Devron & Haenni; Carezzi, 2020). Turkish intervention in Idlib Province was driven in part by Ankara’s desire to preserve its influence over jihadist factions. Since Turkish military intercession, cooperation between jihadists and its forces have intensified. These dynamics facilitated conditions that allowed JFS’ to establish a hegemonic position among Islamist factions in Idlib Province; a precondition of which was breaking from Al Qaeda.

The network’s 2017 reorganization into *Hayat Tahrir al Sham* (HYT), confirmed that the earlier separation from al Qaeda was genuine. Since its formation, HYT has renounced any intent to launch operations outside of Syria. Jawlani’s network works with Turkish occupation forces and he has even raised the prospect of cooperation with the West. Zawahiri condemned HYT’s betrayal of its Al

Qaeda's loyalty oath, denounced its nationalist agenda, and decried its abandonment of global jihadism. Former members of JN loyal to Al Qaeda in 2018 formed *Hurras al Din* (HaD) to preserve Zawahiri's interests. HaD remains isolated from the rebel opposition and faces HYT persecution. Infighting between Zawahiri's beleaguered Al Qaeda loyalists and HYT militants persists (Zelin, 2022) as Jawlani has emphasized the jihadi state building project in Idlib Province.

### Conclusion

Al Qaeda's ambitious project to build a jihadi organization in the Levant has collapsed. Zawahiri failed to manage his Iraq-Syria network because he couldn't reconcile IS's brand of sectarian warfare and JN's nationalist agenda within Al Qaeda's global *far enemy* vision. By attempting to cohere these separate strands of jihadism, Zawahiri contributed to the unraveling of his Levant network.

His ambiguous messaging on sectarianism and his failed effort to integrate a localized insurgency into Al Qaeda's *far enemy* strategy resulted in the departure of ISIS and JN from his organization. The collapse of AQ's Levant strategy is seen in infighting (Zelin, 2020) between Al Qaeda ideologues over the propriety of HTS' separation from Al Qaeda's organizational fold. Furthermore, some analysts see the three jihadi models (IS sectarianism, AQ globalism and HYT localism) as competitive with one another worldwide (Lister, 2020; Hamming, 2019).

Though some Al Qaeda militants still cling to OBL's *far enemy* approach, it is a distinct minority within the unwieldy global jihadi movement. Internal and sectarian conflicts across the Muslim World militate against a rejuvenation of OBL's *far enemy* strategy and weaken its central organization's capacity to direct an increasingly fractured and competitive global network.

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