

# Jihadism in 2014: Jihadist Franchises

January 29, 2015 | 09:01 GMT, Stratfor.

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In the [first part of this series](#), we discussed the changes in the global jihadist movement following the split between al Qaeda and the Islamic State. We then examined the [current state of the al Qaeda core](#) and, in subsequent parts, [the Islamic State](#) and the [grassroots jihadist movement](#).

This week we will focus on regional jihadist franchise groups. Last year all of the franchise groups were al Qaeda affiliates or, at the very least, sympathetic toward al Qaeda. This year, however, the split in the jihadist movement means that rather than assessing them specifically by name, we will need to gauge them by region. This is because many groups now have their own internal splits as well: Both al Qaeda and Islamic State franchise groups exist in many jihadist areas of operation.

## The Arabian Peninsula

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has long been one of the most robust al Qaeda franchise groups and has perhaps the closest ideological as well as personal ties with the al Qaeda core. It has also assumed a leadership role in the al Qaeda movement's efforts to conduct transnational attacks in the West over the past several years.

The close relationship between the al Qaeda core and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has been evident during the public spat between al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has urged the Islamic State to reconcile with al Qaeda and groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. The group has also published statements critical of the manner by which Islamic State militant leadership declared the establishment of a caliphate. This criticism has unleashed a backlash. The sixth issue of the Islamic State's English-language Dabiq magazine contained not only scathing attacks on the al Qaeda core but also on al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The magazine specifically focused on al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula ideologue Harith al-Nadhari, who is characterized as a misguided windbag whose "expressions trickle with blood, forebode evil, and contain wickedness."

Given this back and forth — plus the egos of the personalities involved — reconciliation between al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State is unlikely in the near future. This conflict also has reportedly led to the establishment of an Islamic State jihadist group in Yemen, presumably rivaling al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in its area of operation. This Islamic State move, however, has limitations. Yemenis have indeed fought alongside the Islamic State on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq in addition to working with other jihadist groups. But it is unlikely that al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula would permit the establishment of an Islamic State organization in Yemen that could become a rival for recruits, resources and power. If there is an Islamic State franchise in Yemen, it is very small and is keeping a low profile to evade attention until it is strong enough to challenge the stronger group. Efforts by this Islamic State group, though, might be given a boost if al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is significantly weakened by its fight against [al-Houthi militants](#).

As we [noted last year](#), al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has struggled in Yemen since the group seized large swaths of territory in 2011. This triggered a 2012 government offensive to dislodge the group, in which al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula suffered terrible losses. The group continues to be hit by both Yemeni government operations as well as occasional U.S. airstrikes and is clearly weaker than it was in 2011. One sign of the group's weakness was its inability to launch significant attacks against huge crowds aligned with al-Houthi rebels in Sanaa in August and September. It did dispatch two individual suicide bombers, but those attacks were not well executed or very effective.

Recent al-Houthi advances in Yemen, however, do seem to have breathed new life into al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula because al-Houthi opponents see the group as a potential ally. The more conservative Yemeni tribes — the Salafists within the state security apparatus and the Salafist wing of the al-Islah party, led by Abdul Majid al-Zindani — all fear the al-Houthi movement. They have aligned with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, strengthening the group. Since the beginning of December, we have seen al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula conduct larger and more effective attacks against al-Houthi forces in Marib, Ibb and Bayda provinces.

However, the United States remains firmly focused on containing the group and, despite the current political crisis in Yemen, continues to apply all the tools in its terrorist toolbox against it. This means that the group will likely continue to struggle in 2015.

### Egypt and North Africa

Over the past year, Algerian security forces have continued to apply immense pressure to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's units in the mountain hideouts of Algeria's north. This pressure has been compounded by Tunisian military campaigns against Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia) on the Tunisian side of the border.

Jihadist units associated with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and their rival al Qaeda franchise, [known as al-Mourabitoun](#), continue to range far and wide across the Sahel region seeking to [kidnap Westerners](#), smuggle contraband and engage in occasional terrorist attacks. But these groups remain a chronic rather than an acute threat and are kept in check by regional governments working together with France and the United States.

Libya continues to be a very confusing and muddled place, with a large number of militias operating in the country, several of which are jihadist. Groups such as Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) have demonstrated contacts with al Qaeda while jihadists in Darnah have claimed allegiance to the Islamic State and have even declared wilayahs, or "provinces," in three areas of Libya. We have also seen reports of al Qaeda and Islamic State operatives being dispatched to Libya to work with sympathetic groups there. Jihadists in the country will continue to pose a concern for the foreseeable future. The Jan. 27 suicide bombing and armed assault against the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli underscores this danger.

In Egypt, [Ansar Beit al-Maqdis](#) has splintered. A faction of the group in the Sinai Peninsula has declared allegiance to the Islamic State and now calls itself the Wilayah Sinai, meaning "Sinai Province," while the leadership in the Egyptian mainland remains loyal to al Qaeda. The fact that the [Sinai militants](#) are split is not surprising given the groups' past connections to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, founder of the Islamic State predecessor al Qaeda in Iraq, and the current involvement of Egyptian nationals in the al Qaeda core, most notably Egyptian-born leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

### Iraq and the Levant

Like Libya, the militant landscape in Syria is complex, fluid and difficult to decipher. This ambiguity is seen in the difficulty the United States has experienced in finding so-called "moderate" rebel units to support with weapons and training. In addition to the Islamic State and al Qaeda's Syria affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, there is an array of other groups that coexist, and in some cases cooperate, with the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra or both. The Islamic State has also claimed to have rounded up and executed members of ultra-extremist groups that believe Islamic State sectarianism is too lax, and the group has labeled them "Kharijites."

The al Qaeda core has sent a number of senior leaders to Syria in an attempt to influence the jihadist groups there. It also appears that the al Qaeda core has sought to use Syria as a place to regenerate its terrorist capability by dispatching an operational group from the al Qaeda core called the "Khorasan Group" to work in Jabhat al-Nusra areas. U.S. airstrikes in Syria have targeted this group, which the core purportedly tasked with staging attacks abroad from northern Syria.

## South Asia

The Afghan Taliban are a nationalist jihadist organization, and they have never demonstrated the intent to conduct transnational terrorist attacks. Even some of the members of the Quetta Shura who have demonstrated more sophisticated terrorist tradecraft, such as the Haqqani network, have not conducted attacks outside the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Due to the support the Taliban still enjoy from elements within the Pakistani state and society, it is quite likely they will become an even more powerful force in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal, either through some sort of political settlement or by the force of arms.

The unrelated Pakistani Taliban, aka Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, have declared war on the Pakistani government and non-Sunni Muslims in Pakistan. The sectarian bent of some Pakistani Taliban factions has made them susceptible to the Islamic State's ideology, and some factions of the Pakistani Taliban have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The Islamic State has declared the Afghan Taliban to be misguided and practicing a flawed form of Sharia; this is likely to increase the tension between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban factions that have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State – some of which are operating in southern Afghanistan.

In September 2014, al Qaeda announced the formation of a new franchise group in South Asia called al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. Jihadists have long been active in the region including India and Bangladesh. Because of this, the announcement of al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent's existence seems to be more of a public relations stunt or a branding initiative than an actual increase in operational capability or even effort in the region. Therefore, we do not expect to see a significant increase in the residual threat in the region due to this new group.

## Somalia

Al Shabaab has continued its downward spiral over the past year as the group has been racked by infighting and defections. It also suffered a significant loss in September 2014 when its leader, Ahmad Abdi Godane, was [killed by a U.S. airstrike](#). Godane's death gave the group the opportunity to defect to the surging Islamic State, but instead the group's new leadership reiterated its pledge of allegiance to al Qaeda. In all likelihood this decision was probably influenced by its close relationship to, and dependence upon, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

While al Shabaab is badly damaged, the group has been down before and has rebounded, so it is quite premature to declare it defunct. It still poses a risk of sophisticated terrorist attacks inside Somalia as well as less sophisticated attacks elsewhere in the region, including Uganda and Kenya.

## Nigeria

Boko Haram has grown in size and danger over the past year. In many ways its development has been similar to that of the Islamic State, progressing from merely conducting terrorist attacks and hit-and-run insurgent operations to actually seizing and holding a significant area of territory in northern Nigeria. The group has also conducted occasional raids into northern Cameroon, but so far [those forays have been beaten back](#).

Despite its past dealings with groups such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al Shabaab, Boko Haram appears to have been heavily influenced by the activities of the Islamic State. Like the Islamic State, Boko Haram has conducted large-scale kidnappings of women and brutal massacres of people who oppose it, including other Muslims. Indeed, the group has even declared a caliphate in northern Nigeria.

Boko Haram has not demonstrated the intent or capability to conduct transnational terrorist attacks and, with its heavy focus on its territorial goals, likely has little time or resources to devote to such adventures.

## East Asia

The first generation of East Asian jihadists — figures such as Hanbali, Dulmatin and Janjalani — was trained in terrorist tradecraft in al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. They were then allowed to operate with little or no pressure. Even then, they were able to hit very soft targets, such as nightclubs and restaurants in Bali, but struggled to hit harder targets such as the Australian Embassy in Jakarta.

Counterterrorism operations in the region have removed most of the highly trained terrorist cadres from the region and the capability of East Asian jihadists has been reduced dramatically. East Asian Muslims have also not been a particularly susceptible audience for jihadist recruitment, and despite the large numbers of Muslims there (Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world), few East Asian Muslims have adopted the jihadist ideology.

We have seen Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Bashir pledge allegiance to the Islamic State from prison, but many of his followers, including his own son, have criticized that decision.

Some factions of the Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines have also joined the Islamic State. But like their brethren in Indonesia, it does not really matter what they call themselves: Their capabilities and the threat they pose are not going to change simply because they call themselves Islamic State.

## Caucasus and Central Asia

The leaders of the Caucasus Emirate's Dagestan network have pledged their loyalty to the Islamic State in defiance of the overall Caucasus Emirates leader. This is not surprising given the large number of Chechens and Dagestanis fighting with the Islamic State and the high profile they have taken on. However, one of the important reasons there are so many militants from the Caucasus region in Syria to begin with is the intense pressure they are under from Russian and Chechen security forces at home. The Caucasus Emirates has already been hit hard by the security services, and the split will only serve to make them weaker.

We have also seen a number of reports from Central Asia that countries such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have serious concerns about the threat of jihadism to their stability after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, as we have [discussed elsewhere](#), we believe that these concerns are valid but certainly not beyond the capacity of the Central Asian governments to handle. Indeed, internal social and economic problems pose a greater threat to stability in the region than returning jihadists.

## No Military Solution

As long as the ideology continues to thrive and mutate it will continue to attract adherents. Because of this, we continue to stress that there is no military solution to the threat. The West simply cannot kill its way out of this problem. Nor does the West have any real standing on the ideological battlefield where jihadism must be confronted and defeated. Of course, the West must continue to fight jihadist groups with all the counterterrorism tools it has available — military, intelligence, law enforcement, diplomatic and financial — but such tools can only serve to mitigate the jihadist threat, not eliminate it.

The [split between al Qaeda and the Islamic State](#) has divided and weakened the jihadist movement globally. This competition is not only harmful to jihadist groups because of social media arguments or physical battles in places such as Syria, it is also something that can and will be taken advantage of by those seeking to undermine the movement ideologically. As ideologues affiliated with the Islamic State and those opposed to it point out one another's hypocrisy and deviance, they supply ample ammunition to the theological warriors seeking to discredit jihadism.