

Congressional Testimony

Al Qaeda's Expansion in Egypt *Implications for U.S. Homeland Security*

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss al Qaeda's presence in Egypt. The uprisings throughout the Muslim world that began in late 2010 and early 2011 brought hope to millions of people. Al Qaeda did not instigate these revolts, but in the years since the group has exploited the security vacuums created in their wake.

Al Qaeda's theory of the revolution in Egypt, and the subsequent overthrow of Mohamed Morsi's Islamist regime, is predicated on its deeply anti-American and anti-Semitic worldview. Al Qaeda's senior leaders portrayed Mubarak's fall as a defeat for the U.S. and its interests in the region. For instance, al Qaeda head Ayman al Zawahiri portrayed the toppling of dictators in Egypt and Tunisia as comparable to America's military losses and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. America "was defeated in Tunisia and lost its agent there," Zawahiri said in an October 2011 recording, and "it was defeated in Egypt and lost its biggest agent there."¹

Even though al Qaeda has long disagreed with the Muslim Brotherhood's approach to politics, sometimes vehemently so, the group did not call for jihad against Morsi or his government. Instead, most of post-Mubarak Egypt became a land for proselytization. In "Egypt and Tunisia, the opportunities have opened up for preaching [but] only Allah knows how long they will last," Zawahiri said in an August 2011 message. "Therefore," Zawahiri continued, "the people of Islam and jihad should benefit from them and take advantage of them to report the clear truth and make the Ummah come together around the primary issues that no Muslim can dispute."² Accordingly, from early 2011 through the middle of 2013, Zawahiri's henchmen and allied jihadists set up organizations to spread al Qaeda's ideology. They preached in Tahrir Square, appeared on national television, and openly operated in a country where they had once been hunted and harassed by security services.

In some respects, however, the Sinai was different. The jihadists saw it as a new front for confronting Israel and a base for their operations. Various al Qaeda-linked or inspired groups grew. When Egyptian security forces conducted counterterrorism raids, they became viable terrorist targets. Indeed, al Qaeda's leaders repeatedly condemned Egypt's military even prior to Morsi's ouster. When Morsi was deposed in early July 2013, the landscape changed once again. No longer was the Islamist regime, which al Qaeda saw as doomed to fail, in power. Al Qaeda has consistently portrayed the Egyptian military as a servant of an imaginary Zionist-Crusader conspiracy, making the government a legitimate target for jihad.

¹ SITE Intelligence Group, "Zawahiri Praises Libyan Rebels, Eilat Attackers; Urges Algerians to Revolt," October 11, 2011.

² SITE Intelligence Group, "Zawahiri Rallies for Jihad; Calls for Intellectual Debate, Advocacy," August 15, 2011.

Egypt continues to pose of a variety of counter-terrorism challenges and threats to American interests. I address several of these areas of concern in my testimony today.

- **Al Qaeda likely has “core” leaders inside Egypt today.** During and after the 2011 uprisings, senior jihadists allied with al Qaeda were freed. Others returned from abroad, including from Iran, which offered Egyptian jihadist leaders a form of safe haven for years. Not all of these jihadists returned to terrorism, but some influential jihadists did. The September 11, 2012, protest in front of the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, which turned into an all-out assault, was instigated by “old school” jihadists who are part of al Qaeda’s network and were freed after Mubarak’s fall.

After President Mohamed Morsi’s regime was overthrown, the military and security forces re-arrested a number of senior jihadist figures. However, some likely remain active and may hold leadership roles in new al Qaeda-allied terrorist organizations.

- **The Muhammad Jamal Network (MJN), which was established in 2011, is an international threat and part of al Qaeda’s network.** One of the “old school” Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) jihadists released from prison in 2011 is Muhammad Jamal, a longtime subordinate to Ayman al Zawahiri. Despite Jamal’s re-imprisonment in late 2012, the MJN remains active today in the Sinai, mainland Egypt and elsewhere. The MJN clearly operates as part of al Qaeda’s international network and has ties to terrorists in Europe. Some of its members participated in the September 11, 2012, terrorist attack in Benghazi, Libya. Egyptian authorities have alleged that the MJN was connected to an al Qaeda plot against Western embassies and other interests in Cairo in 2013.³
- **There is strong evidence indicating that al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which is headquartered in Yemen, is operating in the Sinai.** This is an important development because AQAP has repeatedly attempted to attack the U.S. homeland since 2009 and is increasingly managing al Qaeda’s assets far from its home base of operations. The head of AQAP, Nasir al Wuhayshi, is the general manager of al Qaeda’s global network.
- **The Sinai Peninsula has become home to multiple al Qaeda actors, as well as al Qaeda-inspired groups.** Osama bin Laden’s former doctor is reportedly a

³ Thomas Joscelyn, “Egyptian interior minister: Al Qaeda cell plotted suicide attack against Western embassy,” *The Long War Journal*, May 11, 2013.
(http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/05/egyptian_interior_mi.php)

senior al Qaeda leader in the Sinai today. Several groups proclaiming their allegiance to al Qaeda have emerged in the Sinai since 2011.

- **Ansar Jerusalem (Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis), the most prolific Sinai-based jihadist organization, is pursuing al Qaeda's agenda.** Al Qaeda's leader, Ayman al Zawahiri, has repeatedly praised the group's attacks. Ansar Jerusalem shares al Qaeda's ideology, employs al Qaeda's tactics, and routinely refers to and praises al Qaeda's leaders in its statements. There is much we do not know about Ansar Jerusalem's operations, but a growing body of evidence suggests it is tied to al Qaeda's international network.
- **The Muslim Brotherhood, or at least elements of the organization, may have already turned to violence.** The overthrow of Mohamed Morsi's regime was an "I told you so" moment for al Qaeda. The organization's senior ideologues have long argued that an Islamist regime would not be allowed to rule Egypt. Brotherhood members are certainly disillusioned following Morsi's ouster, and al Qaeda may, therefore, be more appealing to them. We know that groups such as Ansar Jerusalem are already poaching from the Brotherhood's ranks. Egyptian officials have leveled a number of allegations against the Brotherhood, saying that it is deeply involved in supporting terrorist activities. These allegations may be false and designed to further delegitimize the Brotherhood at home and abroad. However, some of the allegations are specific and can, therefore, be either verified or rejected. During the Brotherhood's brief reign, Morsi and others did cooperate with jihadists in some ways. This entire subject is murky and requires more analysis.
- **Finally, it is worth stressing that al Qaeda views the Sinai as a base of operations for fighting an imaginary "Zionist-Crusader" conspiracy.** That is, al Qaeda sees the Sinai as a launching pad for attacks against both American and Israeli interests. Today, Israel faces more of a challenge from jihadists allied with al Qaeda than ever before. This threat comes not just from the Sinai, but also from other countries, including Syria.

Below, I have divided the rest of my written testimony into three sections. In the first section, I outline how key al Qaeda leaders (including "core" members) became active in Egypt following the revolution. Some of them are still active to this day. In the second section, I give a brief overview of the leading al Qaeda-linked organizations in the Sinai. In the third and final section, I look at Ansar Jerusalem more closely, demonstrating that the organization is clearly pursuing al Qaeda's agenda.

Post-revolution: Al Qaeda leaders become active in Egypt

For decades, the main terrorist challenge to the Egyptian government came from the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) and Gamaa Islamiyya (IG), two groups that were allied with al Qaeda and responsible for high-profile attacks on both Egyptian leaders and civilians. The EIJ was headed by Ayman al Zawahiri and merged with Osama bin Laden's venture prior to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. While some IG leaders renounced violence from behind bars in Egypt, others did not and remained loyal to al Qaeda. Longtime IG spiritual leader Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, a.k.a. "the Blind Sheikh," remains a popular figure in jihadist circles two decades after his imprisonment in the U.S.

Under Hosni Mubarak's regime, many EIJ and IG leaders were imprisoned. Some avoided confinement by staying abroad, either in Afghanistan-Pakistan, Iran or elsewhere. After Mubarak's fall, dozens of EIJ and IG leaders were freed from prison. Still others returned to their home country, where they were suddenly acquitted of longstanding terrorism charges.

One such key al Qaeda leader is Mohammad Islambouli, the brother of Anwar Sadat's assassin. Islambouli lived in Iran for years after 9/11. While living in Iran, he was a part of an IG contingent that formally merged with al Qaeda. In fact, Islambouli's ties to al Qaeda leadership go back decades. His importance can be seen in the limited number of documents released from Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. In one document, dated October 20, 2010, bin Laden stresses the importance of protecting Islambouli, who had apparently evacuated northern Pakistan (after leaving Iran) for Kunar, Afghanistan. "He should be informed of the nature of work and he should be consulted on things that are being discussed," bin Laden writes, in reference to some ongoing projects.⁴ An earlier document, dated March 28, 2007, is addressed to an individual known as "Adnan Hafiz Sultan," who is also referred to as the "maternal uncle."⁵ The latter phrase ("maternal uncle") is al Qaeda's coded reference for Islambouli.⁶ If this letter is addressed to Islambouli, and it certainly appears that it is, then its contents show how Islambouli is a part of al Qaeda's senior leadership and he has been involved in managing the group's operations in Iraq and elsewhere.

⁴ SOCOM-2012-0000015. Islambouli is referred to as Muhammad Shawqi Abu-Ja'far in the document.

⁵ SOCOM-2012-0000011.

⁶ Bill Roggio, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, and Tony Badran, "Intercepted Letters from al-Qaeda Leaders Shed Light on State of Network in Iraq," *The Long War Journal*, September 12, 2008. (<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/intercepted-letters-from-al-qaeda-leaders-shed-light-on-state-of-network-in/>)

After returning to Egypt, Islambouli was reportedly freed by an Egyptian military court in 2012 despite having been convicted of terrorism charges in absentia decades earlier.⁷ It is not clear where Islambouli is today, or if he has been re-arrested. But Islambouli's re-emergence demonstrates how an Egyptian al Qaeda leader, important enough for bin Laden to protect, suddenly found his home country to be hospitable once again. And Islambouli was not the only IG member turned senior al Qaeda leader to return from abroad in 2011 and 2012.

In addition, a contingent of EIJ leaders loyal to al Qaeda's leader became especially active inside Egypt after their release from prison. They were led by Mohammed al Zawahiri, the younger brother of Ayman al Zawahiri. Until he was re-arrested in 2013, Mohammed al Zawahiri used the permissive environment following the fall of Mubarak to proselytize, often under the banner of "Ansar al Sharia Egypt." This group was established by one of his former EIJ comrades, Ahmed Ashush. In interviews, Ashush proclaimed his allegiance to al Qaeda, saying that he was "honored to be an extension of al Qaeda."⁸ Although Mohammed al Zawahiri spent much of his trying to win new converts for al Qaeda's ideology, he likely returned to terrorist operations and was in contact with his brother as well.⁹

Mohammed al Zawahiri was one of the chief instigators of the September 11, 2012, protest in front of the U.S. Embassy in Cairo. The protest turned into an all-out assault on the compound, with the stars and stripes being ripped down and replaced by al Qaeda's black banner. The protest-turned-assault was a pro-al Qaeda event from the first, with protesters openly praising Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. I have identified at least three other senior al Qaeda-linked jihadists who helped spark the protest: Tawfiq Al 'Afani, 'Adel Shehato, and Rifai Ahmed Taha Musa.¹⁰ Al 'Afani and Shehato are longtime EIJ

⁷ "Egypt military court releases the brother of Sadat's assassin," *Ahram Online*, February 27, 2012. (<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/35491/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-military-court-releases-the-brother-of-Sadat.aspx>)

⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar al Sharia Egypt founder 'honored to be an extension of al Qaeda'," *The Long War Journal*, November 27, 2012.

(http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/ansar_al_sharia_egyp.php) For additional articles concerning Ansar al Sharia Egypt's ties to al Qaeda-linked terrorists see:

<http://www.longwarjournal.org/tags/Ansar%20al%20Sharia%20Egypt/common/>

⁹ For example, see: Siobhan Gorman and Matt Bradley, "Militant Link to Libya Attack," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 1, 2012.

(<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444549204578020373444418316>) Some of Zawahiri's recruits went on to carry out suicide operations. See: Thomas Joscelyn, "Follower of Mohammed al Zawahiri dies in attack in Mali," *The Long War Journal*, May 10, 2013.

(http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/05/follower_of_mohammed.php)

¹⁰ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda-linked jihadists helped incite 9/11 Cairo protest," *The Long War Journal*, October 26, 2012. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/al_qaeda-linked_jiha.php)

ideologues and leaders. Shehato has since been re-arrested and charged with leading the so-called Nasr City Cell, which had multiple ties to al Qaeda.¹¹

Rifai Ahmed Taha Musa once led the IG and was a close confidante of the Blind Sheikh. He was very close to Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri. He even signed al Qaeda's 1998 fatwa declaring the formation of a "World Islamic Front for Confronting the Jews and Crusaders."¹² The CIA considered Taha Musa to be such an important terrorist that he was tracked down in Syria, where he was detained and deported to Egypt in late 2001.¹³

Dozens of other senior al Qaeda-linked jihadists either returned to Egypt or were freed from prison following the revolution. This raises several concerns going forward.

First, these jihadists were able to build up their operations with only occasional interference from security forces for approximately two years. They likely established terrorist cells and played a role in establishing some of the groups now based in the Sinai.

Second, while some of these leaders have been re-imprisoned, there are unconfirmed reports that top jihadists such as Mohammed al Zawahiri and Muhammad Jamal continue to communicate with the outside world from prison. Others remain free.

Third, al Qaeda's senior leadership is filled with Egyptians (including Saif al Adel, an al Qaeda leader still wanted for his role in the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings), who know their home country well and have thick roots in the jihadist scene there. This gives al Qaeda's leaders a clear opportunity to leverage their historical ties with any jihadists who remain free.

Al Qaeda Groups in the Sinai Peninsula

The Sinai has long been plagued by terrorism, among its many other problems. But since the ouster of Mohamed Morsi there has been a stunning increase in the violence. As my colleague at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies David Barnett has documented, there have been more than 300 reported attacks in the Sinai from July 3, 2013 through February 6, 2014. This violence has spilled over into the mainland, as

¹¹ See: Thomas Joscelyn, "Egypt arrests pro-al Qaeda jihadist tied to Benghazi suspect," *The Long War Journal*, November 2, 2012. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/egyptian_islamic_jih.php) and Thomas Joscelyn, "More al Qaeda links to Cairo terror cell reportedly found," *The Long War Journal*, November 9, 2012.

¹² Taha Musa would later claim that his name was mistakenly included on the fatwa.

¹³ For an overview of Taha Musa's al Qaeda role, see: Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda-Linked Jihadists Incited Cairo Protest," *The Weekly Standard*, October 26, 2012. (http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/al-qaeda-linked-jihadists-incited-cairo-protest_657859.html)

Sinai-based groups are increasingly executing high-profile attacks in Egypt's densely-populated urban areas.

There are credible reports of contacts between terrorists in the Sinai and al Qaeda's senior leadership. In late July 2013, Ayman al Zawahiri joined a "conference call" of more 20 al Qaeda operatives around the globe that included "aspiring al Qaeda affiliates operating in the Sinai."¹⁴ Zawahiri's contact with the Sinai jihadists reportedly prompted the closing of the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv. Other U.S. diplomatic facilities around the globe were closed because of the possibility of an impending terrorist attack. There are unconfirmed reports of handwritten communications from Zawahiri to terrorists in the Sinai.¹⁵ Egyptian security officials have alleged that the interrogations of terrorist suspects have revealed ties between the Sinai jihadists and "groups which operate in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as other countries not just Gaza."¹⁶ As I discuss more below, Muhammad Jamal, who established training camps in the Sinai, was in direct contact with Zawahiri.

Several al Qaeda-inspired and/or al Qaeda-linked groups operate in the Sinai today. These include Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Ansar Jerusalem), Al Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula (AQSP) and Ansar al Jihad, the Muhammad Jamal Network (MJN), the Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem (MSC), Al Salafiya Al Jihadiya in Sinai (Salafi Jihadist Movement in the Sinai), and al Tawhid wal Jihad, among others. In addition, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has established a presence in the Sinai. Untangling this web of groups is extremely difficult, if not impossible. There is collusion between at least some of these groups. And it is possible that some of these organizations overlap, sharing a common infrastructure while operating under different names.

In this section, I provide a brief overview of four of these organizations, before moving on to a longer treatment of Ansar Jerusalem. These five organizations are the most operationally relevant.

Al Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula (AQSP) and Ansar al Jihad

In late July 2011, masked gunmen attacked a police headquarters in Arish and a gas pipeline. By some accounts, approximately 100 terrorists were involved in the attack.

¹⁴ Eli Lake and Josh Rogin, "Exclusive: U.S. Intercepted Al Qaeda's 'Legion of Doom' Conference Call," *The Daily Beast*, August 7, 2013. (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/08/07/al-qaeda-conference-call-intercepted-by-u-s-officials-sparked-alerts.html>) The "conference call" actually utilized a sophisticated internet-based communications system.

¹⁵ "Egypt's North Sinai Security Chief: We Are Chasing Ghosts in the Sinai," *Al-Dustur Online* (Cairo), November 11, 2012.

¹⁶ *Al-Misri al-Yawm*, August 1, 2013.

During the initial arrests, 10 Palestinians were identified as being among the attackers.¹⁷ Shortly after the assault, a statement was issued by a group calling itself Al Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula (AQSP). The statement called for the creation of an Islamic emirate in the Sinai. AQSP also called on the Egyptian Army to disregard the Camp David Accords and to end the “siege” in Gaza.¹⁸

The reported emir of AQSP, which has been blamed for a string of attacks, is Ramzi Mowafi, Osama bin Laden’s former physician.¹⁹ Mowafi is believed to be an explosives expert and to have worked on chemical weapons for al Qaeda. Mowafi is another example of the phenomenon of “old school” jihadists returning to the fight.

Another group calling itself Ansar al Jihad in the Sinai Peninsula is believed to be the military wing of AQSP. Ansar al Jihad announced its formation in December 2011, saying it vowed to “fulfill the oath” of slain al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.²⁰ Ansar al Jihad swore allegiance to al Qaeda emir Ayman al Zawahiri the following month.²¹

I find it curious that more attacks have not been claimed by AQSP and Ansar al Jihad. It is possible that the group is working in concert with one of the other jihadist organizations in the Sinai.

The Muhammad Jamal Network (MJN)

Muhammad Jamal, who was first trained by al Qaeda in the late 1980s, was released from prison in 2011 and quickly got back to work. Jamal, who has long been a subordinate to Ayman al Zawahiri, became so prolific that his operation was eventually designated by both the U.S. government and the United Nations.²² Those designations make it clear that the MJN operates as part of al Qaeda’s international network. The State Department revealed that Jamal has “established links with terrorists in Europe.” In addition to al Qaeda’s senior leadership, the MJN has strong ties to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

¹⁷ Jailan Halawi, “Egypt : Al-Qaeda in Sinai?,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, August 4, 2011.

¹⁸ “Security operation continues in North Sinai,” *Daily News Egypt*, August 17, 2011.

¹⁹ David Barnett, “Former bin Laden doctor reportedly heads al Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula,” *The Long War Journal*, July 17, 2013. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/07/former_bin_laden_doc.php)

²⁰ Bill Roggio, “Ansar al Jihad in the Sinai Peninsula announces formation,” *The Long War Journal*, December 22, 2011. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/12/ansar_al_jihad_in_th.php)

²¹ Bill Roggio, “Ansar al Jihad swears allegiance to al Qaeda’s emir,” *The Long War Journal*, January 24, 2012. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/01/ansar_al_jihad_swear.php)

²² The State Department’s announcement of the designation can be found here:

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/10/215171.htm>. The UN’s designation can be found here:

<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2013/sc11154.doc.htm>

Jamal was re-arrested in late 2012. Egyptian authorities discovered on a seized laptop that he had been communicating directly with Ayman al Zawahiri.²³ Jamal mentions in the letters that he sent an emissary to meet with Zawahiri after he was blocked from traveling abroad. Jamal claims to have trained several Yemenis who went on to form AQAP and says that AQAP has provided financing for his operations. Jamal writes that he has established training camps in both eastern Libya and the Sinai.

Jamal tells Zawahiri that he formed “groups for us inside Sinai,” which is an especially interesting revelation given that some jihadist groups there have openly proclaimed their allegiance to al Qaeda. He also describes the Sinai as the “the next confrontation arena with the Jews and the Americans.” In addition to the Sinai, counterterrorism investigations have revealed that Jamal was a leader of the so-called “Nasr City cell” in Cairo and that his network operates elsewhere in Egypt.

As with al Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula (AQSP), I find it curious that the MJN has not claimed any attacks inside Egypt. Jamal’s letters reveal that he has procured a significant amount of arms at great expense, including rockets, from Libya and has transported them into the Sinai. Who is using these arms today? What are Jamal’s operatives, many of whom remain at-large, doing today?

I surmise it is likely that the MJN is cooperating with other jihadist groups in the Sinai.

Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem (MSC)

The MSC operates in both Gaza and the Sinai. The MSC claimed responsibility for a June 18, 2012, cross-border attack in Israel.²⁴ One Israeli civilian was killed during the attack, which targeted construction workers building a security fence. The group identified an Egyptian and a Saudi as the lead attackers. The MSC dedicated the raid to Osama bin Laden and made its adherence to al Qaeda’s ideology unmistakable.²⁵ “We announce the formation of the Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem, as a base for jihadist work... to be part of the global project that aims to re-establish the Caliphate,” the group announced in its video claiming responsibility for the attack.²⁶ “To the Jews, the enemies of Allah, we say: you should know, you infidels, that the future is

²³ Thomas Joscelyn, “Communications with Ayman al Zawahiri highlighted in ‘Nasr City cell’ case,” *The Long War Journal*, February 10, 2013.

(http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/02/communications_with.php)

²⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda-linked group claims responsibility for attack in Israel,” *The Long War Journal*, June 19, 2012. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/06/al_qaeda-linked_grou.php)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Unknown Islamists Claim Border Attack on Israel,” *NOW Lebanon* (with *Agence France Presse*), June 19, 2012.

different from the past... The time of negotiations and compromises is over,” one MSC member said in the video.²⁷

Months later, the MSC released a martyrdom video praising the lead Egyptian in the June 2012 attack. The MSC’s advertisement for the video portrayed him as an al Qaeda martyr, similar to lead 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta and al Qaeda ideologue Anwar al Awlaki.²⁸ Also featured in the advertisement was Ahmed Ashush, the longtime ally of the Zawahiri brothers. In a separate video released on July 27, 2012, the MSC again claimed responsibility for the attack and said it was “a gift to our brothers in al Qaeda and Sheikh Zawahiri,” as well as retaliation for the death of Osama bin Laden.²⁹ The MSC referred to Zawahiri as “our sheikh” and said it was “continuing with our pledge of allegiance on the path of jihad.”

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the Sinai

Citing “American officials,” *The New York Times* recently reported that AQAP “has regular contact with jihadist groups in Lebanon and in the Sinai Peninsula.”³⁰ This is not surprising given that AQAP help establish Muhammad Jamal’s operations in the Sinai and elsewhere. Numerous published reports point to the presence of a significant number of Yemeni militants in the Sinai. It is likely that many of them are working on behalf of AQAP, which has also established a presence in Libya.

In August 2012, CNN reported that ten “Yemeni militants” had “infiltrated Egyptian soil two months ago and trained local Jihadi cells in the Sinai Peninsula.”³¹ CNN cited a “senior security official associated with Egypt’s North Sinai’s border guards” as the source for this revelation. This anonymous official said intelligence reports showed the Yemenis “were in communication with Jihadist cells in Al Mukataa, a remote area south of Sheikh Zuweid in Northern Sinai.” CNN also cited two Bedouin leaders who were aware of the Yemeni militants’ presence in the Sinai. One of these local Bedouins said that the Yemenis’ had been smuggled into the Sinai from Sudan.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, “Egyptian involved in cross-border attack on Israel portrayed as al Qaeda ‘martyr,’” *The Long War Journal’s Threat Matrix*, February 8, 2013. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2013/02/egyptian_involved_in_cross-bor.php)

²⁹ Bill Roggio, “Mujahideen Shura Council calls attack in Israel a ‘gift’ to Zawahiri and al Qaeda ‘brothers,’” *The Long War Journal*, July 30, 2012. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/07/egyptian_jihadist_gr.php) A translation of the video was provided by the SITE Intelligence Group.

³⁰ Robert F. Worth and Eric Schmitt, “Jihadist Groups Gain in Turmoil Across Middle East,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 2013. (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/04/world/middleeast/jihadist-groups-gain-in-turmoil-across-middle-east.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&hp&pagewanted=all&)

³¹ Mohamed Fadel Fahmy, “Official: Yemeni militants infiltrated Egypt before Rafah attack,” CNN.com, August 17, 2012. <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/17/world/meast/egypt-yemen-militants/>

In early September 2013, the *Associated Press* reported that the Sinai “has seen an influx of foreign fighters the past two months, including several hundred Yemenis.”³² The AP also reported that a Yemeni suspected of serving Ramzi Mowafi, the aforementioned head of AQSP, had been arrested. Three months later, in December 2013, a journalist for *Al-Monitor* published his account of an interview with a powerful tribesman in the Sinai who said that Libyans, Palestinians and Yemenis were all operating in the Sinai.³³ “There are around 1,000 al Qaeda fighters here in the Sinai Peninsula, operating under the different groups, and a lot of them are foreigners,” the tribal leader claimed. (Estimates of the number of fighters vary greatly.) He also said that several of the major jihadist groups “coordinate and sometimes run shared operations” and they “are affiliated to al Qaeda in one way or another.” In early January 2013, the *Daily Beast* reported that “Western officials believe that foreign jihadis, possibly from Yemen and Somalia, are among the several hundred extremists operating” in the Sinai close to the Israeli border.³⁴

Ansar Jerusalem (Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis)

Ansar Jerusalem is the most prolific of the Sinai-based jihadist organizations. In recent months, its operations have become more daring and sophisticated. And its attacks have stretched into the heart of mainland Egypt. Noteworthy attacks by the group include: a complex multi-stage assault in August 2011 that left eight Israelis and several Egyptians dead, successful and unsuccessful attacks on Egyptian officials (including car bombings), and the downing of an Egyptian military helicopter in late January. The attack on the helicopter involved a shoulder-fired missile, which indicates that the group’s capabilities have greatly increased since its inception.

Little is known about Ansar Jerusalem’s inner-workings, however. We do not know, based on open source information, the extent of Ansar Jerusalem’s connections to al Qaeda’s international network. Little is known about the identities and biographies of the group’s founders or current leaders. Nor do we know how many members the group has, or how it is financed.³⁵ Ansar Jerusalem’s precise ties to other jihadist groups in Egypt, including the recently formed Afnad Misr, are also murky. (Ansar Jerusalem refers to Afnad Misr as “our brothers.”)

³² “Local, foreign Islamic militants turn Egypt’s Sinai [into] a new front for jihad,” *Associated Press*, September 3, 2013. (<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/09/03/local-foreign-islamic-militants-turn-egypt-sinai-new-front-for-jihad/>)

³³ Mohannad Sabry, “Al-Qaeda emerges amid Egypt’s turmoil,” *Al-Monitor*, December 4, 2013. (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/al-qaeda-egypt-sinai-insurgency-growing-influence.html>)

³⁴ Alastair Beach, “In the North Sinai, Jihadis Stand Down the Egyptian Government,” *The Daily Beast*, January 6, 2013. (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/01/06/in-the-north-sinai-jihadis-stand-down-the-egyptian-government.html>)

³⁵ Undoubtedly, U.S. intelligence officials have additional, classified information on Ansar Jerusalem.

Thus, counterterrorism analysts cannot know for certain the extent of the group's operational ties (if any) to al Qaeda's senior leadership or al Qaeda's official branches. This does not mean that such ties do not exist. In the past, al Qaeda has groomed organizations and so-called affiliates without recognizing them, at least at first, as formal al Qaeda entities.³⁶ It could be the case, therefore, that Ansar Jerusalem is already acting as a clandestine arm al Qaeda. We just do not know for certain one way or the other.

Late last year, Egyptian officials alleged that a longtime Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) leader named Ahmed Salama Mabrouk plays a leading role in Ansar Jerusalem.³⁷ If true, then this is a major red flag. Mabrouk has been a subordinate to Ayman al Zawahiri for decades. He also served al Qaeda after the EIJ became a part of Osama bin Laden's joint venture. After his release from prison in Egypt, Mabrouk starred at Ansar al Sharia Egypt events alongside Mohammed al Zawahiri.

With those uncertainties in mind, a survey of the available evidence shows that Ansar Jerusalem is, at a minimum, pursuing al Qaeda's agenda and al Qaeda's senior leadership approves of the organization.

Ayman al Zawahiri has repeatedly praised Ansar Jerusalem's operations. And the group routinely references senior al Qaeda leaders in its propaganda videos. This is one reason why the group is commonly described as "al Qaeda-inspired" in the press. The group has adopted al Qaeda's tactics, including suicide bombings. And there are various other threads of evidence pointing to Ansar Jerusalem's international ties.

My informed hunch is that Ansar Jerusalem has, at the very least, coordinated its activities with parts of al Qaeda's international network. Below, I summarize some of the evidence connecting Ansar Jerusalem to the al Qaeda network.

Propaganda distributed through al Qaeda's channels

Ansar Jerusalem distributes its propaganda through al Qaeda's official online channels. In October 2013, the group issued a statement denying "any connection to any account on social networking pages," adding that "the only source of our statements and productions

³⁶ For instance, Osama bin Laden instructed Shabaab, which became a formal affiliate of al Qaeda in 2012, to hide its organizational ties to al Qaeda. Jabhat al Nusrah hid its allegiance to Ayman al Zawahiri at first and was branded in such a manner as to disguise its al Qaeda's role in its creation. Senior al Qaeda operatives have been leaders within organizations that are not officially recognized as al Qaeda entities, such as Ahrar al Sham in Syria. And al Qaeda employs multiple brands to increase its influence. In Yemen, for example, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) began using the name Ansar al Sharia. Other al Qaeda-linked organizations have also adopted the same name, including Ansar al Sharia Egypt, which is headed by jihadists loyal to Ayman al Zawahiri.

³⁷ See: <http://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=22122013&id=84d10683-9c61-44fc-a97a-08d4b8c3f954>

are the jihadi forums from al Fajr Media Center (Shumukh al Islam Network and al Fida' Islamic Network).³⁸ Al Fajr is al Qaeda's propaganda distribution arm, while the other two sites are al Qaeda-accredited. Ansar Jerusalem's messages are often "stickied" at the top of Shumukh, showing that they are considered important by the administrators on al Qaeda's top web sites.³⁹

Ansar Jerusalem frequently includes clips of al Qaeda's top leaders in its videos. Clips of Osama bin Laden and Abu Yahya al Libi (a top al Qaeda operative killed in June 2012) discussing martyrdom were included in a video honoring a member of the group who had participated in the August 2011 attacks in Eilat.⁴⁰ Another video, honoring a suicide bomber who blew himself up inside the South Sinai Security Directorate on October 7, 2013, included an audio clip of Ayman al Zawahiri.⁴¹ Still another video featured a clip of deceased al Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi.⁴²

In January 2014, Ayman al Zawahiri directed part of a message "to our people in Sinai." A clip from an Ansar Jerusalem video, showing a funeral for some of its members, was included in this section of Zawahiri's message.⁴³

Ansar Jerusalem's rocket attacks on Israel, gas pipeline bombings and other operations

Ansar Jerusalem has repeatedly launched rockets at Israel and attacked the Arish-Ashkelon pipeline. In an August 2011 audio message, Zawahiri praised the gas pipeline attacks, which Ansar Jerusalem has claimed as its own. "Not only does the siege of Gaza continue, but also continues the provision of Israel with Egyptian gas at prices lower than the market price," Zawahiri said in the video. "Were gas sold to Israel at a price higher than the market price, it would be a crime. What can [you] then say about this compound crime?!" Zawahiri continued: "I here commend the heroes who blew up the gas pipeline to Israel. I ask Allah to reward them for their heroic act, for they have expressed the

³⁸ SITE Intelligence Group, "Ansar Jerusalem Claims Bombing at Military Intelligence HQ in Ismailia," October 21, 2013. The group repeated this statement about his distribution channels on January 24, 2014.

³⁹ BBC Monitoring, "Web monitoring report for 8-10 September 2012," September 10, 2012.

⁴⁰ SITE Intelligence Group, "Ansar Jerusalem Video Eulogizes Fighter, Shows Spy Interrogation," November 7, 2012.

⁴¹ SITE Intelligence Group, "Ansar Jerusalem Releases Video on Suicide Bombing at South Sinai Security Directorate," November 19, 2013. The video also includes a clip of the deceased leader of the Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Omar al Baghdadi.

⁴² SITE Intelligence Group, "Ansar Jerusalem Releases Video of Training, Attacking Egyptian Soldiers," December 2, 2013. Also shown in the video is the spokesman for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS).

⁴³ David Barnett, "Zawahiri's message 'to our people in Sinai'," *The Long War Journal, Threat Matrix* blog, January 27, 2014. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2014/01/zawahiris_message_to_our_peopl.php)

anger of the Islamic Ummah against this continuing crime from the reign of Hosni Mubarak to the rule of the Military Council...’’⁴⁴

Two months later, in a video released in October 2011, Zawahiri lauded Ansar Jerusalem’s attacks on Eilat, Israel. Ansar Jerusalem claimed responsibility for the attacks in a statement released on September 7. The attacks were carried out on August 18 and killed eight Israelis. “And just as I congratulated our people in Libya for their great victory,” Zawahiri said in his video, “I congratulate our mujahideen brothers who carried out the two Eilat operations.” Zawahiri claimed that one “of the gains of [Ansar Jerusalem’s] operation was exposing the treason of the ruling military council, which was quick to send its troops to chase [Ansar Jerusalem’s terrorists] in order to protect Israel’s security, and then begging from Israel to increase the forces in the area so as to pursue Israel’s enemies.’’⁴⁵

Zawahiri has trumpeted Ansar Jerusalem’s gas pipeline attacks on multiple other occasions. In a June 2012 video, Zawahiri heaped praise on the group, calling Ansar Jerusalem members “brave lions” and saying that they should serve as the “guiding example” for Muslims. “I take this opportunity to salute the brave lions, the mujahideen, who blew up the gas pipe to Israel for the thirteenth time,” Zawahiri said in the video. Al Qaeda’s emir continued: “May Allah salute you as lions who do not let justice go in vain, or accept humiliation, and do not accept for the fortunes of the Muslims to be given to their enemies. Therefore, go on the path of Jihad and count what you meet in the Cause of Allah, who does not let the reward of His workers go to waste. Be the guiding example for every free, honorable person who is passionate for Islam in the Egypt of Islam and jihad.’’⁴⁶

In July 2012, Ansar Jerusalem issued a video claiming thirteen attacks on the pipeline. Several clips of Ayman al Zawahiri were played throughout the video. The clips show Zawahiri praising the pipeline bombings on at least three separate occasions. In one scene, terrorists are shown planting an explosive device at the pipeline while an audio clip from Zawahiri is played in the background: “Just giving gas to Israel is a crime even if it is for the market price, so imagine that it is below the market price. Thus, it is a crime by Mubarak that is continued by the ruling military council.” As the bomb explodes, Zawahiri continues: “The greeting goes to the heroes who blew up the gas pipeline and

⁴⁴ SITE Intelligence Group, “Zawahiri Charges America with Hijacking the Egyptian Revolution,” August 8, 2011.

⁴⁵ SITE Intelligence Group, “Zawahiri Praises Libyan Rebels, Eilat Attackers; Urges Algerians to Revolt,” October 11, 2011. Zawahiri further claimed that the U.S. had “commissioned” Egypt’s ruling military council. His statement was recorded sometime in August or September 2011, meaning it could have been recorded either before or contemporaneous with Ansar Jerusalem’s claim of responsibility for the Eilat attacks.

⁴⁶ SITE Intelligence Group, “Zawahiri Demands Shariah in Egypt, Remarks on Razing of Bin Laden House,” June 17, 2012.

who represent the dignity of the Egyptian people. May Allah bless them, until they see the Islamic Caliphate ruling over the countries of Islam. I ask Allah to grant them patience and determination, and to reward them in the best way in this life and the hereafter.” Subsequent clips of Zawahiri in Ansar Jerusalem’s July 2012 video show the al Qaeda master praising the gas pipeline attacks after the “tenth” and “twelfth” such attacks.⁴⁷

Used the video “Innocence of Muslims” as a pretext for terrorism

Ansar Jerusalem has claimed responsibility for a cross-border raid that killed an Israeli soldier on September 21, 2012.⁴⁸ Three jihadists were also killed in the attack, which was dubbed the “raid of punishment.” Ansar Jerusalem claimed the assault was retaliation for the video *Innocence of Muslims* and necessary “to discipline those insulting the beloved Prophet.”⁴⁹

As I’ve reported, multiple known al Qaeda actors seized upon the anti-Islam video as a pretext to justify protests and assaults on U.S. diplomatic facilities beginning on September 11, 2012.⁵⁰ Ansar Jerusalem’s use of the video to justify an attack in Israel is a good example of how the video was used as a pretext, not a true motivation, by jihadists allied with al Qaeda. Ansar Jerusalem blamed Jews for producing the film, even though there was no Jewish involvement in its production. And, in reality, Ansar Jerusalem did not need the video justify its attacks as it struck Israel both before and long after the video became widely known.

On January 11, 2013, Ansar Jerusalem released a video in which it once again claimed that the attack in Israel was in response to *Innocence of Muslims*. The group cited Osama bin Laden as saying, “If the freedom of your expression has no limit, then your chests should bear the freedom of our actions.”⁵¹ This quote, or a similar one, was used by jihadists with known al Qaeda ties to justify the protest-turned-assault on the U.S. Embassy in Cairo on September 11, 2012.⁵² Indeed, the Ansar Jerusalem video contains

⁴⁷ SITE Intelligence Group, “Ansar Jerusalem Releases Video of Bombing Arish-Ashkelon Pipeline,” July 24, 2012. Like other Ansar Jerusalem messages, the video was released on al Qaeda’s Shumukh al-Islam forum.

⁴⁸ Bill Roggio, “Ansar Jerusalem claims attack on Israeli troops in the Sinai,” *The Long War Journal*, September 23, 2012. (http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/09/ansar_jerusalem_clai.php)

⁴⁹ “Egypt jihadi groups say behind deadly Israeli border attack,” *Al-Masry Al-Youm Online*, September 23, 2012.

⁵⁰ See: Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda Lives,” *The Weekly Standard*, December 24, 2012. (http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/al-qaeda-lives_666594.html)

⁵¹ SITE Intelligence Group, “Ansar Jerusalem Releases Video on 9/2012 Cross-Border Attack,” January 14, 2013.

⁵² Thomas Joscelyn, “CIA Warned of ‘Jihadist’ Threat to Cairo Embassy,” *The Weekly Standard*, May 15, 2013. (http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/cia-warned-jihadist-threat-cairo-embassy_724570.html)

footage from that pro-al Qaeda event. The video also contains an audio clip of Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the former leader of al Qaeda in Iraq who was killed in 2006.⁵³

Threatened retaliation for Israel's killing of two top terrorists in Gaza

On October 15, 2012, Ansar Jerusalem threatened retaliation against Israel for the killing of two jihadist leaders, Hisham al Saedni (a.k.a. Abu al Walid al Maqdisi) and Ashraf Sabah (a.k.a. Abu al Bara'a al Maqdisi). Al Saedni, an Egyptian, was the founder and leader of the Tawhid and Jihad Group, which is, at a minimum, al Qaeda-inspired.

Al Saedni reportedly fought with al Qaeda in Iraq. Although he was based in Gaza and even detained for a time by Hamas, the Israeli military accused al Saedni of planning operations from inside the Sinai. His biography shows, therefore, that al Saedni had been a transnational terrorist throughout his career and it is possible that he cooperated with Ansar Jerusalem. There are numerous other accounts pointing to collusion between Ansar Jerusalem and terrorists based in, or traveling to, Gaza.⁵⁴

It is possible that the Tawhid and Jihad Group is more than merely inspired by al Qaeda as well. Ayman al Zawahiri released a eulogy for al Saedni, praising him as “our brother.” Zawahiri also cited al Qaeda’s guidelines, which was named as a “Document for Supporting Islam,” and said that al Qaeda had called on Muslims “to unite under the word Tawhid.” Thus, Zawahiri implicitly connected al Saedni and his group to al Qaeda’s plans. Indeed, al Saedni was working to unite jihadist groups in Gaza under one banner. The praise for al Saedni from both al Qaeda and Ansar Jerusalem is yet another example of how the two count the same terrorists among their “brothers.” Both al Saedni and Sabah were reportedly leaders in the Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem as well.

Assassination attempt on Egyptian Interior Minister

Ansar Jerusalem has claimed responsibility for the September 5, 2013 assassination attempt on Egyptian Interior Minister Mohammed Ibrahim. On October 26, 2013, the group released a video dedicated to the suicide bomber responsible for the operation, a

⁵³ SITE Intelligence Group, January 14, 2013.

⁵⁴ Just recently, Israeli forces claimed to have killed a terrorist in the Gaza Strip who had “cooperated” with Ansar Jerusalem. See: Elinor Levy, “IAF strikes Gaza; Israel says member of Global Jihad wounded,” ynetnews.com, February 9, 2014. (<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4486138,00.html>) Egyptian security officials have also claimed that Ansar Jerusalem members have escaped security operations in the Sinai by fleeing to Gaza. See: “Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis members escape to Gaza, Marsa Matrouh,” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, September 12, 2013. (<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/ansar-bayt-al-maqdis-members-escape-gaza-marsa-matrouh>)

former major in the Egyptian army named Walid Badr. The video is framed by an audio clip from Ayman al Zawahiri at the beginning and a video clip of Zawahiri at the end.⁵⁵ In the closing scene Zawahiri says that the conflict in Egypt is “a struggle between political parties, but a struggle between Crusaders and Zionists on one side and Islam on the other side.”⁵⁶

Badr’s story demonstrates how Ansar Jerusalem is connected to the al Qaeda-led global jihadist network. The video by Ansar Jerusalem celebrating his “martyrdom” says he traveled to Afghanistan and participated “with his brothers in deterring the Crusader campaign against the proud land of Khorasan.” This is a reference to the America-led campaign in Afghanistan that began in late 2001. Badr attempted to fight in Iraq as well, but he “was arrested in Iran, where he was put in prison for about a year,” before he returned to Egypt. At some point, he traveled to Syria to fight Bashar al Assad’s regime, only to return to Egypt once again and become a suicide bomber.⁵⁷ This sequence of events shows that Badr managed to fight in three different theaters (Afghanistan, Syria and Egypt), making him a global jihadist.

There are still additional details in Badr’s story that connect him and Ansar Jerusalem to the al Qaeda network. Egyptian officials alleged that he was trained by the Muhammad Jamal Network in one of its Libyan camps.⁵⁸ And, in late October 2013, Egyptian security sources arrested Nabil al Maghraby, whom they described simply as “a key al Qaeda operative.”⁵⁹ Al Maghraby is one of the old school jihadists let out of prison in the wake of the Egyptian revolution. He had been imprisoned for the 1981 assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, but was freed by a presidential pardon from Mohamed Morsi in 2012. Egyptian authorities described al Maghraby as “a close associate” of Badr.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.

⁵⁵ SITE Intelligence Group, “Ansar Jerusalem Releases Video on Assassination Attempt on Egyptian Interior Minister,” October 27, 2013. Also included in the video is a clip of a spokesman from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (ISIS), which was then a branch of al Qaeda but has since been disowned by al Qaeda’s senior leadership.

⁵⁶ Liam Stack and Robert Mackey, “Egyptian Jihadists Cite Zawahiri in Video Claiming Responsibility for Cairo Attack,” *The New York Times*, *The Lede* blog, October 29, 2013. (http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/29/egyptian-jihadists-cite-zawahiri-in-video-claiming-responsibility-for-cairo-attack/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0)

⁵⁷ SITE Intelligence Group, October 27, 2013.

⁵⁸ “Jihadists see Sinai as ‘next frontier’ in war against U.S., Israel,” UPI, October 30, 2013. (http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2013/10/30/Jihadists-see-Sinai-as-next-frontier-in-war-against-US-Israel/UPI-44931383144187/)

⁵⁹ “Egypt arrests al Qaeda militant previously jailed for Sadat murder,” *Reuters*, October 29, 2013. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/29/us-egypt-militants-idUSBRE99S0WP20131029>)