

Congressional Testimony

The Paris Attacks: A Strategic Shift by ISIS?

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, it is an honor to appear before you to discuss the implications of the Paris attacks, and the broader questions that they raise about U.S. policy toward Syria.

In the immediate wake of the terrorist attack that brought down a Metrojet plane in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and the recent urban warfare-style attacks in Paris, many analysts concluded that these events marked a significant strategic shift on the part of the Islamic State (referred to hereafter as ISIS).¹ The most prominent articulation of the argument that ISIS had undertaken a strategic shift held that until the most recent wave of attacks, ISIS focused almost exclusively on establishing a caliphate and expanding the boundaries of its state in Syria, Iraq, and the surrounding regions. Thus, this view held that unlike al-Qaeda, which had long focused on planning terrorist attacks against the "far enemy" (the United States and other Western countries), ISIS confined its operations outside of its immediate region to inspiring attacks by sympathizers and adherents living in the West.

The view that ISIS has undertaken a major shift in its use of terrorist attacks abroad is fundamentally flawed. Rather than marking a strategic shift by ISIS, the Paris and Sinai attacks represent the culmination of the group's long-standing ambitions to carry out mass-casualty, high-profile attacks in Western states. For over a year, ISIS's top propagandists have made clear the group's intentions to strike the West. And the group has tried to make good on its threats: Since the beginning of 2015, ISIS operatives in Syria and Iraq have been involved in planning several high-profile plots against Western targets even prior to the most recent attacks.

ISIS's Attacks on the "Far Enemy": Not a Strategic Shift

A close reading of ISIS's propaganda reveals its longstanding intentions to cause mass destruction in the West. In January 2015, ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani released a statement praising ISIS sympathizers for carrying out plots in Australia, Belgium, Canada, and France, and called on Muslims to use any weapon available to inflict damage on the "crusaders."² After encouraging more lone wolf attacks in the West, Adnani issued a more ominous threat, saying that "what lies ahead will be worse—with Allah's permission—and more bitter, for you haven't seen anything from us just yet." While Adnani's statement divulged little about ISIS's operational plans, it suggested that the group harbored grander ambitions for striking the West.

¹ The view that the attacks represented a strategic shift for ISIS is articulated in, for example, Eric Schmitt and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Strategy Shift for ISIS: Inflicting Terror in Distant Lands," *New York Times*, November 14, 2015.

Note that this section of my testimony was adapted from an article written by Nathaniel Barr and Bridget Moreng, analysts at my consulting firm Valens Global. See Nathaniel Barr and Bridget Moreng, "Preventing the Next Attack," *Foreign Affairs*, November 23, 2015. Barr and Moreng helped to produce the first draft of this testimony. Since they had written an article that directly—and comprehensively—addressed one of the key questions posed in this hearing just before I was asked to testify, we decided not to reinvent the wheel, but rather to take the somewhat unconventional step of adapting material written by other authors than myself (obviously, with their explicit permission).

² Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, "Say, 'Die in Your Rage!,'" January 26, 2015, available at <https://pietervanostaeyen.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/al-adnani-say-die-in-your-rage.pdf>.

Statements in *Dabiq*, ISIS's English-language online magazine, also provide a window into the organization's intentions toward the West. In the fourth issue (released October 2014), ISIS noted that it is "very important that attacks take place in every country that has entered into the alliance against the Islamic State, especially the US, UK, France, Australia, and Germany."³ This declaration, unlike Adnani's, was unambiguous.

If any further proof of ISIS's global terrorist aspirations is needed, the group provided it in the eighth issue of *Dabiq*, released in March 2015. In an article bearing the byline of John Cantlie, a British hostage and a gruesomely conscripted ISIS propagandist, a provocative question was posed: "How many more Westerners will die? The way things are going at the moment, the answer is many. France, Belgium, Denmark, Australia, and Canada, have all been the targets of mujahidin attacks over the last three months alone, and as more Islamic fighters ... pledge allegiance to the Islamic State, such attacks will surely only become more numerous and better-executed."⁴

Though ISIS has frequently threatened to attack the West, many analysts have long argued that the group's rhetoric did not match its actual ambitions. Some experts reasoned that the organization's central leadership was concentrating on fighting local regimes and non-state Shiite forces, and was thus unwilling to invest serious resources in plotting complex attacks against the West. According to this view, ISIS instead relied heavily on its social media capabilities to inspire sympathizers to carry out opportunistic attacks in the West. If its Western strategy were based primarily on lone wolf attacks, ISIS's threat to the homeland would be manageable—and, most likely, minimal. As noted by Juliette Kayyem, former Assistant Secretary for Intergovernmental Affairs in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security: "We can withstand random guys with low-level attacks and minimal consequences."⁵

But ISIS also possessed grander and deadlier ambitions. The group's efforts to inspire lone wolf attacks did not preclude it from pursuing a parallel track of planning large-scale operations. Indeed, the preoccupation that previously existed with the lone wolf phenomenon caused analysts to underestimate the threat of an ISIS-directed terrorist attack against the West.

ISIS's external operations capabilities have significantly evolved since the group declared its caliphate in June 2014. In the early months of the caliphate, the group's external operations were relatively limited, and lone wolves were indeed the primary means through which ISIS could strike the West. But by early 2015, ISIS had scaled up its external operations capabilities, thanks in large part to the involvement of several key European ISIS fighters, including the British nationals Reyaad Khan and Junaid Hussain (the latter of whom was linked to several plots in the United Kingdom and United States, including the May 2015 shooting at a Garland, Texas venue hosting a "Draw Muhammad" contest).⁶ Another key player was Salim Benghalem, a French

³ "Reflections on the Final Crusade," *Dabiq*, issue 4, September/October 2014, p. 44.

⁴ John Cantlie, "Paradigm Shift," *Dabiq*, issue 8, March/April 2015, p. 64.

⁵ Peter Baker and Eric Schmitt, "Paris Terror Attacks May Prompt More Aggressive U.S. Strategy on ISIS," *New York Times*, November 14, 2015.

⁶ Elliott C. McLaughlin, "ISIS Jihadi Linked to Garland Attack has Long History as Hacker," CNN, May 7, 2015.

jihadi described as the commander of ISIS's French foreign fighter network, whom Western intelligence agencies have implicated in the recent Paris attacks.⁷

The group soon began plotting high-profile attacks on Europe. The first concrete sign of ISIS's European ambitions came just days after the notorious January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attack, when Belgian police killed two militants and arrested another in a raid in the town of Verviers.⁸ Investigations revealed that all three men had fought with ISIS in Syria, and were using a house in the town to store weapons and build explosives.⁹ Belgian officials warned that the cell was preparing for a major attack in their country.¹⁰ They also learned that the Verviers cell was in contact with Belgian ISIS member Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who is believed to have served as the key intermediary between ISIS's senior leadership and the Verviers cell, and also played a central role in the Paris attacks.¹¹

In an interview published in *Dabiq* in February 2015, Abaaoud revealed that he and two other Belgian ISIS members had traveled from Syria to Belgium to “terrorize the crusaders waging war against the Muslims.”¹² Abaaoud explained that his foreign fighter cell had managed to “obtain weapons and set up a safe house while [they] planned operations against the crusaders.” Though the Verviers plot was a clear indication of ISIS's ambitions to strike the West, it went largely unnoticed amid the tumult that followed the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.

In the months between the Verviers plot and the Russian plane crash, several more plots demonstrated the geographic reach—though not necessarily the competence—of ISIS's external operations. In April 2015, several teenagers were arrested in Melbourne, Australia in police described as a “major counterterrorism operation.”¹³ Australian authorities later revealed that the Melbourne cell had planned a gruesome attack on Anzac Day (Australia and New Zealand Army Corps Day), in which the plotters would run over a police officer, behead him, and use his weapon to carry out a shooting spree in Melbourne.¹⁴ Investigators concluded that the plot's ringleaders had been in contact with Australian ISIS member Neil Prakash, who had attended Melbourne's al-Furqan center (a mosque that the Melbourne operatives had also frequented) before he left for Syria.¹⁵ Prakash reportedly maintained relationships with al-Furqan attendees after he arrived in Syria, directing them to carry out domestic attacks.¹⁶

⁷ Shane Harris, “The Hunt for ISIS' French Chief ‘Executioner,’” *Daily Beast*, November 14, 2015.

⁸ “Belgian Anti-Terror Raid in Verviers Leaves Two Dead,” BBC, January 16, 2015.

⁹ Paul Cruickshank, “Inside the ISIS Plot to Attack the Heart of Europe,” CNN, February 13, 2015.

¹⁰ Andrew Higgins and Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, “An ISIS Militant From Belgium Whose Own Family Wanted Him Dead,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2015.

¹¹ Aurelien Breeden, Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura and Katrin Benhold, “Call to Arms in France Amid Hunt for Belgian Suspect in Paris Attacks,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2015.

¹² The interview with Abdelhamid Abaaoud can be found in “Interview with Abu Umar al-Baljiki,” *Dabiq*, issue 7, February 2015, p. 72.

¹³ Ralph Ellis and Ben Brumfield, “Australian Teens Held after ‘ISIS-inspired’ Plot Foiled,” CNN, April 19, 2015.

¹⁴ David Wroe, “Anzac Day Terrorism Plot Payback for Haider Shooting,” *The Age* (Australia), April 20, 2015.

¹⁵ David Wroe, “Terror Plot: Teenagers Linked to Top Islamic State Recruiter Abu Khalid al-Kambodi,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 20, 2015.

¹⁶ Paul Maley and Mark Schliebs, “Alleged Anzac Day Plotters Were Groomed From Frontline,” *The Australian*, April 20, 2015.

Prakash was not the only ISIS foreign fighter with aspirations to strike his homeland. As previously mentioned, Junaid Hussain, a British citizen, was involved in several plots against the United Kingdom. Hussain, who was killed by a U.S. air strike in August 2015, was also involved in organizing what could have been a major attack in the United States. In the weeks prior to the Fourth of July holiday, the FBI publicly voiced concerns about an increase in chatter related to an ISIS attack. At least ten U.S. citizens were arrested in the lead-up to the July 4 weekend, and intelligence officials later revealed that strikes had been planned across the country, with ISIS recruiters based in Syria identifying potential operatives in the United States, and encouraging them to strike around the holiday weekend.¹⁷

After months of failed and foiled plots against Western targets, a confluence of factors enabled ISIS to succeed in Paris. Luck was certainly involved, as is the case for any successful terrorist attack. However, luck typically favors terrorists, especially if they make consistent efforts. More important than luck, however, was the ability of ISIS operatives to learn from their mistakes and to exploit holes in European security and intelligence capabilities. The Paris attacks provided definitive proof that European intelligence agencies are overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge posed by foreign fighters and domestic radicals. At least five of the operatives involved in the Paris attack had traveled to Syria to fight for ISIS. Abaaoud, the plot's ringleader, managed to move back and forth between Europe and Syria even after he was implicated in the Verviers plot, and was thus a highly wanted man.¹⁸

When viewed against the backdrop of nearly a year's worth of ISIS-directed plots against Western targets, the Paris and Sinai attacks seem less like a shift and more an indication of strategic continuity. These two attacks mark a shift not in intention but in outcome. However, if ISIS continues to lose ground in Syria and Iraq—as it has done lately—it may undertake a strategic shift of another variety, investing more resources in terrorist attacks to maintain its image of victory and momentum.

ISIS has several goals in attacking the West. There is no question its competition with al-Qaeda for supremacy over the global jihadist movement has factored into ISIS's strategic calculus. By carrying out high-profile attacks against Western targets, ISIS can increase its appeal to jihadist foot soldiers and impatient affiliates who may be tiring of al-Qaeda's strategic patience and pragmatism. In the days following the Paris attacks, ISIS released at least two videos directed at supporters of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, both of which highlighted ISIS's attacks as a reason that AQAP members should join its ranks. In considering U.S. policy toward Syria, it is important to understand not only ISIS's posture but also al-Qaeda's, as both are key players in that theater.

Al-Qaeda's Rebranding Campaign

¹⁷ Pamela Brown and Jim Sciutto, "U.S. Law Enforcement Thwarted Plots Timed to July 4," CNN, July 10, 2015.

¹⁸ Andrew Higgins and Kimiko De Freytas-Tamura, "Paris Attacks Suspect Killed in Shootout Had Plotted Terror For 11 Months," *New York Times*, November 19, 2015.

The Paris and Sinai attacks provide yet another example of how ISIS's rise has challenged al-Qaeda's position as the standard-bearer of the jihadist community. But ISIS's emergence and headline-grabbing behavior has also presented al-Qaeda with a strategic opportunity. For years, al-Qaeda has sought to remake its image, hoping to rid itself of the reputation for brutality it earned in large part through the excesses of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)—the group that would later rechristen itself as ISIS. Thanks to two parallel developments—ISIS's emergence and rising Sunni–Shia sectarian tensions in the Middle East—al-Qaeda's rebranding campaign has been invigorated. Al-Qaeda has taken on the image of a more reasonable, and perhaps controllable, alternative to ISIS. And as the rivalry between Iran and Sunni states rages, including proxy wars in Syria and Yemen, al-Qaeda can present itself as a bulwark against Iranian expansion.

Al-Qaeda's belief that it needed to remake its image dates back to the group's campaign in Iraq in the mid-2000s. AQI ascended rapidly to the fore of the global jihadist movement, then burnt out just as quickly, scorching al-Qaeda's image as well. AQI's early success during the U.S. occupation derived in part from its ability to spark sectarian strife through attacks into Shia areas: AQI correctly believed that it could interject itself into a sectarian civil war by presenting itself as the Sunnis' protector. Yet even while it offered protection from the Shia reprisals that it provoked, the group oppressed those same Sunnis by imposing an alien form of religious law through its reign of terror in Anbar province. An intelligence assessment written in August 2006 described AQI as the “dominant organization of influence” in Anbar.¹⁹

AQI's proclivity for brutality and indiscriminate violence raised concerns within al-Qaeda's senior leadership (AQSL), which feared that AQI would alienate Iraqis. Members of AQSL sent at least two letters—from then-deputy emir Ayman al-Zawahiri and *masul aqalim* (head of regions) Atiyah Abd al-Rahman—to AQI's emir Abu Musab al-Zarqawi exhorting the hotheaded Jordanian to moderate his approach. Zawahiri reprimanded Zarqawi for his videotaped beheadings of victims, warning the former street thug not to “be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the shaykh of the slaughterers.”²⁰ Both Zawahiri and Atiyah emphasized the need to win over the population, with Atiyah instructing him to gain Iraqis' support in a gradualist manner by “lauding them for the good they do, and being quiet about their shortcomings.”²¹

The objections offered by Zawahiri and Atiyah were strategic rather than moral. Indeed, Zawahiri noted that rather than beheading AQI's prisoners, “we can kill the captives by bullet.” The preeminence of strategic over moral concerns can be discerned also in al-Qaeda's current rebranding efforts, where rather than avoiding atrocities, al-Qaeda appears more concerned with keeping them off-camera and minimizing negative attention.

¹⁹ Col. Peter Devlin, “State of the Insurgency in al-Anbar,” intelligence assessment, August 17, 2006, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/02/AR2007020201197.html>.

²⁰ Ayman al-Zawahiri letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, July 2005, available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Zawahiris-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf>.

²¹ Atiyah Abd al-Rahman letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, late 2005, available at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Atiyahs-Letter-to-Zarqawi-Translation.pdf>.

Zarqawi disregarded these AQSL leaders' instructions, and after a period of repression, the Sunni population in Anbar rebelled in an uprising known as the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement. The Sahwa soon spread to other provinces and, along with a "surge" in U.S. troops and American shift to population-centric counterinsurgency, contributed to AQI's downfall.

The damage done by AQI and its successor organizations was so severe that in January 2011 Adam Gadahn, an American-born al-Qaeda media strategist, wrote a letter to Osama bin Laden arguing that al-Qaeda should cut ties with its Iraqi branch. Gadahn contended that if al-Qaeda did not expel AQI, al-Qaeda's "reputation will be damaged more and more as a result of the acts and statements of" that group, "which is labeled under our organization."²² There is no indication that Gadahn's suggestion was seriously entertained at the time.

AQI's failed experiment was a strategic inflection point for both al-Qaeda and the group that would become ISIS. AQSL viewed AQI's defeat as a repudiation of the group's approach, while it saw the U.S.'s population-centric approach as a success. Consequently, al-Qaeda began to adopt a more population-centric approach in its global operations in the wake of the Iraq war. ISIS, in contrast, viewed Zarqawi as a founding father who was above reproach. ISIS's continued adherence to Zarqawi's approach would drive tensions with its parent organization and contribute to its eventual expulsion from al-Qaeda.

Perhaps the clearest evidence that al-Qaeda had been making rebranding efforts before ISIS's rise can be found in a letter that bin Laden wrote to Atiyah in May 2010.²³ Bin Laden lamented the damage that affiliates had done to al-Qaeda's image, noting that indiscriminate violence had "led to the loss of the Muslims' sympathetic approach towards the mujahedin." Bin Laden proposed commencing a "new phase" in al-Qaeda's operations that would "regain the trust of a large portion of those who had lost their trust." Bin Laden emphasized minimizing Muslim casualties. He urged a new media strategy, ordering media operatives to avoid "everything that would have a negative impact on the perception of the nation towards the mujahedin."

AQSL even considered changing the organization's name. In a letter found in Abbottabad, an unidentified official remarked that the group's name had become dissociated from Islam, allowing Western states to claim that their war was with al-Qaeda and not the broader Muslim community.²⁴ The official asserted that al-Qaeda (*the base* in Arabic) had become associated solely with a "military base," without any "reference to our broader mission to unify the nation." The official proposed several alternative names that he believed would have greater resonance with the global Muslim community.

²² Adam Gadahn, letter to unknown recipient, January 2011, SOCOM-2012-0000004-HT, available at <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/SOCOM-2012-0000004-Trans.pdf>.

²³ Letter from Osama bin Laden to Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, SOCOM-2012-00000019, May 2010, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/05/03/Foreign/Graphics/osama-bin-laden-documents-combined.pdf>.

²⁴ Letter from unknown al-Qaeda official, SOCOM-2012-0000009, date unknown, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/05/03/Foreign/Graphics/osama-bin-laden-documents-combined.pdf>.

The Arab Spring was another watershed moment in al-Qaeda's rebranding campaign. With the fall of autocratic regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, al-Qaeda perceived an opportunity to expand into new theaters and introduce itself to populations that had little experience with al-Qaeda's ideology and worldview. In these post-revolutionary environments, al-Qaeda adopted a population-centric approach that included cooperation with local actors, gradual introduction of *sharia* law, and expansion through popular front groups, a tactic intended to avoid alienating or intimidating local populations for whom the al-Qaeda brand had negative connotations. The group also placed a premium on *dawa* (evangelism), with the goal of introducing local populations to the salafi jihadist methodology in a relatively unthreatening manner.

In September 2013, Zawahiri released a document entitled "General Guidelines for Jihad" that made public al-Qaeda's new, population-centric approach.²⁵ Zawahiri instructed affiliates to avoid conflict with Middle Eastern governments when possible, asserting that conflict with local regimes would distract from efforts to build bases of support. Zawahiri also instructed affiliates to minimize violent conflict with Shias and non-Muslims in order to prevent local uprisings, and to abstain from attacks that could result in Muslim civilian casualties. A purportedly leaked letter that Zawahiri wrote to IS's caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in September 2013 notes that the General Guidelines were distributed to all of al-Qaeda's affiliates for review prior to their publication to allow for comments and objections, thus suggesting that the document represents the unified policies of al-Qaeda as a whole.

Early efforts to change al-Qaeda's image yielded mixed results, as some affiliates executed the rebranding strategy poorly or inconsistently. However, al-Qaeda's rebranding campaign has benefitted from ISIS's emergence. While al-Qaeda's missteps prior to ISIS's rise received considerable media scrutiny (including in Mali and Yemen), the group's use of violence has been eclipsed by ISIS's unchecked atrocities. ISIS's beheadings, immolations, and mass executions have allowed al-Qaeda to change its image in a way that would have been unthinkable when the "Arab Spring" revolutions first gripped the region in 2011.

As part of its rebranding initiative, al-Qaeda has launched a full-blown media campaign in recent months, deploying top officials to give interviews with mainstream media outlets. These officials downplay the threat the group poses to the West, and sometimes even encourage the perception of al-Qaeda's weakness. One of the first concrete signs of this media offensive came in early 2015, when Zawahiri issued a directive to Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the emir of al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, ordering Julani to improve Nusra's ties with the Syrian population and other rebel groups.²⁶ Since then, Syria has become a primary testing ground for al-Qaeda's rebranding strategy. In March 2015, Al Jazeera aired an interview with Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir, an Australian cleric who became one of Nusra's top religious officials. Muhajir contrasted Nusra with ISIS, stating that Nusra's primary goal was to topple Assad and "restore the right of the

²⁵ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for Jihad," September 2013, available at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf>.

²⁶ Charles Lister, "An Internal Struggle: Al-Qaeda's Syrian Affiliate Is Grappling With Its Identity," *Huffington Post*, May 31, 2015.

Muslim people to choose their leaders independently.”²⁷ His emphasis on popular representation and claim that Nusra focused on national objectives would become hallmarks of Nusra’s media campaign.

After Muhajir’s interview, Nusra granted Al Jazeera a conversation with Julani. In May 2015, Nusra’s emir sat for a 47-minute interview in which he too contrasted Nusra’s approach with ISIS’s extremism.²⁸ Julani asserted that Nusra’s sole goal was to topple the Assad regime. He hedged on the question of whether Nusra would establish an Islamic state once Assad was removed, claiming that all rebel groups would be consulted. Julani adopted a comparatively tolerant stance toward religious minorities, promising that Nusra would neither target Druze nor Alawites. (Julani did say that Alawites would have to renounce elements of their faith that contradicted Islam, and Al Jazeera’s English-language reporting on the interview charitably omitted these ominous statements.)²⁹

Al-Qaeda ideologues have also been involved in rebranding efforts. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada, two of al-Qaeda’s most prominent religious figures, gave an in-depth interview to the U.K.’s *Guardian* for an article published in June 2015.³⁰ Both Abu Qatada and Maqdisi slammed ISIS, while claiming that the group’s emergence had caused al-Qaeda’s organization to “collapse.” The two clerics’ statements look different when examined in the context of al-Qaeda’s rebranding campaign: their portrayal of al-Qaeda as a dying organization fits the group’s strategy of understating its strength in order to both avoid drawing the attention of Western militaries and alleviate Gulf states’ fears.

Nusra has buttressed this media offensive by adopting a more collaborative approach toward other Syrian rebel factions. In March 2015, Nusra and several other prominent rebel groups, including the hardline salafi group Ahrar al-Sham, announced the establishment of a new coalition, Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest).³¹ Since then, Nusra and its allies have made considerable gains in Idlib province. Nusra has exported this collaborative model to other provinces, and has signaled that it is open to sharing power with other organizations: After Jaysh al-Fatah captured Idlib city, Julani stated that Nusra would not “strive to rule the city or to monopolize it without others.”³² (Consistent with the uneven implementation of al-Qaeda’s rebranding campaign—and the general

²⁷ “People & Power—Western Jihadis in Syria,” Al Jazeera English, March 4, 2015, video available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OD_A3CHzvjQ.

²⁸ For video of Al Jazeera’s Arabic-language interview with Julani, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QBuvwsg0Gc>.

²⁹ “Nusra Front Leader: We Will Not Target Syria’s Alawites,” Al Jazeera, May 27, 2015. In reality, Nusra’s policies toward the Druze in areas it controls have been genocidal. It has generally employed “softer” genocidal policies (forced renunciation of the Druze faith and religious reeducation) rather than IS’s mass executions, but that does not make Nusra’s intent to destroy these religious minorities any less real. See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Druze Clues: Al-Nusra’s Rebranding and What It Means for Syria,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 6, 2015.

³⁰ Shiv Malik, Ali Younes, Spencer Ackerman and Mustafa Khalili, “How Isis Crippled Al-Qaida,” *Guardian* (U.K.), June 10, 2015.

³¹ Thomas Joscelyn, “Al-Qaeda and Allies Form Coalition to Battle Syrian Regime in Idlib,” *Long War Journal*, March 24, 2015.

³² “Al-Qaeda in Syria Signals Sharia Law for Captured City,” Reuters, April 1, 2015.

tension between adopting a moderate face but remaining brutal in practice—some of Nusra’s actions have departed from its goal of appearing more moderate to the world.)

Al-Qaeda is also implementing its rebranding strategy in Yemen, where the conflict between Iranian-backed Houthis and a Saudi-led military coalition, as well as ISIS’s emergence, have enabled al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to recast itself as a force that can counter both the Houthis and ISIS. AQAP sometimes fights the Houthis alongside the Saudi-led coalition, as it did in the summer of 2015 in the coastal city of Aden.³³ At the same time, AQAP has engaged in a careful balancing act where it carries out attacks against Houthi militants while distancing itself from ISIS’s terrorist operations against Houthi civilians.³⁴

AQAP has also capitalized on the anarchic conditions in Yemen to carve out territory for itself, and has exhibited its new gradualist approach to governance. In April 2015, AQAP seized the city of Mukalla, the capital of Hadramawt province. The group refrained from hoisting jihadist banners, and even issued a statement refuting rumors that it would ban music and shorts for men.³⁵ AQAP established an umbrella group to rule Mukalla known as the Sons of Hadramawt, a name intended to emphasize local roots, and has generally avoided measures that could alienate the local population. AQAP will likely export this model of governance to other provinces as it continues to exploit Yemen’s chaotic situation.

Al-Qaeda’s rebranding efforts have already found some traction with local populations and Sunni states, and even some Western analysts. In both Syria and Yemen, al-Qaeda affiliates have received support from, or fought alongside, Sunni states. The Jaysh al-Fatah coalition in Syria has become a favorite aid recipient for Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, AQAP has benefitted from the Saudi-led coalition’s preoccupation with the Houthi and Iranian threats. Mukalla residents say the tribes that run the city receive Saudi aid, some of which certainly reaches AQAP.³⁶ Saudi Arabia has refrained from carrying out air strikes against AQAP strongholds, and has turned a blind eye to AQAP developing a foothold in other parts of southern Yemen.³⁷ Prince Faisal bin Saud bin Abdulmohsen, a scholar at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, explained the Saudis’ divergent approach toward al-Qaeda and ISIS: “At this point we must really differentiate between fanaticism and outright monstrosity.”³⁸

Though al-Qaeda’s rebranding campaign poses definite risks for the organization, analysts seem to be underestimating al-Qaeda’s strategic capacity to adapt and thrive in part due to ISIS’s

³³ Maria Abi-Habib and Mohamed al-Kibsi, “Al-Qaeda Fights on Same Side as Saudi-Backed Militias in Yemen,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 16, 2015.

³⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, “Why AQAP Quickly Denied Any Connection to Mosque Attacks,” *Long War Journal*, March 20, 2015.

³⁵ Lee Keath and Maggie Michael, “In the Face of IS Successes, al-Qaeda Adapts, Grows Stronger,” Associated Press, May 4, 2015.

³⁶ Maria Abi-Habib and Mohammed al-Kibsi, “Al-Qaeda Fights on Same Side as Saudi-Backed Militias in Yemen,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 16, 2015.

³⁷ Rene Slama, “Saudis Turn a Blind Eye as Qaeda Gains Ground in Yemen,” *Agence France Presse*, August 24, 2015.

³⁸ Yaroslav Trofimov, “To U.S. Allies, al-Qaeda Affiliate in Syria Becomes the Lesser Evil,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2015.

dominance over the headlines. Yet al-Qaeda's rebranding campaign leaves it well positioned to exploit political conditions in the Middle East for years to come.

Empowering Jabhat al-Nusra

In fact, recent reporting makes it seem that the U.S.'s policy of supporting "moderate" Syrian rebel factions is emboldening and empowering Jabhat al-Nusra. As part of the U.S.'s strategy to weaken Bashar al-Assad, the CIA has provided training and support, including weapons, ammunition and funds, to a variety of rebel factions fighting the regime. While the CIA has vetted the groups that receive lethal aid, some CIA-backed groups have gone on to collaborate with Nusra and the Jaysh al-Fatah coalition. This collaboration is not necessarily due to these groups being extremist, but may reflect the ground realities in Syria, where moderate factions have little choice but to play by the rules set by Nusra and other extremist factions that dominate the battlefield. But whether CIA-backed groups' cooperation with Nusra is borne out of necessity or choice, the end result is that weapons provided by the CIA are being put to use in Nusra-led offensives, allowing Nusra to expand its areas of control, and its influence, in northern Syria.

The CIA program has received relatively little media and congressional attention thus far, but clearly deserves greater scrutiny. Launched in 2013, the program was primarily intended as a means to increase military pressure on the Assad regime. Even with the U.S. strictly regulating arms flows to rebel factions, Nusra has gained access to weapons or functioned as a cobelligerent with U.S.-backed groups. In December 2014, Nusra and allied groups seized control of a Syrian military base in Idlib province, with CIA-backed rebel factions acknowledging that they had used TOW missiles, provided by the CIA, in the Nusra-led offensive. Rebel commanders claimed they had been forced by Nusra to use the TOW anti-tank missiles in the operation, and that Nusra had allowed the CIA-backed groups to retain control of the TOW missiles so that they could continue to receive support from the CIA in the future.³⁹ This incident provided one clear-cut example of how Nusra coerces weaker rebel factions, including CIA-backed groups, into supporting its efforts.

This trend continued into 2015, with CIA-backed rebel factions providing firepower as Nusra and allied groups made sweeping gains across northern Syria. In the spring of 2015, the Jaysh al-Fatah coalition seized broad swaths of territory in Idlib and Hama provinces, driving back regime forces and threatening the Assad regime's stronghold in Latakia Province. CIA-backed forces played an important, if little recognized, role in the offensive:

- One analyst remarked that the alacrity with which Nusra and aligned factions acquired territory in Idlib was due to two factors: suicide bombers and U.S.-provided TOW missiles.⁴⁰

³⁹ Anne Barnard, "As Syria's Revolution Sputters, a Chaotic Stalemate," *New York Times*, December 28, 2014. Barnard writes: "One commander of a group that received antitank missiles said that some F.S.A. fighters were forced to operate them in the battle on behalf of the Nusra Front, which had captured them from American-backed groups—a turn of events that he worried would lead the United States to cut off support."

⁴⁰ Hassan Hassan, "Syria's Revitalized Rebels Make Big Gains in Assad's Heartland," *Foreign Policy*, April 28, 2015.

- Fursan ul-Haq and Division 13, two CIA-backed groups that have received lethal aid, including TOW missiles, have both publicly acknowledged that they operated alongside Nusra.⁴¹
- A Fursan ul-Haq commander, noting that TOW missiles had helped to repel Syrian tanks in Idlib, remarked: “There is something misunderstood by world powers: We have to work with Nusra Front and other groups to fight the regime and Daesh.”⁴²
- A spokesperson for Suquor al-Ghab, a CIA-backed group based in Hama Province that has received TOW missiles, defended his group’s collaboration with Nusra, noting: “We work with all factions when there are attacks on the regime, either through direct cooperation or just coordinating the movements of troops so we don't fire at each other.”⁴³
- In southern Syria, CIA-backed factions such as the Southern Front collaborated with Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham in a June offensive in the city of Deraa.⁴⁴

In piecing together the various reports about collaboration between CIA-backed rebel factions and Nusra, a clear picture emerges about the state of the battlefield in Syria. Nusra is one of the dominant players on the ground in northern Syria, and is thus able to dictate terms to smaller Syrian rebel factions, which have little choice but to accede to Nusra’s demands or risk annihilation. The experience of Harakat Hazm and the Syrian Revolutionary Front, two CIA-backed groups that were virtually obliterated by Nusra in late 2014, present a cautionary tale to other Syria rebel factions.⁴⁵ Left with few viable alternatives, CIA-backed factions have entered into a “marriage of necessity” with Nusra.⁴⁶ This uneasy alliance plays directly into the hands of Nusra, which gains access to TOW missiles and other U.S. weapons by incorporating CIA-backed groups into its military operations.

The Obama administration has acknowledged that some CIA-backed factions have coordinated their operations with Nusra and other jihadist factions, but has not taken steps to cut weapons flows to those groups.⁴⁷ To the contrary, the United States, alongside Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, is currently ramping up support for Syrian rebel factions in response to the Russian military intervention in Syria. With Russian jets pounding anti-Assad rebel groups, including several CIA-backed units, the U.S. and its Sunni allies have drastically increased the amount of lethal aid, particularly anti-tank missiles, being provided to Syrian rebel factions.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Dasha Afanasieva, “Shared Battlefield Goals Trump Ideology among Syria Rebels—for Now,” Reuters, April 30, 2015.

⁴² Nabih Bulos, “A 'Kaleidoscopic' Mix of Rebel Alliances on Syria's Battlefield,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 2015.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ruth Sherlock, “Syrian Rebels Armed and Trained by US Surrender to al-Qaeda,” *Telegraph*, November 2, 2014.

⁴⁶ Anne Barnard and Karam Shoumali, “U.S. Weaponry Is Turning Syria into Proxy War with Russia,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2015.

⁴⁷ Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, “U.S. Allies in Middle East Ramping Up Support for Rebel Forces in Syria,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 2015.

⁴⁸ Adam Entous, “U.S., Allies to Boost Aid to Syria Rebels,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2015.

This flow of weapons has had a noticeable impact on the battlefield. The commander of Fursan ul-Haq has noted that his forces had received a consistent supply of TOW missiles since the Russian campaign commenced.⁴⁹ Another rebel commander explained that when it came to TOW missiles, at this point “we can get as much as we need and whenever we need them.”⁵⁰ The decision to increase support to Syrian rebel factions comes at a steep, albeit unappreciated, price.

Navigating Problem Sets in Syria and Iraq

As legislators weigh options in the Syria campaign, they will have to address a complex web of tensions and rivalries. The anti-ISIS “coalition” is fissiparous and riven with internal conflicts involving both state and non-state actors. This testimony concludes with several key challenges that the U.S. should address as it seeks to degrade and destroy ISIS in its stronghold of Syria and Iraq:

1. *Addressing coordination between CIA-backed rebels and extremist factions in Syria.* As the previous section discusses, al-Qaeda affiliates and associated groups have directly benefited from the CIA’s program in Syria. This issue has not received sufficient attention from the Congress. Al-Qaeda is preparing itself for a multi-generational battle in the Middle East, and overlooking the group’s gains in Syria today will present far more significant challenges down the road. This issue is of particular importance as the U.S. is considering providing even more high-end weapons, such as MANPADs.
2. *The designation of Syrian jihadist factions.* A number of key jihadist factions and coalitions in Syria—including Ahrar al-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa, and Jaysh al-Fatah—are not designated as terrorist organizations. There may be pragmatic reasons not to designate them, but there are also some pragmatic considerations weighing in favor of designation. This is an issue worthy of legislative consideration.
3. *Countering ISIS’s “winner’s message.”* Though its recent attacks are a stunning success, ISIS has lost significant ground in Syria and Iraq, and has also experienced deep setbacks in Africa. Even many professionals who work on these issues are unaware of the group’s many losses, not to mention the general public. Given that ISIS recruits around its message of strength, and inspires both recruits and lone wolf attackers in this way, the U.S. should more effectively counter this specific aspect of the group’s messaging.⁵¹
4. *Overcoming infighting among Kurdish factions.* Many analysts have pointed to the Kurds as the ground force best positioned to reverse ISIS’s gains in both Syria and Iraq

⁴⁹ Bassem Mroue, “Despite Russian Strikes, Syrian Rebels Hold Ground,” Associated Press, November 6, 2015.

⁵⁰ Anne Barnard and Karam Shoumali, “U.S. Weaponry Is Turning Syria Into Proxy War With Russia,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2015.

⁵¹ I have discussed this in depth in a previous legislative testimony. See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “Jihad 2.0: Social Media in the Next Evolution of Terrorist Recruitment,” hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, May 7, 2015.

(a claim that is often disputed because of their difficulty making incursions into Arab areas). However, infighting between Kurdish political parties in Iraq has hindered security cooperation, disrupted economic growth, and threatened to upend stability in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁵² Even the operation to retake the strategic city of Sinjar in Iraq was delayed by backbiting and political squabbles between various Kurdish factions.⁵³ If Iraq's Kurds cannot resolve their internal squabbles, it will be nearly impossible for them to mobilize against a determined opponent such as ISIS.

5. *Reining in the Popular Mobilization Committees (PMC)*. With the Iraqi military still in a rebuilding stage, the Iraqi government has had to rely heavily on Iranian-backed PMCs to reverse ISIS's gains. PMC violence against Sunni populations fans the flames of sectarian hatred in Iraq, and sets the stage for an ongoing cycle of violence. ISIS's brutality is horrific, and is no way minimized by saying that we should pay attention the atrocities committed by the anti-ISIS forces as well.

⁵² Loveday Morris, "As Their Power Grows, Iraq's Kurds are Fighting Among Themselves," *Washington Post*, October 12, 2015. Morris's article notes:

In recent months, Iraq's northern Kurdish region has seen unprecedented political and economic independence as relations with Baghdad have frayed. But now the region's own unity appears on the brink of collapse, at a time when it is battling the Islamic State militant group. At the center of the crisis is a political standoff between the dominant Kurdish Democratic Party, or the KDP, and the rival Movement for Change, or Gorran. The KDP accuses Gorran of fomenting a week of violent protests in which KDP offices have been attacked and at least five people have been killed. Gorran, in turn, says the KDP has flouted the democratic process to stay in power.

⁵³ Denise Natali, "Lessons from the Liberation of Sinjar," *War on the Rocks*, November 25, 2015.