

THE THREAT OF NEW AL-QAEDA LEADERSHIP: THE CASE OF SYRIA'S ABU MOHAMMED AL-JOULANI

The death of al-Qaeda's general manager, Nasir al-Wahayshi, will likely disrupt al-Qaeda's global operations until he is replaced. It is likely that al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri will nominate his replacement according to traditional leadership patterns, choosing, for example, a former companion of Osama bin Laden. It is dangerous but plausible, however, that Zawahiri will seek to maximize the influence of newer al-Qaeda leaders who have proven their qualifications on the battlefield in order to shepherd the reemergence of a reinvigorated and highly resilient global al-Qaeda organization with a leadership structure that is embedded within local affiliates. One possible candidate for future al-Qaeda leadership is Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, the leader of al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. If al-Qaeda shifts away from its current reliance on a core cadre of eligible members for leadership, the U.S. must fundamentally adjust its current paradigm for limited counterterror operations in the effort to disrupt and eventually defeat al-Qaeda.

The al-Qaeda organization suffered a major blow with the confirmed¹ death of Nasir al-Wahayshi in a U.S. drone strike in Yemen in early June 2015. Wahayshi was the leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Qaeda's general manager. The exact role of the general manager is unclear under al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri, who assumed command of the organization after Osama bin Laden's death in 2011, but has historically² involved the coordination of military and media activities across al-Qaeda's global affiliates in addition to planning attacks against the West. Zawahiri may replace Wahayshi as general manager. He may draw from the traditional cadre of bin Laden's original companions and the al-Qaeda members who fought against the U.S. after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. This set of leaders is dwindling under U.S. pressure, however. Wahayshi's death is therefore likely to disrupt al-Qaeda's ability to manage its global affiliates, at least until a successor is appointed or until the organization adapts to manage its global operations differently.

A new potential leadership cadre is emerging at the helm of successful al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere. These individuals do not qualify for leadership in al-Qaeda according to historic paradigms because they were not companions of Osama bin Laden. They may

nonetheless provide Zawahiri with new options to replace Wahayshi or otherwise absorb his death if Zawahiri is willing to depart from past traditions. Even though these commanders do not have the same set of credentials as typical al-Qaeda leaders, many of them fought U.S. forces during the 2003-2008 Iraq War or in Afghanistan after bin Laden's initial resistance in Tora Bora. These individuals offer Zawahiri a promising source of future leadership within al-Qaeda because of their battlefield experience and, in many cases, their demonstrated commitment to fighting the U.S. Because some of these commanders have extensive regional networks, they



Al-Jazeera interview with JN Leader al-Joulani (May 27, 2015)

may furthermore offer Zawahiri new opportunities for pursuing al-Qaeda's objectives beyond the specific theater in which they currently operate. Changed circumstances, such as ISIS's rise to preeminence within the global jihad, may also prompt Zawahiri to alter al-Qaeda's typical leadership patterns in order to adapt to new requirements.

Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, the leader of al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), is a prominent example of this new generation of potential leaders. He is by open source accounts³ a Syrian national who joined al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in order to fight the U.S. during the Iraq War. Joulani was subsequently dispatched to Syria to establish a new al-Qaeda affiliate as an offshoot of AQI during Ramadan in 2011, as the Syrian revolution was becoming violent. Joulani and his companions recruited heavily from the Syrian countryside after entering Syria and quickly established a skilled rank-and-file comprised predominantly of local Syrians, later augmented by a steady flow of foreign fighters. Once established, JN launched a series of effective spectacular attacks against the Syrian regime, acquiring immediate prestige just as the Syrian armed opposition began to mobilize. This positioned JN as a leading force in the fight against Bashar al-Assad within the first two years of the Syrian Civil War. JN steadily capitalized on this initial success in order to deepen its influence within Syrian rebel ranks as the conflict continued to escalate. JN demonstrated⁴ the extent of its influence within rebel ranks from October 2014 to February 2015 by escalating directly against two U.S.-supported rebel brigades in northern Syria, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and Harakat Hazm. JN forced the dissolution of both groups without generating considerable backlash by other rebel groups, a marker of JN's rank among rebel groups. Joulani is an effective implementer of Zawahiri's paradigm for jihad, which contrasts starkly with the methodology implemented by ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his predecessor, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zawahiri maintains bin Laden's vision of the establishment an Islamic caliphate that stretches across the Muslim world and reverses the perceived decline of the Muslim community. As an interim and conditions-setting step, Zawahiri prioritizes the acquisition of popular support by al-Qaeda affiliates above other short-term objectives. This is an inverse of ISIS's brutal methodology, which succeeds in asserting ISIS control at the expense of social support. Counter to ISIS, Zawahiri advocates a form of jihad that positions al-Qaeda at the helm of local insurgencies within Muslim-majority countries, fighting against repressive state regimes. Zawahiri then

intends to leverage al-Qaeda's contribution to these insurgencies to mold them over time and emerge at the forefront of a Muslim community united against the West.

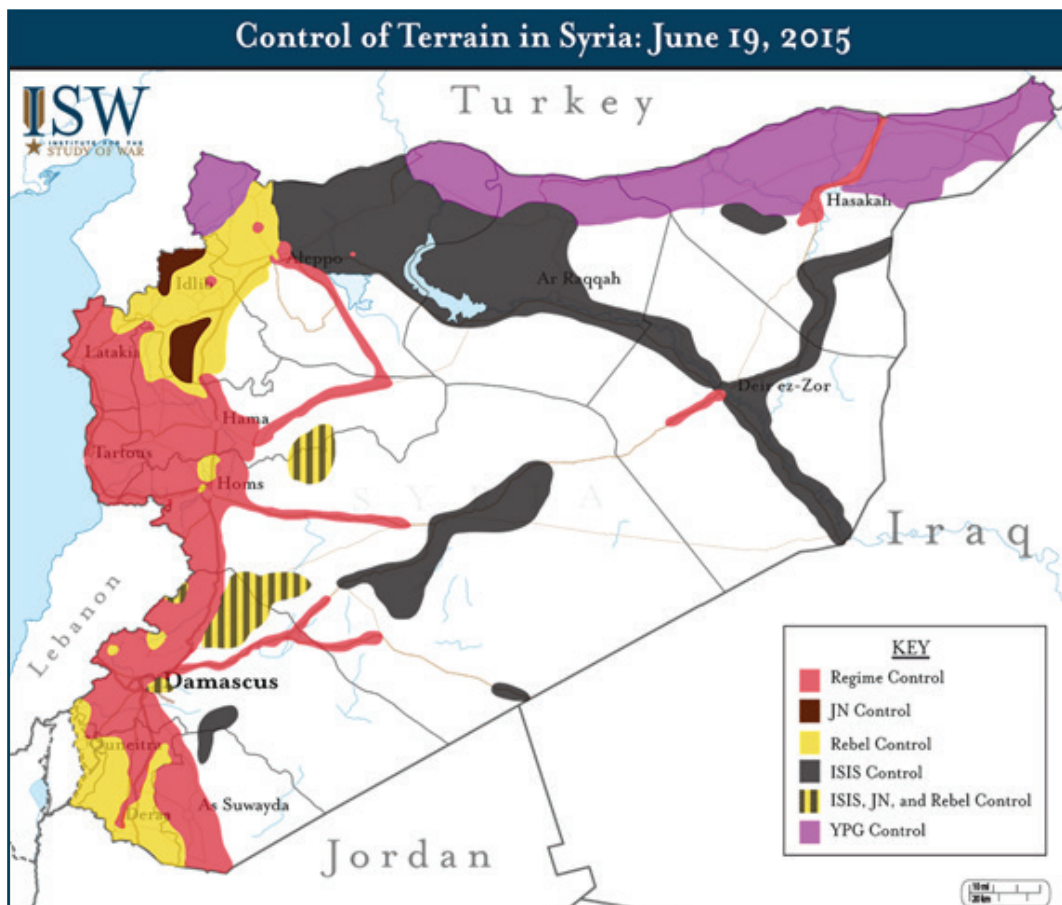
JN seeks⁵ to create an Islamic emirate in Syria that possesses widespread social support and can be incorporated into the envisioned al-Qaeda caliphate. Joulani pursues this objective using a calibrated and patient strategy to leverage military contributions to the war against Assad alongside social outreach to acquire the support of local communities and the dependence of Syrian rebel powerbrokers. JN intends to use this support to transform Syrian society in its own image over time, for example by conducting religious outreach to transform the religious beliefs of Syrians according to al-Qaeda's interpretation of Islam. This dual approach represents the careful implementation of Zawahiri's paradigm within the unique environment in Syria. JN's success is therefore an important test case that demonstrates that Zawahiri's methodology can be tailored to maximize influence within a given social environment. This could encourage Zawahiri to make an example out of Joulani in order to encourage other al-Qaeda affiliates to adopt Zawahiri's model.

Joulani has repeatedly justified his adherence to al-Qaeda's ideology on the basis of values that appeal to Syrian and international audiences. Joulani has conducted two major interviews with al-Jazeera since creating JN in 2011. He leveraged both as a platform to put forth a narrative that links al-Qaeda to the will of the people, in accordance with Zawahiri's vision.

In his first interview in December 2013, Joulani explained how JN's contributions to the Syrian revolution against Bashar al-Assad demonstrate al-Qaeda's commitment to defending Muslims against repressive regimes empowered by the West. The interview followed months of upheaval within the jihadist community in Syria caused by an attempt by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, to absorb JN into a newly declared Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in April 2013. Joulani instead pledged allegiance to Zawahiri in May 2013 and sought his intervention to mediate the growing fitna, or schism, between JN and ISIS in Syria. Joulani's interview was therefore a strong signal to Zawahiri and the community of al-Qaeda supporters that Joulani was committed to al-Qaeda's vision and methodology. The interview simultaneously reassured Syrian audiences of JN's commitment to defeating the Assad regime, which Joulani characterized as a natural extension of JN's affiliation to al-Qaeda.

More recently, in a two-part interview with al-Jazeera in May and June 2015, Joulani reassured a Syrian viewership of JN's continued commitment to overthrowing Assad as the organization begins to consolidate its influence over rebel military and governance structures. Joulani clearly articulated his vision of JN's place within the history of jihad, nesting the Syrian war against Assad within a historical effort to defend and restore Muslim glory. He stated that JN's war in Syria is part of an "inherited jihad" that began after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, tying JN to the earliest founders of al-Qaeda's ideology. JN later released a 43-minute long video⁶ on June 26 titled "Heirs of Glory" that explained the history of al-Qaeda's jihad beginning with the prophet Mohammed and extending to JN's current war in Syria. The video, which included English subtitles, was the clearest and most comprehensive articulation of JN's worldview to date and reinforced Joulani's message conveyed through al-Jazeera. In both interviews, Joulani demonstrated an ability to nest his local military activity against the Assad regime within a rhetorical narrative that generates support for al-Qaeda without weakening his position in Syria. Joulani's ability to communicate to both the global jihadist community and to his own Syrian constituency is a strong signal of his potential value to Zawahiri in a global

environment currently dominated by ISIS showmanship. A second strategic objective that Zawahiri could achieve by choosing to elevate Joulani is the integration of Syria's new, networked generation of foreign fighters into the global al-Qaeda organization. Joulani currently holds guardianship over a formative foreign fighter experience within the Syrian Civil War. This experience could rival Afghanistan's mujahideen period that ushered forward al-Qaeda's first major fighting network. The Syrian war against Assad continues to provide a crucial testing ground for new waves of foreign fighters that are honing their military skills and developing high-value networks alongside JN and other Salafist jihadist brigades in Syria. These fighters are an important form of capital that provides long-term potential for future expansion and further globalization of the al-Qaeda network. The network of relationships formed among these foreign fighters during the war in Syria will likely define their evolution in coming decades. Joulani began to highlight the involvement of foreign fighters within JN's rank and file in November 2014, a fact that he had previously downplayed in favor of establishing a Syrian image. This likely indicates that JN faces growing pressure to compete with ISIS for the allegiance of foreign fighter recruits in the aftermath of ISIS's declaration



of a caliphate on June 29, 2014. It is therefore likely a strategic consideration for both Joulani and Zawahiri to ensure this network adheres to al-Qaeda as it evolves.

The third strategic objective that elevating Joulani to leadership in al-Qaeda could accomplish is to position al-Qaeda to more effectively compete with ISIS for leadership in the global jihadist movement. Joulani occupies a unique position that Zawahiri can leverage to compete with ISIS, both because of JN's geographical proximity to ISIS and also because of its organizational success. Joulani has proven his ability to navigate a complex and hostile relationship with ISIS, rendering him a potential asset for Zawahiri as al-Qaeda increases its competition with ISIS. Joulani pursues a long-term strategy of competition with ISIS that exchanges immediate and flashy military victories and religious claims in return for the acquisition of a high level of local support that will ultimately secure al-Qaeda's staying power for generations to come. JN's strategy against ISIS is therefore a further manifestation of Joulani's adherence to Zawahiri's paradigm for jihad.

Support for JN among local populations and armed groups in Syria re-emerged clearly after U.S. strikes targeted JN-linked members⁷ of an operational al-Qaeda cell in Syria popularly described as the "Khorasan Group." The targeting of these individuals in Syria triggered protests⁸ against the U.S. and prompted numerous rebel brigades to release statements of condemnation⁹. This was the second notable demonstration of rebel support for JN in Syria. The first occurred as numerous¹⁰ elements¹¹ of the Syrian opposition protested¹² the U.S. decision to designate JN as a foreign terrorist organization in December 2012. JN's successful competition with ISIS for the allegiance of Syrian rebel brigades offers a compelling example to other al-Qaeda affiliates currently under threat of ISIS predation such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Zawahiri may therefore choose to elevate Joulani in order to position Joulani to export his approach to other al-Qaeda affiliates.

There have been reports of direct communication from Zawahiri to Joulani. If true, they may indicate that Zawahiri is reinforcing Joulani's leadership position in Syria and Joulani's commitment to the paradigm Zawahiri seeks to export. They may also indicate that Zawahiri has begun to groom Joulani for future leadership in al-Qaeda. Zawahiri sent a letter to Joulani in early 2015 for the first time since mid-2013, according¹³ to two "well-connected Syrian Islamists" with links to JN. The letter reportedly included a detailed set of guidance to Joulani regarding

the necessary aspects of JN's strategy in Syria, including instructions for Joulani "to better integrate his movement within the Syrian revolution and its people; to coordinate more closely with all Islamic groups on the ground; to contribute towards the establishment of a Syria-wide Sharia judicial court system; and to use strategic areas of the country to build a sustainable Al-Qaeda power base." Zawahiri's engagement, if accurately reported, reaffirms many of the lines of effort that JN is currently pursuing in Syria and classifies them as requirements for the success of al-Qaeda as a whole. Zawahiri likely sought to bolster Joulani's authority by overtly recognizing the value of his approach. Joulani appeared to confirm his receipt of Zawahiri's guidance during his recent al-Jazeera interview, in which he stated that JN's focus on the defeat of the Assad regime adheres to Zawahiri's direct orders.

Joulani may seek more direct oversight from Zawahiri as JN approaches new thresholds of success. JN is entering a new phase in Syria as a result of its successes to date. This may require Joulani to make difficult decisions regarding how to navigate increasingly complex relationships with Syrian rebels or how to proceed with governance. Joulani has different options for how to advance JN's interests in Syria, including renouncing al-Qaeda in order to receive funding from Gulf States or merging with ISIS in order to benefit from the group's prestige. Growing rebel pressure¹⁴ on JN to relinquish its al-Qaeda affiliation may furthermore prompt some JN members to contemplate breaking with al-Qaeda, requiring Joulani to convince JN members of the necessity of their current allegiance to al-Qaeda. JN's approach to its relationship with rebel brigades has historically been a subject of contention¹⁵ between Joulani's advisors, and the issue could become more divisive in coming months if competition with ISIS increases. Joulani may seek, or may have sought, additional affirmation of his authority by Zawahiri in order to quell internal dissent and enable him to maintain his current strategy in Syria without risking internal fragmentation. Joulani reportedly distributed Zawahiri's recent letter across JN's leadership structure, suggesting that the letter enabled Joulani to address rising discontent by asserting his status as an integrated member of the al-Qaeda network. Further promotion of Joulani within al-Qaeda ranks could buffer JN against fragmentation and enable Joulani to succeed in navigating future ISIS conflict. Joulani's visible role as the leader of a successful al-Qaeda affiliate does not necessarily indicate that he qualifies for future leadership within the organization, nor does his prominence alone signify an overall ascent by al-Qaeda's newest generation. But there may be little

direct indication of the rise of a new generation of al-Qaeda leaders prior to their appointment. Zawahiri will likely seek to minimize the transparency of his calculus for the regeneration of al-Qaeda leadership in order to protect candidates from immediate U.S. targeting. It is therefore important to consider visible candidates such as Joulani in order to explore the implications of a change in al-Qaeda's method of leadership regeneration for the ultimate success of the War on Terror.

The elevation of Joulani, or any member of the new generation he represents, into a leadership role within al-Qaeda would require Zawahiri to undertake an organizational shift. Zawahiri would need to depart from past reliance on a set of al-Qaeda members who were the original companions of Osama bin Laden or members of the former mujahideen era in Afghanistan. Zawahiri initially departed from tradition¹⁶ in 2013 by appointing Wahayshi as his deputy, at the time greatly increasing the importance of Wahayshi's franchise, AQAP, to the central organization. This may demonstrate flexibility in Zawahiri's strategic calculus that could lead to future departures from al-Qaeda leadership norms. The challenges that al-Qaeda faces from successful counter-terrorism strikes by the U.S., such as the strike that killed Wahayshi, and ISIS's predation on al-Qaeda affiliated and associated groups may render future shifts by Zawahiri increasingly likely. Zawahiri could pursue this change by altering the types of leadership positions available to al-Qaeda members or the sets of responsibilities that certain leaders possess. He could also do so by changing the requirements for leadership candidacy.

It nonetheless remains possible that al-Qaeda will continue to elevate leaders in a more classical fashion, prioritizing, for example, those commanders with past experience working with Wahayshi or a personal history with bin Laden. Zawahiri is furthermore likely to weigh potential increases in his engagement with Joulani against the requirements for preserving and augmenting JN's success in Syria. It is likely that Zawahiri will choose to leave Joulani in place in order to avoid potentially disrupting JN's efforts in Syria. Zawahiri could instead choose to elevate one of JN's high-echelon strategic advisors such as Abu Firas al-Suri¹⁷ or Sanafi¹⁸ Nasr¹⁹, who have historic ties to bin Laden. Zawahiri initially sent these two men, among a number of JN's current advisors, to Syria in mid-2013 to advise Joulani and act as intermediaries between JN and ISIS as the schism between the two groups widened. It is possible that Zawahiri also sought to provide these individuals

with valuable experience at the helm of a preeminent al-Qaeda affiliate in order to groom them for future leadership. In either case, Joulani's status will remain unchallenged as a formidable al-Qaeda commander whose success and leadership will likely influence the behavior of other affiliates and define the course of al-Qaeda's evolution over the coming years and possibly decades.

Zawahiri's plans to attack the West likely affect his calculus regarding how to regenerate al-Qaeda leadership. In his recent al-Jazeera interview, Joulani stated that JN suspended its involvement in plans to attack against the West in accordance with Zawahiri's instruction. This admission does not mean that al-Qaeda no longer seeks to damage the West, and it is possible that Zawahiri has simply transferred operational cells back to Yemen. It could indicate, however, that Zawahiri seeks to preserve Joulani for future leadership by removing him from immediate U.S. target lists. Zawahiri may calculate that the U.S. will halt its targeting of al-Qaeda members in Syria if he suspends JN's involvement in efforts to conduct an immediate attack against the West. Although initial strikes targeting JN-linked members in Syria actually provided momentum to JN's anti-U.S. narrative, subsequent strikes have reportedly killed key members²⁰ of the organization, such as JN's military commander Abu Hammam al-Shami, and may threaten to disrupt JN's operations. Zawahiri may have decided to halt al-Qaeda's near-term efforts to attack the West in order to avoid prompting an expansion of U.S. strikes that could damage JN's successes in Syria.

Zawahiri likely seeks to capitalize upon JN's embedded position within Syrian rebel ranks in order to achieve longer-term strategic positioning against the U.S. According to unconfirmed reports²¹, members of the JN-linked "Khorasan Cell" directly participated in JN-led offensives²² that seized control of most of Idlib Province from March to June 2015. It is unclear whether this involvement included Khorasan members dispatched from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, who may have relocated to Yemen. More likely, JN members associated with the Khorasan cell who remained behind sought to demonstrate their commitment to the Syrian revolution against Assad. JN's current positioning within rebel ranks, enabled by such demonstrations of support, positions al-Qaeda to undertake preparations to attack U.S.-trained rebels when they are inserted into Syria or to leverage local support to ensure that al-Qaeda fills the void left behind by the defeat of ISIS. Both courses of action could provide al-Qaeda with an effective and sustainable narrative that positions the

group as a counter-U.S. force while complicating the ability of the U.S. and its allies to act directly against the organization without harming the intended allies of the U.S. in Syria. Joulani is a natural leader to exemplify the potential benefits of this strategy, and halting JN's involvement in active al-Qaeda attack cells could provide Joulani the necessary space to pursue this effort.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. STRATEGY

The singular focus of U.S. counterterrorism operations on traditional candidates for al-Qaeda leadership risks obscuring the potential threat posed by effective leaders of al-Qaeda affiliates who have potential to rise to leadership within the organization. The U.S. must evaluate its strategy against al-Qaeda in the context of current realities and recognize the developing trends within the organization that could require the U.S. to adopt a more comprehensive approach. Under current conditions, JN will likely continue to experience success in its effort to convince Syrian rebels and civilian populations that al-Qaeda is a true ally in their fight against Assad. Embedded al-Qaeda presence within popular movements in Syria and elsewhere in the region will increasingly render counterterrorism strikes such as the one that killed Wahayshi unviable for several reasons: the proliferation of al-Qaeda groups, their depth of leadership, the lack of indigenous partner governments from which drones can be based in a region of failed states, and the condemnation these strikes will generate within local populations associated with insurgencies. Al-Qaeda's strategic competition with ISIS also underscores the fact that the U.S. must carefully nest its strategy against al-Qaeda within wider efforts to combat ISIS in order to avoid the indirect empowerment of another strategically dangerous jihadist threat in the wake of ISIS.

The U.S. must therefore develop a comprehensive strategy to address the threats posed by the global jihadist movement as a whole. The U.S. could achieve strategic success against al-Qaeda by regaining the narrative in Syria and supplanting al-Qaeda as the ally of Syrian rebels against Assad. If combined with counterterrorism operations against JN's leadership, such a policy may sufficiently disrupt the success achieved by JN in Syria to alter Zawahiri's calculus going forward. It is a costly approach, but one that is worth considering in the context of the potential long-term cost of allowing al-Qaeda to play a defining role in the evolution of Syria's devastated society. Intervention to end the Syrian war

while marginalizing JN is furthermore likely a necessary precondition for the eventual defeat of ISIS, as continued war in Syria will facilitate ISIS's effort to remain. If U.S.-led operations against ISIS succeed in disrupting ISIS globally, there is also a risk that al-Qaeda affiliates will fill the void. Even in that case, the U.S. must carefully examine the rest of al-Qaeda's global network and the insurgencies on which it rests symbiotically in order to assess the likelihood that other affiliates will successfully adopt Zawahiri's paradigm and set conditions for their own long-term success. Nevertheless, the U.S. must ensure that JN, currently the most successful of al-Qaeda's franchises, does not gain control of a state or a global, ideological, and religious movement.

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NOTES

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