

Is there a future for al-Qaeda in Iraq?

Mamoon Alabbasi

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With the military defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq, at least in terms of territory, there is speculation that al-Qaeda is looking to reclaim leadership of jihadist militancy in the country.

Prior to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, the only significant al-Qaeda presence in Iraq was that of the predominately Kurdish group Ansar al-Islam, which controlled several villages near the Iranian border in the semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan. The group, mainly made up of fighters returning from Afghanistan, was beyond the reach of the Iraqi Army and too powerful for the peshmerga to dislodge.

Once the Iraqi state collapsed in 2003, al-Qaeda called on its supporters to flood into Iraq as the place for holy war with US forces. Al-Qaeda became the most dominant force of Sunni insurgency in Iraq until 2006 when its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, notorious for targeting civilians, was killed.

Al-Qaeda was weakened with the formation of Arab Sunni tribal forces known as Sahwa (Awakening) in Anbar province in late 2006 but it regained strength when the Shia-led Iraqi government gradually stopped the payment of salaries to the anti-Qaeda fighters.

Like other extremist groups, al-Qaeda benefitted from the grievances of local populations – discrimination, unemployment, severe poverty, having a loved one killed or tortured at the hands of US or Iraqi forces – to help increase its recruits. Women, children and even mentally ill patients were tar-



What comes next? An Iraqi Counter Terrorism Services (CTS) soldier looks through binoculars during a battle between CTS and ISIS militants in western Mosul, last April. (Reuters)

geted for recruitment.

The militant group rebranded itself from al-Qaeda in Iraq to the Islamic State in Iraq in 2006. It formally split from al-Qaeda and named itself the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in 2013.

The split between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) began with a dispute over leadership roles but other differences between the two groups gradually

became apparent.

ISIS was more focused on territorial control, as opposed to al-Qaeda's hit-and-run strategy.

Regardless of the name or the nature of the next terror threat, all militant groups are feeding off the same pool in Iraq.

Following ISIS's 2014 capture of Mosul, it declared itself as a "caliphate."

ISIS surpassed al-Qaeda's notoriety in targeting civilians in Iraq and boasted of grotesque punishments on social media. That led the group to be considered a cult rather than a typical jihadist militancy.

This and the fact that many al-Qaeda supporters did not have to endure living under al-Qaeda rule, resulted in the militant group being

seen as the lesser evil compared to ISIS.

Some observers say al-Qaeda may regain support from Iraqis who believe ISIS has gone too far in its brutality. Other analysts suggest the two groups might unite. A third view is that a worse group – maybe ISIS 2.0 – could emerge if the Iraqi government does not learn from its past mistakes.

It is worthy to note that al-Qaeda in Iraq, before giving birth to ISIS, was deemed too brutal by al-Qaeda's leadership in Afghanistan.

"Among the things that the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable – also – are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages. You shouldn't be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the sheikh of the slaughterers," wrote Ayman al-Zawahiri, then al-Qaeda's number two, to Zarqawi in 2005.

In the same letter, Zawahiri expressed the concern of many al-Qaeda members of what Zarqawi was doing to Shias in Iraq: "If the attacks on Shia leaders were necessary to put a stop to their plans, then why were there attacks on ordinary Shias?"

Despite calls on Zarqawi to tone down his zeal for bloodshed in Iraq, the Jordanian-born militant did not listen to the leaders to whom he had pledged allegiance.

Baghdadi's whereabouts remain unknown, and there are questions over whether he is still alive. Yet ISIS-inspired attacks continue, the latest of which claimed more than 30 lives in Baghdad.

Regardless of the name or the nature of the next terror threat, all militant groups are feeding off the same pool in Iraq. They are generally competing for the same recruits.

Viewpoint



Sami Moubayed

is a Syrian historian and author of "Under the Black Flag" (IB Tauris, 2015).

Al-Qaeda's roots stretch beyond bin Laden's seed

Older jihadists from across the Muslim world like referring to him as "Father." Others call him "Imam al-Jihad." To many who witnessed the early years of al-Qaeda, Sheikh Abdullah Azzam is the group's real ideologue, theorist and fundraiser – the one worthy of reverence and homage – and not Osama bin Laden.

Behind closed doors, many expressed extreme discomfort with bin Laden, who they claim hijacked al-Qaeda, becoming both its public face and chequebook, immediately after Azzam was killed by a car bomb in Peshawar, Pakistan, in November 1989. Almost everything written about al-Qaeda says it had been founded by bin Laden but the real founder, they believed, was Abdullah Azzam.

Levantines in the global jihadi community often market Azzam's rather aggressively, given that, as a Palestinian from the West Bank, he breaks the Saudi monopoly over al-Qaeda that emerged after 9/11. Middle Easterners who flocked from the Palestinian territories, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon were drawn by Azzam, not bin Laden, they argue.

Azzam was born in Mandatory Palestine in 1941 and is described by al-Qaeda biographers as being an exceptionally bright child who excelled in mathematics and literature. He grew up hating the British colonisers and, at the age of 7, watched with a combination of awe and deep anger as the state of Israel was created, crushing the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria.

Azzam vowed to commit himself to the Palestinian resistance, joining the Palestinian branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, whose members fought within the

Egyptian Army in 1948.

The collective Arab command would never succeed in liberating an inch of the Palestinian territories, he said, because they were mostly seculars and urban aristocrats who were distant from the people and from God's path.

After completing his secondary education, Azzam left his native Silat al-Harithiya and joined the Khaduri College in Tulkarm. He taught at local Palestinian schools before moving to Syria where he enrolled at the Faculty of Islamic Sharia at Damascus University, whose founding dean, Sheikh Mustapha al-Sibaii, also established the Syrian Brotherhood.

Azzam arrived in Syria shortly after the Ba'ath Party took power in 1963, at a time when the Muslim Brotherhood was organising secret cells to topple the Damascus government. This is where he mastered the skills of the political underground.

The Ba'athists drew on their massive membership base in the Syrian countryside, calling on teachers and village officials to go to cities to take government jobs. This left the rural areas as vast playing fields for the Syrian Brothers, where they were able to teach, recruit and train young men, with little competition from the Ba'athists.

Their headquarters were local mosques, whose imams were usually either Brotherhood members or secret sympathisers.

Young boys would go to the mosque after school for evening recitals of the Quran. Brotherhood teachers such as Azzam would single out potential recruits and train them in how to hide and load or strip a gun. Eventually, their training would be to engage in 24-hour surveillance of local Ba'athists and report on their activities to the

Brotherhood cells.

Finally, the boys would be taught how to use firearms. The Brotherhood found easy targets for shooting practice in the state-employed street sweepers who were often at work before dawn when nobody else was around. From the rooftops of carefully concealed huts, the boys would practise shooting at these wretched innocents, killing many in a ruthless training exercise.

In 1964, the Brotherhood clashed with government troops in the ancient city of Hama on the Orontes River. A manhunt ensued and Azzam hid teenage comrades fleeing arrest at an apartment in the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus.

His stay in Syria not only cemented his hatred for the Ba'ath members, it also made him many friends in the Damascus underground whom he recruited into al-Qaeda 20 years later. He took note of why the Islamic project had failed so drastically in Syria and vowed to do things differently – one day. Among other things, they lacked a unified leadership and sustainable funds, two elements that he embarked on securing after leaving Syria.

After graduating from Damascus University, Azzam went to Egypt for his doctorate and moved to Saudi Arabia where he was employed as an instructor at the King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah. That career was short and he was soon forced out of the country, due to his criticism of the kingdom's pro-US policies.

In 1979, Azzam went to Peshawar, near the Pakistani-Afghan border, as the Soviet Army was launching its infamous invasion of Afghanistan. He saw striking parallels between Soviet practices and what was happening in the Palestinian territories, telling his aides: "It

is the duty of all Muslims across the world to fight the occupiers, regardless of their name or race. All of them are infidels. A holy war against them is fard ayn (religious obligation), as dictated in the Holy Quran."

Azzam recruited in the countries he lived and worked in – the Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The message he sent to old friends – almost always verbal to avoid falling into the hands of state informers – was: "Come join me in Pakistan. A new world awaits you; one that pleases Allah."

He would add: "From here we will return home one day, hand-in-hand, first to liberated Damascus and then to liberated Jerusalem."

From 1979-85, 35,000 jihadists registered with Azzam's Maktab al-Khidamat – "Afghan Services Bureau."

Among his many recruits was none other than Osama bin Laden, the son of a wealthy Saudi family famed in the construction business, whom he had met in Saudi Arabia in the mid-1970s.

Inspired by Azzam's charisma, bin Laden invested parts of his massive fortune in the jihadist movement, which gave birth to al-Qaeda.

Bin Laden was a sworn enemy of the Saudi royal family and of the Soviet Union. Liberating the Palestine territories was not on his priority list, unlike Azzam, who hoped to lead a Muslim army one day into his native West Bank, occupied by Israel in 1967. Azzam wanted an Islamic state, headed by a caliph, ruling an empire that spread far and wide on all four corners of the globe, with a capital in Damascus or in Jerusalem.

He was killed in November 1989 before his ambitions bore fruit and before al-Qaeda assumed its present form and shape.

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