

From the Arab Spring to the Syrian Civil War – Foreign Fighters in the New Middle East



FOUR PHASES OF THE AL-QAEDA RESPONSE

1. Peaceful uprisings come as a threat to al-Qaeda narrative.
2. Claiming credit.
3. Kindred outreach.
4. New opportunities for violence.

THE IMMEDIATE THREAT

- Al-Qaeda is defeated.
 - It's leaders are dead;
 - The Arab Spring demonstrates 'people power' and peaceful opposition.

“Al Qaeda played no role in the Arab Spring and hasn't been able to exploit in any meaningful way the most significant development in the Middle East since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.”

- Peter Bergen

CLAIMING CREDIT

- Al-Qaeda celebrated the loss of its leaders, but had to insert itself into the uprisings.
- Two arguments were used:
 - Al-Qaeda has given people the confidence to rise up, demonstrating that individuals can take matters into their own hands.
 - Al-Qaeda has weakened the United States after more than a decade of conflict.

‘The abandonment of America’s allies one by one is the fallout of its diminishing pride and arrogance after receiving the blows in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. [This] directly caused America to lose influence over the [Arab] people because its grasp over the [Arab] regimes was weakened’.



Ayman al-Zawahiri, ‘A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Part 5’ (As-Sahab Media)

KINDRED OUTREACH

- Attempts by al-Qaeda to appeal to Islamist movements in the MENA region on kindred terms.
- They reversed decades old policies – such as Ayman al-Zawahiri criticising the Muslim Brotherhood.
- The group adopted a more humble posture.



Al-Qaeda does not have a 'magic wand'...al-Qaeda is only a small part of this striving & Mujahid Ummah. Do not overestimate it...There is no need to indulge in differences about the various Islamic movements which may differ.

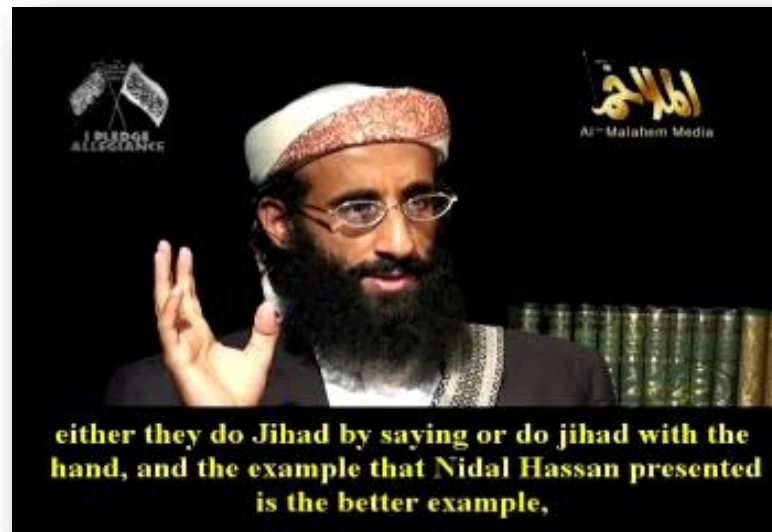
-Attiyah Allah al-Libi

PROSPECTS FOR VIOLENCE

- Provides al-Qaeda with a chance to demonstrate that its method retains some relevance; there is a time/place for violent uprising.
 - Libya; Mali; Sahel; & Syria.
- Utilising the chaos and political instability to regroup and establish new safe havens.

“Our mujahidin brothers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the rest of the Muslim world will get a chance to breathe again after three decades of suffocation”

- Anwar al-Awlaki



THE REVIVAL

‘Parts of the Arab world have once more become a permissive environment for Al Qaida’

- Jonathan Evans, Director-General of the Security Service

THE SYRIAN JIHAD: HOW AL-QAEDA SURVIVED THE ARAB SPRING



THE BACKGROUND

- Syrian uprising was originally peaceful, non-sectarian.
- Sectarianism become dominant feature of the government crackdown.
 - This inflamed Sunni sentiments, particularly across the Gulf.
- Reaffirmed Jihadist message of need for/role of violent upheaval.

THE GULF/NORTH AFRICAN SUNNI AXIS AWAKENS – THE FIRST FOREIGN FIGHTERS



Oh Muslims, Our Brothers in Syria, we are
aware of everything happening to them

THE FOREIGN FIGHTER TREND BEGINS

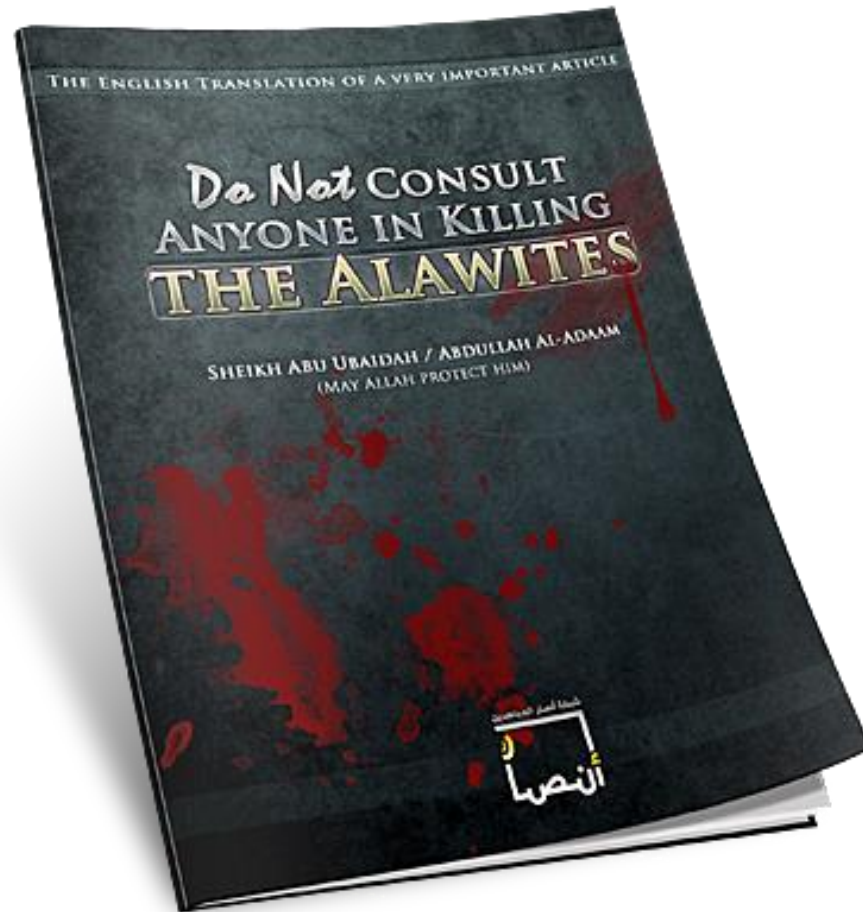


"Permission is granted to fight for those who are being persecuted,

...AND SECTARIANISM TAKES ROOT



BUT AL-QAEDA IS LEARNING...



WHAT IS AQ DOING?

- Jihadists have learned the lessons of Iraq.
 - Letters sent to Mali.
- Social welfare provision
 - Religious lessons
 - Distribution of food
 - Utilities
 - Guaranteeing food supplies

الجمهورية الإسلامية في مالي			الجمهورية الإسلامية في ليبيا		
الجدول الأسبوعي لتوقيتات تحفيظ القرآن			الجدول الأسبوعي للحدوس المعتمرة للرجال والنساء		
اليوم	اسم الجامع	الوقت	اليوم	اسم الجامع	الوقت
الجمعة	القرنوس	بعد المغرب	الجمعة	القرنوس	بعد المغرب
السبت	الجامع الكبير	بعد المغرب	السبت	القرنوس	بعد المغرب
الأحد	الجامع الكبير	بعد الظهر	الأحد	القرنوس	بعد الظهر
الاثنين	الجامع الكبير	بعد الظهر	الاثنين	القرنوس	بعد الظهر
الثلاثاء	الأصغر	بعد الظهر	الثلاثاء	القرنوس	بعد الظهر
الأربعاء	الأصغر	بعد الظهر	الأربعاء	القرنوس	بعد الظهر
الخميس	القرنوس	بعد المغرب	الخميس	القرنوس	بعد المغرب
الجمعة	القرنوس	بعد المغرب	الجمعة	القرنوس	بعد المغرب





WHO BECOMES A FOREIGN FIGHTER?

- Men;
- In their twenties;
- Of South-Asian ethnic origin (UK);
- With recent connections to higher education;
and
- With links to individuals or groups who have international connections.

WHY DO THEY GO?

- **The ‘ummah consciousness’**
 - An established idea
- **Ease of travel & entry**
 - Particularly from Europe
- **Lack of counter-narrative.**
 - Conflict seems less contentious than previous ones.

HOW DO THEY TRAVEL?

- Typically through Turkey.
- Jihadists inside the country advise foreign fighters against arriving in the country without a pre-existing connection.
- Charities/Humanitarian missions as cover for foreign fighters.

WHAT DO THEY DO?

- Fight!
- Offer specialist skills
 - Medical training
 - Media/Propaganda
- Fight in 'Muhajireen' battalions as an auxiliary force.

ARE FOREIGN FIGHTERS A THREAT?

- **No clear, overarching picture just yet.**
- **Immediate threat declines**
 - Difficulty is to juggle: Urgent vs Important
 - Jihad movement is more introverted at the moment.
- **Current narrative is not anti-Western in tone**
 - But don't overlook 'Bosnia effect' – blunting/distancing from Western society.
- **Fighters don't have psychological support.**
- **Repopulation of terrorist network**
 - 'The Afghan effect'

OPEN SOURCE METHODOLOGY

We compile data from:

- **Jihadist Forums**
 - Increasingly information is disseminated through social media too:
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
- **‘Martyrdom’ notices**
- **Social media accounts of fighters**
- **Talking to people like you (& the media)**
 - Important to cross-reference numbers/data