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The Rise of Al-Qaeda's Khorasan Group: What It Means for U.S. National Security

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The air strikes against Islamist terrorist groups in Syria that the U.S. launched on September 22 included strikes against a group that few Americans had heard about before: the Khorasan group. Although sometimes mistakenly characterized as a new terrorist group, Khorasan is a new tentacle of an old organization—the al-Qaeda high-command or core group. The rise of the Khorasan group underscores that al-Qaeda's core remains a dangerous threat, and that it has grown stronger by feeding off the corpses of failed states and by recruiting foreign fighters. To defeat al-Qaeda, Washington must address the regional trends that gave rise to Khorasan, not merely target the group itself.

The Black Flags of Khorasan

According to U.S. officials, the Khorasan group is a cadre of experienced al-Qaeda operatives dispatched to Syria by Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of the al-Qaeda core, to organize terror attacks against Western targets. Many members of the group, estimated to number in the dozens, are veterans of al-Qaeda's unholy war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This region, part of what was known as Khorasan in ancient times, looms large in the minds of Islamist extremists because of a prophecy attributed to

Mohammed that foretold the coming of an unstoppable army bearing black flags that would emerge from Khorasan. To underscore the Islamic connection, al-Qaeda adopted a black flag as its symbol. U.S. officials apparently coined the term Khorasan group, perhaps because they overheard members of Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise, refer to the newcomers as "Khorasanis."

U.S. officials now see the Khorasan group as "the primary Al-Qaeda entity plotting near-term attacks against the West."¹ It emerged in Syria within the past two years, embedded itself in Jabhat al-Nusra, but operates under the direct orders of al-Qaeda's senior leadership. Its mission is to recruit, train, and deploy Western militants drawn to the fighting in Syria for attacks on Western targets.

In a sense, it is a fusion cell that applies the "best practices" of various al-Qaeda units. It works closely with Jabhat al-Nusra to recruit militants with Western passports, and it trains them to use sophisticated bombs developed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the franchise based in Yemen. AQAP's master bomb-maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, who developed the innovative bombs used in the failed "underwear bomber" plot and two foiled plots to place bombs on cargo aircraft headed for the United States, reportedly traveled to Syria to build hard-to-detect bombs and train others to do so. Lieutenant General William Mayville, director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that U.S. air strikes were launched against the Khorasan group in Syria because it was in the "final stages of plans to execute major attacks against Western targets."

The emerging Khorasan threat has important implications:

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1. The al-Qaeda core group remains a dangerous threat. Although Osama bin Laden's successor Zawahiri has been eclipsed in recent months by the rapid rise of the Islamic State (previously called ISIS or ISIL), al-Zawahiri still calls the shots and ensures cooperation between various al-Qaeda affiliates. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified recently that Khorasan had become at least as much of a threat to the U.S. homeland as the Islamic State. The Khorasan revelations indicate that al-Qaeda remains focused on attacking passenger aircraft. A spectacular terrorist attack would help al-Qaeda steal the spotlight back from the Islamic State, a splinter group that al-Zawahiri disowned after it ignored his orders to defer to Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

2. Al-Qaeda puts a premium on recruiting foreign fighters. Al-Qaeda itself was built by Arab fighters who coalesced in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. Foreign militants often comprise the most zealous combatants in the various civil wars raging in Arab states. The Khorasan group also recruits foreign fighters because they offer the most direct vehicle for targeting Western countries, particularly if they already possess Western passports.

3. The record of Khorasan's leader underscores Iranian tolerance, if not support, for al-Qaeda operations. Khorasan's leader, Mohsen al-Fadhli, reportedly traveled to Syria from Iran, where he had functioned as a senior facilitator who helped to move al-Qaeda personnel and money through Iran to Syria. A longtime al-Qaeda veteran, Fadhli had extensive experience fighting in Afghanistan and Chechnya before he became an important fundraiser in his native Kuwait. He was close to bin Laden and was one of the few trusted associates who knew about the 9/11 plot before it was executed, according to the U.S. Treasury Department.

Fadhli's ability to operate as a facilitator and fundraiser inside Iran for many years raises important questions about Iranian permission, if not active support, for al-Qaeda operations. After initially denying the presence of al-Qaeda leaders in Iran, many of whom fled from neighboring Afghanistan after the 2001 ouster of the Taliban regime, Tehran claimed that it had put them under some form of house arrest. But the Iranian regime refused to extradite them to their native lands or effectively restrict their operations.

Despite the fact that al-Qaeda's Sunni supremacist ideology conflicts with Iran's Shia brand of revolutionary Islam, and al-Qaeda affiliates attacked Iran's allies in Iraq and Syria, Tehran evidently concluded that al-Qaeda plays a useful role in attacking the United States and its Arab allies. The growing strength of al-Qaeda's two offshoots in Syria also helped to preserve Syria's Assad regime, a vital Iranian ally, by discouraging Western countries from aiding Syrian rebels, whose cause has been hijacked by al-Qaeda. Iran's double game in simultaneously fighting and enabling al-Qaeda raises disturbing questions about whether Tehran can be trusted to cooperate against the Islamic State or comply with the terms of any agreement on its nuclear program, if one is reached.

Time for a Paradigm Shift

If Jabhat al-Nusra consolidates victory in Syria, Khorasan will become even more of a threat to the United States and its allies. But rather than focusing narrowly on military strikes against Khorasan, the U.S. must also develop a broad and comprehensive strategy for defeating al-Qaeda's Islamist revolution. Al-Qaeda sees itself as the vanguard of a global insurgency. Khorasan's rise in Syria is emblematic of al-Qaeda's wider exploitation of the "Arab Spring" uprisings to bolster offshoots in Egypt, Libya, Mali, and Yemen. Washington must adopt a paradigm shift,² stop treating the al-Qaeda threat as primarily a law enforcement problem, and adopt a comprehensive political, military, and ideological program for defeating al-Qaeda's global insurgency.

1. Matthew Levitt, "The Khorasan Group Should Scare Us," *Politico Magazine*, September 24, 2014, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/09/why-the-khorasan-group-should-scare-us-111307.html#.VC21wF_D_yA (accessed October 2, 2014).

2. Heritage Foundation Counterterrorism Task Force, "A Counterterrorism Strategy for the 'Next Wave,'" Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 98, August 24, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/08/a-counterterrorism-strategy-for-the-next-wave>.

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