

The Continuing Cost of the Iraq War: The Spread of Jihadi Groups throughout the Region

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February 18, 2014

The US invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, initiated in part to retaliate against al Qaeda for the 9/11 strikes, had the foreseeable but still unforeseen effect of inspiring the creation of new al Qaeda franchises, now spread throughout the Middle East. These new groups, which have already killed many thousands of civilians in Iraq and Syria, are continuing to evolve and expand. They have hijacked the "Arab-Spring" rebellion against President Assad, turning it into a sectarian civil war. They are spreading their sectarian conflict into [Lebanon](#), and some [Egyptian volunteers](#) to the Syrian conflict are now reportedly returning to Egypt to take up a Syrian jihadi group's call "for a long and bitter jihad" against the military government.

The presence of these new jihadi groups, borne out of the war in Iraq, are making it exceedingly difficult for donor nations to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Syria, which as of this writing involves [140,000](#) deaths and up to [500,000](#) displaced persons. [Rape](#) is reportedly rampant at refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan. For the same reasons, the international community was reluctant to respond to documented use of chemical weapons in Syria, for fear that by bolstering the opposition to President Assad, it would inadvertently be supporting jihadi groups.

As Megan McBride and I argued in our earlier essay, "[Terrorism After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq](#)," the number of foreign fighters who participated in the Iraq war significantly exceeded the number active in Afghanistan between 1984 and 1992. The veterans who survived are much better trained than those that formed the basis of the original al Qaeda organization. Among the groups that evolved out of the Iraq war is Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), a Syrian jihadi militant group led by Iraq veteran Abu Mohammad al-Golani and populated with jihadists from former AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's extensive [network](#). Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recently described Syria as a "huge magnet" for extremists. He reports "tremendous concern" among his intelligence counterparts in Europe about the travel of Western extremists to Syria, in part because of the possibility that they will return to their home countries to carry out the jihad there. "We're seeing now the appearance of training complexes in Syria to train people to go back to their countries and, of course, conduct more terrorist acts," he [testified](#). He also [reported](#) that the al-Nusra Front, among other Syrian jihadi groups, "does have aspirations for attacks on the homeland."

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria was formed as a [separate](#) group from al-Nusra due to tensions between Golani and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, both of whom were followers of Zarqawi and became rivals for leadership of the Iraqi al Qaeda affiliates' spread into Syria. ISIS's goal is to establish a Sharia-based state throughout the region. ISIS has turned out to

be even more [brutal](#) than al Nusra. ISIS has been fighting in Iraq, exploiting simmering resentment among the country's Sunnis in the north and west against the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, and has largely [retaken](#) the towns of Fallujah and Ramadi, the main cities of Anbar province bordering Syria, in essence undoing the work of the US military. ISIS has also been fighting other Syrian rebel groups, who, in some cases, have banded together to fight ISIS. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the successor to bin Laden and current leader of al Qaeda, repeatedly admonished ISIS for its continuing involvement in internecine strife. After ISIS killed the leaders of several rival groups, Zawahiri wrote a letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, formally [ending](#) ISIS' relationship with al Qaeda.

It does not appear that Zawahiri's ousting of ISIS from the al Qaeda fold will have much effect on its operations. ISIS has its own sources of [funding](#), including taxes collected from businesses in its Iraqi and Syrian strongholds, fees taken from the Turkish-Syrian border crossing, and foreign donations. It has [taken over](#) the oil-rich northeastern province of Raqqah as well as parts of rural Aleppo. While this may be the first time that al Qaeda has formally ejected a group officially affiliated with it, it is not the first time al Qaeda has criticized a franchise.

Al Qaeda has long been concerned about the possibility that affiliates would tarnish its image as the vanguard of Muslims around the globe. Ayman al-Zawahiri has repeatedly emphasized the importance of jihadi media, declaring "more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media." According to documents seized at [Abbottabad](#) and analyzed extensively by the Combatting Terrorism Center at Westpoint, bin Laden was so obsessed with public relations that he was reluctant to allow groups to use the name al Qaeda, and even considered changing the name of his organization. There have been a number of examples of the al Qaeda leadership criticizing affiliated groups for excessive brutality against Muslims, including Zawahiri's [admonishing](#) Zarqawi for disseminating film footage of beheadings. ISIS, too, has been filming beheadings.

Syria has replaced Iraq as the jihadist destination *du jour*. The jihadi groups in Syria are even more successful in recruiting foreign fighters than the Iraqi jihadi groups were. According to a detailed [study](#) by Aaron Zelin of the Washington Institute for Near East policy, between 3,400 and 11,000 foreign fighters have entered Syria since the uprising turned into an armed rebellion. Zelin found that [Western Europeans](#) represent up to 18 per cent of the foreign fighter population in Syria, with most recruits coming from France (63-412), Britain (43-366), Germany, (34-240), Belgium (76-296), and the Netherlands (29-152). Adjusting for population size, the most heavily affected countries are Belgium (up to 27 foreign fighters per million), Denmark (15), the Netherlands (9), Sweden (9), Norway (8), and Austria (7). The "[foreign contingent](#)" still doesn't represent more than 10 per cent of the militant opposition, which is thought to number more than 100,000 fighters. Intelligence and counterterrorism officials [believe](#) that at least 70 Americans are among the Western recruits.

The formation of ISIS and the other jihadi groups active in Syria and now spreading elsewhere through the region, together responsible for thousands of deaths, is one of the many costs of the Iraq war. These new groups – which formed and trained during the US

occupation of Iraq - are impeding US foreign policy in a way that bin Laden's al Qaeda organization could only dream of. They are preventing donor nations from providing humanitarian relief for those suffering under the brutal tactics of President Assad. It is only a matter of time before Western veterans of the Syrian conflict bring the jihad back home.