

# The Gaza War Has Jump-Started a Weakened al-Qaeda

by [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Oct 4, 2024

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



Brief Analysis

---

**Although the former jihadist standard-bearer has failed to inspire attacks during the Gaza war, its efforts to exploit rising anti-Israel sentiment and train a new generation of terrorists in Afghanistan should not be taken lightly.**

In the year since Hamas launched the October 7 attack, the senior leadership of al-Qaeda (AQ) has attempted to nudge its way back into relevancy by coopting international anger toward Israel's subsequent military response. It has done so by situating itself closer to Hamas—a group it has historically criticized—and by providing new guidance for AQ members and supporters. It has even reportedly created a startup affiliate in Gaza to take advantage of the current vacuum there.

## AQ Prior to October 7

Since the Islamic State (IS) stole the title of the most important global jihadist organization, much of AQ's international network has decayed. Over the past decade, AQ's strongest branches in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen either disaffiliated themselves from their parent group or were severely degraded. At the local level, the AQ branch al-Shabab has continued its steady insurgency in Somalia, while Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) has made gains across the Sahel region. Yet neither of those causes has excited the global jihadist ranks to a degree that AQ could parlay into another wave of terrorist attacks in the West. It did manage to carry out some high-profile operations during this period (e.g., the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attack and 2019 Pensacola [attack](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/al-qaedas-external-operations-one-year-after-pensacola-attack) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/al-qaedas-external-operations-one-year-after-pensacola-attack>)), but these were isolated and infrequent [compared to IS external operations](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#home>).

Moreover, despite losing its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan more than two years ago, the organization has yet to formally announce his death or proclaim a successor. Unofficially, Saif al-Adel is known to have taken the reins, but AQ's handling of the transition has been rather embarrassing. The group is hiding his

status due in part to the fact that he is currently based in Iran, a supposed ideological rival of AQ. Moreover, disclosing the activities that he and the rest of the leadership circle are conducting in Afghanistan would contradict the group's Taliban partners, who have continually gaslighted the international community by claiming that AQ has no presence there.

## AQ Messaging Since October 7

For the most part, AQ has stuck to its usual script over the past year, calling for attacks against Israelis as well as foreign Jews and Westerners who support Israel. After [congratulating \(https://jihadology.net/2023/10/13/new-statement-from-al-qaidahs-general-command-unquestionably-the-help-of-god-is-near/\)](https://jihadology.net/2023/10/13/new-statement-from-al-qaidahs-general-command-unquestionably-the-help-of-god-is-near/) Hamas for the October 7 attack, AQ [attempted \(https://jihadology.net/2023/11/17/new-statement-from-al-qaidahs-general-command-concerning-the-zionist-crusader-war-against-gazas-hospitals-and-the-slaughter-of-thousands-of-sick-wounded-and-innocent-pr/\)](https://jihadology.net/2023/11/17/new-statement-from-al-qaidahs-general-command-concerning-the-zionist-crusader-war-against-gazas-hospitals-and-the-slaughter-of-thousands-of-sick-wounded-and-innocent-pr/) to exploit reports that Israel had bombed hospitals by [calling \(https://jihadology.net/2023/11/29/new-release-from-al-qaidahs-salim-al-sharif-this-is-gaza-the-islamic-nations-vanguard-today-for-change/\)](https://jihadology.net/2023/11/29/new-release-from-al-qaidahs-salim-al-sharif-this-is-gaza-the-islamic-nations-vanguard-today-for-change/) for a new “vanguard of jihad,” [connecting \(https://jihadology.net/2024/02/15/new-article-from-al-qaidahs-salim-al-sharif-this-is-gaza-the-days-of-the-armistice-and-palestine-from-75-years-ago-until-today/\)](https://jihadology.net/2024/02/15/new-article-from-al-qaidahs-salim-al-sharif-this-is-gaza-the-days-of-the-armistice-and-palestine-from-75-years-ago-until-today/) the 1948 “Nakba” to the Gaza war. AQ members also sent condolences to Hamas for the deaths of several high-profile figures, including its previous military leader [Saleh al-Arouri \(https://jihadology.net/2024/01/04/new-issue-from-al-qaidahs-bulletin-al-nafir-42/\)](https://jihadology.net/2024/01/04/new-issue-from-al-qaidahs-bulletin-al-nafir-42/); the children and grandchildren of political leader [Ismail Haniyeh \(https://jihadology.net/2024/04/21/new-statement-from-al-qaidahs-general-command-condolences-and-congratulations-to-the-haniyeh-family/\)](https://jihadology.net/2024/04/21/new-statement-from-al-qaidahs-general-command-condolences-and-congratulations-to-the-haniyeh-family/); and eventually Haniyeh himself after he was [killed in Iran \(https://jihadology.net/2024/07/31/new-statement-from-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinent-the-martyrdom-of-shaykh-ismael-haniyeh/\)](https://jihadology.net/2024/07/31/new-statement-from-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinent-the-martyrdom-of-shaykh-ismael-haniyeh/) in July.

Further efforts to stir up local anger and incite terrorist attacks emerged in late May, when an Egyptian soldier shot at Israeli troops across the border after the bombing of a camp for displaced Palestinians in Rafah. AQ quickly used the incident as another [rallying cry \(https://jihadology.net/2024/05/23/new-statement-from-al-qaidahs-general-command-support-and-endorsement-of-the-lions-unilateral-operations-against-the-aggressing-zionists/\)](https://jihadology.net/2024/05/23/new-statement-from-al-qaidahs-general-command-support-and-endorsement-of-the-lions-unilateral-operations-against-the-aggressing-zionists/). And during last month's anniversary of the September 11 attacks, AQ and its Yemeni branch, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), sought to [situate \(https://jihadology.net/2024/09/10/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-arabian-peninsulas-shaykh-ibrahim-al-qu%e1%b9%a3i-khubayb-al-sudani-reflections-on-the-two-raids/\)](https://jihadology.net/2024/09/10/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-arabian-peninsulas-shaykh-ibrahim-al-qu%e1%b9%a3i-khubayb-al-sudani-reflections-on-the-two-raids/) 10/7 alongside 9/11 as another chapter in their war against the “Crusaders” and “Zionists.” Thus far, however, their calls for new attacks have fallen on deaf ears.

## Adel Puts Out a New Strategy

On July 16, Saif al-Adel [released \(https://jihadology.net/2024/07/16/new-article-from-al-qaidahs-salim-al-sharif-this-is-gaza-a-war-of-existence-not-a-war-of-borders-4/\)](https://jihadology.net/2024/07/16/new-article-from-al-qaidahs-salim-al-sharif-this-is-gaza-a-war-of-existence-not-a-war-of-borders-4/) the fourth part of his essay series on the Gaza war. Diverging from the previous installments, which largely focused on Israel and Palestine, the fourth essay offers a new program for exploiting the post-October 7 reality worldwide. This program is built on key passages in the [third essay \(https://jihadology.net/2024/06/06/new-article-from-al-qaidahs-salim-al-sharif-this-is-gaza-a-war-of-existence-not-a-war-of-borders-3/\)](https://jihadology.net/2024/06/06/new-article-from-al-qaidahs-salim-al-sharif-this-is-gaza-a-war-of-existence-not-a-war-of-borders-3/), which called on foreign fighters to travel to Afghanistan, undergo relevant training, and then return to their home countries and apply lessons learned from the successful Taliban insurgency.

Among other directives, the new program urges AQ branches and supporters to do the following:

- **Take advantage of military conscription in their home countries.** Adel describes this as a “wonderful opportunity” to train on various weapon systems, specialize in valuable military disciplines, and gain intelligence on “enemy” forces.

- **Launch attacks against the enemy’s political institutions, economic interests, military bases, military personnel, and intelligence assets**, whether in Muslim-majority countries or the West. In Adel’s view, such efforts will help “blind the enemy” and counterbalance Western air superiority if AQ conducts operations against military personnel (e.g., drone operators and technicians) and infrastructure (e.g., ammunition stores and operations rooms).
- **Attack Western factories.** Adel specifically declares that Muslims in the West have a “great responsibility” to strike “France’s factories that plunder iron from...the Islamic Maghreb.”
- **Launch economic boycotts.** Adel echoes the “Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions” movement by calling for Muslims to open an “economic war” by boycotting “all Western products,” with the goal of undermining both Israel and “enemy” Arab governments he considers complicit in the Gaza war.
- **Increase cooperation and knowledge transfer** between jihadists worldwide.

Notably, AQ also began **reorganizing** (<https://x.com/azelin/status/1812872728950792203>) its media operations in June-July, favoring its strongest branches in Mali, Somalia, and Yemen. As noted previously, the Somali and Mali branches have made numerous local gains in recent years, while AQAP is attempting to rebuild its fortunes under Saad al-Awlaki, who was **announced** (<https://jihadology.net/2024/03/10/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-arabian-peninsulas-shaykh-ibrahim-al-qu%e1%b9%a3i-khubayb-al-sudani-obituary-statement-for-shaykh-khalid-bin-umar-ba%e1%b9%adarfi/>) as the group’s new leader in March. Among other changes seen during Awlaki’s short tenure, AQAP has apparently learned how to arm quadcopter drones with grenades—a tactic previously used by IS in Iraq and Syria.

## An AQ Affiliate in Gaza?

On September 5, a new Gaza group called Huras al-Masra (which roughly translates to “Guardians of Jerusalem”) released an ideological **platform** (<https://jihadology.net/2024/09/05/new-statement-from-%e1%b8%a5uras-al-al-masra-our-organizational-identity/>) mirroring AQ’s worldview. In addition to calling for sharia rule, the tract criticized many of the usual suspects that AQ officially regards as competitors, such as Hezbollah, Iran, the “extremist” IS, and Islamist factions that submit to state governments. Notably, the document made no mention of Hamas.

Over the past month, this tract and other Huras al-Masra releases have been shared by pro-AQ influencers on Telegram, bolstering the new group’s legitimacy and signaling that it may be an official AQ startup in Gaza. In the past, AQ has often kept quiet about its formal ties with affiliates unless forced to acknowledge them publicly, as seen with al-Shabab, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. So its silence about a potential new Gaza affiliate would not be out of the ordinary.

On the operational front, Huras al-Masra has claimed one attack since its emergence: a Grad rocket launch from north Gaza on September 15. It also began soliciting donations in the Tether cryptocurrency on September 23, asking contributors to help boost the “resilience and perseverance of your brothers in Gaza.” The group claims to have raised at least \$11,000 so far.

Predicting the future trajectory of Huras al-Masra is difficult because it is still in its infancy. Yet AQ’s softened stance toward a **steadily weakening** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-weakened-prolonged-guerrilla-conflict-looms>) Hamas could position this new group to provide an outlet for youths who seek revenge on Israel.

## Policy Implications

The biggest question going forward is whether younger jihadist cadres around the world are still listening to al-Qaeda. The organization has not launched a single known terrorist operation related to the October 7 attack,

while IS and its supporters have been involved in at least nine such attacks/plots over the past year. This disparity could mean that AQ no longer has a substantial audience of armed jihadist operatives in the West anymore—individual terrorists and cells currently seem to prefer conducting attacks on behalf of IS. One thing is clear: a year into the Gaza war, few if any are heeding AQ’s calls for a new wave of attacks in the West.

Although this silence is promising in the immediate term, AQ’s recent messaging points to a longer-term plan—to have growing numbers of foreign fighters travel to Afghanistan under the sympathetic Taliban, then return home with new terrorist skill sets. In light of this threat, the U.S. government should establish a mechanism for issuing public reports every six months regarding AQ activity in Afghanistan, focusing on instances in which the Taliban has violated provisions of the 2020 Doha Agreement that prohibit AQ’s presence there. Ideally, this mechanism would make the Taliban think twice about actively enabling AQ operations on its territory.

More broadly, the October 7 attack and the potent radicalizing environment created by the Gaza war are certain to have a long tail. AQ’s failure to mobilize greater support in year one is a positive, but the lack of mobilization or attacks may not persist if war in the Middle East continues to expand.

*Aaron Y. Zelin is the Levy Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [U.S. Policy in the Post-October 7 Middle East: Looking Back, Looking Forward](#)

Oct 2, 2024

◆  
Dennis Ross,  
Dana Stroul,  
David Schenker

(/policy-analysis/us-policy-post-october-7-middle-east-looking-back-looking-forward)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [Hezbollah Is Weakened, But Still Dangerous](#)

Oct 2, 2024

◆

Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/hezbollah-weakened-still-dangerous)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## After Hezbollah's Miscalculations, It Has Lost Much of Its Power

Oct 1, 2024



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/after-hezbollahs-miscalculations-it-has-lost-much-its-power)

### TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)