IN THE SPRING of 2011, all was not well for Al-Qaida and the global jihad movement it had spawned.

On May 11, a US special operations team had killed Osama bin Laden in his safe house in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The elimination of the charismatic leader of Al-Qaida coincided with dramatic upheavals in the Middle East that did not initially seem to play into the hands of the global terror organization.

On the face of it, the dramatic series of protests in Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt, which called for greater liberties, should have come as good news to Al-Qaida. After all, the jihadist group had long called for Arab dictators to be deposed and replaced by “genuine” Muslims. But the incipient “Arab Spring” put a large dent in Al-Qaida’s strategy since the group preached that only violence could bring about the desired change. The mostly bloodless nature of those uprisings caught it ideologically off guard. On top of that, calls for greater freedom from the Arab street did not exactly correspond with Al-Qaida’s blueprint for an Islamic upheaval in the region.

Three years later, however, it is painfully obvious that the global jihad movement, far from having suffered a fatal setback in 2011, is alive and kicking. True, the movement’s nominal leadership, the Pakistani-based Al-Qaida Central under the leadership of Bin Laden’s deputy Ayman Zawahiri, is a shadow of its former self. But the movement’s morphed, with the center of gravity having shifted to affiliates and associates in such places as Somalia, Iraq, Yemen, Mali and Syria.

These affiliates have evolved into new hubs of jihadi activity, some of them eclipsing Al-Qaida Central in terms of their capacity and success in challenging local regimes. Importantly, the new decentralized jihad universe presents a far more diversified danger that includes more than traditional terrorist threats. Local regimes in places like Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen or Syria have been facing formidable insurgent forces.

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Aware of the somewhat tarnished image of Al-Qaida among moderate Muslims, the affiliates are working through local, organic proxy forces far more capable of mobilizing local populations. Unlike Al-Qaida organization at the time of the 9/11 attacks, most of these groups are also aware that continued mobilization of the local population requires a modicum of governance and the provision of social services.

Among the greatest achievements of the global jihad movement in recent years has been its growing presence in Syria. Important in its own right, especially given its status as the former seat of the early medieval Umayyad Caliphate, Syria is also considered a superior jihadi battleground due to its proximity to Israel.

The global jihad movement has always been deeply opposed to “Zionism,” Al-Qaida’s shorthand for Israel and Jews combined. Together with the “Crusader” Christian nations of the West and the “Apostates”—Muslims who have supposedly strayed from the true path—Israel and the Jews form the three-pronged enemy whose defeat the jihadis see as a precondition for achieving their ultimate goal, namely the reestablishment of an Islamic caliphate on as large a territory as possible.

Among this triangle of enemies of jihadism, “Zionism” occupies a special place in that Al-Qaida and its associates have never offered Israelis and Jews a chance to avoid a violent confrontation. Apostates have an opportunity to convert to the “true” Islam, while Christian “Crusader” countries can start mending fences with jihadis by ending their occupation of Muslim lands. The battle between the Muslim umma or nation and the “Zionists,” however, is inescapable.

Not surprisingly, therefore, anti-Jewish rhetoric is deeply ingrained in jihadi discourse and consciously used as a tool to mobilize Muslim youth to jihad. Neither is it surprising that the global jihad movement has previously attacked Jewish and Israeli targets. In 2002, for example, Al-Qaida attacked a hotel popular among Israelis and attempted to shoot down an Israeli airliner in Mombasa, Kenya. In the same year, 9/11 mastermind Khaled Sheik Mohammad supervised an attack on a synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia, in which 14 people were killed.

Al-Qaida-linked groups were responsible for a large number of additional attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets, such as a
July 2004 suicide mission against the Israeli Embassy in Baku, Azerbaijan, and a shooting attack in February 2008 on the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania. Among the most horrific attacks of recent memory was the torture and subsequent killing of a Jewish family in an attack on the Mumbai Chabad House in November 2008 by the jihadist group Lashkar-e-Taibeh.

What is surprising about global jihad’s fixation on the “Zionists,” however, is that despite some isolated attacks, jihadis have thus far failed to marshal their efforts into a serious, prolonged and concerted attack on their despised Jewish/Israeli enemy. The discrepancy between the high level of anti-Jewish rhetoric, on the one hand, and the modest success of anti-“Zionist” campaigns, on the other, is striking. It is precisely this mismatch that jihadis hope to reverse through their presence in Syria and other areas bordering on Israel, such as the Sinai Peninsula. There are now an estimated 30,000 jihadi fighters in Syria alone. They see this as the perfect opportunity to finally align their rhetoric with action.

The Israeli security establishment views these developments with growing concern. Israeli officials are worried by the growing number of ungoverned or undergoverned territories nearby, where weapons proliferate and a growing number of local and foreign fighters are gaining valuable battle experience. There is a prevailing sense among Israeli officials that the weakening of the surrounding authoritarian regimes has had a detrimental impact on the ability of those countries to keep the lid on jihadi activity.

The growing regional instability raises the chances of escalation of the conflict in Syria and a potentially violent spillover into Israel. Rocket firings by rebel groups inside Syria onto Israeli territory could trigger rapid escalation. Border breaches, including by the civilian population along the Syrian-Israeli border, is another worrisome scenario – not to mention the possible knock-on effects of foreign fighters, Palestinians and Arab Israelis participating in the Syrian jihad. The authoritative Israeli Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center reports that some three dozen Palestinians, mostly from the Gaza Strip, are fighting in Syria. So are a small number of Arab Israelis, at least two of whom were asked by their Syrian jihadist handlers to carry out terrorist attacks in Israel upon their return.

Returning foreign fighters also pose a growing risk to Jewish, and perhaps Israeli, targets in Europe and elsewhere. The arrest of Mehdi Nemmouche, a 29-year-old French jihadist who shot to death four Jews at the Jewish Museum in Brussels on May 24 exemplifies the new specter of individual terrorism. Nemmouche reportedly spent more than a year in Syria training with jihadist groups and even recorded a video showing the flag of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS).

ISIS, which significantly moved into several Iraqi cities and towns over the past few weeks and now controls large swaths of territory on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border, could become the greatest jihadist threat to Israel in the longer term. ISIS’s official goal is the establishment of an Islamic state in a region that includes present day Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan, at the very least. While a direct attack by ISIS on Israel is unlikely any time soon, the group is trying to expand its network in Jordan. Should ISIS manage to hold territory in Iraq and Syria for a prolonged period of time, the resulting safe haven could produce training grounds for jihadi recruits and a convenient base from which to plan and execute cross-border attacks.

The recent rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq has also put on gory display the group’s abhorrent and reckless use of violence. Footage of mass shootings invoked painful Holocaust memories. Despite their recent gains, however, it is important to bear in mind that ISIS, and the jihadi movement in general, suffer from substantial weaknesses that will prevent them from posing an existential threat to the State of Israel, at least in the short term. So far, all efforts by jihadis to establish emirates or other Islamist proto-states have failed. Far from being a united front, jihadis are deeply divided on a variety of issues ranging from strategic and ideological goals to more mundane bureaucratic and financial issues.

Israel and the West have a common stake in ensuring that these divisions remain in place.

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