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As Iraqi al-Qaeda Surges Into Syria, the War Changes

By Jason Ditz

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Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) made a very public show of its involvement in Syria, announcing a name change for its umbrella group from the “Islamic State of Iraq” to the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” to reflect its regional ambitions, and sending a lot of seasoned fighters into Syria.



The decision was announced months ago, and was seen as a major coup for the group and for the rebellion. Yet in retrospect AQI's involvement has added a lot of combatants to the civil war, but very few of them are fighting the Assad government.

AQI's ambition to annex Jabhat al-Nusra was only partially realized, and it finds itself only one of many al-Qaeda affiliates and would-be affiliates on the ground now. It's influx from Iraq has left it primarily interested in Syria's northeast.

And instead of fighting Assad, the AQI fighters have spent a lot of time attacking other rebel factions, assassinated FSA leaders it sees as too secular and attacking Western journalists and aid workers.

The biggest impact they've had in Syria is starting an entirely separate war, with Syria's Kurdish population. West Kurdistan was operating as a mostly autonomous region with the war seeing most of Syria's military fighting elsewhere, and AQI has been trying to force the Kurds under rebel control.

Indeed, the fighting with the Kurds has gotten so bad that Iraqi Kurdistan is openly threatening intervention against AQI and on behalf of the Syrian Kurds. Instead of being a decisive shift against Assad, AQI's surge is changing the war and bringing a lot of rivals into direct conflict with one another.