



THE  
SOUFAN  
CENTER

# DIMINISHED, BUT NOT DEFEATED:

*The Evolution of al-Qaeda Since September 11, 2001*

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SEPTEMBER 2021

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Cover photo: Associated Press; Al-Qaeda fighters in Iraq in January 2014

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIAI	Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya
AMB	Al Mulathamun Battalion
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
ANSF	Afghan National Security Force
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighter
GIA	Armed Islamic Group
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
GWOT	Global War on Terror
HAD	Hurras al-Din
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
HUJI	Harkat ul Jihad e Islami
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	So-called Islamic State, or Daesh
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
JFS	Jabhat Fateh al-Sham
JN	Jabhat al-Nusra
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
LeJ	Lashkar e Jhangvi
LeT	Lashkar e Toiba
MUJAO	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
SOF	Special Operations Forces
TFG	Transitional Federal Government
TWJ	Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad

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## KEY FINDINGS

- With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent Taliban takeover, questions arise about the Taliban's relationship to al-Qaeda and the state of the terrorist threat today. In combination with al-Qaeda's vast network, the timing of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan will offer significant opportunities to the organization. The resurrection of a safe haven under Taliban protection could provide the operational space necessary to recruit, rearm, and reunify in such a way that would allow for a refocus on the West.
- The "Global War on Terror" decimated al-Qaeda's leadership and diminished its capabilities to stage large-scale attacks on Western soil. In response, al-Qaeda shifted its strategy to local insurgency and the exploitation of sectarianism and geopolitical conflicts across multiple regions.
- Estimates in recent years suggest al-Qaeda has grown exponentially since 9/11 and currently boasts approximately 30,000 - 40,000 members in various affiliate organizations ranging from the Sahel to South Asia.
- At the same time, al-Qaeda's current emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is either dead or in serious decline, which will force another leadership transition that could present challenges for the organization. Saif al-Adel, al-Qaeda's deputy emir currently believed to be residing in Iran, will likely take the helm once it is clear Zawahiri is dead.
- Decapitation strikes have been an effective tool for disruption, and the armed drone campaign achieved numerous tactical successes, but it was often confused for being a strategy in and of itself.
- New challenges could also breed new opportunities for al-Qaeda. The global jihadist movement is energized by the Taliban's victory, and al-Qaeda and several of its affiliates have released messages supporting and congratulating the Taliban. This could be the beginning of a new phase for al-Qaeda, one which the United States will be less prepared to deal with, given the difficulty in intelligence collection in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.
- Framing U.S. involvement in Afghanistan as a sideshow to more important missions like great power competition is a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept itself. If President Biden is concerned with limiting the influence of countries like Russia, China, and Iran, withdrawing from Afghanistan will actually have the opposite effect.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years, al-Qaeda has proven to be resilient and adaptive in its efforts to survive the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Twenty years after the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States, perpetrated by al-Qaeda, the organization looks much different than it did at the time. “We are no longer dealing with the same terrorist threat, or even the same al-Qaeda, as we did on September 11,” says Ali Soufan. “What we have today is something more complex and resilient, and an organization that has learned lessons from our policies and counterterrorism approaches. We did a lot to secure the U.S. homeland, but in our handling of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, we may have shown terrorist groups that all it requires to outlast a superpower is patience.”

Following a relentless onslaught of Western counterterrorism efforts led by the United States, the organization's leadership has been decimated and its ability to stage large-scale attacks on Western soil has been diminished. Its longtime leader, Osama bin Laden, has been dead for ten years. Al-Qaeda's ability to evolve has been driven by the resilience and widespread appeal of its ideology combined with strategic adaptability—most notably evidenced by its shift to the franchise model through the development of its regional branches and affiliates. Al-Qaeda's network now stretches from West Africa to South Asia with developed inroads to local populations and a keen ability to exploit local sectarian and geopolitical conflicts to wreak havoc, recruit followers, and promote the organization's inter-regional agenda. Nonetheless, al-Qaeda has not been able to launch another high-profile attack on U.S. soil and its external operations capabilities have been significantly diminished. Today, al-Qaeda is less capable of conducting attacks against the West, and its operational pace has remained modest.

The United States has developed a multi-pronged approach to countering al-Qaeda. Through aggressive targeting of its senior leadership, the U.S. and its allies have killed numerous high-ranking al-Qaeda members, disrupted terrorist plots, and forced the group to focus more on operational security and survival. Led by the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and with partners such as the Financial Action Task Force, the Egmont Group, and the United Nations, the international community has also developed more advanced tools and policies to identify and track al-Qaeda's financial streams, forcing the group to shift to more cumbersome means of

generating revenue and moving funds outside the formal banking system.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. and international partners have also developed tools and methods to disrupt al-Qaeda communication networks, forcing its members to revert to more analog means of communication.

As will be discussed, given the U.S.-led Global War on Terror, some al-Qaeda affiliates have been substantially diminished, struggling to replace talented leaders with unique expertise. The elimination of top leaders has thinned out what was once a “deep bench” of strategists, bombmakers, ideologues, and recruiters. But drones and special operations forces (SOF) raids have not been adequate to defeat these organizations completely. Decapitation strikes have been an effective tool for disruption, and the armed drone campaign achieved numerous tactical successes, but was often confused for being a strategy in and of itself.

Al-Qaeda, and particularly its ideology, has proven remarkably resilient.<sup>2</sup> It remains a highly adaptive organization, successfully transforming from a hierarchical structure of several hundred fighters into a decentralized network of franchise groups and affiliates.<sup>3</sup> Beginning with the advent of the Arab Spring in 2011 and accelerating with the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), al-Qaeda adopted a localization strategy in many of the regions where it maintained a presence.<sup>4</sup>

Now led by its longtime deputy, veteran jihadist Ayman al-Zawahiri, even in its diminished state, al-Qaeda still offers a globally recognizable brand, tactical and operational expertise, and strategic oversight in an attempt to achieve unity of message and a consistent and compelling narrative. Al-Qaeda has always sought to project an image of strength, and once its affiliates were formed, its core leadership devoted significant time and energy to ensuring that, to the greatest extent possible, franchise groups parroted messages crafted by senior ideologues. Consistency across franchises would make al-Qaeda more appealing to local groups. When certain franchise leaders stepped out of line—as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi did with his sectarian campaign targeting Iraqi Shiites—al-Qaeda core leadership attempted to intervene. Core al-Qaeda’s success in taming its affiliates has varied over time.

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<sup>1</sup> Zarate, Juan. *Treasury’s War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare*, New York: Public Affairs, 2013. See also, Financial Action Task Force (FATF) reports & UN Security Council Resolution 1267.

<sup>2</sup> Soufan, Ali. “How to Beat Salafi-Jihadi Terrorism.” *Cato Unbound*, February 7, 2018. <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2018/02/07/ali-soufan/how-beat-salafi-jihadi-terrorism>.

<sup>3</sup> Mendelsohn, Barak. *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Green, Daniel. “The al-Qaeda of Today Has Changed Since 9/11 and the U.S. Must Adapt.” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 4, 2018. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/al-qaeda-today-has-changed-911-and-us-must-adapt>.



Finally, developments like the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the shift of resources away from counterterrorism and toward great power competition are coalescing to form a window of opportunity for al-Qaeda to regroup and reorient its strategy to focus on global terror. Currently, al-Qaeda core is suffering attrition to its leadership and has been forced to loosen its command

**The conditions that allow al-Qaeda to thrive—weak governance and rule of law, sectarian tension, heightened political and economic grievances, and geopolitical conflict—are unlikely to abate in the near future.**

and control over its affiliates. Nonetheless, al-Qaeda remains a threat to U.S. interests, in large part due to the combined power of its network. With the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, al-Qaeda is once again maneuvering for a comeback, seeking to recruit new members and leverage the gains its localization strategy has garnered since the start of the Arab Spring. Taken as a whole, al-Qaeda's branches act as force multipliers and allow the group to respond to events on the ground, including civil wars, insurgencies, and internecine conflicts fueled by a wide range of longstanding and unresolved grievances plaguing local populations.

Furthermore, the conditions that allow al-Qaeda to thrive—weak governance and rule of law, sectarian tension, heightened political and economic grievances, and geopolitical conflict—are unlikely to abate in the near future. Instead, these conditions will likely grow in Africa, the Levant, and South Asia without a strong counterbalance to halt the organization's growth.

The Taliban victory in Afghanistan—and the potential growth of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) amidst the next phase of an Afghan civil war—has the potential to supercharge the global jihadist movement. There is growing concern that al-Qaeda may be able to regenerate its networks throughout the country and the broader region. If the organization can re-establish a territorial stronghold in Afghanistan, it could be well-positioned to strengthen its command structure, operational planning, and ability to mobilize its vast network. Such rejuvenation could enable al-Qaeda to reemerge as a top-tier threat capable of striking the West directly and as a destabilizing force in South and Central Asia again.

This report will touch briefly upon al-Qaeda's recent history, describe its evolution as an organization, assess its current status, and attempt to discern its future trajectory, arguing that al-Qaeda is diminished, but not defeated.

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## HOW AL-QAEDA HAS EVOLVED

### *Leadership*

Al-Qaeda has undergone numerous leadership transitions since the Global War on Terror commenced. A majority of those leading the organization on 9/11 have either been killed or captured, with the most notable being the killing of al-Qaeda's founder, Osama bin Laden, by U.S. Special Forces in May 2011 in Abbottabad, Pakistan. These kinetic operations sought to hollow out and weaken al-Qaeda, and they have succeeded to varying degrees. After the killing of Osama bin Laden, for example, al-Qaeda core suffered defections and a loss of morale as the less charismatic Ayman al-Zawahiri took the helm. Since then, three of Zawahiri's deputy leaders have been killed by counterterrorism operations, and it is now reported that Saif al-Adel is the current deputy leader of al-Qaeda, residing in Iran.<sup>5</sup>

However, one factor that mitigated the effects of the decapitation strategy was al-Qaeda's adoption and development of the franchise model evident today. After the advent of the Arab Spring and the killing of bin Laden, al-Qaeda initiated a strategic shift that focused more heavily on the exploitation of local insurgencies and geopolitical conflicts. As the franchises developed across the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, North Africa, and elsewhere, al-Qaeda core delegated authority and granted semi-autonomy to its local franchise leaders while still providing strategic, operational, and ideological guidance. As the organization has become more decentralized, it has sought to navigate the disruption caused by the killing of its leaders.

Of course, the replacement of leadership is not always seamless and devoid of costs to the organization and its affiliates. Zawahiri, for example, has not proven nearly as charismatic as bin Laden. Counterterrorism expert Thomas Joscelyn stated in an interview for this research that "Bin Laden had this sort of calm warrior monk aura about him. Zawahiri is about as boring and dry as you can listen to. Totally devoid of charisma."<sup>6</sup> While rumors and reports of Zawahiri's death have often circulated in the media, some counterterrorism analysts have expressed skepticism, though it does appear Zawahiri's health is in decline. When he dies, the strength of the group could be tested again when the time comes to select the next emir.

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<sup>5</sup> Soufan, Ali. "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be-Third Emir? A Profile on Saif al-'Adl." *CTC Sentinel*, February 2021, 14(2). <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CTC-SENTINEL-022021.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Joscelyn, Tom. Interview with *Long War Journal* author Tom Joscelyn, March 12, 2021.

Many experts suggest that Saif al-Adel is the al-Qaeda veteran most likely to assume leadership of the group following the death of Zawahiri.<sup>7</sup> Al-Adel is reported to be currently residing in Iran, and there is widespread speculation as to whether and where he will attempt to relocate once he assumes the leadership role. Given the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's control of the government, Afghanistan could very likely become an oasis for foreign fighters and a restored territorial base for al-Qaeda and its next emir. However, a UN report from July 2021 also mentioned al-Adel's extensive experience in Africa which, coupled with the organization's growth on the continent, could make for another strong potential location.<sup>8</sup>

**Al-Qaeda's membership has grown by the tens of thousands as a result of its localization strategy that focuses more heavily on the "near enemy."**

In addition to the pending transition, there is also the question as to what strategic direction al-Qaeda's leadership will adopt in the coming years. Al-Qaeda's membership has grown by the tens of thousands as a result of its localization strategy that focuses more heavily on the "near enemy." At the same time, the constant replacement of leadership in al-Qaeda core and its regional affiliates, combined with near constant attacks initiated by the U.S. and its allies, have reduced al-Qaeda's capability for spectacular attacks and external operations. Thus, the ability to reorient its strategy to target the West will depend on whether its leadership

can strengthen its operational base and communications and continue unifying its vast network ideologically without spreading itself too thin in local conflicts or generating blowback.

### ***Organizational Structure***

In its nascent stages, al-Qaeda as an organization was inchoate and suffering from the lack of a well-defined organizational structure. "Moreover," as Ali Soufan points out, "we lacked the depth of knowledge and understanding of these groups, and as a result, our policy choices were premised on a failure to understand that the success of attacks like 9/11 and failures like the abuses in Abu Ghraib would bring new recruits, support, and energy even to what first

<sup>7</sup> Soufan, Ali. "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be-Third Emir? A Profile on Saif al-'Adl." *CTC Sentinel*, February 2021, 14(2). <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CTC-SENTINEL-022021.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> "Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities." United Nations Security Council, July 21, 2021.

appeared to be a rag-tag group to some.” Nevertheless, over time the group expanded its membership, enlisting a roster of fighters from myriad countries committed to their own interpretation of “jihad.” Under bin Laden’s guidance, al-Qaeda developed a strong core group of leaders, while simultaneously arranging partnerships and alliances with other jihadist groups in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. Despite bouncing from Afghanistan to Sudan and then back to Afghanistan, bin Laden and his top lieutenants were still able to “build a significant degree of organization, cohesiveness, and operational capability,” resulting from a “meticulous planning and consultative process.”<sup>9</sup> This approach facilitated the development of the logistical expertise and infrastructure necessary to execute transnational terrorist attacks. Shortly after returning to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996, al-Qaeda went to work creating a hybrid organizational structure where it could be at once “a unitary organization, assuming the dimensions of a lumbering bureaucracy” while also functioning as a transnational network with operatives and alliances spanning the globe.<sup>10</sup>

The emir sits atop of al-Qaeda’s organizational structure and is involved in “operational, strategic, and tactical planning” in addition to overseeing the regular administrative and organizational responsibilities of the group.<sup>11</sup> Beneath the deputy lies the Shura or command council, comprised of senior members, all appointed by the emir; this is the highest decision-making body of al-Qaeda. The Shura council is also primarily responsible for consulting on important decisions and major activities carried out by the affiliates.<sup>12</sup> Al-Qaeda’s organizational structure includes specialized committees and ensures that individuals with specialized skills are fully utilized. Each committee has its own set of budgets, missions, and objectives. Bin Laden remained closely involved until his death.

Al-Qaeda’s organizational structure was deliberately designed to be resilient and adaptive, capable of withstanding significant losses to its senior leader corps and mid-level commander echelon. Within the organization, mid-level commanders have been empowered to execute the organization’s strategic vision with significant autonomy, and it was the “group of middle managers” that were able to “provide the connective tissue that links the top of the organization with its bottom and, thus, makes it possible for Al Qaeda to function as a coherent

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<sup>9</sup> Bergen, Peter and Paul Cruickshank. “Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of Its Formative Years.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2012, 35(1), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Hoffman, Bruce. “The Changing Face of Al-Qaeda and the Global War on Terrorism.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 27, Iss. 6, 2004, 551.

<sup>11</sup> Gunaratna, Rohan and Aviv Oreg. “Al-Qaeda’s Organizational Structure and its Evolution.” Vol. 33, Iss. 12, 2010, 1043-1078.

<sup>12</sup> Brachman, Jarret M. *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*. 2009. <https://www.routledge.com/Global-Jihadism-Theory-and-Practice/Brachman/p/book/9780415452427>.

and operationally effective entity.”<sup>13</sup> Following the loss of its Afghan sanctuary after 9/11, one of al-Qaeda’s top strategists, Abu Musab al-Suri, called for the group to adopt a decentralized model of “leaderless resistance.”<sup>14</sup> Another camp within al-Qaeda favored the approach advocated by Abu Bakr Naji, author of *The Management of Savagery*, who believed that holding territory and working to establish local governance mechanisms while implementing sharia law and providing social services to the population would be the most effective approach. Following its rise in 2014, this is the approach Islamic State would follow.

Even in the face of an aggressive U.S.-led counterterrorism campaign in the decade following 9/11, al-Qaeda managed to retain a centralized core, while also exercising command and control by “determining both the trajectory of the organization as well as its strategic direction.”<sup>15</sup> Al-Qaeda played an important role in several high-profile attacks, including those in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005.<sup>16</sup> In the roughly ten years between the 9/11 attacks and his death in May 2011, bin Laden remained an active leader that provided important input to tactics, operations, and strategy.<sup>17</sup> Inevitably, by making the strategic decision to adopt a franchise model, al-Qaeda ceded some level of autonomy to its affiliates, trading control for increased reach and relevance in conflicts in the Levant, Arabian Peninsula, and Horn of Africa.

Recognizing an opportunity when it saw one, al-Qaeda dispersed militants to new locales in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring protests. Wherever al-Qaeda identified power vacuums, it sought to take advantage of the situation. Front groups were created through Ansar al-Sharia branches in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, and al-Qaeda fighters developed front groups while attempting to make themselves indistinguishable from rebel fighters in Mali, Syria, and

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<sup>13</sup> Neumann, Peter et al., “Locating Al-Qaeda’s Center of Gravity: The Role of Middle Managers.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 34(11), 2011, 826.

<sup>14</sup> Cruickshank, Paul. “Abu Musab al-Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30(1), 2007, 1-14; see also: Lia, Brynjar. *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Musab al-Suri*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed and Nathaniel Barr. “How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group’s Evolving Organizational Design.” Hudson Institute, June 1, 2018, 68. <https://www.hudson.org/research/14365-how-al-qaeda-works-the-jihadist-group-s-evolving-organizational-design>.

<sup>16</sup> On al-Qaeda’s connections to the Madrid attack, see: Reinares, Fernando. *Al-Qaeda’s Revenge: The 2004 Madrid Train Bombings*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017; on the London attacks, see: Pantucci, Raffaello. “We Love Death as You Love Life.” *Britain’s Suburban Terrorists*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Hoffman, Bruce. “What Osama Was Thinking at the End.” *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2012. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304451104577390112647897578>.

Yemen.<sup>18</sup> Al Qaeda also established a growing presence in West Africa; its African affiliates developed the capability to conduct a campaign of high-profile attacks over a six month period in late 2015 and early 2016 in Bamako, Mali; Ougadougou, Burkina Faso; and Grand-Bassam, Ivory Coast. A more decentralized structure allowed al-Qaeda to cultivate networks in weak states and alternatively governed spaces and tap into sources of local anger and resentment stemming from political, socio-economic, or religious grievances.<sup>19</sup> During this same period, increased sectarianism related to an intensifying proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran helped al-Qaeda recruit new members in Yemen and elsewhere throughout the Middle East.<sup>20</sup>

While al-Qaeda has undeniably allocated critical resources to ensuring its toehold in Syria, as well as in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, the group's activities in the Sahel and other regions of sub-Saharan Africa appear to be more geared toward the long-term. In response to what al-Qaeda sees as a major opportunity for future expansion, its leaders have redeployed assets to the African continent.<sup>21</sup> Driven in part by an ongoing competition with Islamic State for primacy in Africa, al-Qaeda has increased its focus on operations while also laying the foundation for a comeback in countries like Mali and Somalia.<sup>22</sup> As it has in other regions it considers important, al-Qaeda restructured its organization in West Africa, with Ansar al-Din, al-Murabitoon, and the Sahara branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) merging to form Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), or "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Zelin, Aaron Y. "Introduction," in Aaron Y. Zelin, ed., *How al-Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State: The Nature of the Current Threat*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, June 2017, 3-5. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-al-qaeda-survived-drones-uprisings-and-the-islamicstate>.

<sup>19</sup> Clarke, Colin. "How Terrorist Groups Learn: Implications for al-Qaeda." *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 13, 2019. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/03/how-terrorist-groups-learn-implications-for-al-qaeda/>.

<sup>20</sup> Riedel, Bruce. "Al-Qaida today, 18 years after 9/11." Brookings Institution, September 10, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/09/10/al-qaida-today-18-years-after-9-11/>.

<sup>21</sup> Wirtschafter, Jacob and Karim John Gadiaga. "Africa becomes the new battleground for ISIS and al-Qaeda as they lose ground in Mideast." *USA Today*, October 25, 2017. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/10/25/africa-becomes-new-battleground-isis-and-al-qaeda-they-lose-ground-mideast/796148001/>.

<sup>22</sup> Carey, Glenn. "Al-Qaeda is as Strong as Ever After Rebuilding Itself, U.S. Says." *Bloomberg*, August 1, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-01/al-qaeda-is-as-strong-as-ever-after-rebuilding-itself-u-s-says>.

<sup>23</sup> Newlee, Danika and the CSIS iDeas Lab. "Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/programs/past-projects/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/jamaat-nasr-al-islam>.

## *Ideology*

Al-Qaeda's ideology is the central element that holds the group together, attracts global recruits, and shapes its message.<sup>24</sup> Without a strong ideological core to keep members bonded and inspiring their dedication, the group would have long since lost its membership and status as a threat.<sup>25</sup> Al-Qaeda's perseverance, despite the loss of numerous leaders, has been fueled by an organizational structure in which well-prepared subordinates promptly replace lost leaders and a core of religious and ideological zealots inspire fervor in their followers.<sup>26</sup> General Stanley McChrystal discussed this point in an interview related to this research, saying "al-Qaeda had a mediocre structure, but an extremely strong message."<sup>27</sup>

Al-Qaeda's ideology is centered around a single narrative that presents a unifying framework from which its followers can understand the world and their role in it.<sup>28</sup> The chief message is that the West is waging a war against Islam. Under this broad idea, al-Qaeda is able to channel a wide range of regional grievances that relate to the "median voter"<sup>29</sup>—grievances regarding Western colonialism and the U.S. presence in the Middle East; that the West is oppressive and unjust toward Islam around the world, enabling or permitting violence against Muslim communities in places like Chechnya or Bosnia; that the West supports corrupt apostate regimes in the Islamic world; and that the West is responsible for the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Although he was not a religious scholar, bin Laden's *fatwas* established four foundational goals that have remained essential to the organization's mission: to bring all Muslims together under a single nation that follows Sharia; to free the "holy lands" from the "Zionist-Crusaders" who align against Muslims and Muslim countries (i.e. the West); to overthrow any regimes deemed "non-Islamic" by al-Qaeda; and to lessen the burden of economic and social issues affecting

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<sup>24</sup> Blanchard, Christopher (2007). *Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology* (CRS Report No. RL32759). <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32759.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Ligon, G.S., Logan, M.K., Hall, M., Derrick, D.C., Fuller, J., & Church, S. (2017). "The Jihadi Industry: Assessing the Organizational, Leadership, and Cyber Profiles." Final report prepared for the Department of Homeland Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs, College Park, MD: START.

<sup>26</sup> Gunaratna, Rohan. *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*. Columbia University Press, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.7312/guna12692>.

<sup>27</sup> McChrystal, Stanley. Interview with General Stanley McChrystal. December 22, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Schmid, A.P. "The Importance of Countering al Qaeda's 'Single Narrative,'" in E.J.A.M. Kessels (Ed.), *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives* (The Hague: National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 2010), 47.

<sup>29</sup> Lynch, Marc. "Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies." *The National Interest*, 2006, no. 83, 51. <http://www.marclynch.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/out.pdf>.

Islamic nations.<sup>30</sup> Bin Laden was rarely coy about what al-Qaeda's goals and objectives were—his public statements can be utilized as essential primary sources for anyone seeking to understand the demands, expectations, and ideology of al-Qaeda.<sup>31</sup> In a 1997 interview, bin Laden said, “the U.S. today has set a double standard, calling whoever goes against its injustice, a terrorist.”<sup>32</sup> Today, the U.S. and others have criticized several authoritarian regimes of doing just that to silence opposition, from Syria to China.

Like Islamic State, al-Qaeda follows a warped interpretation of the Islamic doctrine of *takfir* which they consider a loophole for killing fellow Muslims, despite the Quran's forbiddance. *Takfir* is theoretically limited to killing of Muslim tyrants, those that serve Muslim despots or betray their peers to serve foreign interests, and those Muslims found to be improperly practicing their faith. This final scenario has become an increasingly common justification for the invocation of al-Qaeda's interpretation of *takfir* against all Muslims, but especially the Shi'a and those who follow more progressive or syncretic interpretations of Islam.<sup>33</sup> Although al-Qaeda embraces *takfir* less intensely than Islamic State, they have expanded their use of it in declarations since 9/11.

**Al-Qaeda's ideology is centered around a single narrative that presents a unifying framework from which its followers can understand the world and their role in it.**

The gradual embrace of *takfir* allowed al-Qaeda's ideology to exploit sectarian conflicts and recruit and mobilize followers in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. One of the starkest examples was in Iraq after the 2003 invasion when the United States adopted reconstruction and de-Baathification policies that expelled civil servants, teachers, military officials, intelligence officers, and others who had served under Saddam Hussein. Intense sectarian tensions resulted between Iraqi Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, and al-Qaeda in Iraq exploited the tensions to bolster its

<sup>30</sup> Haynes, Jeffrey. “Al Qaeda: Ideology and Action.” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, June 2005, 8(2), 177–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230500108868>; Bin Laden, Osama. “Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites, 1996.” <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Declaration-of-Jihad-against-the-Americans-Occupying-the-Land-of-the-Two-Holiest-Sites-Translation.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Blanchard, Christopher (2007). *Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology* (CRS Report No. RL32759). <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32759.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> “Timeline: Osama Bin Laden, over the Years.” *CNN*, May 2, 2011. <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/05/02/osama.timeline/index.html>.

<sup>33</sup> “Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.” *Crisis Group*, March 14, 2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state>.



ranks and mobilize against the Shi'a. Under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, AQI attacks against Iraq's Shi'a population and religious symbols were so vicious that even bin Laden and Zawahiri attempted to rein him in.<sup>34</sup> More recent examples of al-Qaeda's exploitation of sectarianism and geopolitics can be identified across multiple regions, ranging from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) role in the civil war in Yemen to al-Qaeda's propaganda highlighting injustices against Muslims in South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, and Sri Lanka.

AQAP has long been the affiliate most focused on propaganda and the spread of al-Qaeda's ideology through media outreach. For years, AQAP acted as the general communication hub for al-Qaeda core, working with the core and other affiliates to create and share content. AQAP's media arm was previously effective and well-financed, to even include a popular magazine, *Inspire*, but the branch has suffered significant losses in recent years. The United States and its allies have escalated targeted attacks and airstrikes against the members responsible for the writing, production, and distribution of the propaganda in written and video form.<sup>35</sup> When discussing the United States' multifaceted counterterrorism strategy, Admiral William McRaven explained that "it takes a network to defeat a network."<sup>36</sup> Setbacks for AQAP's propaganda efforts impact al-Qaeda's global network by reducing the group's relevance and hampering communication with its followers; however, the deaths of some AQAP propagandists did the opposite. For example, the death of AQAP's ideological figurehead, Anwar al Awlaki, created a martyr to many supporters and only fueled the spread of his pre-mortem message.<sup>37</sup>

Over the past twenty years, al-Qaeda's ideology has remained resilient in the face of the Global War on Terror. Tragically, U.S. missteps have fueled the narrative rather than counter it, as evidenced by the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the images released from Abu Ghraib prison and the use of "Enhanced Interrogation Techniques," and the indefinite detention of al-Qaeda members without trial in Guantanamo. Rather than countering extremist narratives, Washington and its allies have lent credence to them through ill-designed sanctions, errant drone strikes, and support to autocratic leaders that merely serve to exacerbate al-Qaeda's grievances and bolster recruitment into its ranks.

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<sup>34</sup> Hunt, Emily. "Zarqawi's 'Total War' on Iraqi Shiites Exposes a Divide among Sunni Jihadists." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 15, 2005. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/zarqawis-total-war-on-iraqi-shiites-exposes-a-divide-among-sunni-jihadists>.

<sup>35</sup> Joscelyn, Thomas. "Analysis: AQAP Remains under Pressure." *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 26, 2018. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/05/analysis-aqap-remains-under-pressure.php>.

<sup>36</sup> McRaven, William H. Interview with Admiral William H. McRaven (RET), December 10, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Shane, Scott. "The Enduring Influence of Anwar Al-Awlaki in the Age of the Islamic State." *CTC Sentinel*, July 2016, 9(7), 15-19. <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-enduring-influence-of-anwar-al-awlaki-in-the-age-of-the-islamic-state/>.

## Strategy

As with any organization that has existed for more than three decades, al-Qaeda's strategy has shifted over time, with adaptations implemented in response to macro-changes in the operating environment. In an effort to blunt Western counterterrorism efforts designed to disrupt and dismantle al-Qaeda's command-and-control network, the organization has periodically realigned its priorities and reevaluated its objectives, thus necessitating adjustments to its strategy. Al-Qaeda's strategic vision has been a merger of global and local interests. The so-called "near enemy" is represented by the regional "apostate" regimes backed by the West. As such, expelling American influence in the region is a top-tier goal for al-Qaeda and its branches.<sup>38</sup> By attacking the "far enemy," exemplified by the United States and the West more broadly, al-Qaeda seeks to weaken the resolve of the American people to remain in the region and coerce elected officials to push for a reduced presence in the Middle East.<sup>39</sup> Various affiliates have assumed a more local agenda, but as a whole, al-Qaeda continues to balance global and local priorities. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has therefore been widely celebrated in jihadist circles as proof that sticking to the plan is working.<sup>40</sup>

Al-Qaeda attacked the United States to achieve some of its most high priority objectives, including a strong desire to drive the U.S. out of the Middle East and dislodge American support for governments in the Arab and Islamic world that vehemently opposed al-Qaeda.<sup>41</sup> While it may prefer large, dramatic attacks on hard targets like the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in East Africa or the 2000 USS Cole bombings, al-Qaeda will support smaller attacks on Western or Jewish targets.<sup>42</sup> Al-Qaeda also sees value in striking symbolic or culturally significant targets, like the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris.

As terrorism experts Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank have noted, bin Laden sought to keep "Al Qaeda's aims broad enough," so that he could "create a somewhat cohesive organization."<sup>43</sup> But by launching terrorist attacks against Western (particularly American) targets, the al-Qaeda

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<sup>38</sup> Libicki, Martin C., Peter Chalk, and Melanie Sisson. "What Drives al Qaeda's Choice of Target?" *RAND Corporation*, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Soufan, Ali H. *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> "IntelBrief: African Jihadist Groups React to the Taliban's Victory." The Soufan Center, September 9, 2021. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-september-9/>.

<sup>41</sup> Joscelyn, Tom. Interview with Long War Journal author Tom Joscelyn, March 12, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Byman, Daniel L. "Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different Goals, Different Targets." *Brookings*, April 29, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Bergen, Peter and Paul Cruickshank. "Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of Its Formative Years." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2012, 35(1), 11.

leader was trying to imbue a shared sense of purpose among jihadists. Accordingly, the attacks themselves served a strategic purpose; bin Laden believed that launching highly symbolic spectacular attacks could forge unity among “foreign militants” in the global jihadist movement. This would compel smaller groups to recognize al-Qaeda as the “strong horse” capable of expelling Western nations from Muslim lands and then turning to focus on what the jihadists considered apostate regimes in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>44</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in late 2002, al-Qaeda still sought to remain the vanguard for change leading to a broader Islamist revolution. Deprived of its safe haven in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda moved most of its surviving leadership to Pakistan, particularly the areas of Sindh and Punjab; other leaders would end up in Iran, forcing the group into clandestine operations across vast distances and uncertain communications. Ultimately, a major pillar of al-Qaeda’s strategy for most of the 2000s was plotting external operations against the West. Spectacular attacks were intended to garner widespread attention for the global jihadist cause, unite the *umma* under the banner of al-Qaeda, and drive the United States and its allies from Muslim lands.<sup>45</sup>

Expansion formed the cornerstone of a multi-pronged strategy that also included “bleeding wars” of attrition in Afghanistan and Iraq, and devoting resources to cultivating loyal supporters and promising recruits from Western countries, especially in Europe.

To maintain pressure on the West, al-Qaeda embarked upon a process of geographic expansion, developing a range of affiliates and franchise groups in different parts of the world. Expansion formed the cornerstone of a multi-pronged strategy that also included “bleeding wars” of attrition in Afghanistan and Iraq, and devoting resources to cultivating loyal supporters and promising recruits from Western countries, especially in Europe.<sup>46</sup>

One of the major strategic debates during the decade following the 9/11 attacks and U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was between those in al-Qaeda who advocated for a more decentralized approach versus those who believed that a centralized and hierarchical structure was a prerequisite to organizational success. Those in favor of the decentralized approach prevailed, but al-Qaeda would look to alter its strategy yet again.

<sup>44</sup> Farrall, Leah. “How Al Qaeda Works: What the Organization’s Subsidiaries Say About Its Strength.” *Foreign Affairs*, 2011, no. 90, 128.

<sup>45</sup> Malet, David. “Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions.” *Orbis*, Winter 2010, 105.

<sup>46</sup> Riedel, Bruce. *The Search For Al Qaeda*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008, 121-2.

In the years since the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS, al-Qaeda has consistently attempted to portray itself throughout the Middle East as the moderate alternative to Islamic State.<sup>47</sup> At times, this approach has borne fruit, with al-Qaeda-linked groups securing direct and indirect state support in both Yemen and Syria.<sup>48</sup> Al-Qaeda's approach in Syria has been compared to that of a "lean startup model," wherein strategy is developed in both a bottom-up and top-down fashion.<sup>49</sup> For al-Qaeda, this translates to a strategy shaped primarily by its senior leadership, but with input from regional representatives. In both its propaganda and internal communications, al-Qaeda has repeatedly warned about the danger in failing to heed valuable lessons from failed jihadist campaigns in countries like Algeria and Iraq. In both of these cases, draconian measures alienated local populations. In an effort to remind al-Qaeda's followers of the importance of its brand, Zawahiri released the *General Guidelines for Jihad* in 2013, imploring militants to eschew attacking civilians and deliberately juxtaposing the group's methodology to that of Islamic State.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Clarke, Colin. "The Moderate Face of al-Qaeda: How the Group Rebranded Itself." *Foreign Affairs*, October 24, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-24/moderate-face-al-qaeda>.

<sup>48</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed and Varsha Koduvayur. "How to Win Friends and Wage Jihad: Understanding al-Qaeda's Pragmatism." *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2019. [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-07-01/how-win-friends-and-wage-jihad?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter\\_cta&utm\\_campaign=cta\\_share\\_buttons](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-07-01/how-win-friends-and-wage-jihad?utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter_cta&utm_campaign=cta_share_buttons).

<sup>49</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed. "A Strategic History of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Formation," in Aaron Y. Zelin, ed., *How al-Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State: The Nature of the Current Threat*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, June 2017, 34-35. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-alqaeda-survived-drones-uprisings-and-the-islamic-state>.

<sup>50</sup> Hamming, Tore Refslund. "Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences." *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Lowell) 11(6), (2017), 63–88. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26295957.pdf>.

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## AFFILIATES AND FRANCHISES

Currently, al-Qaeda affiliates operate as a franchise, with al-Qaeda core acting as financiers for new or struggling affiliates when possible, as consultants to bring in tactical and technical expertise, and as guides who align leadership decisions over immediate objectives in accordance with al-Qaeda's overarching strategy. The affiliates are drawn by al-Qaeda's financial connections, recruitment potential, and brand name recognition, and adhere to the broader mission of establishing a unified Salafi-jihadist caliphate over the entire Islamic world.<sup>51</sup> Affiliates must ascribe to a constrained set of tactics and targets, as opposed to the gratuitous violence that we see with alternatives such as Islamic State. They believe the primary opposition to their version of Islamic society is Western culture and support for apostate regimes in the Arab and Muslim world. This relationship is sealed by a culturally powerful public or private formal pledge of *bayat* or allegiance to al-Qaeda's emir.

### ***Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)***

Of all of al-Qaeda's affiliates, the most consequential was al-Qaeda in Iraq, or al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers, led by al-Zarqawi.<sup>52</sup> Al-Qaeda's Iraq franchise was its first affiliate resulting from a merger, in which al-Zarqawi's Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (TWJ) and al-Qaeda joined forces. Both groups had their own motives for the merger. For al-Qaeda, the group's leadership felt compelled to expand into Iraq after the U.S. invasion in 2003, lest it risk being marginalized at a time when jihadists were flocking to the country to fight American soldiers. Al-Qaeda lacked a domestic infrastructure in Iraq, and so had to partner with another jihadist outfit already established in the area. For Zarqawi, the move to form AQI was a pragmatic attempt to gain

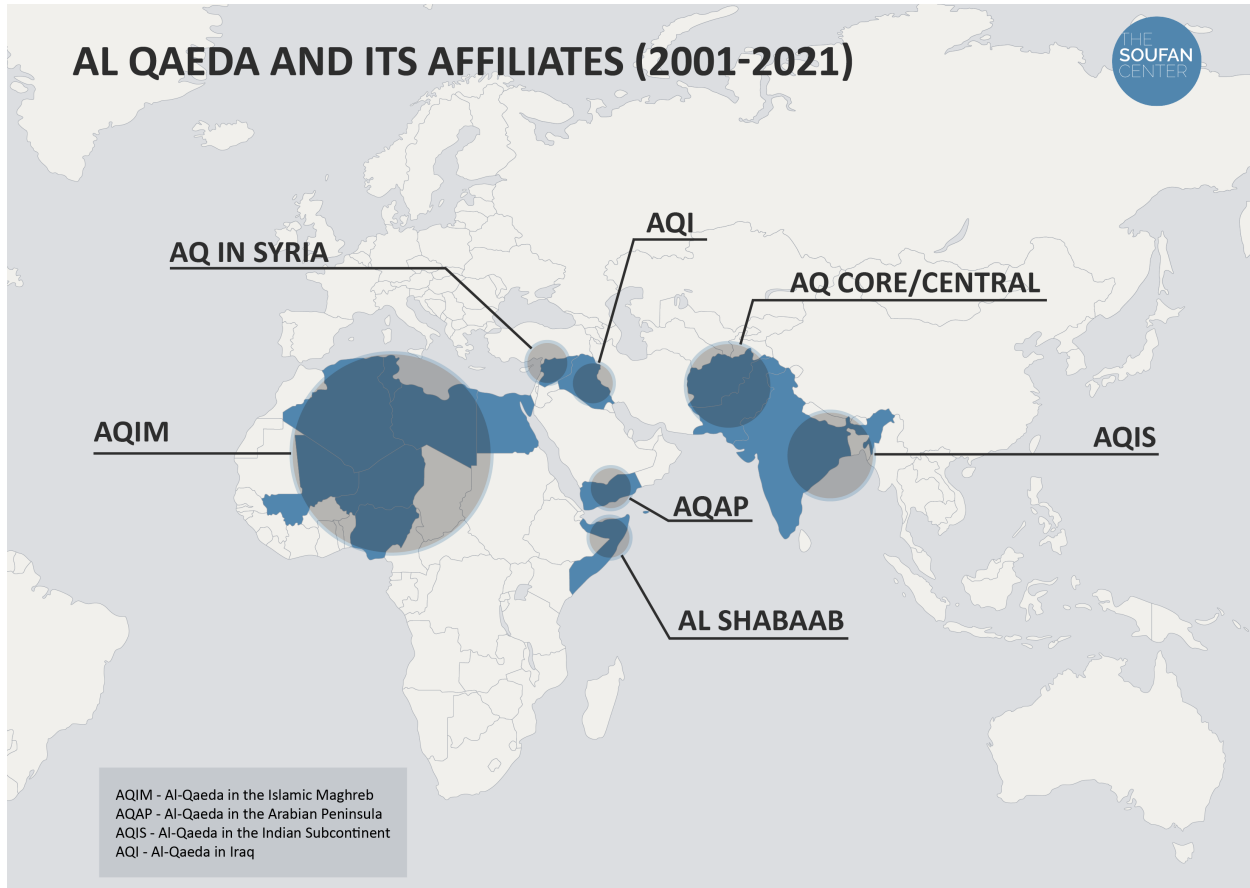
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<sup>51</sup> For the purposes of this paper, our research looks explicitly at al-Qaeda affiliates or franchise groups in the last twenty years. As such, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine what some have labeled "associated movements." Terrorism scholar Seth G. Jones categorized groups like Jemaah Islamiya (JI) as "other Salafi-jihadist groups," meaning groups that have a direct relationship with al-Qaeda, but which were not created by core al-Qaeda, have not become formal members, and groups whose leaders have not sworn *bayat* to core al-Qaeda. Other such groups include Ansar al-Sharia Libya, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, and the Caucasus-based Imarat Kavkaz, to name just a few examples. For more, see: Jones, Seth. *A Persistent Threat*. RAND (2014). [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR637.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR637.html).

<sup>52</sup> In between the time it was AQI and ISIS, the group was alternatively known as Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin (MSM) and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Zelin, Aaron Y. "The War Between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 2014, no. 20, 1.

access to core al-Qaeda's deep-pocketed donors throughout the Gulf, as well as to adopt a brand that would help attract foreign fighters.

**Figure 1: Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates (2001-2021)**



After the U.S. invasion in 2003, western Iraq in particular became a sanctuary for many foreign fighters. Saudi militants in AQI provided the most money of any foreign contingent to the group, and also accounted for nearly three-quarters of all AQI's suicide bombers at the height of the insurgency in 2006 and 2007.<sup>53</sup> The most common nationalities of foreign fighters who traveled to fight in Iraq were, in order, Saudi, Libyan, and Syrian.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, since TWJ was composed primarily of militants from Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories, AQI had a

<sup>53</sup> Fishman Brian, ed. *Bombers, Bank Accounts, & Bleedout: Al-Qai'da's Road In and Out of Iraq*. Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, 2008. <https://ctc.usma.edu/bombers-bank-accounts-and-bleedout-al-qaidas-road-in-and-out-of-iraq>.

<sup>54</sup> Fishman, Brian and Joseph Felter. *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records*. Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, January 2, 2007. <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaidas-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-a-first-look-at-the-sinjar-records>.

significant non-Iraqi core from its inception.<sup>55</sup> From the start, there were tensions between AQI's Iraqi members and foreigners.<sup>56</sup> These tensions extended to the leadership, including the Jordanian-born Zarqawi, who was constantly at odds with core al-Qaeda's leaders on a number of issues—above all, his penchant for targeting Shiites.<sup>57</sup>

The egregious sectarianism of AQI generated more than just a theological dispute; senior core al-Qaeda members recalled what happened in Algeria, after the population turned against the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), a Salafi-jihadist group that resorted to killing fellow Muslims and even targeting neutrals who did not provide overt support to its agenda. The February 2006 bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra, one of Shi'a Islam's holiest places, killed dozens and unleashed “a tidal wave of reprisals that would claim thousands more lives across the country.”<sup>58</sup> The bombing of the mosque got AQI what it wanted, reprisals from anti-Sunni death squads that supercharged Iraq's civil war, although there would also be a backlash against AQI from the Sunni population in Anbar over time.<sup>59</sup> The insubordination of AQI would be a harbinger of the future foreshadowing the rise of Islamic State.<sup>60</sup> As terrorism expert Brian Fishman notes, “Zarqawi and Al Qaeda were allies of convenience rather than genuine partners.”<sup>61</sup> Zarqawi never fell in line with core al-Qaeda's agenda and consistently clashed with bin Laden and Zawahiri, successfully maintaining his autonomy and ignoring the leadership's repeated pleas to focus on the Americans rather than the Shi'a.

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<sup>55</sup> Johnston, Patrick B. et al. *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005-2010*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Fishman, Brian. “Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside Al-Qa’ida in Iraq.” *Washington Quarterly*, March, 2009. In 2006, AQI joined the Mujahedin Shura Council (MSC), which was a political–military front for several jihadist organizations, but as Craig Whiteside notes, the council was “so dominated by AQI to the point that it is possible MSC was a sham organization used to convince Iraqis of its indigenous nature.” See: Whiteside, Craig. “The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 2016, 27(5), 768-9.

<sup>57</sup> Forest, James J.F., Jarret Brachman, and Joseph Felter. *Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting al-Qa’ida’s Organizational Vulnerabilities*. Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, February 14, 2006. <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-and-disharmony-exploiting-al-qaidas-organizational-vulnerabilities>; see also Byman, Daniel. “Buddies of Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations.” *Security Studies*, 23:3, 2014, 461-465.

<sup>58</sup> Soufan, Ali H. *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, p.155.

<sup>59</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Massacre Strategy.” *Politico*, June 17, 2014. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/the-massacre-strategy-107954/>.

<sup>60</sup> Mendelsohn, Barak. *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016: 123. After Zarqawi's death, AQI rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), without ever discussing the move with Al Qaeda core leadership.

<sup>61</sup> Fishman, Brian. “After Zarqawi: The Dilemmas and Future of Al Qaeda in Iraq.” *Washington Quarterly*, 2006, 29(4), 21.

Zarqawi was killed in June 2006, and several events followed that further demoralized AQI, including the Sunni Awakening and the 2007 U.S. troop surge. Along with a relentless counterterrorism campaign that targeted AQI's leadership, these developments helped to reduce the group's influence, revenue, and access to territory and supporters. The group rebranded as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), and proved not only resilient, but regenerative. ISI overcame the loss of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri in April 2010 after the group's top two leaders were killed following a raid on a safe house near Tikrit.<sup>62</sup> After 2010, the increasing marginalization of Iraqi Sunnis helped clear the way for ISI to reassert control in Sunni-dominated areas where it once held sway.<sup>63</sup> The group underwent an organizational restructuring, implementing functional bureaus that would allow it to exert control over territory more efficiently. Around the time of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011, ISI began creating support zones and lines of effort focused on logistics. These two innovations would later facilitate the capture of large swaths of territory once it began its offensive in earnest over the next few years as it transitioned into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.<sup>64</sup>

**By leaving al-Qaeda, not only did Islamic State deal a blow to the group's senior leadership, but this new group led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would go on to become al-Qaeda's primary rival.**

The Islamic State in Iraq continued its evolution, branching out into Syria, attempting to subjugate Jabhat al-Nusra under its control, then eventually breaking with al-Qaeda and declaring the Islamic State. Back to its roots as AQI, this wing of the jihadist movement always had a revolutionary streak. But by leaving al-Qaeda, not only did Islamic State deal a blow to the group's senior leadership, which looked on helplessly from South Asia, but this new group led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would go on to become al-Qaeda's primary rival. In many ways, at least for a period of several years, Islamic State was ascendant, poaching al-Qaeda recruits and setting the stage for a rivalry that persists to this day. The big takeaway for al-Qaeda was a lesson in clamping down on affiliate insubordination early. The case of AQI demonstrates that, given geographic distance and infrequent communications resulting from counterterrorism pressure, franchise groups may develop an autonomy that can lead to a split further down the

<sup>62</sup> Arango, Tim. "Top Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Reported Killed in Raid." *New York Times*, April 19, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/20/world/middleeast/20baghdad.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Whiteside, Craig. "War, Interrupted, Part I: The Roots of the Jihadist Resurgence in Iraq." *War on the Rocks*, November 5, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Whiteside, Craig. "New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016)." *Perspectives on Terrorism*, August 2016, 10(4), 15.



road. AQI's wanton violence and relentless targeting of civilians, including Muslims, greatly damaged the al-Qaeda brand in the Middle East.

### ***Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)***

In 2006, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb was created by way of a merger between al-Qaeda and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), an Algerian Islamist group which fought against the Algerian government in the country's civil war. Like other al-Qaeda affiliates, AQIM has a hierarchical structure but is more "deterritorialized and departmentalized."<sup>65</sup> AQIM is divided into two emirates: the Central Emirate containing Algeria and Tunisia, and the Sahara Emirate covering northern Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Libya.<sup>66</sup> Below the central leadership, AQIM areas are divided into geographic zones with each zone holding a number of *katibats* (brigades), which number between dozens to hundreds of fighters.<sup>67</sup>

In the years following its establishment under the al-Qaeda brand, AQIM expanded its targeting strategy and initiated attacks not only in Algeria but also in neighboring countries like Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Tunisia. Over time, the organization's strategy has remained relatively unchanged with its broad objectives being to rid North Africa of Western influence, overthrow apostate governments, and establish fundamentalist regimes based on sharia.<sup>68</sup> How those objectives are pursued, however, has evolved and adapted, making AQIM an amorphous and resilient organization in the face of counterterrorism operations. The height of AQIM's threat in North Africa, and especially Algeria, was between its establishment in 2007 and 2013, the year of the *In Amenas* gas facility attack and hostage crisis. Prior to merging with al-Qaeda, the GSPC's attacks were primarily hostage taking or ambushes against the Algerian government with small arms and light weapons.<sup>69</sup> However, the merger with al-Qaeda granted access to more sophisticated bombs so that from 2007-2012, the organization initiated 34 suicide bombings in Algeria alone.<sup>70</sup> AQIM's use of kidnap for ransom to raise funds netted substantial

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<sup>65</sup> Rivinius, Jessica Stark. "The Jihadi Industry: Assessing the Organizational, Leadership and Cyber Profiles." 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Boeke, Sergei. "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, Insurgency, or Organized Crime?" *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, September 2, 2016, 27(5). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1208280>.

<sup>67</sup> Rivinius, 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Laub, Zachary and Jonathan Masters. "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb." *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)*, March 27, 2015. <https://www.cfr.org/background/al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb>.

<sup>69</sup> Chivvis, Christopher S. and Andrew Liepman. "North Africa's Menace: AQIM's Evolution and the U.S. Policy Response." *Rand Corporation*, 2013, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Warner, Jason, Ellen Chapin, and Caleb Weiss. "Desert Drift, Declining Deadline: Understanding the Evolution of AQIM's Suicide Bombings." West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), October 2020, IV. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Desert-Drift-Declining-Deadline.pdf>.

resources; it is estimated that the organization's ransoms fees were as high as \$65 million, making the organization impressively well-funded for its relatively low membership.<sup>71</sup>

Since 2013, AQIM's operations shifted heavily to the Sahel following the Arab Spring and subsequent civil war in Libya, followed by the 2012 coup in Mali which offered AQIM the opportunity to shop for more sophisticated weapons and seize territory. Mokhtar Belmokhtar led this territorial expansion for over a decade, as well as the organization's southern operations, making inroads to local populations and exploiting the area's lawless environment and fragile states. Working closely with *Ansar Dine* and the *Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa* (MUJAO), Belmokhtar established a foothold in Northern Mali in 2012. Later that year, however, AQIM's southern front began to fragment due to tensions with AQIM's founder Abdelmalak Droukdel. For years, Droukdel had been criticizing Belmokhtar's adventurism and growing independence from central leadership. As French and Algerian military crackdowns increased in 2012 and worsened relations between the two leaders, Belmokhtar and his divisions split from AQIM to form the Al Mulathamun Battalion (AMB), which in August of 2013 merged with MUJAO to form Al Mourabitoun. In 2015, Al Mourabitoun joined AQIM and carried out a number of deadly attacks including a mass shooting at Mali's Raddison Blu Hotel in 2015, the hostage crisis at Burkina Faso's Splendid Hotel in 2016, and the bombing of a French-UN military base in 2017. In March of 2017, AQIM created another merger under the name Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) that included AQIM's Sahel branch, Al Murabitoun, Ansar al Dine, and the Macina Liberation Front. Since the merger was formed, attacks have increased in the Sahel every year and attracted terrorist and criminal groups to the region.<sup>72</sup>

AQIM has experienced a decline in recent years, in large part due to French and Algerian counterterrorism forces, the rise of Islamic State's influence in the region, the aforementioned divisions and splinter groups, and, more recently, the deaths of some of its key leaders. Consequently, while JNIM is still linked to AQIM and presents one of the most pressing regional threats, al-Qaeda's influence over the organization could be in flux, especially after the deaths of leaders like Abdelmalak Droukdel, Djamel Okcha, Ali Maychou, and Mohamed Ould Nouini.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Chivvis, 7.

<sup>72</sup> Eizenga, Daniel and Wendy Williams. "The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel." *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, Africa Security Brief no. 38, December 1, 2020. <https://africacenter.org/publication/puzzle-jnim-militant-islamist-groups-sahel/>.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

Five months after Droukdel was killed in a French raid last year, AQIM announced that Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Annabi would lead as the affiliate's new emir.<sup>74</sup> Annabi is an Algerian who was the head of the AQIM's Council of Notables and has been heavily involved in AQIM's strategy in the Sahel. Annabi faces an uphill battle to strengthen AQIM's influence in the region and keep the organization from losing more fighters to Islamic State. However, France's recent announcement about drawing down Operation Barkhane and shift its counterterrorism posture in the region could present a window of opportunity for AQIM to maintain its staying power.<sup>75</sup>

The evolution of al-Qaeda's involvement in north and west Africa demonstrates its capacity for organizational learning, one that belies a sophisticated understanding of local political developments. Further, the splintering and merging of various factions and offshoots is evidence of the dynamic nature of the threat posed by al-Qaeda in Africa, especially as AQIM, JNIM, and allied groups spread to countries such as Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin, and Senegal. The continued expansion of the terrorist threat in Africa was highlighted by the UN Secretary-General's thirteenth report on the threat posed by ISIL/Da'esh (S/2021/682), and this owes a great deal to the foundations laid by al-Qaeda in the region. As the United States and France both draw down their troop presence in Africa, al-Qaeda will certainly foresee a promising future on the continent, now posing a problem for African governments from the Maghreb, across the Sahel, to the Horn and southeastern Swahili coast.<sup>76</sup>

### ***Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)***

Of all of al-Qaeda's affiliates, its Yemeni branch, AQAP emerged to become the most operationally capable. Al-Qaeda's Yemen franchise was the product of an in-house expansion, with the establishment of "The al-Qaeda Organization of Jihad in the South of the Arabian Peninsula," which became "The al-Qaeda Organization in the Land of Yemen" and eventually gave way to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula when al-Qaeda's Saudi and Yemeni networks merged in early 2009.<sup>77</sup> Although estimates vary, AQAP is thought to have as many as 4,000 militants under arms. AQAP operates on multiple levels, pursuing local grievances in Yemen,

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<sup>74</sup> Nasr, Wassim. "Implications of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's New Leadership." *Newlines Institute*, February 8, 2021. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/al-qaeda/implications-of-al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-new-leadership/>.

<sup>75</sup> "Intelbrief: As France Draws Down in the Sahel, How Will it Impact Regional Stability?" The Soufan Center, June 24, 2021. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-june-24/>.

<sup>76</sup> Clarke, Colin P. and Jacob Zenn. "ISIS and Al-Qaeda's Sub-Saharan Affiliates Are Poised for Growth in 2021." *Defense One*, February 26, 2021. <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/02/isis-and-al-qaedas-sub-saharan-affiliates-are-poised-growth-2021/172313/>.

<sup>77</sup> Mendelsohn, Barak. *The Al Qaeda Franchise*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, 134.

where it seeks to establish a province ruled by sharia law, but also plugs its objectives more broadly into the global jihad, where it ties into al-Qaeda's transnational narrative.

While core al-Qaeda went years without being able to pull off a spectacular attack against the West, AQAP managed several "near misses" against U.S. airliners, including the notorious "underwear bomber" plot and another plot against cargo planes with explosive-laden printer cartridges onboard. Even though they failed, they demonstrated AQAP's ability to plan spectacular attacks that would have been devastating if not foiled due to security services' efforts and terrorists' ineptitude. The now-deceased master bombmaker of the group, Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, was at one point considered by former CIA Director David Petraeus to be "the world's most dangerous man."<sup>78</sup> Currently, the group provides training and assistance to other terrorist groups, including al-Shabaab in Somalia, and has been credited with helping Shabaab improve the lethality of its improvised explosive devices and other bomb-making tactics. The leadership of AQAP has also communicated with other al-Qaeda affiliates, including AQIM, specifically to provide instruction on dealing with local populations throughout the Maghreb, and how AQAP navigated a range of obstacles in Yemen.<sup>79</sup>

According to Yemen specialist Michael Horton, AQAP has generally followed a three-pronged strategy: provision of goods and services to the local population; deepening ties with local tribes; and intertwining its forces with Yemeni groups fighting against the Houthis in order to garner more widespread legitimacy. This is all being done as the group has softened its stance on implementing sharia law throughout Yemen, in an attempt to avoid alienating the population.<sup>80</sup> AQAP has undoubtedly survived due to the geopolitical chaos and weak governance in Yemen, especially in the last decade. The brutal nature of the Yemeni conflict allowed AQAP to reposition itself as a legitimate grassroots political entity. AQAP thrived amidst the chaos and was able to secure more popular support among the population by juxtaposing its own actions to those of external intervention forces. At various points, the Saudi-Emirati coalition has argued that its iron-fist counterinsurgency campaign is effective, pointing to the withdrawal of AQAP from some of its strongholds. Yet, in fact, what occurred in many of these cases was a tactical withdrawal, where militants negotiated with local tribes to temporarily draw

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<sup>78</sup> Schmitt, Eric and Saeed al-Batati. "The U.S. Has Pummeled Al Qaeda in Yemen. But the Threat is Barely Dented." *New York Times*, December 30, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/world/middleeast/yemen-al-qaeda-us-terrorism.html>.

<sup>79</sup> Zimmerman, Katherine. "AQAP: A Resurgent Threat." *CTC Sentinel*, September 2015, 8(9).

<sup>80</sup> Horton, Michael. "Fighting the Long War: The Evolution of Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula." *CTC Sentinel*, January 2017, 10(1).

back and go to ground, before reemerging to take over the same terrain they had previously abandoned.<sup>81</sup>

Historically one of al-Qaeda's most formidable branches, AQAP is experiencing a phase of retrenchment as it seeks to recover from a series of setbacks and defeats.<sup>82</sup> In 2020, AQAP's emir, Qasim al-Raymi, was reportedly killed by U.S. airstrikes.<sup>83</sup> The loss of Raymi disrupted the group's organizational capabilities at a critical moment. He was replaced by the lesser-known Khalid bin Umar Batarfi. AQAP also suffered from a solid defeat at the hands of the Houthis rebels last year. All of these difficulties have compounded AQAP's struggles and left the group weakened, especially against the backdrop of leadership losses and challenges stemming from the spread of the coronavirus.

Overall, AQAP's future is uncertain. In addition to suffering a loss of key leadership and resources, the organization has been fighting multiple enemies in Yemen simultaneously, including the Houthis, the Southern Transitional Council, the Yemeni government, the Saudi led coalition, and Islamic State.<sup>84</sup> However, AQAP has demonstrated time and again the dangers of a terrorist affiliate evolving to eclipse the capabilities of the parent or core group. If al-Qaeda affiliates worldwide are reenergized by the drawdown of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, AQAP could once again become capable of rebuilding a robust capacity to strike the West.<sup>85</sup>

## ***Al-Shabaab***

Al-Shabaab, or "The Youth," is al-Qaeda's East African franchise, a group which is continuing the legacy of its predecessors, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Somalia, and prior to that, al-Itihaad

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<sup>81</sup> Kendall, Elisabeth. "How Can Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Be Defeated?" *Washington Post* Monkey Cage blog, May 3, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/03/how-can-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-be-defeated/>.

<sup>82</sup> Schmitt, Eric. "Killing of Terrorist Leader in Yemen Is Latest Blow to Qaeda Affiliate." *The New York Times*, February 10, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/10/us/politics/al-qaeda-yemen-qassim-al-rimi.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Carboni, Andrea, and Matthias Sulz. "The Wartime Transformation of AQAP in Yemen." ACLED, December 14, 2020. <https://acleddata.com/2020/12/14/the-wartime-transformation-of-aqap-in-yemen/>.

<sup>84</sup> Johnsen, Gregory D. "Khalid Batarfi and the Future of AQAP." *Lawfare*, March 22, 2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/khalid-batarfi-and-future-aqap>.

<sup>85</sup> Radman, Hussam. "Myth of Batarfi's Arrest Plays into Weakened AQAP Narrative." *Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies* (blog), March 18, 2021. <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/13466>.

al-Islamiya (AIAI).<sup>86</sup> Numerous members of al-Shabaab's founding core group participated in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan during the 1980s.<sup>87</sup> In 2005, al-Shabaab began to take shape when Afghan veterans of Somali origin, ex-AIAI militants, and remnants of al-Qaeda's East Africa network joined forces, although they were fewer than three dozen in total.<sup>88</sup> One year later, in response to Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia, al-Shabaab grew its organization through networking and recruitment among Somali clans.<sup>89</sup> The presence of an occupation force catalyzed the mobilization of foreign fighters, including many members of the Somali diaspora living in the United States—dozens of American citizens flocked to join al-Shabaab in Somalia.<sup>90</sup> While Somali nationalism was important to many foreign fighters, expelling Christian Ethiopia resonated deeply with al-Qaeda's supporters. And as researchers Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph observed, "if there was one thing that kept the leaders of Al-Shabaab under the same tent, it was their admiration for Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden."<sup>91</sup>

Al-Shabaab even began to mimic al-Qaeda tactics, introducing suicide bombing to Somalia for the first time.<sup>92</sup> In 2010, the same year that al-Shabaab carried out bombings in Kampala, Uganda, the group's leader Ahmed Godane declared his intention to operate with a more "global mindset," demonstrating a clear interest in joining al-Qaeda.<sup>93</sup> Al-Qaeda formally

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<sup>86</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed. "The Strategic Challenge of Somalia's Al-Shabaab." *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2009, 16(4), 25-36; see also: Menkhaus, Kenneth J. "Somalia and Somaliland: Terrorism, Political Islam, and State Collapse." in Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa*, Cambridge, MA: World Peace Foundation, 2005, 35-36.

<sup>87</sup> Jones, Seth G., Andrew Liepman, and Nathan Chandler. *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2016, 9.

<sup>88</sup> Hansen, Stig Jarle. *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005–2012*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 28-32.

<sup>89</sup> Menkhaus, Ken and Christopher Boucek. "Terrorism Out of Somalia." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 23, 2010. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2010/09/23/terrorism-out-of-somalia-pub-41612>.

<sup>90</sup> Shinn, David. "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia." *Orbis*, 2011, 55(2), 203-215; see also: Committee on Homeland Security. *Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization Within the Muslim American Community and the Threat to the Homeland*. Washington DC: Government Printing Office, July 27, 2011, 2.; Bacon, Tricia and Daisy Muibu. "The Domestication of Al-Shabaab." *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 2019, 10(3), 270-305.

<sup>91</sup> Maruf, Harun and Dan Joseph. *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018, 195.

<sup>92</sup> Warner, Jason and Ellen Chapin. "Targeted Terror: The Suicide Bombers of al-Shabaab." *CTC Sentinel*, February 13, 2018. <https://ctc.usma.edu/targeted-terror-suicide-bombers-al-shabaab/>; see also: Menkhaus, Ken. "Non-State Actors and the Role of Violence in Stateless Somalia," in Klejda Mulaj, ed., *Violent Non-State Actors in World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, 373.

<sup>93</sup> Vidino, Lorenzo, Raffaello Pantucci, and Evan Kohlmann. "Bringing Global Jihad to the Horn of Africa: al Shabaab, Western Fighters, the Sacralization of the Somali Conflict." *African Security*, 2010, 3(4), 224.

cemented ties with al-Shabaab in 2012 following an announcement from Zawahiri.<sup>94</sup> After the formal merger took place, it did not take long for al-Qaeda to leave its imprimatur on al-Shabaab. High-profile attacks followed at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya in September 2013 and a coordinated attack at a university in Garissa, Kenya in April 2015. These attacks foreshadowed al-Shabaab's evolution into an organization with the capabilities to strike throughout the region.<sup>95</sup> As al-Shabaab expert Tricia Bacon has noted, the group now operates as "a powerful hybrid organization: governing rural areas in Somalia, terrorizing Somali cities and AMISOM-contributing countries, and running a massive extortion ring that keeps the group well financed."<sup>96</sup>

Godane would only lead al-Shabaab for two years after its formal ascension into the al-Qaeda orbit, as he was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2014 and succeeded by Ahmed Umar (Abu Ubaidah).<sup>97</sup> Al-Shabaab also branched out to work with other al-Qaeda affiliates. Indeed, the increased lethality of al-Shabaab's improvised explosive devices is a function of its relationship with al-Qaeda, specifically AQAP, which has been credited with helping al-Shabaab refine its bombmaking skills.<sup>98</sup>

Al-Shabaab has demonstrated an ability to conquer and hold territory at various points, fighting against various Somali and regional forces, including the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), forces from the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), and the Kenyan military. Even against adversaries with far superior firepower, al-Shabaab has demonstrated resilience, successfully transitioning "from an insurgent group that controlled territory to a terrorist group that commits indiscriminate attacks on civilians and combatants alike."<sup>99</sup>

The U.S. began to escalate the conflict with al-Shabaab in 2017, conducting more than two dozen airstrikes against the group in the first year of the Trump administration. But kinetic strikes have not been enough to upend al-Shabaab. In January 2019, al-Shabaab launched a

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<sup>94</sup> Lahoud, Nelly. "Beware of Imitators: Al-Qa`ida Through the Lens of its Confidential Secretary." *CTC West Point Combating Terrorism Center*, June 4, 2012. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CTC-Beware-of-Imitators-June2012.pdf>

<sup>95</sup> Menkhaus, Ken. "Al-Shabaab's Post-Westgate Capabilities." *CTC Sentinel*, February 2014, 7(2).

<sup>96</sup> Bacon, Tricia. "No Shortcuts to Negotiating With al-Shabaab," *Lawfare*, November 22, 2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/no-shortcuts-negotiating-al-shabaab>.

<sup>97</sup> Felter, Claire, Jonathan Masters, and Mohammed Aly Sergie. "Al-Shabab." *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Background*, May 19, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/background/al-shabab>.

<sup>98</sup> Muibu, Daisy and Benjamin P. Nickels. "Foreign Technology or Local Expertise? Al-Shabaab's IED Capability." *CTC Sentinel*, November 2017, 10(10). <https://ctc.usma.edu/foreign-technology-or-local-expertise-al-shabaabs-ied-capability/>.

<sup>99</sup> Anzalone, Christopher. "The Resilience of al-Shabaab." *CTC Sentinel*, April 2016, 9(4).

spectacular attack against an office complex and hotel in Nairobi, Kenya, killing 21 people and injuring 28 more in a siege that lasted overnight.<sup>100</sup> In a two week span at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, al-Shabaab's launched a spate of attacks in Mogadishu and northern Kenya. In early January 2020, in an al-Shabaab attack on Manda Bay, a Kenyan military base hosting U.S. personnel, three Americans were killed.<sup>101</sup>

In recent years, al-Shabaab has heeded the advice of al-Qaeda senior leadership and attempted to avoid civilian casualties, although with varying degrees of success. An al-Shabaab effort to ban the use of plastic bags due to the harm they cause the environment demonstrates the jihadists are thinking about political legitimacy and the benefits of a population-centric approach.<sup>102</sup> The group also embarked on a campaign to combat the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19), establishing an isolation center and issuing advice to the population on how to maintain adequate hygiene to avoid spreading the virus.<sup>103</sup>

**Most experts agree that al-Shabaab is mostly focused on local issues in Somalia and regional issues throughout the Horn of Africa, although that could change over time.**

Most experts agree that al-Shabaab is mostly focused on local issues in Somalia and regional issues throughout the Horn of Africa, although that could change over time. The recent unsealing of an indictment of a Kenyan Shabaab operative arrested in the Philippines who was allegedly planning a September 11<sup>th</sup>-style attack using a plane in the United States is proof that not all of al-Qaeda's affiliates have stopped planning external operations.<sup>104</sup> One national security expert sees the arrest as "a worrying indicator that al-Shabaab's operational ambitions

<sup>100</sup> Bryden, Matt and Premdeep Bahra. "East Africa's Terrorist Triple Helix: The Dusit Hotel Attack and the Historical Evolution of the Jihadi Threat." *CTC Sentinel*, July 2019, 12(6). <https://ctc.usma.edu/east-africas-terrorist-triple-helix-dusit-hotel-attack-historical-evolution-jihadi-threat/>.

<sup>101</sup> Gibbons-Neff, Thomas et al. "Chaos as Militants Overran Airfield, Killing 3 Americans in Kenya." *New York Times*, January 22, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/world/africa/shabab-kenya-terrorism.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Callimachi, Rukmini. "Al Qaeda-Backed Terrorist Group Has a New Target: Plastic Bags." *New York Times*, July 4, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/04/world/africa/somalia-shabab-plastic-bags.html>.

<sup>103</sup> Hockey, Christopher and Michael Jones. "The Limits of 'Shabaab-CARE': Militant Governance amid COVID-19," *CTC Sentinel*, June 2020, 13(6). <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-limits-of-shabaab-care-militant-governance-amid-covid-19/>.

<sup>104</sup> "Kenyan National Indicted for Conspiring to Hijack Aircraft on Behalf of the Al Qaeda-Affiliated Terrorist Organization Al Shabaab." United States Department of Justice: Press Release Number 20-1355, December 16, 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/kenyan-national-indicted-conspiring-hijack-aircraft-behalf-al-qaeda-affiliated-terrorist>.



are broader than some assume,” which if true, is a foreboding prospect for continued U.S. counterterrorism efforts against al-Qaeda and its affiliates.<sup>105</sup> Al-Shabaab is also an example of how terrorist groups can learn over time. From a primarily local phenomenon, al-Shabaab grew into a regional threat and, after cooperating with AQAP, improved its bombmaking expertise, making its attacks more lethal and devastating.

### ***Al-Qaeda in Syria***

Following domestic protests against the brutalities of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in 2011, Syria descended into all-out civil war, as Assad doubled down on repressing opposition and external forces entered the conflict and fueled a proxy war, as well. As al-Qaeda’s leadership followed events closely from South Asia, Syria offered the jihadists a golden opportunity for relevance in the heart of the Middle East. In January 2012, with the establishment of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), ISI expanded into Syria, led by a Syrian militant named Abu Muhammad al-Jolani. But in April 2013, the ISI declared JN its subsidiary, leading Jolani to reject “junior partner” status and declare JN’s loyalty to Zawahiri and al-Qaeda central.

Al-Qaeda’s failure to control its affiliates in Syria sullied its reputation and led to the emergence of what would become its most significant rival.<sup>106</sup> ISI subsequently expanded into Syria, poached large numbers of Nusra members, and rebranded as Islamic State.<sup>107</sup> Zawahiri publicly denounced the split between the groups in February 2014, but in reality, there was little he could do except attempt to manage the ensuing fallout from afar.<sup>108</sup>

The evolution of Al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch epitomizes some of the challenges and opportunities facing the group today.<sup>109</sup> Following Jolani’s public pledge of *bayat* to both Zawahiri and al-Qaeda, JN maintained an open affiliation for the next several years.<sup>110</sup> Then in mid-2016, Jabhat al-Nusra rebranded itself to become Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS), leading to a rift between JFS

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<sup>105</sup> Chesney, Robert. “Did Al-Shabaab Attempt a 9/11-Style Aircraft Attack Targeting the United States?” *Lawfare*, December 16, 2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/did-al-shabaab-attempt-911-style-aircraft-attack-targeting-united-states>.

<sup>106</sup> Byman, “Al Qaeda’s Decline,” p. 1112.

<sup>107</sup> Weiss, Michael and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. New York: Regan Arts, 2015, 186.

<sup>108</sup> Lister, Charles R. *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>109</sup> Hamming, Tore Refslund and Pieter Van Ostaeyen. “The True Story of al-Qaeda’s Demise and Resurgence in Syria.” *Lawfare*, April 8, 2018. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/true-story-al-qaedas-demise-and-resurgence-syria>.

<sup>110</sup> Lister, Charles. “Al-Qaeda’s Complex Balancing Act in Syria,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2017, 11(6). <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/661/html>.

and al-Qaeda leadership.<sup>111</sup> Disagreements between the importance of local versus global objectives was a major source of the breakup.<sup>112</sup> In January 2017, JFS became part of an umbrella organization along with Noor al-Deen al-Zenki, Liwa al-Haqq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and Jaysh al-Sunna, as well as militants from Ahrar Sham who had defected and formed Jaysh Ahrar.<sup>113</sup> This subsequent rebranding led to the formation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and disputes within the broader community of counter-terrorism experts about whether the latest rebrand from JFS to HTS marked a genuine break with al-Qaeda or another smokescreen seeking to achieve obfuscation and misdirection.<sup>114</sup>

Over the course of 2017, it became apparent that the splintering was real.<sup>115</sup> In October 2017, Zawahiri offered a stinging rebuke of HTS.<sup>116</sup> Toward the end of 2017, Zawahiri released a message confirming that a real split occurred between HTS and al-Qaeda, settling the debate for many observers.<sup>117</sup> Zawahiri and the al-Qaeda leadership labeled Jolani's actions as "sowing

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<sup>111</sup> Clarke, Colin. "Al-Nusra is Stronger Than Ever." *The Cipher Brief*, November 2, 2016. <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/al-nusra-stronger-than-ever>; see also: Byman, Daniel. "What's In a Name? The New Jabhat al-Nusra and the Future of Al Qaeda." *Lawfare*, October 24, 2016. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/whats-name-new-jabhat-al-nusra-and-future-al-qaeda>; Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed and Thomas Joscelyn. "Rebranding Terror: Nusra's Renaming is Part of al Qaeda's Plan." *Foreign Affairs*, August 28, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-08-28/rebranding-terror>; Hassan, Hassan. "Jabhat al Nusra and Al Qaeda: The Riddle, The Ruse, The Reality." *The National*, November 1, 2017. <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/jabhat-al-nusra-and-al-qaeda-the-riddle-the-ruse-and-the-reality-1.672221>; Lister, Charles. "The Dawn of Mass Jihad: Success in Syria Fuels al-Qa'ida's Evolution." *CTC Sentinel*, September 2016, 9(9). <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-dawn-of-mass-jihad-success-in-syria-fuels-al-qaidas-evolution/>.

<sup>112</sup> Lister, Charles. "How al-Qa'ida Lost Control of its Syrian Affiliate: The Inside Story." *CTC Sentinel*, February 2018, 11(2). <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaida-lost-control-syrian-affiliate-inside-story/>.

<sup>113</sup> Alami, Mona. "HTS Continues to Evolve." *The Atlantic Council*, December 1, 2017. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/hts-continues-to-evolve>.

<sup>114</sup> Clarke, Colin. "Al Qaeda in Syria Can Change Its Name, But Not Its Stripes." *The Cipher Brief*, March 23, 2017. <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/al-qaeda-in-syria-can-change-its-name-but-not-its-stripes>.

<sup>115</sup> Bunzel, Cole. "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi." *Jihadica*, March 29, 2017. <http://www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad/>; for more detail, see: al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad. "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (IX)." February 5, 2019. <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/02/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary-8>.

<sup>116</sup> Jones, Seth G. et al. "Al Qaeda's Struggling Campaign in Syria: Past, Present, and Future." *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (CSIS), April 2018, 2. [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180403\\_Jones\\_AIQaedaSyria\\_Web.pdf?BFU0s3SNr4wr\\_quys45nmWdrQbYPQQjA](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180403_Jones_AIQaedaSyria_Web.pdf?BFU0s3SNr4wr_quys45nmWdrQbYPQQjA).

<sup>117</sup> Lister, Charles. "How al-Qa'ida Lost Control of Its Syrian Affiliate." *CTC Sentinel*, February 2018, 11(12), 6. <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaida-lost-control-syrian-affiliate-inside-story/>.

division (*fitna*)” and a “violation of the covenant.”<sup>118</sup> The clearest proof that the break was real was HTS’ actions over the course of the summer of 2019, when Jolani’s organization behaved in ways completely inimical to al-Qaeda’s worldview, publicly acknowledging its willingness to abide by an externally negotiated cease-fire crafted by Russia, Iran, and Turkey. HTS also participates in periodic elections, devolves power to a technocratic (instead of a theocratic) government, and has occasionally sought to engage with Western countries in political dialogue.<sup>119</sup> HTS’ current strategy is a repudiation of al-Qaeda and an attempt to provide an alternative path to consolidating control and jihadist governance.<sup>120</sup> A group of veteran al-Qaeda operatives, many of whom are Jordanian, formed Hurras al-Din (HAD), or the Guardians of Religion Organization, in February 2018.<sup>121</sup> Its initial formation was comprised of sixteen separate factions, linkages that HAD highlighted as evidence of connections to a local support base.<sup>122</sup>

The question most pressing to the United States and Europe is, will HAD set its sights on attacking the West? According to Edmund Fitton Brown, Coordinator of the ISIL (Daesh)/Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team at the United Nations, Hurras al-Din consists of as many as 2,000 fighters and the organization has “aspirations to mount international attacks.”<sup>123</sup> If HAD is going to evolve into a formidable fighting force with a toehold in northwestern Syria, it will have to survive the ongoing campaign by HTS to arrest its members.<sup>124</sup> What is certain is that al-Qaeda leadership values having a branch in Syria, which is not a situation it will forfeit lightly.

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<sup>118</sup> Newlee, Danika and the CSIS iDeas Lab. “Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/past-projects/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir-al-sham>.

<sup>119</sup> Lister, Charles. “What’s Next for Al-Qaeda After the Death of Hamza bin Laden?” *Middle East Institute*, August 8, 2019. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/whats-next-al-qaeda-after-death-hamza-bin-laden>.

<sup>120</sup> Tsurkov, Elizabeth. “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Syria).” *European Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://ecfr.eu/special/mena-armed-groups/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-syria/>.

<sup>121</sup> Hassan, Hassan. “Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism.” *CTC Sentinel*, October 2018, 11(9). <https://ctc.usma.edu/two-houses-divided-conflict-syria-shaped-future-jihadism/>.

<sup>122</sup> Zelin, Aaron Y. “Huras al-Din: The Overlooked al-Qaeda Group in Syria.” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 24, 2019. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/huras-al-din-overlooked-al-qaeda-group-syria>.

<sup>123</sup> Cruickshank, Paul. “A View from the CT Foxhole: Edmund Fitton-Brown, Coordinator, ISIL (Daesh)/Al-Qaida/Taliban Monitoring Team, United Nations.” *CTC Sentinel*, April 2019, 12(4). <https://ctc.usma.edu/view-ct-foxhole-edmund-fitton-brown-coordinator-isil-daesh-al-qaida-taliban-monitoring-team-united-nations/>.

<sup>124</sup> al-Khateb, Khalid. “Is al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria’s Idlib on its way to demise?” *Al-Monitor*, April 11, 2021. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/al-qaeda-affiliate-syrias-idlib-its-way-demise>.

## ***Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)***

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is al-Qaeda's youngest affiliate, officially founded in 2014 as a result of al-Qaeda's strategic shift to develop local roots with global aspirations. Initially, it appeared that AQIS was the weakest and least active of the al-Qaeda affiliates.<sup>125</sup> The only large-scale attack the organization has attempted was its failed hijacking of the PNS *Zulfiqa* three days after its founding in September 2014. The objective of the attack was to board the Pakistani Navy frigate and launch missiles at U.S. ships in the Persian Gulf, but the attack was thwarted as three militants and one petty officer was killed. Since then, AQIS has only carried out minor attacks throughout the region, typically through lone wolf style attacks that include one or two people and target any person opposed to the group's ideology.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, many of its operatives and leaders were killed in drone strikes in Pakistan. This led to a complacent counterterrorism response to the group, as many security analysts believed that AQIS was doomed to fail.

However, to understand the scope of the threat posed by AQIS requires an understanding of its network of relationships within South Asia. For decades, Al-Qaeda has maintained relationships with various Pakistani militant groups, including Lashkar e Toiba (LeT), Harkat ul Jihad e Islami (HUJI), and Lashkar e Jhangvi (LeJ).<sup>127</sup> The formation of AQIS was simply the establishment of a formal institutional relationship with these groups with a focus on local capacity building for al-Qaeda. AQIS also has been able to forge a working relationship with the Afghan Taliban to bolster operations and establish AQIS training camps within the country. Furthermore, AQIS has established ties with tribes in North and South Waziristan, especially the Meshuds, and also assisted the TTP in carrying out a number of attacks against the Pakistani state.<sup>128</sup>

In June 2017, AQIS published a 20-page code of conduct for jihadists around the world to follow.<sup>129</sup> As evidenced by this document, AQIS appears to be using its media to attempt to unify various jihadi groups through shared grievances and a focus on the "near enemy."<sup>130</sup> The document also served as a call for Muslims in India and Bangladesh to take up the mantle of

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>126</sup> "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) | Counter Extremism Project." n.d. <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-qaeda-indian-subcontinent-aqis>.

<sup>127</sup> "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia." *The Soufan Center*, January 2019, 12. <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-AQIS.pdf>.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>129</sup> Hamming, Tore Refslund. "Jihadists' Code of Conduct in the Era of ISIS." *Middle East Institute*, April 2019, 4. [https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2019-04/Tore\\_Jihadi\\_Code\\_of\\_Conduct.pdf](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2019-04/Tore_Jihadi_Code_of_Conduct.pdf).

<sup>130</sup> The Soufan Center, 22.

jihad in Kashmir, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, as AQIS has struggled to gain traction with India's Muslim population. Within the code of conduct was the addition of more tolerant rules, like abstaining from attacking noncombatant Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus, potentially making an attempt to attract more support from those who view al-Qaeda as less radical than its Islamic State counterparts.<sup>131</sup> The document is an attempt to reestablish al-Qaeda as the leader of the global jihadist movement, whether in Syria, Yemen, Africa, or South Asia.

While its strategy has heavily focused on local conflicts, the ideology, aims, and aspirations of AQIS does not lack the ambition of targeting the "far enemy".<sup>132</sup> This makes sense given its close relationship with al-Qaeda's senior leadership and the Taliban. By embedding fighters into Taliban ranks, AQIS provides its members an opportunity to strike U.S. forces and demonstrate its commitment to global jihad. With the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan now complete, there may be a window of opportunity for al-Qaeda to reinforce its presence and recruit foreign fighters in the country with AQIS playing a major role as both facilitator and beneficiary.

Despite it being the youngest affiliate, AQIS has proven itself to be as resilient as any of the affiliates under the al-Qaeda umbrella. The organization maintains close ties, both in funding and operations, with al-Qaeda core and has benefitted from the sectarian and geopolitical conflicts across South Asia. The Taliban victory in Afghanistan could be a boon for AQIS, providing its fighters with a broader area of operations and more resources to enhance a growing set of organizational capabilities and an opportunity to exploit regional tensions. Over the past several years, al-Qaeda has sought to recruit Indian and other South Asian Muslims who have grown disaffected by growing sectarianism in the region, including in India where extremist Hindu nationalists have repeatedly targeted Indian Muslims, opening opportunities for further support.<sup>133</sup>

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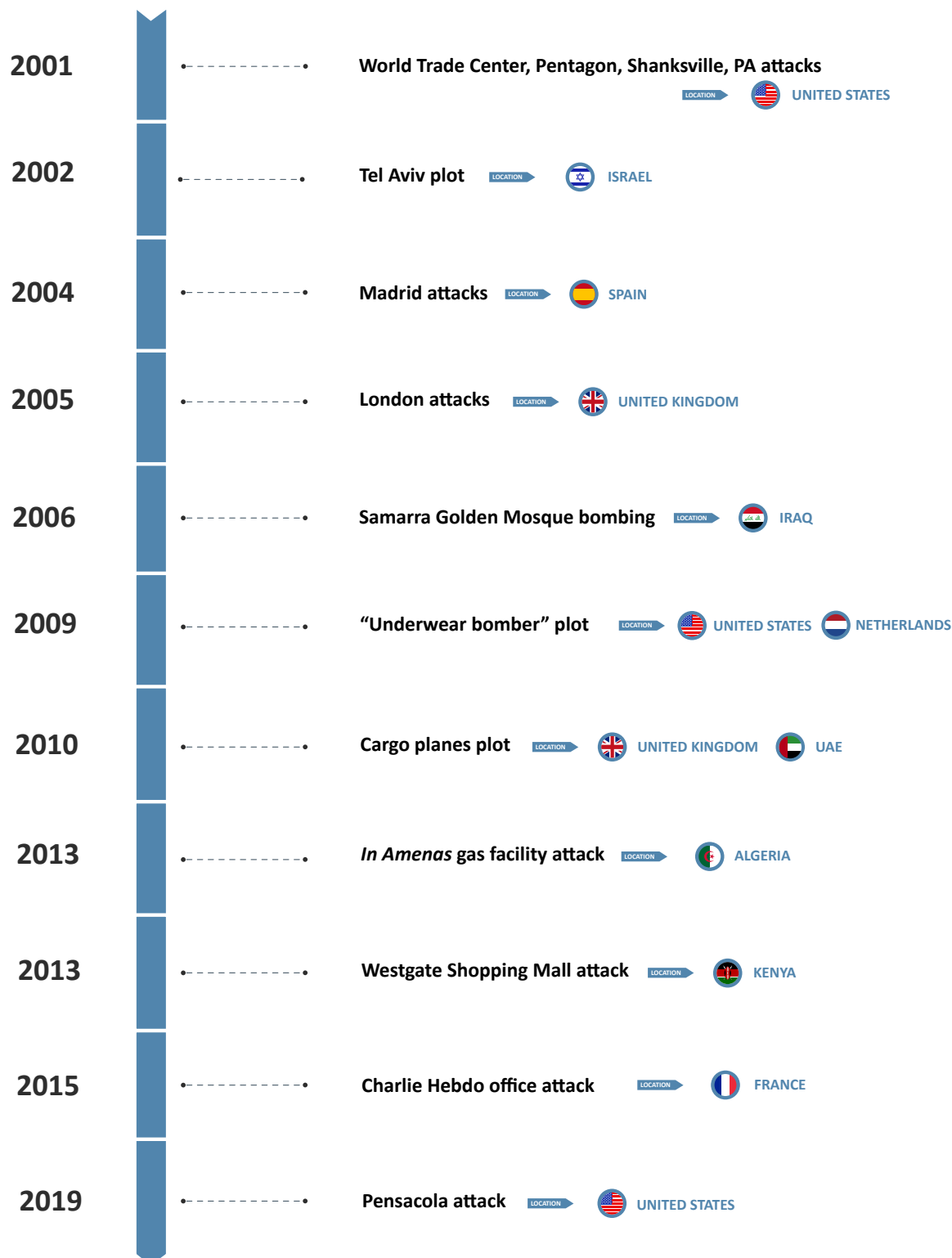
<sup>131</sup> Clarke, Colin P. "The Moderate Face of Al Qaeda." *Foreign Affairs*, October 24, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-24/moderate-face-al-qaeda>.

<sup>132</sup> The Soufan Center, 40.

<sup>133</sup> Hoffman, Bruce and Jacob Ware. "The Afghanistan Withdrawal and Taliban takeover mean the terror threat is back." *NBC News*, August 19, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/afghanistan-withdrawal-taliban-takeover-mean-terror-threat-back-ncna1276807>; see also: Mirchandani, Maya. "IntelBrief: Expanding Priorities in South Asian Security Two Decades After 9/11" The Soufan Center, August 9, 2021. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-august-9/>; Mirchandani, Maya. "India's Fight Against a Pandemic Leads to an 'Infodemic' Targeting Minorities and The Poor." The Soufan Center, February 16, 2021. <https://thesoufancenter.org/indias-fight-against-a-pandemic-leads-to-an-infodemic-targeting-minorities-and-the-poor/>.

Figure 2: Timeline of Select Significant Attacks and Major Plots by al-Qaeda and its Affiliates

## TIMELINE OF SELECT SIGNIFICANT ATTACKS AND MAJOR PLOTS BY AL-QAEDA AND ITS AFFILIATES (2001-2021)



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## LOOKING AHEAD: THE FUTURE OF AL-QAEDA

In April 2021, U.S. President Joseph Biden made the decision to withdraw all U.S. military troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2001. In justifying the withdrawal, the President declared, “Bin Laden is dead and al-Qaeda is degraded in Iraq and Afghanistan.”<sup>134</sup> Bin Laden is indeed dead, and has been for more than a decade; however, al-Qaeda is not defeated, and the U.S. withdrawal could very well be the precipitating event that the jihadist group has been waiting for to accelerate a strategy of rebuilding in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and throughout South Asia more broadly. In mid-August, the Taliban effectively took control of Afghanistan, cutting side deals with Afghan security forces to get them to surrender, while marching on the capital city of Kabul. Since the Taliban has not jettisoned al-Qaeda over the past two decades, echoes of security dynamics in Afghanistan in the years leading up to September 11, 2001 have returned, with al-Qaeda’s longtime ally now back in charge. By all accounts, a Taliban-led government in Afghanistan will provide al-Qaeda with the operational space it needs to regroup and rebuild jihadist networks throughout South Asia.<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, there is a significant risk posed to the progress Afghans have achieved over the last two decades, an effort toward which a generation of Afghan women contributed, with gains and human rights now threatened by the Taliban.

The U.S. intelligence community assesses that both al-Qaeda and Islamic State are still focused on striking the U.S. homeland. According to the 2021 Annual Threat Assessment released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “ISIS and al-Qa’ida remain the greatest Sunni terrorist threats to US interests overseas; they also seek to conduct attacks inside the United States, although sustained US and allied [counterterrorism] pressure has broadly degraded their capability to do so.”<sup>136</sup> In the absence of a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, high-ranking

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<sup>134</sup> “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” The White House, April 14, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>135</sup> Erlanger, Steven. “The Taliban Are Back. Now Will They Restrain or Support Al Qaeda?” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-al-qaeda.html>; Isikoff, Michael and Jana Winter. “Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan sparks new fears of al-Qaida resurgence.” *Yahoo News*, August 17, 2021. <https://news.yahoo.com/talibans-return-to-power-in-afghanistan-sparks-new-fears-of-al-qaeda-resurgence-183219689.html>.

<sup>136</sup> “2021 Annual Threat Assessment.” Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2021/item/2204-2021-annual-threat-assessment-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community>.

military officials, policymakers, and counterterrorism analysts are growing concerned that jihadist groups will further metastasize to the point of once again being able to pose a direct threat to the United States.<sup>137</sup>

Former State Department coordinator for counterterrorism Nathan Sales said it is “virtually certain” that al-Qaeda will reestablish a safe haven in Afghanistan and use it to plot attacks against the United States and other Western countries.<sup>138</sup> In an acknowledgment of the challenges that the U.S. withdrawal will present to the intelligence community, CIA Director William Burns publicly bemoaned a degraded ability to collect, analyze, and act on intelligence.<sup>139</sup> With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan, both the Pentagon and CIA are now “forced to contemplate an environment abruptly off-limits and under the control of a hostile regime.”<sup>140</sup>

It remains unclear what an offshore U.S. counterterrorism strategy will look like now that the withdrawal is complete. To maintain a presence closer to Afghanistan, the U.S. could look to a Central Asian nation, or to neighboring Pakistan. But even if Washington is able to secure basing rights from Islamabad, any deal will be unable to address Pakistan’s continued support for militant groups, which it sees as part of its national security strategy. Now that the Taliban has secured political and military control over large swaths of Afghanistan, it could soon become difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate between the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Haqqani network. Afghanistan could once again become home to myriad jihadist groups, to include al-Qaeda, but also Islamic State, and militants from throughout the region, including Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, Uzbekistan, and elsewhere.<sup>141</sup>

The Biden administration believes that the terrorist threat from Afghanistan is similar in nature to other jihadist threats in theaters where U.S. and allied counterterrorism efforts have

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<sup>137</sup> Schmitt, Eric and Helene Cooper. “How the U.S. Plans to Fight from Afar After Troops Exit Afghanistan.” *New York Times*, April 27, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/15/us/politics/united-states-al-qaeda-afghanistan.html>.

<sup>138</sup> Erlanger, Steven. “The Taliban Are Back. Now Will They Restrain or Support Al Qaeda?” *The New York Times*.

<sup>139</sup> Zengerle, Patricia and Jonathan Landay. “CIA Chief Highlights Loss of Intelligence Once U.S. Troops Leave Afghanistan.” *Reuters*, April 14, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/cia-chief-says-intelligence-will-diminish-once-us-troops-leave-afghanistan-2021-04-14/>.

<sup>140</sup> Missy Ryan and Souad Mekhennet. “After Taliban Triumph, Biden Faces Even Greater Test in Preventing Extremist Resurgence in Afghanistan.” *Washington Post*, August 16, 2021. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-counterterrorism-surveillance-afghanistan/2021/08/16/d27433ee-feaa-11eb-825d-01701f9ded64\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-counterterrorism-surveillance-afghanistan/2021/08/16/d27433ee-feaa-11eb-825d-01701f9ded64_story.html).

<sup>141</sup> Zelin, Aaron Y. “Return of the Islamic Emirate of Aghanistan: The Jihadist State of Play.” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 18, 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/return-islamic-emirate-afghanistan-jihadist-state-play>.



contained or mitigated terrorist groups, including in Somalia, Yemen and Libya. However, the Taliban military victory in Afghanistan, where in several instances Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) troops fled and abandoned their vehicles, was eerily reminiscent to scenes from Iraq in 2011 following another calendar-based withdrawal of U.S. troops, which was swiftly followed by the rise of Islamic State. And once again, Islamic State, through its Afghan branch Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), could receive a much-needed boost from the U.S. military withdrawal.

**Now that the Taliban has secured political and military control over large swaths of Afghanistan, it could soon become difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate between the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Haqqani network.**

If Afghanistan again becomes a major global hub for foreign terrorist fighters, there will be serious international security ramifications.<sup>142</sup> Since the rise of Islamic State in 2014, Western nations have dedicated significant resources to preventing an outflow of their citizens to combat zones in order to join terrorist groups and curtail the impact of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs).<sup>143</sup> Many of the laws and policies put in place over the past seven years targeting FTFs would likely prevent a similar migration of European citizens to Afghanistan, although the issue of so-called “frustrated” foreign fighters—those prevented from leaving but who

subsequently seek to conduct attacks at home—will remain a pressing issue for policymakers and intelligence services.<sup>144</sup> And while any outflow of foreign fighters from Europe and other Western countries to Afghanistan would likely be far smaller than what occurred with the rise of Islamic State, many of Afghanistan’s neighbors and other countries in the region are either unable or unwilling to enact similar laws to prevent their citizens from seeking out new conflicts. The ISKP suicide attack in Kabul in late August 2021 that killed over 160 Afghan civilians and thirteen U.S. service members could be the opening salvo in a renewed terrorist campaign, a conflict that will drag in al-Qaeda and the Haqqani network on the opposing side. Afghanistan may be on the brink of its next civil war, a scenario that would turn Afghanistan back into a jihadi terror state.<sup>145</sup> A revived ISKP in Afghanistan would also threaten Iran, which

<sup>142</sup> Clarke, Colin P. “What Will the Terrorism Landscape Look Like in a Taliban-Led Afghanistan?” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, August 20, 2021. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/08/what-will-the-terrorism-landscape-look-like-in-a-taliban-led-afghanistan/>.

<sup>143</sup> “Foreign Fighters in Syria.” The Soufan Center, June 2014. <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/foreign-fighters-in-syria/>.

<sup>144</sup> Byman, Daniel L. “Frustrated Foreign Fighters.” *Brookings Institute*, July 13, 2017.

<sup>145</sup> Renuka Rayasam, “The Next Afghan Civil War Just Started,” *Politico*, August 26, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-nightly/2021/08/26/the-next-afghan-civil-war-just-started-494135>; see also: Wright, Robin. “Afghanistan, Again, Becomes a Cradle for Jihadism and Al-Qaeda.” *New Yorker*, August 23, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/afghanistan-again-becomes-a-cradle-for-jihadism-and-al-qaeda>.

might then deploy battle-hardened Liwa Fatemiyoun (Shi'a militia) fighters from Syria to Afghanistan with the specific mandate of protecting Afghan Shi'a and fighting Sunni jihadis.<sup>146</sup> The more violent non-state actors involved in a civil war, the lengthier and deadlier these conflicts tend to be, which in turn contributes to destabilization in neighboring countries.

An unresolved question is whether the Taliban have learned anything about the repercussions of its policies in the past two decades. With the group now in de facto control of Afghanistan, will it revert to its old ways and allow transnational terrorist groups like al-Qaeda to operate openly on Afghan soil? The announcement of a hardline government and the treatment of women protesting the imminent erasure of two decades of progress in education, media, and politics suggests that the Taliban have not changed in any meaningful way. Another concern is that the Taliban will learn from the Iranian model employed by the Houthis and Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>147</sup> This means a comprehensive politico-military approach that focuses on gaining influence and legitimacy while keeping a militia or armed wing intact. There are real disincentives for the Taliban allowing Afghanistan to once again become a safe haven or sanctuary for transnational terrorist groups like al-Qaeda.<sup>148</sup> Yet, once the Taliban is actually faced with the task of ruling Afghanistan, it may not wield the command-and-control to completely dictate the terms of al-Qaeda's behavior. And in the absence of U.S. intelligence assets in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda could potentially begin plotting attacks against Western targets under the radar.

Framing U.S. involvement in Afghanistan as a sideshow to more important missions like "great power" competition is a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept itself. If President Biden is concerned with limiting the influence of countries like Russia, China, and Iran, withdrawing from Afghanistan will actually have the opposite effect. With the United States absent from Afghanistan, Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran see opportunities to move in, as already demonstrated by their diplomatic presence in Kabul and ongoing dialogue with the Taliban. Moreover, they can be spoilers in international efforts to sanction or influence Taliban behavior through the United Nations. This is especially significant as many Taliban officials are affected by sanctions, and the group may seek recognition as Afghanistan's formal representative in international bodies. Pakistan will look to reinvigorate irregular proxy forces that could be used

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<sup>146</sup> Clarke, Colin P. and Ariane Tabatabai. "What Iran Really Wants in Afghanistan." *Foreign Affairs*, July 8, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-07-08/what-iran-wants-afghanistan>.

<sup>147</sup> Stein, Jeff. "Al-Qaeda's Learning Curve: the Fall of the Roman Empire." *SpyTalk*, August 17, 2021. <https://www.spytalk.co/p/al-qaedas-learning-curve-the-fall>.

<sup>148</sup> Byman, Daniel. "Will Afghanistan Become a Terrorist Safe Haven Again?" *Foreign Affairs*, August 18, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-08-18/afghanistan-become-terrorist-safe-haven-again-taliban>.

to strike against India in Kashmir. As regional powers look to shore up their respective interests in Afghanistan, the country will become a point of convergence between the concepts of great power competition and counterterrorism.

Whether Afghanistan becomes yet again a safe haven for al-Qaeda core to recharge is one pivotal facet of the group's global trajectory and its potential for external operational capacity heretofore. Yet, more imminently, the propaganda and operational momentum galvanized by the Taliban sweeping Kabul will invigorate global jihadism across al-Qaeda affiliates, with far-reaching immediate impacts to localized conflict dynamics across various regions of operation. Al-Qaeda and several of its affiliates have released messages supporting and congratulating the Taliban. This could be the beginning of a new phase for al-Qaeda, one which the United States will be less prepared to deal with given a reduced global military presence. Al-Qaeda's patience has paid off, its strategy to outlast the United States rewarded with an embarrassing and chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan less than two weeks before the twenty year anniversary of 9/11.

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## ABOUT THE SOUFAN CENTER

The Soufan Center (TSC) is an independent non-profit center offering research, analysis, and strategic dialogue on global security challenges and foreign policy issues, with a particular focus on counterterrorism, violent extremism, armed conflict, and the rule of law. Our work is underpinned by a recognition that human rights and human security perspectives are critical to developing credible, effective, and sustainable solutions. TSC fills a niche role by producing objective and innovative reports and analyses, and fostering dynamic dialogue and exchanges, to effectively equip governments, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society with key resources to inform policies and practice.

