

Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda

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Dr. Eric V. Thompson, Director and VP
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Abstract

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.” The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, the results of which are presented in this report.

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Executive Summary

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.” The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment. Section 1228 specified that the independent assessment should include these topics:

1. An assessment of Al-Qaeda core’s current relationship with affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.
2. An assessment of the current objectives, capabilities, and overall strategy of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how they have changed over time.
3. An assessment of the operational and organizational structure of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.
4. An analysis of the activities that have proven to be most effective and least effective at disrupting and dismantling Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.
5. Recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.

The NDAA mandated that the results of this assessment be provided to select congressional committees via an unclassified report. This document fulfills that requirement and presents the results of CNA’s assessment of these topics. Of note, given the wide scope and long timeframe of these topics, we had to carefully bound our assessment approach. A list of specific scoping caveats can be found in the body of this report.

Assessment results

Findings on Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates

Nearly 16 years after September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda is a very different organization in a very different world. It has suffered setbacks and periods of weakening, but it has also made gains and expanded in the face of international efforts against it. With respect to the first three topics required by the NDAA, we arrived at these findings:

- **Al-Qaeda is still pursuing the core goals that it had in 2001, the most notable of which is the establishment of a global caliphate.** Over time, the organization has added goals and adjusted its strategy in response to counterterrorism actions against it and changes in the environments in which it operates, but its primary objectives remain unchanged. Al-Qaeda's leadership continues to advocate for a long-term, patient campaign utilizing terrorist and insurgent tactics against both the "near enemy" (apostate Muslim regimes) and the "far enemy" (the United States and the West).
- **Al-Qaeda today is larger, more agile, and more resilient than it was in 2001.** Sixteen years ago, the core of Al-Qaeda was in Afghanistan and the organization had a nominal presence in a handful of other countries. Today, in addition to what remains of core Al-Qaeda, there are five Al-Qaeda affiliates: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Syria (AQS), Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and al-Shebab (in Somalia). In addition, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), once the most virulent of Al-Qaeda's affiliates, evolved into what we now know as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).
- **In 2001, Al-Qaeda was a rigidly hierarchical organization. Today, Al-Qaeda is a flat, decentralized, and geographically dispersed organization.** The notion of "core" Al-Qaeda sitting at the center of the group's affiliates is waning in utility, as many of the original members of Al-Qaeda and its other leaders have moved out of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and co-located themselves with some of the group's affiliates (most notably AQAP and AQS). The group's affiliates, which are now active in over 10 Muslim-majority countries, have more autonomy than in the past, and most of the affiliates have connections with other affiliates (the possible exception being AQIS).
- **Al-Qaeda is a learning and adaptive organization, and this contributes to the group's resilience.** Al-Qaeda has shown that it can weather severe setbacks (e.g., AQI's near defeat in Iraq), learn from its mistakes, and evolve its approach over time. In recent years, Al-Qaeda has been able to adapt its approach to make new gains. In particular, the group's affiliates have become

more adept at pursuing local goals via the provision of governance attuned to local contexts.

- **The threat from Al-Qaeda to the United States homeland remains, but does not appear to be the foremost goal of every part of the organization.** While Al-Qaeda’s leadership continues to advocate for attacks against the United States directly and some of its affiliates (e.g., AQAP and AQS) have at times acted in accordance with these wishes, Al-Qaeda’s affiliates today seem more focused on achieving success in local and regional conflicts against the organization’s “near enemies.”
- **The emergence of ISIS (an Al-Qaeda offshoot), presents both obstacles and opportunities for Al-Qaeda.** ISIS is arguably the vanguard of global jihad today and the group has amassed an impressive following and significant resources in only a few years. However, ISIS has also drawn the bulk of the attention and resources of the United States-led global counterterrorism effort in recent years, which has reduced the pressure on Al-Qaeda in other areas.
- **Al-Qaeda may be biding its time to regroup, regenerate, and regain the mantle of global jihad.** While the world has been focused on ISIS in recent years, Al-Qaeda has been learning, adapting its approach, and grooming the next generation of its leadership via the jihad in Syria, Yemen, and other locations. Notable among these due to his lineage is Hamza Bin Laden, one of Osama Bin Laden’s sons.

Findings on local and regional security environments

The trajectory of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates has been shaped by the organization’s own actions and decisions, but also by external forces. Actions by the United States and its partners are one such external force, but shifts in local and regional security conditions have also impacted how the group has changed and evolved. Shifts in these conditions have also impacted the United States’ ability to pursue its objectives against Al-Qaeda, often in negative ways.

With the specific questions from the NDAA in mind, we offer the following findings concerning the evolution of local and regional security environments and the associated impact on Al-Qaeda and the United States:

- **In the years since 2001, many of the countries in the Middle East and Africa have become increasingly politically, socially, and economically unstable.** The worsening conditions in many of these countries have led to a host of vulnerabilities in their security environments, such as internal conflicts, government corruption and illegitimacy, collapse of governing regimes, and neighboring states in crisis.

- **Al-Qaeda routinely exploits deteriorating security conditions, or vulnerabilities, in the security environments of weak and failing countries in order to maneuver and expand.** Key examples include Syria, Yemen, the Sahel region of Africa (especially Mali), Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Southeast Asia. In these countries and many others, security vulnerabilities have emerged or become more widespread within the past decade.
- **Al-Qaeda can exploit security vulnerabilities in weak or failing states, though its success in doing so still requires skillful approaches on the part of the organization’s affiliates.** Al-Qaeda’s ability to take advantage of these conditions is enhanced when it has a pre-existing presence or relationships with disaffected populations or groups in a country, or when it is able to quickly establish such relationships.
- **Al-Qaeda has benefitted from slow, negative trends in the security conditions in countries across much of the Middle East and Africa, but its largest gains have occurred when there were sharp and rapid deteriorations.** For example, Al-Qaeda’s strongest affiliates today are AQAP and AQS, which exist in the midst of the civil wars in Yemen and Syria, respectively. Additionally, AQI instigated a civil war in Iraq and its strength increased considerably as that civil war increased in intensity.
- **Worsening trends in security conditions not only help Al-Qaeda but can significantly hinder U.S. government efforts to counter the group.** This has been the case for the United States’ “by, with, and through” approaches (in which we lose local partners), unilateral counterterrorism actions (in which we lose bases for such operations), and diplomatic and development activities (in which our civilian personnel lose the ability to engage at-risk communities).

Findings on the U.S. government’s effectiveness against Al-Qaeda

With respect to the fourth topic required by the NDAA, the table on the next page presents a summary of broad observations from our assessment of U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda, at institutional and operational levels.

Table. Summary of assessment of U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda

	Successes	Failures
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. has made significant progress moving from a “stove-piped” approach to a comprehensive “whole-of-government” approach to countering Al-Qaeda, and countering terrorism in general The U.S. has established key partnerships and worked cooperatively with countries around the world to counter Al-Qaeda The U.S. has developed a highly effective and efficient set of counterterrorism forces which operate through a combination of intelligence and special operations forces (SOF), coupled with continued innovation and improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. has failed to learn that regime change without effective stabilization operations creates enormous opportunities for Al-Qaeda in both the targeted country and neighboring ones The U.S. has failed to develop a proactive, consistent, and compelling narrative that can effectively compete with the narrative that Al-Qaeda uses to advance its cause and to gain new recruits and followers The U.S. has failed to adequately and consistently align its approaches in ways that address the full spectrum of challenges that Al-Qaeda poses to the U.S. and the security vulnerabilities that Al-Qaeda exploits in countries where it currently operates or seeks to expand The U.S. has failed to fundamentally appreciate the resilience of Al-Qaeda as an organization, as a brand, and as a movement
Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There has not been another terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland anywhere near the scale of the attacks of 9/11 In the early years of the war in Afghanistan, U.S. forces were effective at disrupting core Al-Qaeda, driving its leadership into hiding, and depriving the organization of what had been its main base of operations in Afghanistan In Iraq in the 2006-2008 timeframe, U.S. forces were able to almost completely dismantle AQI The Department of Defense (DOD) has had success building counterterrorism capacity in some partner nation security forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. has not effectively consolidated gains in the few instances where it has had success against Al-Qaeda in order to prevent the group from resurging The U.S. has failed to stop the spread of Al-Qaeda The U.S. has been unable to replicate the conditions that allowed it to almost completely dismantle AQI in its fight against any of the other Al-Qaeda affiliates

Discussion

The NDAA states the U.S. policy goals for Al-Qaeda as disrupt, dismantle, and defeat, and calls for recommendations to achieve those goals. However, it does not define those terms—nor are there commonly accepted definitions for them across the U.S. government. As such, we reviewed a number of sources and established the following definitions:

- **Disrupt:** Al-Qaeda is unable to conduct attacks against the U.S. homeland or U.S. interests abroad.
- **Dismantle:** Al-Qaeda has been reduced to a point where it is no longer a coherent, functioning entity operationally and tactically.
- **Defeat:** Al-Qaeda does not have the capability and will to fight the United States and its partners.

With respect to these definitions, we assess that:

- **The United States has primarily emphasized approaches that aim to disrupt Al-Qaeda (especially since 2011) and has been generally effective at doing so.**
- **The U.S. has had some successes in dismantling Al-Qaeda, but none has been sustained.** This has mostly been due to a lack of, or the ineffectiveness of, efforts to address underlying local and regional security vulnerabilities that Al-Qaeda exploits to maintain and expand its presence.
- **The United States has not defeated Al-Qaeda core or any of its affiliates, and it is not clear that the United States—at the strategic level—has a vision for what that defeat would look like or how to bring it about.**
- **The United States’ assumption that “disrupt, dismantle, defeat” represents a linear set of goals that build upon each other is flawed and should be revisited.** In particular, we assess that the goal of *disrupting* Al-Qaeda is distinct from (and potentially contradictory to) the goals of *dismantling* and *defeating* the group.

With these assessments in mind, we conclude that the U.S. government needs to decide which goal it wants to pursue: continued disruption; dismantling of some or all of the Al-Qaeda affiliates; complete defeat of the Al-Qaeda organization; or something else.

Below, in accordance with the fifth NDAA topic, we identify what the U.S. government would need to do in order to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda. But we do so

with the understanding that these are not the only policy goals available to the U.S. government.

Requirements for disrupting Al-Qaeda

We assess that the degree of the Al-Qaeda problem is likely to increase in the near-term future as a result of existing (and in some cases, growing) vulnerabilities in the security environments in the regions of the world where Al-Qaeda operates and seeks to operate. If the U.S. continues to pursue a strategy that emphasizes *disrupting* Al-Qaeda in order to reduce the short-term risk of an attack on the U.S. homeland and its interests abroad, we assess that the level of U.S. resources required will also likely continue to increase. If the U.S. government decides to pursue this goal, we assess that it would need to:

- Largely continue its current approaches to Al-Qaeda, but prepare itself—and the American public—for the likelihood of increased costs in both blood and treasure to maintain Al-Qaeda in a disrupted state over time.
- Conduct additional analysis to determine how much further it can expand its current approaches to countering terrorism before the forces tasked with these missions reach a breaking point.

Requirements for dismantling Al-Qaeda

If the U.S. government decides to shift its strategy to pursue the goal of fully *dismantling* Al-Qaeda, we assess that the U.S. government would need to:

- Create an operational plan focused on Al-Qaeda with a goal of isolating each affiliate and conducting high-tempo counterterrorism operations to dismantle each part of the organization. This plan should be tailored to address the operational differences between the affiliates and the contextual nuances that accompany each one. To enable these operations, the United States would need to:
 - “Surge” resources to reinforce on-going counterterrorism efforts focused on Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. This would likely entail greater use of conventional U.S. military forces to bolster U.S. SOF and greater use of the civilian agencies, to include the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Office of Transition Initiatives, and the Department of the Treasury’s Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence.
 - Establish well-defined rules of engagement and limits for collateral damage, and push authorities for military action within those guidelines down to the lowest politically acceptable levels within the DOD.

- Establish a combined joint inter-agency task force to focus on severing the linkages between Al-Qaeda's affiliates (i.e., personnel movement, money transfers, and communications).
- Strive to establish and maintain counterterrorism operating bases that are as close to the areas in which Al-Qaeda is operating as possible. In some instances (e.g., Yemen, Syria, Pakistan), this may entail revisiting U.S. policies regarding "boots on the ground" and/or require strong diplomatic efforts to regain access.
- Reconsider the balance of emphasis that has been placed on "kill" missions relative to "capture" missions. This necessarily entails working through how the United States would legally handle increased numbers of Al-Qaeda detainees.
- Design a new, proactive messaging campaign that considers how to amplify the values and ideas shared by the West and much of the Muslim world, relying in part on local Islamic voices, in an effort to counter Al-Qaeda's ideological narratives. The United States would need to designate and resource a single entity (e.g., the State Department's Global Engagement Center) to serve as the focal point for these efforts, with robust funding and support from all relevant U.S. government agencies.
- Conduct thorough interagency reviews of the security vulnerabilities of the countries where Al-Qaeda currently has a presence, along with those countries most likely to be targeted by Al-Qaeda for future expansion. These reviews would need to identify those countries' most pressing security vulnerabilities, and work with each country to identify proactive measures that the United States could take to assist in addressing them, so as to consolidate any successes gained from the actions recommended above or prevent Al-Qaeda's expansion into new areas.
- Invest in maintaining and strengthening our international alliances and partnerships, most notably those with governments, international organizations, and non-government organizations that share U.S. interests and goals with respect to Al-Qaeda.

Requirements for defeating Al-Qaeda

If the U.S. government decides to pursue the complete *defeat* of Al-Qaeda, we assess that it would need to:

- Devise a vision for what *defeat* of the group would look like, both politically and practically, and then ensure that this vision is promulgated and pursued by the entirety of the U.S. government, so that all U.S. entities are synchronized

and aligned in their mission against Al-Qaeda. The United States would also need to share this vision with its partner nations and organizations, and use it as a lens to identify common and divergent interests among these entities.

- Create and resource a strategy to bring about the vision for Al-Qaeda’s defeat. As part of this strategic planning process, the United States would need to critically examine its current assumptions that the DOD should be the lead agency for this effort, and that the three goals articulated by the NDAA—disrupt, dismantle, and defeat—are a linear process. Additionally, the United States would need to clearly address how to defeat both Al-Qaeda’s capability and its will to fight. The requirements for dismantling Al-Qaeda that we identify above largely address its capability, but the United States would need to think much more deeply about how to effectively address Al-Qaeda’s will.
- Prepare for a protracted fight against Al-Qaeda and like-organizations. While the objective of dismantling Al-Qaeda could conceivably be achieved on a timescale of years, the U.S. experience with Al-Qaeda over the past two decades suggests that defeat of the group is likely to take decades more. The U.S. government would need to be realistic in both its own plans and programs—taking a long-term and persistent approach to the challenges that Al-Qaeda poses—and its communications with the America public.

Conclusion

Having assessed the threat that Al-Qaeda poses to the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests abroad, the impact of changing security environments across much of Africa and the Middle East on Al-Qaeda and U.S. efforts to counter the group, and the effectiveness of U.S. government approaches against Al-Qaeda, we conclude the following:

- **Current U.S. efforts are more aligned with the direct threat that Al-Qaeda poses to the United States and less to the security conditions, or vulnerabilities, that Al-Qaeda exploits to survive and expand.**
- **U.S. government efforts to date have not defeated Al-Qaeda. The current U.S. strategy—centered on military approaches and anchored in the assumed linear goals of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating the organization—is unlikely to do so.**
- **Dismantling Al-Qaeda would entail a commitment of U.S. resources well beyond those committed today.**

- **Continued disruption of Al-Qaeda is likely to require increasing resources as security environments continue to weaken in many parts of the world where Al-Qaeda operates and seeks to operate.**

Based on these findings, we conclude that *the current U.S. strategy toward Al-Qaeda is unlikely to attain the United States' desired goals*. Therefore, *we recommend that the U.S. government should undertake a new review of its policy goals and overarching strategy against Al-Qaeda*. This review should take a fresh look at Al-Qaeda and the environments in which it operates, or seeks to operate, as they exist today. This review should also critically examine U.S. strategic goals with respect to Al-Qaeda and like groups, the resources required to achieve those goals, and the political and domestic appetite for sustaining them. It should also examine the balance of roles across U.S. government agencies and the timelines and metrics required for success.

The U.S. has been battling Al-Qaeda primarily militarily for 16 years and yet the group is stronger and present in more places today than it was in 2001. Clearly, the U.S. needs a renewed approach.

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Glossary

AAS	Jama'at Ansar al-Shari'a
ABT	Ansarullah Bangla Team
AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission in Mali
AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
AFRICOM	U.S. Africa Command
AIAI	Al-Ittihad Al-Islami
AMISOM	African Union Mission to Somalia
ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
AQ	Al-Qaeda
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
AQS	Al-Qaeda-Syria
AQY	Al-Qaeda in Yemen
ARMM	Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
ARPCT	Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism
ARS	Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia
ASD	Assistant Secretary of Defense
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
ASSF	Afghan Special Security Forces
AST	Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia
BICES	Battlefield Information Collection and Exploitation System
BPC	Building Partner Capacity
CAS	Close Air Support
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
CENTRIXS	Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange System
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDNE	Combined Information Data Network Exchange
CJIATF	Combined Joint Inter-Agency Task Force
CMO	Civil-Military Operations
CMSE	Civil Military Support Elements

COIN	Counterinsurgency
CP	Counter-Productive
CPP	Communist Party of the Philippines
CSCC	Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications
CT	Counterterrorism
CTPF	Counterterrorism Partnership Fund
CTS	Counterterrorism Service (Iraq)
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
DHS	U.S. Department of Homeland Security
DOD	U.S. Department of Defense
DSOP	National Counter Terrorism Center - Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning
EIJ	Egyptian Islamic Jihad
EUTM	European Union Training Mission in Mali
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
FF	Foreign Fighter
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
FMF	Foreign Military Financing
FSA	Free Syrian Army
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
GAO	U.S. Government Accountability Office
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEC	Global Engagement Center
GIA	Armed Islamic Group
GSCF	Global Security Contingency Fund
GSPC	Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat
GWOT	Global War on Terror
HM	Hizb-ul-Mujahideen
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Group for the Liberation of the Levant
HUJI	Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam
HuJI-B	Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh
HuM	Harkat-ul-Mujahideen
HVT	High Value Target
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IM	Indian Mujahideen
IMET	International Military Education and Training
IMINT	Imagery Intelligence
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
INL	U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
IO	Information Operations

IS	Islamic State
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISI	Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance
JFS	Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Levant Conquest Front)
JN	Jabhat al-Nusra
JeM	Jaish-e-Mohammad
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
JMB	Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh
JSOC	Joint Special Operations Command
JSOTF-P	Joint Special Operations Task Force - Philippines
JSOTF-TS	Joint Special Operations Task Force - Trans Sahara
JTF-51	Joint Task force 510
KG	Khorasan Group
LeT	Lashkar-e-Taiba
LRC	Light Reaction Company
LRR	Light Reaction Regiment
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MISO	Military Information Support Operations
MIST	Military Information Support Teams
MNF-I	Multi-National Force - Iraq
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
MNSTC-I	Multi-National Security Transition Command - Iraq
MRC	Mombasa Republican Council
MSC	Mujahideen Shura Council
MUJWA	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
MYC	Muslim Youth Center
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Alliance
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NCTC	National Counter Terrorism Center
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
NIC	Office of the Director of National Intelligence - National Intelligence Council
NPA	New People's Army
ODNI	Office of the Director of National Intelligence
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OEF-P	Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines

OGP	Operation Gallant Phoenix
OIF	Operation Iraqi Freedom
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
OTI	USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives
PACOM	U.S. Pacific Command
PBIED	Person-Borne Improvised Explosive Device
PNP	Philippine National Police
PNS	Pakistan Naval Ship
POLAD	State Department's Political Advisor
PSF	Philippine Security Forces
PSYOPS	Psychological Operations
QDR	Quadrennial Defense Review
SAF	Special Action Force
SDGT	Specially Designated Global Terrorist
SF	Special Forces
SGI	Security Governance Initiative
SNA	Somali National Army
SO/LIC	Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict
SOCAF	U.S. Special Operations Command - Africa
SOCCENT	U.S. Special Operations Command - Central
SOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command
SOF	Special Operations Force
SOLO	Special Operations Liaison Officers
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TFC	Transitional Federal Government
TFG	Transitional Federal Government
TFI	Department of the Treasury's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence
TNC	Transitional National Government
TSCTP	Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership
TTP	Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UIC	Union of Islamic Courts
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNITAF	United Task Force
UNOSOM I	United Nations Operations in Somalia
UNOSOM II	United Nations Operations in Somalia II
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USASOC	U.S. Army Special Operations Command
USG	U.S. Government
USG	United States Government

USS	United States Ship
VEO	Violent Extremist Organization
WOT	War on Terror

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Summary of Assessment

Introduction

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.”¹ The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment. Section 1228 specified that the independent assessment should include the following topics:

1. An assessment of Al-Qaeda core’s current relationship with affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents,² and how it has changed over time.
2. An assessment of the current objectives, capabilities, and overall strategy of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how they have changed over time.
3. An assessment of the operational and organizational structure of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.

¹ Carl Levin and Howard “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, December 19, 2014, Section 1228, “Independent Assessment of the United States Efforts against al-Qaeda.” <https://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ291/PLAW-113publ291.pdf>.

² The NDAA did not provide specific definitions for the terms: “affiliated,” “associated,” and “adherent.” Our analysis focuses on Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates, as we explain in the Methodology section of this report. For the purpose of the paper, we define “affiliated groups” as: “groups that have aligned with Al-Qaeda, which means that they have pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda has publicly accepted/acknowledged the pledge.” In order to bound our assessment within resource and time constraints, we largely exclude less formal participants, including Al-Qaeda inspired individuals and small groups, or what the NDAA refers to as “associates” and “adherents.”

4. An analysis of the activities that have proven to be most effective and least effective at disrupting and dismantling Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.
5. Recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.³

The NDAA mandated that the results of this assessment be provided to select congressional committees via an unclassified report. This document fulfills that requirement and presents the results of CNA's assessment of these topics.

Methodology

To address the topics mandated by the NDAA, we employed an “expanded net assessment” approach. Traditional net assessment examines the interplay between the U.S. and an adversary directly, and the topics mandated by the NDAA for this study fit within such a construct. However, in order to fully understand the conflict between the U.S. and Al-Qaeda, it is necessary to also examine changes in the environments in which this conflict has played out and how those changes have impacted the dynamics and trajectory of the conflict. To conduct such an expanded net assessment, our analysis proceeded in four stages:

- First, we relied on a wide variety of data sources (described below) to create case studies on Al-Qaeda core and six of its affiliates: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shebab (in Somalia), Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and Al-Qaeda in Syria (AQS). We also developed a case study on the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Although the latter ultimately did not fit the definition of an affiliate, we used the data from this case as part of our assessment where appropriate. After we developed the case studies, we then conducted a qualitative comparative analysis of these cases to address the first three topics required by the NDAA concerning Al-Qaeda's strategies, objectives, capabilities, and structure (to include the relationship between the core and its affiliates). We also used the case study data to identify what specific challenges Al-Qaeda's activities pose to U.S. national security interests.
- Second, we examined in detail how the environments relevant to this conflict have evolved since 2001, and we identified specific vulnerabilities in the security environments of the countries where Al-Qaeda has operated or sought to operate. We then conducted a comparative analysis of these examples to

³ 2015 NDAA, Section 1228.

identify what types of security vulnerabilities Al-Qaeda exploits, how it does so, and what has changed in the security environment of these countries (and in the regions in which they sit) that could account for Al-Qaeda’s current state and the changes in its state over time. We also examined the impact of changing security environments on the United States’ ability to pursue its objectives against Al-Qaeda over time.

- Third, we catalogued the various components of U.S. government efforts against each of seven Al-Qaeda entities (the core and six affiliates). We then organized these components into several discrete “approaches” that the United States has used to combat Al-Qaeda over the past 16 years—in effect, we detailed the toolkit that the United States has used or is using to combat these groups. As part of this step, we articulated the rationale behind each of the U.S. approaches, to make clear what the U.S. government believed it could accomplish via each approach.
- Last, we used a qualitative, analytically comparative framework to conduct an expanded net assessment of Al-Qaeda, U.S. efforts against the group, and the environment in which this conflict has taken place. To do this, we first assessed whether the U.S. approach to Al-Qaeda core and each of its affiliates has been optimally aligned to the challenges that these groups pose to U.S. national security interests as well as to the vulnerabilities in the security environment that they exploit for their own gains. Second, we assessed the U.S. approach across all of the cases to identify which U.S. actions against Al-Qaeda have been most and least effective.

Data

We collected data from a wide range of sources, including the following:

- Strategic documents from across the U.S. government
- Operational and tactical documentation from across the Department of Defense (DOD), the Department of State, the intelligence community, and other entities
- Intelligence reporting and assessments
- Extensive discussions with leading Al-Qaeda experts from the research and academic communities⁴

⁴ Please refer to Appendix A for a list of organizations contacted for this assessment.

- Extensive discussions with current and former U.S. government officials (e.g., military, intelligence, and law enforcement professionals)
- Open sources, including social media, news outlets, and blogs
- The subject matter expertise of our own analysts, many of whom have focused on Al-Qaeda and like-organizations for all, or a large portion of, their careers

Scoping

Given the magnitude of the topics directed for study by the NDAA, and the limited time and resources available for this assessment, we had to bound the scope of the study to make it tractable. We did so in the following ways:

- We took the NDAA’s direction of this study to the Secretary of Defense to imply that the focus of the study should be on DOD’s actions against Al-Qaeda. This is not to say that we ignored the actions of other U.S. government agencies—we identified those as best we could within the constraints of the study—but we focused our attention on the approaches taken by DOD, which account for most of the efforts and resources applied by the United States against Al-Qaeda to date.
- We focused our analytical attention on Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates and excluded less formal participants, including Al-Qaeda inspired individuals and small groups. We define “affiliates” as groups that have aligned with Al-Qaeda, meaning that they have pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda has publicly accepted that pledge. To that end, this assessment focuses on Al-Qaeda core, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Qaeda in Syria, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, al-Shebab (in Somalia), and the now-defunct Al-Qaeda in Iraq.
- We took the NDAA’s focus on the disruption, dismantling, and defeat of Al-Qaeda—and the absence of the term “defend”—to imply that the study should focus on the United States’ offensive efforts against Al-Qaeda abroad, thereby excluding the policies and programs carried out by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), as well as the counterterrorism-related efforts of state, local, and tribal authorities.
- We also took the language of the NDAA focused on disrupt, dismantle, and defeat to be indicative of the current U.S. policy goal for Al-Qaeda. As such, we largely focus our findings with respect to that policy goal, though we recognize that there are other policy goals that might be pursued.
- Finally, given the NDAA’s requirement for an unclassified report to Congress, we focused our attention on unclassified sources of material for this assessment. In the course of our research, we did review a number of classified

documents and held classified discussions with current U.S. government personnel, but we used that information as background and context for our unclassified research.

Organization

This section of the report summarizes the results of CNA's findings during its assessment of these topics. The remainder of this section is organized into five parts. The first part summarizes the results of our assessment of the first three issues in the NDAA which focus on Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates and how they have evolved and changed over time in terms of relationships, structure, objectives, capabilities, and strategies. The second section summarizes our analysis of the security environment in the countries where Al-Qaeda and its affiliates operate. The third section summarizes our assessment of U.S. approaches to Al-Qaeda since 2001, highlighting which aspects of each approach have been effective and which have not. The fourth section summarizes our findings and recommendations for future U.S. government efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The final section presents our conclusions.

The remainder of the report presents CNA's full independent assessment of the NDAA-mandated topics, and is organized into the following sections:

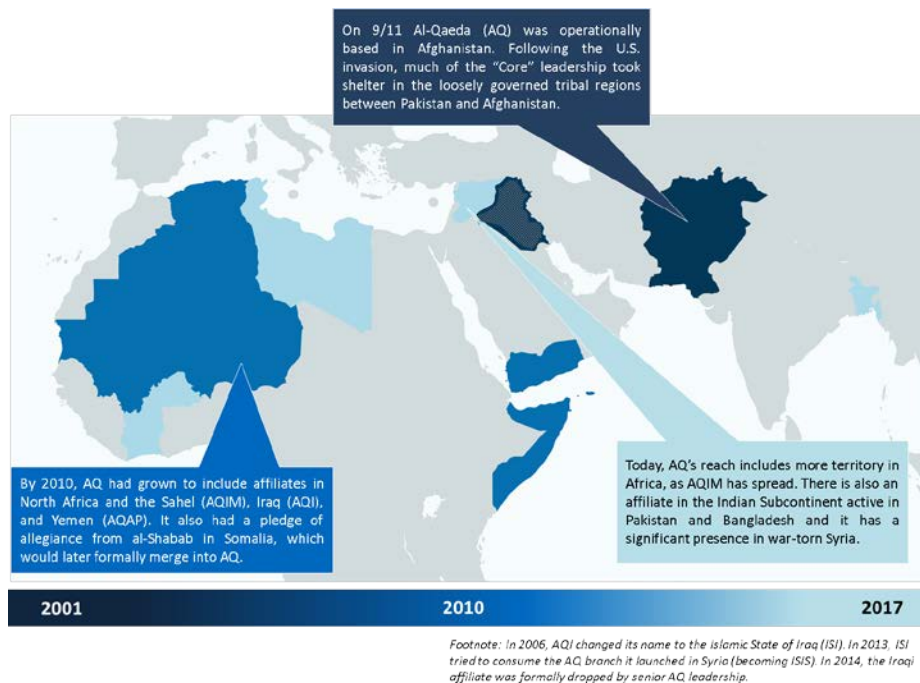
- Detailed analysis of Al-Qaeda's evolution
- Detailed analysis of the evolution of local and regional security environments
- Detailed assessment of U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda
- Detailed discussion of our findings and recommendations
- Conclusions
- Appendix A: List of organizations contacted during the study
- Appendix B: Case study of Al-Qaeda core
- Appendix C: Case study of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
- Appendix D: Case study of Al-Qaeda in Iraq
- Appendix E: Case study of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
- Appendix F: Case study of Al-Shebab
- Appendix G: Case study of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent

- Appendix H: Case study of Al-Qaeda in Syria
- Appendix I: Case study of the Abu Sayyaf Group
- Appendix J: Assessment data tables

Assessment of Al-Qaeda

Nearly 16 years after September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda is a very different organization, in a very different world. It has suffered significant setbacks and periods of weakening, but it has also had impressive gains and expansion. In 2001, the core of Al-Qaeda was in Afghanistan and the organization had a nominal presence in a handful of other countries (Figure 1). Today, in addition to what remains of core Al-Qaeda, there are five active Al-Qaeda affiliates: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Qaeda in Syria, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and al-Shebab. Together, these groups are active in over 10 Muslim-majority countries. In addition, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, once the most virulent of Al-Qaeda's affiliates, evolved into what we now know as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

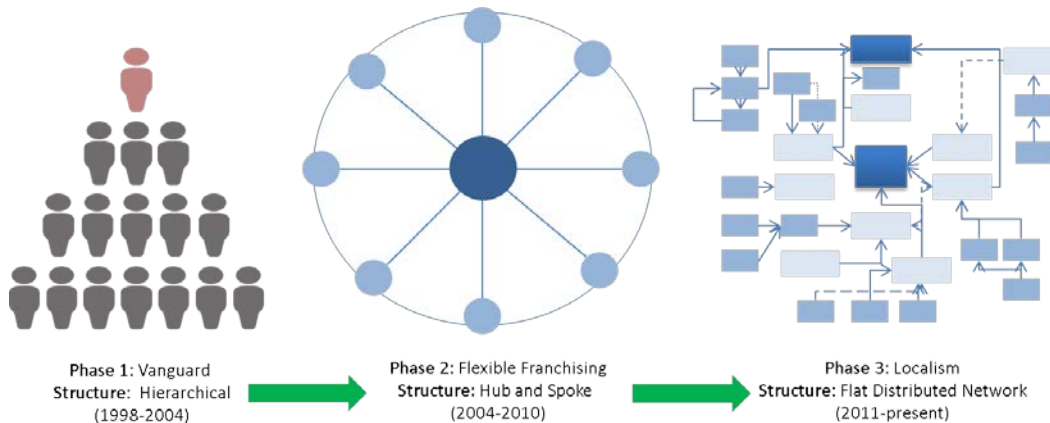
Figure 1. Al-Qaeda's expansion over time: 2007 to 2017



Source: P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Zack Gold, CNA.

The evolution of Al-Qaeda has been significantly shaped by U.S. and other countries' efforts to defeat the group. But equally, if not more significant, the deteriorated political, economic, and security conditions across much of the Middle East, Africa, and Southwest Asia have provided apertures that Al-Qaeda has skillfully exploited to its advantage to grow into new areas, gain influence, and attract followers. It is within the context of on-going international counterterrorism efforts, and a changing world, that Al-Qaeda has gone through three distinct developmental phases since 2001, revealing an ability to adapt, spread, and remain resilient. Each of the three phases differs in terms of Al-Qaeda's relationships, structure, objectives, capabilities, and strategies (Figure 2). We summarize these phases below.

Figure 2. Al-Qaeda's operational structure in each of its phases



Source: P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Zack Gold, CNA.

Phase one: Vanguard (1998-2004)

The first phase focused on Osama Bin Laden, the son of a successful Saudi businessman. Bin Laden used his sizeable family wealth to establish Al-Qaeda with ideological input from Abdullah Azzam, who has been described as an architect of international jihad. In 1998, Bin Laden merged his group with the group Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), which supplied Al-Qaeda with some of its most disciplined and resourceful militants. Ayman al-Zawahiri, EIJ's leader, became Al-Qaeda's deputy leader.

During its vanguard phase, Bin Laden was at the top of a cadre of jihadi veterans that sought out—and were sought by—local causes to support them with financing, training, and fighters. The 9/11 Commission referred to this group as “the general

headquarters for international terrorism.”⁵ Although Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and the core were operationally based in Afghanistan, the group claimed a relatively small roster of members (in the hundreds), some of whom were dispersed as emissaries from East Africa to Indonesia in search of opportunities.⁶

In terms of the group’s strategy and objectives in this phase, for Al-Qaeda, “victory” was defined as the establishment of a Muslim caliphate that would lead a global clash against the West. To achieve this, Al-Qaeda believed that it needed to both collapse the international system of independent Muslim-majority states and convince Muslim populations to replace their current governance structures with that of strict Islamic law (Sharia). In this phase, to achieve these outcomes, Al-Qaeda sought to:

- Overthrow and replace local and national governance structures in Muslim lands (the so-called “near enemy”) and replace them with governance based on its interpretation of Sharia
- Remove U.S. presence from what it considered Muslim lands and U.S. support to the governments in those countries by attacking the U.S. homeland, and Americans and American interests abroad (the so-called “far enemy”)
- Discredit, undermine, and eventually replace the Western-dominated international order with a pan-Islamic caliphate based on its interpretation of Sharia

In this phase, Al-Qaeda was a hierarchical organization, with strong leadership that provided detailed guidance to the rank and file. In terms of capabilities, Al-Qaeda was focused on spectacular attacks in the West, primarily the United States and Europe, and recruitment and training in Afghanistan, until its ability to do so was thwarted by U.S. operations there in late 2001 and 2002. Prior to the U.S. invasion, having freedom of movement in Afghanistan allowed Al-Qaeda to plan, train for, and execute complex operations such as those on September 11, 2001, with little to no external pressure. During this phase, Al-Qaeda was also focused on its messaging and spreading its ideology throughout Muslim-majority countries in order to justify its actions and gain followers. A key part of its messaging was also aimed at U.S. and Western audiences in an attempt to force the West out of Muslim-majority countries.

⁵ Thomas H. Kean and Lee Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004), 67, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/911commission.pdf>.

⁶ Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, 67.

Phase two: Flexible franchising (2004-2010)

During this phase, Al-Qaeda began lending its name to regional affiliates in order to survive and, in some cases, expand, in the face of the U.S.-led Global War on Terror (GWOT). However, not all of its franchises were created equally, and the “mechanism” for franchising was different from one affiliate to the next. Both affiliates in Africa, AQIM and al-Shebab, took years to prove their value, and even after they pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda there was a gap in time before they were formally merged into the organization. On the other hand, Al-Qaeda perhaps rushed to close the deal that created its Iraqi branch (AQI), in order to capitalize on the opportunity the U.S. presented to the group when it invaded and occupied a second Muslim country. The creation of AQI also positioned Al-Qaeda to take advantage of the presence of large numbers of U.S. troops to target and attack.

The lack of an effective U.S. stabilization plan in Iraq following the invasion of the country in 2003 created the conditions for AQI to establish a foothold and attract jihadis from within the Middle East and beyond to fight the United States in the heart of the Middle East. The U.S. toppling of a secular regime in Baghdad also put the United States at war in two Muslim countries, which was a boon to the narrative of a “clash of civilizations” on which Al-Qaeda fed. Even if the invasion of Afghanistan was viewed as justified, international opinion was strongly against the Iraq war, isolating Washington and diminishing post-9/11 goodwill around the world.

The organization’s strategy and objectives remained the same in this phase as in the first phase, except that the organization also began to spread its brand and presence by establishing affiliates. With the establishment of the affiliates, Al-Qaeda remained fairly hierarchical with its core members at the center, but it evolved in this phase to take on a “hub-and-spoke” structure with the affiliates taking guidance from the core. In terms of capabilities, during this phase the affiliates—in particular AQAP—began to attempt to carry out attacks in the West. It was also during this phase that AQI began to make widespread use of the improvised explosive device (IED) against Iraqi, U.S., and coalition forces in Iraq. Over time, the IED has become a standard weapon of Al-Qaeda and other like-organizations, including ISIS.

During this phase, Al-Qaeda also conducted large-scale attacks aimed at weakening the international coalition that had assembled against it. For example, in Madrid, Al-Qaeda conducted a large-scale attack using explosive devices detonated by cell phones. It is widely believed that the attack was intended to intimidate the Spanish government as a result of its having joined the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. Shortly after the bombings, Spain held elections, which resulted in the election of a new government under the Socialist Party. Several months after the election, Prime

Minister Zapatero kept his campaign promise and withdrew Spain's 1,300 troops from the coalition in Iraq.⁷

Phase three: Localism (2011-present)

Today, Al-Qaeda continues to adjust to the Arab Spring events that unfolded in 2011, beginning with the ouster of Tunisian strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, which prompted protests, uprisings, revolutions, and civil wars across many Arab countries. The deterioration of the security environments in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen provided oxygen to Al-Qaeda affiliates and like-minded groups, allowing them to take advantage of instability and, where there was ongoing conflict, delve deeper. Perhaps no affiliate's fortunes reversed as drastically in this phase as those of AQI, which used the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, the marginalization of Iraqi Sunnis by the government in Baghdad, and the emergent civil war in Syria to push into Syria and—from a safe-haven there—launch successive attacks against the government in Baghdad, seize huge swaths of both Iraq and Syria, and declare itself the new caliphate. The rapid re-emergence of its Iraqi affiliate was not, however, a boon to Al-Qaeda. Instead, ISIS' 2014 declaration of the caliphate (for which Al-Qaeda had been working so diligently and patiently to set the conditions) provided Al-Qaeda with a new strategic challenge: a competing group claiming the mantle of global jihadism.

As this phase has unfolded, Al-Qaeda has become a flatter, more networked organization. The core "hub" in the previous phase's structure has diminished over time, with affiliates acting increasingly more independent of the core. Today, Al-Qaeda's individual franchises focus on exploiting local conflicts—most notably in Syria and Yemen—and Al-Qaeda affiliates seek opportunities to move into additional (and often adjacent) areas where there is ongoing conflict and instability. They are able to do this because they are under less pressure today than they have been in the past and therefore can operate more freely in these environments. Over this phase, the affiliates have become increasingly responsive to local contexts, and commensurate with their size, have reduced their focus on attacking the U.S. homeland and the West relative to the previous phases.

Overall, Al-Qaeda maintains the strategy and objectives described above in its previous phases, but it has also expanded its operational modus operandi: it has become deeply enmeshed in local conflicts; increased its focus on, and role in, the provision of local governance; and expanded its control of territory. Notably, in this

⁷ Keith Richberg, "Madrid Attacks may have Targeted Elections," *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A38817-2004Oct16.html>.

phase, Al-Qaeda has also been seeking to position itself as “less extreme” in comparison to ISIS and to outlast the rival group. It is possible that Al-Qaeda is leaving the door open for rapprochement with ISIS, or with what remains of ISIS, in the coming months and years. In terms of capabilities, Al-Qaeda has been taking advantage of civil unrest in the broader Middle East and Africa to increasingly participate in local conflicts. In Syria and Yemen, Al-Qaeda branches are employing the full spectrum of military capabilities against their enemies in an effort to militarily defeat them. In the Sahel region of Africa, AQIM continues to plan and execute fairly regular large-scale attacks on soft targets, such as hotels, in addition to targeting French and United Nations (UN) forces in the region. In Somalia, al-Shebab continues to plan and execute fairly regular attacks against government and soft targets in that country and in neighboring countries.

During this phase, Al-Qaeda affiliates have increased their targeting of the aviation sector. In the previous phase, only AQAP was actively plotting attacks against aircraft. In this phase, AQAP, AQS, and al-Shebab have each plotted—and the latter has executed (though unsuccessfully)—attacks using hidden explosives aboard aircraft. The only attack claimed by Al-Qaeda in the West during this phase was the January 2015 assault on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. The attackers were brothers, who had received weapons training in Yemen in the summer of 2011.⁸ However, it is unclear how much—if any—planning, funding, or direction AQAP provided to this attack.⁹

In terms of what is next for Al-Qaeda, there is not a consensus view of the organization’s future trajectory. Some speculate that Al-Qaeda is currently taking a “strategic pause” from attacks on the West and “laying low” while the focus of international efforts is on destroying ISIS. Al-Qaeda may seek to exploit the demise of that organization for any number of purposes, including re-claiming the role of the vanguard and the “true” path of global jihadism, in addition to more practical reasons such as seeking to recruit previous ISIS followers into their fold. It is also likely that Al-Qaeda and its affiliates are directing much of their operational capabilities at fighting local and national governments in Muslim countries (the so-called “near enemy”) to overthrow and replace them. The objective to hit the “far enemy” has certainly not gone away, but that part of Al-Qaeda’s strategy appears to

⁸ Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, “Both Brothers Behind Paris Attack Had Weapons Training in Yemen: Sources,” Reuters, Jan. 11, 2015, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-yemen-idUSKBN0KKOF620150111>.

⁹ Tim Fernholz, “The Unanswered Questions After AQAP Takes Credit for the Charlie Hebdo Attacks,” Quartz, Jan. 14, 2015, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <https://qz.com/326588/the-unanswered-questions-after-aqap-takes-credit-for-the-charlie-hebdo-attacks/>.

be receiving relatively less emphasis today than it has in the past, at least for the time being.

Relationship between Al-Qaeda “core” and its affiliates

Most of Al-Qaeda’s affiliates have depended on Al-Qaeda leadership for general strategic guidance, and there is evidence that affiliates have carried out direct instructions from Osama Bin Laden, his successor Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and other core leaders. However, much of the published correspondence captured from Bin Laden’s Abbottabad hideout and other intercepted letters leave the impression that the Al-Qaeda leader was disappointed with his subordinate groups. For example, in one letter Bin Laden lamented that even AQAP, the affiliate most actively attempting external attacks, was not trying hard enough.¹⁰ Table 1 summarizes Al-Qaeda core’s relationships with its affiliates today.

Table 1. Al-Qaeda core’s relationships with the affiliates

AQI	Had its relationship voided by Al-Qaeda in February 2014
AQIM	Follows general guidance from Al-Qaeda core
AQAP	Follows general guidance from Al-Qaeda core
Al-Shebab	Follows general guidance from Al-Qaeda core. Recently, there has been open-source documentation of al-Shebab receiving and following direct orders from Al-Qaeda leadership
AQS	Has key Al-Qaeda core veterans within its decision-making leadership
AQIS	Has Al-Qaeda core members within its decision-making leadership

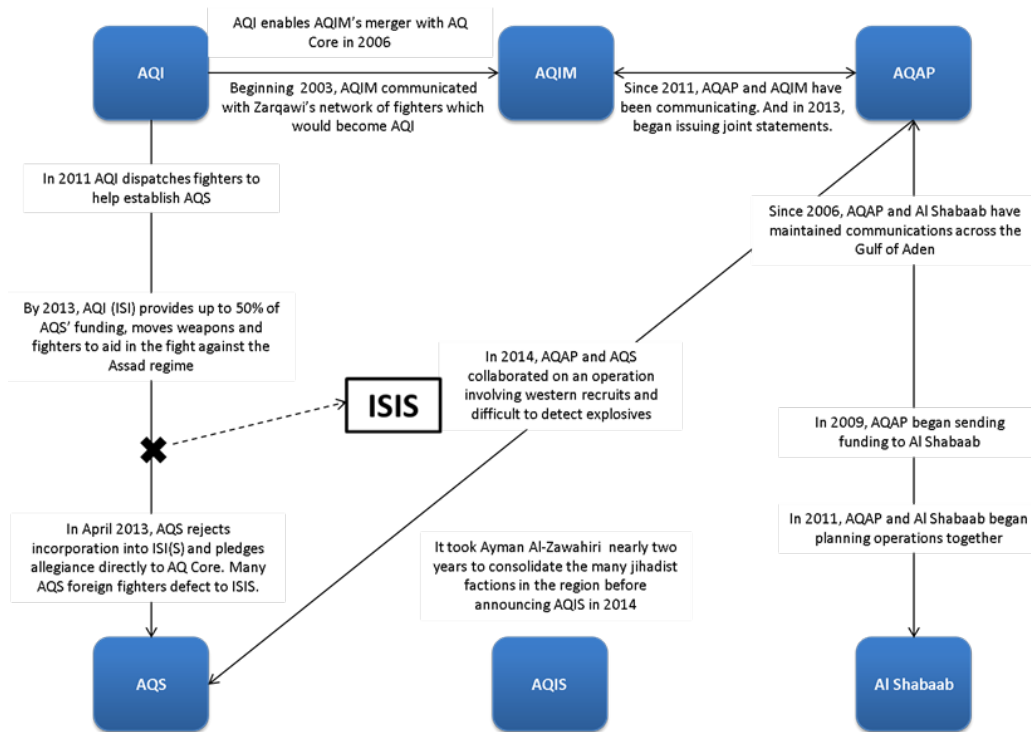
Relationships among Al-Qaeda’s affiliates

An assessment of the affiliates’ current ties to one another is important for understanding Al-Qaeda’s structure and whether the concept of a “core” continues to be relevant. As shown in Figure 3, today, AQAP is connected to all of its peer affiliates—with the exception of AQIS. AQAP and al-Shebab, operating across the Gulf of Aden from each other, have maintained inter-group communications since 2006. From 2009 to 2013, AQAP also provided funding to al-Shebab. Additionally, there is some evidence of joint planning of operations between the two groups since 2011.

¹⁰ Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined? Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 2012, 29, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CTC_LtrsFromAbottabad_WEB_v2.pdf.

Subject matter experts, for example, suspect that the Somali affiliate does not, on its own, have the capability to produce the laptop bomb that detonated aboard a flight out of Mogadishu in February 2016 and that therefore it must have received assistance from another group. AQAP and AQIM began direct communications with each other in 2011. Since 2013, the groups have also been issuing joint statements. Reports also point to operational links between AQAP and AQS, which in 2014 was working with AQAP to develop another external aviation plot. However, it is unclear in open-source reporting whether AQAP and AQS co-planning of operations has continued after that.

Figure 3. Al-Qaeda affiliates' relationships with each other



Source: P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Zack Gold, CNA.

Al-Qaeda challenges to the U.S. and its interests

Al-Qaeda and its affiliates conduct activities that directly impact the United States and its interests at home and abroad. We refer to these activities as “challenges.” Based on our comparative examination of Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates’ activities today and over time, we identified five challenges that the organization poses to the United States and its interests. These are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Challenges Al-Qaeda and its affiliates pose to the United States

Challenges	Definition	Examples
Conduct attacks on U.S. interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attack U.S. homeland • Attack U.S. regional interests • Attack U.S. local interests (e.g., U.S. embassies and Americans in country) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1998 attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania • 2000 attack on USS <i>Cole</i> • 2001 9/11 attacks • 2009 “Underwear bomber”
Conduct attacks on U.S. allies (within and outside region)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attack Western interests • Attack local interests that represent the West • Attack local/regional interests (governments, economic centers, academic institutions, etc.) • Attack local security/military/law enforcement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing attacks on UN mission in Mali • 2003 attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad • 2004 Madrid attacks • 2005 attacks on London transit • 2005 AQI hotel attacks in Amman, Jordan • 2015 Al-Shebab attack on Garissa University in Kenya
Attempt to overthrow local and national governments in partner countries and replace with Al-Qaeda governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foment instability and strife by attacking sectarian or civilian targets • Control territory; expand territory • Provide support/assistance to local population • Establish Sharia rule and courts, conduct governance activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AQI attacks and brutality against Shia population in Iraq • AQIM part of jihadi alliance that took over and ruled northern Mali in 2012. • In 2015, AQAP administered Sharia in Mukalla, Yemen, and provided humanitarian and civic services
Conduct messaging / propaganda activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discredit the Western order • Disseminate AQ-brand Islam as “true” version of Islam • Malign local governments as illegitimate • Promote narrative that Muslims are victims of U.S./Western aggression, abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From 2001, Al-Qaeda’s “Al-Sahab” produces videos providing spiritual guidance, recruitment and propaganda. Affiliates have their own media outlets • In 2010, AQAP launches <i>Inspire</i> magazine for Western Muslims
Man, train, & equip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit, convince followers to join jihad in person, online, etc. • Train members of the group and provide information/advice to actual/potential followers/attackers • Acquire funding, weapons, and other materiel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Until 2001, Al-Qaeda openly operated training camps in Afghanistan. Today, Al-Qaeda affiliates still train fighters • After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Al-Qaeda’s network funneled funds, arms, and fighters to Zarqawi’s network—which became AQI • Al-Qaeda affiliates, AQIM especially, have earned millions of dollars ransoming hostages, which it uses to support operations

Summary of findings on Al-Qaeda Core and its affiliates

Nearly 16 years after September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda is a very different organization in a very different world. It has suffered setbacks and periods of weakening, but it has also made gains and expanded in the face of international efforts against it. With respect to the first three topics required by the NDAA, we arrived at these findings:

- **Al-Qaeda has kept a focus on the same core goals that it had in 2001 most notable of which is the establishment of a global caliphate.** The organization has also added goals and adjusted its strategy over time in response to counter-terrorism actions against it and changes in the environments in which it operates. Al-Qaeda's leadership continues to advocate for a long-term, patient campaign utilizing terrorist and insurgent tactics against both the "near enemy" (apostate Muslim regimes) and the "far enemy" (the United States and the West).
- **Al-Qaeda today is larger, more agile, and more resilient than it was in 2001.** Sixteen years ago, the core of Al-Qaeda was in Afghanistan and the organization had a nominal presence in a handful of other countries. Today, in addition to what remains of core Al-Qaeda, there are five Al-Qaeda affiliates: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Qaeda in Syria, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and al-Shebab (in Somalia). In addition, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, once the most virulent of Al-Qaeda's affiliates, evolved into what we now know as ISIS.
- **In 2001, Al-Qaeda was a rigidly hierarchical organization. Today, Al-Qaeda is a flat, decentralized, and geographically dispersed organization.** The notion of "core" Al-Qaeda sitting at the center of the group's affiliates is waning in utility, as many of the original members of Al-Qaeda and its other leaders have moved out of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and co-located themselves with some of the group's affiliates (most notably AQAP and AQS). The group's affiliates, which are now active in over 10 Muslim-majority countries, have more autonomy than in the past, and most of the affiliates have connections with other affiliates (the possible exception being AQIS).
- **Al-Qaeda is a learning and adaptive organization, and this contributes to the group's resilience.** Al-Qaeda has shown that it can weather severe setbacks (e.g., AQI's near defeat in Iraq), learn from its mistakes, and evolve its approach over time. In recent years, Al-Qaeda has been able to adapt its approach to make new gains. In particular, the group's affiliates have become more adept at pursuing local goals via the provision of governance attuned to local contexts.

- **The threat from Al-Qaeda to the United States homeland remains, but does not appear to be the foremost goal of every part of the organization.** While Al-Qaeda's leadership continues to advocate for attacks against the United States directly and some of its affiliates (e.g., AQAP and AQS) have at times acted in accordance with these wishes, Al-Qaeda's affiliates today seem more focused on achieving success in local and regional conflicts against the organization's "near enemies."
- **The emergence of ISIS (an Al-Qaeda offshoot), presents both obstacles and opportunities for Al-Qaeda.** ISIS is arguably the vanguard of global jihad today and the group has amassed an impressive following and significant resources in only a few years. However, ISIS has also drawn the bulk of the attention and resources of the United States-led global counterterrorism effort in recent years, which has reduced the pressure on Al-Qaeda in other areas.
- **Al-Qaeda may be biding its time to regroup, regenerate, and regain the mantle of global jihad.** While the world has been focused on ISIS in recent years, Al-Qaeda has been learning, adapting its approach, and grooming the next generation of its leadership via the jihad in Syria, Yemen, and other locations. Notable among these due to his lineage is Hamza Bin Laden, one of Osama Bin Laden's sons.

Assessment of local and regional security environments

The trajectory of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates has been shaped by the organization's own actions and decisions, but also in response to external forces. Actions by the United States and its partners are one such external force, but the shifts in local and regional conditions have also impacted how the group has changed and evolved. Many of the countries where Al-Qaeda operates—and the broader regions in which these countries sit—have become increasingly politically, socially, and economically unstable over the past decade and a half. Al-Qaeda has adapted to these changes and exploited them to its benefit. Shifts in these conditions have also often negatively impacted the United States' ability to pursue its objectives against Al-Qaeda.

Security vulnerabilities

Because these conditions present an opportunity for Al-Qaeda to grow and expand, we refer to them as "vulnerabilities" in the security environment. For example, Al-Qaeda has taken advantage of crises and the relative freedom of action they provide to recruit and train members, spread propaganda, plan and execute attacks, and even

govern through their own structure. For efforts against Al-Qaeda to be effective, these contextual factors must be understood and taken into account since they not only have allowed for the growth and expansion of the organization but also have greatly influenced—and, at times, limited—U.S. efforts to counter the group. For example, in Syria and Yemen, the conditions of the civil wars in those countries today are such that the United States simply does not have a partner nation government with which to work. In Table 3, we describe and define seven security vulnerabilities that Al-Qaeda exploits, and we present specific examples of where Al-Qaeda has been able to do so.

Table 3. Summary of security vulnerabilities in countries where Al-Qaeda operates

Vulnerability	Definition	Examples
Internal conflict	Ongoing internal violence at the local/communal, regional, or central level(s). Can take different forms, to include: sectarian fighting, civil war, insurgencies, and separatist movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syria: civil war (2011-present) • Yemen: civil War (2015-present) • Afghanistan: insurgency (2002-present) • Somalia (1991-present) • Iraq (2004-2007, present)
History of violent Jihadism	A long-standing history of jihadi movements, opposed to the government, within the population in which Al-Qaeda can tap and build	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yemen: Jihadi groups (1990s) • Afghanistan/Pakistan (1980s to the present)
Collapse or partial-collapse of the central government	The central government is not operating effectively due to an external invasion or an internal coup, uprising, revolution, insurrection, etc. In this case, governments do not have control of their national territory or their borders, and face violent opposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syria (2011-present) • Yemen (2015-present) • Mali (2012-present) • Iraq (2003-present) • Afghanistan (2002-present)
Government illegitimacy	A significant portion of the population does not view the central government as the legitimate authority, but sees it as a foreign puppet, a sectarian regime, a corrupt failure, and/or an oppressive tyrant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraq: Shia-dominated government, backed by U.S. • Syria: Minority Alawite regime in Sunni majority country • Afghanistan: U.S. brokered “National Unity Government” in the wake of highly flawed elections
Demographic instabilities	Trends that leave large portions of the population economically vulnerable, such as youth bulges, ethno-sectarian competition/violence, refugee populations, internally displaced peoples (IDPs), and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraq: Shia/Sunni strife • Syria: Urbanization • Mali: Youth bulge, Tuareg rebellions • Yemen: Youth bulge, sectarian tensions, displacement of populations as part of the ongoing conflict

	mass urbanization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afghanistan: Large IDP populations in Pakistan and Iran (now being forced back into Afghanistan)
Security sector ineffective-ness	Problems within the security sector, including lack of capacity/capability and professionalism within the security forces, weak institutions for security and defense, and corruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mali: Extensive corruption within government and military • Iraq: Sectarianism and corruption led to the collapse of the U.S.-trained Iraqi Army • Afghanistan: Afghan security forces have been steadily losing ground in recent years • Yemen: The Yemeni security forces have effectively collapsed
Neighbor in crisis	When a neighboring country is undergoing significant internal violent strife/conflict or is in a state of conflict with a third country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syria (Iraq, 2003-present) • Iraq (Syria, 2011-present) • Mali (Algeria, 1991-2002) • Afghanistan (Pakistan, 2002-present)

Summary of findings on the impact of local and regional security environments

With the specific questions from the NDAA in mind, we offer the following findings concerning the evolution of local and regional security environments and the associated impact on Al-Qaeda and the United States:

- **In the years since 2001, many of the countries in the Middle East and Africa have become increasingly politically, socially, and economically unstable.** The worsening conditions in many of these countries have led to a host of vulnerabilities in their security environments, such as internal conflicts, government corruption and illegitimacy, collapse of governing regimes, and neighboring states in crisis.
- **Al-Qaeda routinely exploits vulnerabilities in the security environments of weak and failing countries in order to maneuver and expand.** These environments allow the organization to operate with relative freedom. In addition, often there are grievances within the population that the organization can exploit to its advantage. Key examples include: Syria, Yemen, the Sahel region of Africa (especially Mali), Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and

Southeast Asia. In these countries and many others, security vulnerabilities have emerged or become more widespread within the past decade.¹¹

- **Al-Qaeda can exploit security vulnerabilities in weak or failing states, though its success in doing so still requires skillful approaches on the part of the organization’s affiliates.** It is not a given that populations in vulnerable or failing states will support Al-Qaeda. Rather, the organization must devise effective approaches that allow it to take advantage of conditions. For example, in places where there is on-going civil war, the government is not responding to the needs of the people in terms of basic services and governance. This provides an aperture for Al-Qaeda to step into, for example, by establishing its own parallel governance structures or providing services. Al-Qaeda’s ability to take advantage of these conditions is enhanced when it has a pre-existing presence or relationships with disaffected populations or groups in a country, or when it is able to quickly establish such relationships.
- **Al-Qaeda has benefitted from slow, negative trends in the security conditions in countries across much of the Middle East and Africa, but its largest gains have occurred when there were sharp and rapid deteriorations.** For instance, Al-Qaeda’s strongest affiliates today are AQAP and AQS, which exist in the midst of the civil wars in Yemen and Syria, respectively. Additionally, AQI instigated a civil war in Iraq and its strength increased considerably as that civil war increased in intensity.
- **Worsening trends in security conditions not only help Al-Qaeda but can significantly hinder U.S. government efforts to counter the group.** The United States’ “by, with, and through” approaches (in which we lose local partners), unilateral counterterrorism actions (in which we lose bases for such operations), and diplomatic and development activities (in which our civilian personnel lose the ability to engage at-risk communities) are examples of efforts that have been hindered by these deteriorating security conditions.

¹¹ Please refer to the Fragile States Index (FSI), which is produced by the Fund for Peace. The FSI is an annual report on the status of fragility in countries around the world. A comparative look at the countries where Al-Qaeda operates today versus 2006, using a variety of indicators, shows that fragility has increased significantly in these countries and regions. We present these data in more detail in a later section of this report. The FSI data can be accessed at: <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/>.

Assessment of U.S. government effectiveness against Al-Qaeda

Since 2001, Al-Qaeda has been largely framed as a national security issue for the United States that requires a military response, with other U.S. government entities playing mostly supporting roles. With respect to the fourth NDAA topic, this assessment focuses on the tools that the DOD has applied against Al-Qaeda to understand which have been effective and which have not, and under what circumstances. In looking across the DOD’s actions against Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates, we identified activities and programs that fall into eight categories, which we call “approaches.” For each approach, we also identified the rationale behind it—why the U.S. uses it and what outcomes the U.S. hopes to achieve by its use (Table 4).

Table 4. DOD approaches against Al-Qaeda

Approach ¹²	Rationale
ATTACK THE NETWORK	<p>The U.S. attacks and removes the Al-Qaeda network’s key nodes (e.g., high value individuals) in order to disrupt its ability to operate and to degrade its capabilities. Attacking the network includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Direct action</i>, which includes kinetic missions such as raids and strikes from manned or unmanned aircraft • <i>Isolating the Network</i>, which includes interrupting foreign fighter flows and disrupting terrorist financing so that the Al-Qaeda network is weakened and ultimately defeated¹³ • <i>Capture/Detention/Interrogation Operations</i>, which remove fighters from the battlefield and generate intelligence for future operations
SECURITY COOPERATION / BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY	<p>The U.S. provides partner nation forces with training and equipment in order to increase their capability and capacity to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda (also called “Train and Equip” programs, or, when Department of State is in the lead, security assistance)¹⁴</p>

¹² Cyber operations are a key line of effort for the DOD against Al-Qaeda; however, for reasons of classification, we chose to omit them from this assessment.

¹³ CJCS General Dunford stated that: “...to be successful [the U.S.] needs to, number one, cut the connective tissue between regional groups that now form a transregional threat.” Global Threats and American National Security Priorities: A Discussion with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, Washington, D.C. Thursday, February 23, 2017, The Brookings Institution.

¹⁴ Kathleen J. McInnis, Nathan Lucas, “What is ‘Building Partner Capacity’? Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service R44313, December 18, 2015. See also: Joint Publication 3-20, “Security Cooperation,” May 23, 2017.

REGIME CHANGE AND STABILIZATION OPERATIONS	The U.S. conducts major combat operations in order to remove regimes that support terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, to deny space for Al-Qaeda to operate, and to provide a platform for direct action, security cooperation, and stabilization activities
ADVISE, ASSIST, AND ACCOMPANY	The U.S. supports partner nation security forces with operational advice and assistance in order to improve the capability and capacity of those forces to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda. In some cases, U.S. forces also accompany partner nations' security forces to bolster their will and capability to conduct effective operations
"THIRD PARTY" PARTNERS	The U.S. partners with or supports third-party entities who conduct counterterrorism operations in order to amplify U.S. unilateral actions, generate additional access or information, and reduce resource requirements for the U.S. Examples include working with ¹⁵ an ally (e.g., France against AQIM), international organizations (e.g., the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) against al-Shebab), or local forces (e.g., Sunni tribal elements as part of the Al Anbar Awakening movement)
MESSAGING / COUNTER-MESSAGING	The U.S. provides, promotes, and supports messaging that conveys our values, interests, intentions, and justifications to generate support for U.S. counterterrorism activities. The U.S. also provides, promotes, and supports messaging that counters Al-Qaeda's ideology, intentions, and justifications in order to degrade support for Al-Qaeda's vision and operations
INTELLIGENCE AND INFORMATION SHARING	The U.S. promotes sharing of intelligence and information among U.S. government agencies and with allies and partner countries to accelerate, improve, and better coordinate counterterrorism operations
BUILDING NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS	<p>The U.S. engages with and synchronizes a wide array of partner organizations and countries as part of a coordinated, cooperative, or coalition approach to counterterrorism in order to enable the other elements of the U.S. approach (e.g., by increasing resources, access, and reach). Two prominent activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Military Diplomacy and Civil Affairs Operations</i>: The U.S. military engages with partner nation security entities, non-state partner organizations, and local populations in order to forge relationships, build trust, create a common perception of the enemy, and generate access • <i>The SOF Network</i>: The U.S. maintains a persistent, distributed SOF posture in order to improve strategic reach and our ability to rapidly respond to or interdict threats posed by Al-Qaeda

¹⁵ For the purpose of this paper, we deliberately use the phrase "work with" to capture a broad spectrum of arrangements that the United States could have with these entities, ranging from formal agreements, to coordination and cooperation, to providing training and equipping to combined operations.

Summary of the most and least effective aspects of the U.S. government's approaches

Given time and resource constraints—and the sixteen year timeframe covered by this study—we were unable to assess each of these approaches to the level of depth of a formal programmatic evaluation. Rather, we relied on a variety of mostly qualitative data sources, including interviews with over forty subject matter experts and current and former high-ranking U.S. government officials, to identify which aspects of each approach have been deemed most and least effective. Table 5 on the next few pages presents a summary of the results of our assessment.

Table 5. Summary of the most, and least, effective aspects of U.S. government approaches against Al-Qaeda

Approach	Most Effective Aspects	Least Effective Aspects
ATTACK THE NETWORK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When persistently applied, this approach has pressured and disrupted Al-Qaeda by forcing its key members to “keep their heads down.” Examples include efforts against core Al-Qaeda post-2008 and those against AQI in the 2004-2008 timeframe • When used early against a group that has not yet gained momentum, this approach can blunt progress being made by the group to organize, plan, and conduct operations. Examples include U.S. airstrikes against the Khorasan Group (part of AQS) in 2015 and against AQAP in 2017 • When applied with a tempo that outpaced the Al-Qaeda network’s ability to respond and reconstitute, this approach has led to the dismantling of Al-Qaeda groups. The most notable example is AQI in the 2006 to 2008 timeframe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This approach does not address the underlying conditions that give rise to an Al-Qaeda presence, therefore it is not effective for consolidating the gains that may accrue from its use • It has resulted in significant numbers of civilian casualties. The Obama administration strove to minimize these via the imposition of “near certainty” standards for the use of lethal force, but even these stringent requirements could not completely remove this risk • It has placed a heavy—and increasing—burden on SOF and the intelligence community. In his most recent congressional testimony, the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) stated that the current pace of SOF deployments is unsustainable • The emphasis on “kill” missions over “capture” missions in recent years has resulted in missed opportunities to gather and exploit intelligence
SECURITY COOPERATION / BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY (BPC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When the DOD has engaged in long-term, patient, and persistent BPC activities, this approach has yielded capable partner forces that have then conducted effective operations against Al-Qaeda (though typically with some continued U.S. assistance). The examples cited most often are the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) and the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) • When the provision of equipment has been tailored and calibrated to the needs and sustainment capabilities of the host nation forces, this approach has led to effective improvement of the operational capabilities of partner forces (e.g., programs under the 1208/1209 authorities and the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When used in the midst of conflict, this approach has returned results below expectations. The most prominent example is Afghanistan, where the U.S. has invested tens of billions of dollars and nearly a decade’s worth of advising into the Afghan security forces, only to see them consistently lose territory to the Taliban in the wake of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) drawdown in 2014 • When the U.S. has failed to tailor the equipment provided to the partner force in terms of the latter’s ability to employ, maintain, or sustain the equipment, or when the U.S. has failed to provide equipment that is adequately suited for the geography or climate of the local environment, this approach has been ineffective.

CTPF have shown success)

- When the DOD has removed individuals being trained from the midst of a combat environment, this approach has been more effective. Examples include training of Afghan pilots conducted in the U.S., and the IMET program

The most prominent case is Afghanistan, where the U.S. has in numerous instances provided Afghan security forces with equipment that it cannot employ, maintain, or sustain, only to see that equipment unused or misused

- When the U.S. has failed to maintain oversight of the equipment provided, some or all of the equipment has eventually fallen into the hands of terrorist groups. A notable example is the amount of equipment left behind by the Iraqi Army and eventually captured by ISIS during the latter's blitzkrieg into Iraq in 2014
- When the U.S. has failed, or was unable, to take a persistent, patient approach to BPC—resulting in ad hoc or episodic activities—the results have been less effective. An example is Pakistan, where the U.S. was involved for several years in efforts to train the Pakistani Frontier Corps but had to stop after the souring of U.S.-Pakistani relations in 2012
- When the U.S. has cycled myriad units through a country as trainers—as opposed to using repeat rotations of the same units—the results of this approach have been less effective. For example, Afghan Army units have not had a consistent set of partner advisor units, which has contributed to their slower development relative to Afghan SOF

REGIME CHANGE AND STABILIZATION OPERATIONS

- In Afghanistan, the U.S. invasion did remove a key safe-haven for Al-Qaeda and initial U.S. operations there dealt the organization a significant blow in terms of attrition of fighters and reduction in the group's freedom of action
- In Iraq, the U.S. did eventually discern how to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against AQI, which were significantly enabled by a number of factors related to the large-scale presence of U.S. forces

- The invasion of Iraq is the prime example of how this approach can go wrong. Al-Qaeda had only a minimal presence in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion but was able to capitalize on the resultant insecurity to rapidly expand in both size and reach. The Iraq invasion was also a distraction from the focus on core Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which reduced pressure on that part of the organization and allowed it to reconstitute
- In Iraq, while the U.S. was eventually able to decimate AQI, the withdrawal of U.S. forces there in 2011 removed

**ADVISE, ASSIST,
AND
ACCOMPANY**

- When the U.S. has employed persistent, patient, and prolonged advise-and-assist activities, this approach has been most effective. The most commonly cited examples are the Iraqi CTS and ASSF, though U.S. efforts to develop a Somali partner force and U.S. efforts in the Philippines (i.e., JSOTF-P) have also been effective
- The use of professional advisors (e.g., Army Special Forces) and sustained sourcing of these advisors from the same units (e.g., Army SF Groups) have been critical to the effectiveness of these efforts
- Accompany missions are most effective when advisors are given authorities to be fully engaged with the partner force, at least up until the “last terrain feature”

**“THIRD PARTY”
PARTNERS**

- In the case of AQIM, the U.S. provided limited but critical support to the French-led intervention in 2013 that successfully dislodged rebels and Al-Qaeda fighters from the north of that country. The U.S. has continued to support French-led efforts to counter Al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups in the

pressure on the remnants of AQI and on the government of Iraq to address grievances in the Sunni communities in which AQI had found support. Both of these issues eventually enabled the resurgence of terrorism in Iraq, now in the form of ISIS

- In both Iraq and Afghanistan, a large-scale U.S. presence in the country served as a rallying cry for foreign jihadists. And in both cases, the U.S. was unable to secure these countries’ borders to prevent the influx or outflow of fighters
- The Iraq and Afghanistan wars have been extremely costly—the U.S. has lost thousands of personnel to these wars and has expended over a trillion dollars on them

- Those examples (e.g., efforts to advise and assist the Pakistani Frontier Corps or Yemeni security forces) in which the U.S. was unable to maintain a persistent application of this approach have been less effective
- This approach is less effective (or may be ineffective) when it is conducted by untrained or *ad hoc* advisors, which often come from non-advisory-focused conventional military units or via military personnel who are not adequately trained or do not have the requisite skill sets to be effective advisors

- There have been instances of third-party partners pursuing their own interests above the mutual interests of the third-party and the U.S. One example is in Yemen, where the U.S. has been supporting Saudi Arabia’s Operation Decisive Storm and working with UAE forces. While these operations at least ostensibly target AQAP

MESSAGING / COUNTER- MESSAGING

- Sahel. The U.S. provision of enabling capabilities to French operations has improved the sustainability of those operations at relatively low cost to the U.S.

 - In Afghanistan, the U.S. was able to leverage the presence of large numbers of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces to free some U.S. capabilities to combat Al-Qaeda directly. Numerous NATO and other third-party countries contributed their own SOF, which were used to develop Afghan special police forces which are conducting effective high-risk arrest and response activities in Kabul and other populated areas
- When we have enabled local voices to be heard against Al-Qaeda's ideology, this approach has been most effective. One example was the use of so-called "Radio in a Box" devices in Afghanistan to provide a platform for local Afghan voices to speak out against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Another was the use of fixed and mobile loudspeakers to deliver addresses by moderate clerics and local government officials in various parts of Iraq

INTELLIGENCE AND INFORMATION SHARING

- The continued and expanded use of the combined joint interagency task force (CJIATF) model has been an effective application of this approach
 - The emphasis in some parts of the intelligence community to write for release, along with efforts to create blanket coalition release authorities and to use coalition networks has been an effective way to promote and enable this approach
 - The placement of liaison officers with other U.S.
- forces, at times they have given AQAP freer rein in that country.
 - When the U.S. has relied on non-state armed groups as a partner, it has sometimes then failed to persuade the host nation government to effectively integrate these forces into state security structures or to effectively demobilize, disarm, and reintegrate them. One example of this was the failure of the Iraqi government to integrate the "Sons of Iraq" (Sunni tribal elements that participated in the Awakening movement) into the Iraqi Security Forces, as was initially promised.
 - This approach is widely viewed as being the one in which the U.S. has been the least effective. Reasons for this include a lack of understanding of local audiences; over-engaging in "tit-for-tat" discussions about U.S. versus Al-Qaeda narratives on social media; failure to devise and deliver a consistent, proactive, and positive U.S. narrative; not enough emphasis on the empowerment of local voices as opposed to Western ones; and too much emphasis being placed by the U.S. on its own counterterrorism operations (e.g., via press releases highlighting the killing of Al-Qaeda members). U.S. efforts to speak authoritatively about the "nature of Islam" or to counter Al-Qaeda's ideology by identifying "good" and "bad" strains of Islam have also been ineffective
 - Increased sharing of classified information carries attendant risks which have not always been effectively mitigated. Leaks from those trusted with access to this information—Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden being among the more notable cases—have at times increased risk to U.S. personnel or the success of U.S. operations. When these leaks have crossed U.S. government agencies (e.g., Manning—a member of DOD—leaking State Department cables), they have

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government and/or foreign entities (e.g., via SOCOM's Special Operations Liaison Officers (SOLOs) or via the State Department's Political Advisor (POLAD) program) has been a good practice for fostering information sharing

- The expansion and/or broadening of U.S. government intelligence sharing agreements with foreign countries has been effective

- The United States' emphasis on building and maintaining coalitions for its operations against Al-Qaeda have helped maintain the support of the international community for sustained counterterrorism operations around the world. These efforts have also helped impart legitimacy to U.S. operations in other countries
- The United States' focus on coalition building and diplomacy has been mostly successful at generating and maintaining the access that the U.S. needs for its military operations (e.g., overflight rights and access permissions)
- The use of coalitions has been successful at reducing the overall cost of counterterrorism operations for the U.S., as well as for other countries involved in the fight against Al-Qaeda
- The Global SOF Network (and other liaison networks) has helped the U.S. maintain a persistent sensory presence around the world to identify new areas of, or shifting patterns in, Al-Qaeda activity. It has also enabled some of the other U.S. approaches (e.g., information/intelligence sharing)

eroded trust between those agencies

- The U.S. government has been notoriously ineffective at archiving its own operational information. Early in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, for example, units would often redeploy with their own computers, whose hard drives would then be wiped clean upon their return. This resulted in the loss of significant information and institutional knowledge. There were some attempts to address this (e.g., the Combined Information Data Network Exchange (CIDNE) database used to document operational events in Iraq and Afghanistan), but those examples are limited and even CIDNE did not become widely used until 2007 in Iraq and 2008 in Afghanistan
- The use of coalitions to combat Al-Qaeda has often resulted in challenges in maintaining unity of effort. U.S. partners often have differing views of the Al-Qaeda threat and the best approaches to deal with it, or different national interests. In some instances, coalition partners of the U.S. have been reluctant (or have refused) to conduct certain types of operations (e.g., kill/capture missions), which has hampered the effectiveness of coalition operations (e.g., in Afghanistan where many nations put "caveats" on the employment of their forces prohibiting them from participating in counterterrorism activities)
- In some instances, the U.S. has invested significant resources—time, money, and political capital—in trying to build partner relationships, with limited or no success. An example is the U.S. attempt to work with Pakistan against Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups, which has vacillated between the U.S. providing billions of dollars in aid and Pakistan allowing U.S. forces to operate within its territory; and the U.S. calling extremist organizations (e.g., the Al-Qaeda-friendly Haqqani Network) a "veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency"

Summary of findings on U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda

Having analyzed the U.S. government’s counterterrorism strategies, the approaches the DOD has used counter Al-Qaeda, and the ways in which each approach has been most and least effective, Table 6 presents a summary of some broad observations from our assessment of U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda, at institutional and operational levels.¹⁶

Table 6. Summary of assessment of U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda

	Successes	Failures
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. has made significant progress moving from a “stove-piped” approach to a comprehensive “whole-of-government” approach to countering Al-Qaeda, and countering terrorism in general The U.S. has established key partnerships and worked cooperatively with countries around the world to counter Al-Qaeda The U.S. has developed a highly effective and efficient set of counterterrorism forces which operate through a combination of intelligence and SOF, coupled with continued innovation and improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. has failed to learn that regime change without effective stabilization operations creates enormous opportunities for Al-Qaeda (and other like-organizations) in both the targeted country and neighboring ones The U.S. has failed to develop a proactive, consistent, and compelling narrative that can effectively compete with the narrative that Al-Qaeda uses to advance its cause and to gain new recruits and followers The U.S. has failed to adequately and consistently align its approaches in ways that address the full spectrum of challenges that Al-Qaeda poses to the U.S. and the security vulnerabilities that Al-Qaeda exploits in countries where it currently operates or seeks to expand The U.S. has failed to fundamentally appreciate the resilience of Al-Qaeda as an organization, as a brand, and as a movement

¹⁶ By “institutional,” we refer to activities that focus on processes and organization, and on the way the counter-Al-Qaeda campaign is conducted. By “operational,” we mean how effective the DOD has been at reaching its stated operational objectives for Al-Qaeda: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat.

Operational

- There has not been another terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland anywhere near the scale of the attacks of 9/11
- In the early years of the war in Afghanistan, U.S. forces were effective at disrupting core Al-Qaeda, driving its leadership into hiding, and depriving the organization of what had been its main base of operations in Afghanistan
- In Iraq in the 2006-2008 timeframe, U.S. forces were able to almost completely dismantle AQI
- The DOD has had success building capacity in some partner nation security forces
- The U.S. has not effectively consolidated gains in the few instances where it has had success against Al-Qaeda in order to prevent the group from resurging
- The U.S. has failed to stop the spread of Al-Qaeda
- The U.S. has been unable to replicate the conditions that allowed it to almost completely dismantle AQI in its fight against any of the other Al-Qaeda affiliates

Discussion and recommendations

The NDAA calls for us to provide recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, but it does not define these terms—nor are there commonly accepted definitions for them across the U.S. government. As a result, we reviewed a number of sources and established the following definitions, which we will use in this discussion:

- **Disrupt:** Al-Qaeda is unable to conduct attacks against the U.S. homeland or U.S. interests abroad (e.g., U.S. embassies, U.S. military facilities, U.S. personnel operating overseas).
- **Dismantle:** Al-Qaeda has been reduced to a point where it is no longer a coherent, functioning entity operationally and tactically.
- **Defeat:** Al-Qaeda does not have the capability and will to fight the United States and its partners.

Assessment of U.S. government effectiveness at *disrupting* Al-Qaeda

The United States has primarily emphasized approaches that aim to disrupt Al-Qaeda (especially since 2011) and has been generally effective at doing so.

An examination of the U.S. successes against Al-Qaeda reveals that U.S. approaches to the group have primarily aligned with the aim to disrupt it, and the U.S. has effectively done so in a number of cases, to include: in Afghanistan, against the core in 2001-2003; against AQI in 2007; and through its ongoing efforts to target key individuals in Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Requirements for disrupting Al-Qaeda

If the United States continues to pursue a strategy that emphasizes *disrupting* Al-Qaeda in order to reduce the short-term risk of an attack on the U.S. homeland and its interests abroad, it should recognize the following serious shortcomings associated with this strategy:

- **The approaches that the United States takes to disrupt Al-Qaeda do not address the range of security vulnerabilities that have emerged (and in some cases are getting worse), in the places where Al-Qaeda operates or seeks to expand.**
- **A continued emphasis on disruption will come with additional costs and may not be sustainable over time.** The level of resources that the United States has invested in dedicated counterterrorism forces and operations since 2011 has been steadily increasing, and yet, since 2011, Al-Qaeda has continued to expand. These trends, when combined with worsening security vulnerability trends in many countries of the Middle East and Africa, suggest that the United States may need to steadily increase its investments in counterterrorism forces just to maintain Al-Qaeda in a disrupted state.
- **Continued or increased efforts aimed at disruption will not necessarily put the United States on a path to dismantling, and ultimately defeating, Al-Qaeda; in some cases, it could have the opposite effect.** Al-Qaeda's growth and expansion into new areas has continued in spite of U.S. efforts to disrupt the organization to date. This suggests that disruption in an overall general sense is not leading to the defeat or even dismantling of Al-Qaeda. And in some cases, our study suggests it may be contributing to the group's resilience.

These observations together suggest that the degree of the Al-Qaeda problem is likely to increase in the near term and therefore the requirement for U.S. forces to disrupt the group will also likely increase. As a result, if the U.S. government chooses to prioritize the disruption of Al-Qaeda, we assess that it would need to:

- Largely continue its current approaches to Al-Qaeda, but prepare itself—and the American public—for the likelihood of increased costs in both blood and treasure to maintain Al-Qaeda in a disrupted state.

- Conduct additional analysis to determine how much further it can expand its current approaches to countering terrorism before the forces tasked with these missions (e.g., SOF) reach a breaking point.

Assessment of U.S. government effectiveness at *dismantling* Al-Qaeda

The U.S. has had some successes in dismantling Al-Qaeda, but none has been sustained.

In our study, we identified a number of cases in which the U.S. (and often its partners) has been able to dismantle a part of Al-Qaeda. These are:

- Al-Qaeda core, 2001-2002, Afghanistan
- AQI, 2009-2010, Iraq
- AQAP, 2003, Yemen (Yemen led)
- AQAP, 2002-2006, Saudi Arabia (Saudi led)
- ASG, 2000-2014, Philippines (Philippine led)

However, in each of these cases, the group in question has been able to resurge, due to a variety of factors. In the case of Al-Qaeda core, the U.S. removed pressure from the group by diverting the assets needed to do so to Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in 2003. In the case of AQI, by the end of 2011, the U.S. felt confident enough in its victory over that group to withdraw its forces from Iraq. But these gains proved only temporary and by 2014 the remnants of AQI (along with a host of new recruits and merged groups) moved back into Iraq as ISIS due to the continued presence of strong vulnerabilities in Iraq's security environment. In the case of AQAP, while the Saudis have been able to keep that group from operating or having a presence in their country, severe vulnerabilities in the security environment of Yemen have allowed the group to take hold and expand there. And in the special case of ASG, while the government of the Philippines has been able to disrupt that group, ASG's embrace of ISIS has led to a recent degree of resurgence, at least in part due to the continued existence of security vulnerabilities in that country.

Requirements for dismantling Al-Qaeda

If the U.S. government chooses to pursue a policy focused on trying to fully *dismantle* the Al-Qaeda organization, we assess that it would need to:

- Create an operational plan focused on Al-Qaeda with a goal of isolating each affiliate and conducting high-tempo counterterrorism operations to dismantle

each part of the organization. To enable these operations, the United States would need to:

- “Surge” resources to reinforce ongoing counterterrorism efforts focused on Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. This would likely entail greater use of conventional U.S. military forces to bolster U.S. SOF (who are stretched thin) and greater use of agencies such as the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), and the Department of the Treasury’s Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (TFI).
- Establish well-defined rules of engagement and limits for collateral damage, and push authorities for military action within those guidelines down to the lowest politically acceptable levels within the DOD. In addition, the restrictions placed on U.S. diplomats in the wake of the Benghazi incident would need to be rescinded such that these individuals can get off of embassy compounds and out of capital cities in order to engage relevant local entities and populations.
- Establish a CJATF to focus on severing the linkages between Al-Qaeda’s affiliates (i.e., personnel movement, money transfers, and communications). Expanding on Operation Gallant Phoenix (OGP) may be an efficient means of doing this.¹⁷
- Strive to establish and maintain counterterrorism platforms that are as close to the areas in which Al-Qaeda is operating as possible. In some instances (e.g., Yemen, Syria, Pakistan), this may entail revisiting U.S. policies regarding “boots on the ground” and/or require strong diplomatic efforts to regain access.
- Reconsider the balance of emphasis that has been placed on “kill” missions relative to “capture” missions. This necessarily entails working though how the United States would legally handle increased numbers of Al-Qaeda detainees.
- Design a new, proactive messaging campaign that considers how to amplify the values and ideas shared by the West and much of the Muslim world, relying in part on local Islamic voices, in an effort to counter Al-Qaeda’s ideological narratives. The United States would need to designate and resource a single entity (e.g., the State Department’s Global Engagement Center) to serve as the

¹⁷ Statement by General Raymond A. Thomas III, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) before the Senate Armed Services Committee, May 4, 2017.

focal point for these efforts, with robust funding and support from all relevant U.S. government agencies.

- Conduct thorough interagency reviews of the security vulnerabilities of the countries where Al-Qaeda currently has a presence, along with those countries most likely to be targeted by Al-Qaeda for future expansion. These reviews would need to identify these countries' most pressing security vulnerabilities, and the U.S. should work with each country (via the U.S. country team) to identify proactive measures that could be taken (potentially with U.S. support) to address them, so as to consolidate any successes gained from the actions recommended above or prevent Al-Qaeda's expansion into new areas. Such measures might include:
 - Strengthening border security forces
 - Strengthening internal police and intelligence forces
 - Strengthening platforms for moderate voices to deliver proactive, positive messages
 - Security sector reform and defense institution building
 - Economic stimulus and development at the local level, as well as national economic reforms
 - Strengthening government accountability (via internal institutions or civil society organizations)
- Invest in maintaining and strengthening our international alliances and partnerships, most notably those with governments and non-government organizations that share U.S. interests and goals with respect to Al-Qaeda.

These recommendations may sound like a tall order, and indeed they are in terms of the level of additional investment that would be required by the United States. But our assessment of the U.S. track record against Al-Qaeda to date suggests that this level of activity and investment would be required in order to truly dismantle Al-Qaeda and its affiliates and prevent the resurgence of these groups.

Assessment of U.S. government effectiveness at *defeating* Al-Qaeda

The United States has not defeated Al-Qaeda core or any of its affiliates, and it is not clear that the United States—at the strategic level—has a vision for what that defeat would look like or how to bring it about.

In looking across the history of U.S. efforts against Al-Qaeda, there are no examples of the United States having successfully caused Al-Qaeda to lose the capability and the will to continue fighting. In addition, as part of this assessment we were unable to identify a consensus view among current or former U.S. government officials as to what the defeat of Al-Qaeda would look like, or how the United States might go about accomplishing that goal.

Requirements for defeating Al-Qaeda

If the U.S. government decides to pursue the complete *defeat* of Al-Qaeda, we assess that it would need to:

- Devise a vision for what defeat of the group would look like, both politically and practically, and then ensure that this vision is promulgated and pursued by the entirety of the U.S. government, so that all U.S. entities are synchronized and aligned in their mission against Al-Qaeda. The United States would also need to share this vision with its partner nations and organizations, and use it as a lens through which to identify common and divergent interests among these entities.
- Create and resource a strategy to bring about the vision for Al-Qaeda's defeat. As part of this strategic planning process, the United States would need to critically examine its current assumptions that the DOD should be the lead agency for this effort, and that the three goals articulated by the NDAA—disrupt, dismantle, and defeat—are a linear process. Additionally, the United States would need to clearly address how to defeat both Al-Qaeda's capability and its will to fight. The requirements for dismantling Al-Qaeda that we identify above largely address its capability, but the United States would need to think much more deeply about how to effectively address Al-Qaeda's will.
- Prepare for a protracted fight against Al-Qaeda and like-organizations. While the objective of dismantling Al-Qaeda could conceivably be achieved on a timescale of years, the U.S. experience with Al-Qaeda over the past two decades suggests that true defeat of the group is likely to take decades more.

Summary of conclusions

The war between Al-Qaeda and the United States government has been one of notable gains and significant setbacks on both sides for nearly two decades. While both entities publically state the same goals as they did in 2001, the approaches that each are taking today suggest that both sides have learned, adapted, and evolved their thinking, organizational structures, and activities according to their experiences—especially in recent years.

In this assessment, we have addressed the relationships, strategy, objectives, capabilities, and structure of Al-Qaeda; the impact of changing security environments across much of Africa and the Middle East on Al-Qaeda and U.S. efforts to counter the group; and how the U.S. government has been most and least effective against Al-Qaeda to date. Per the NDAA requirement, we have also provided the U.S. government with the actions that it would need to take to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda—which we believe are distinct, and not linearly escalating, goals. Having completed these assessments, we conclude the following:

- **Current U.S. efforts are more aligned with the direct threat that Al-Qaeda poses to the United States and less to the security conditions, or vulnerabilities, that Al-Qaeda exploits to survive and expand.**
- **U.S. government efforts to date have not defeated Al-Qaeda. The current U.S. strategy—centered on military approaches and anchored in the assumed linear goals of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating the organization—is unlikely to do so.**
- **Dismantling Al-Qaeda would entail a commitment of U.S. resources well beyond those committed today.**
- **Continued disruption of Al-Qaeda is likely to require increasing resources as security environments continue to weaken in many parts of the world where Al-Qaeda operates and seeks to operate.**

Based on these findings, we conclude that *the current U.S. strategy toward Al-Qaeda is unlikely to attain the United States' desired goals*. Therefore, *we recommend that the U.S. government should undertake a new review of its policy goals and overarching strategy against Al-Qaeda*. This review should take a fresh look at Al-Qaeda and the environments in which it operates, or seeks to operate, as they exist today. This review should also critically examine U.S. strategic goals with respect to Al-Qaeda and like groups, the resources required to achieve those goals, and the political and domestic appetite for sustaining them. It should also examine the balance of roles across U.S. government agencies and the timelines and metrics required for success.

The U.S. has been battling Al-Qaeda primarily militarily for 16 years and yet the group is stronger and present in more places today than it was in 2001. Clearly, the U.S. needs a renewed approach.

NDAА Mandated Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaеda

Part I: Assessment of Al-Qaеda

In this section, we assess Al-Qaеda and how it has evolved over time, addressing the following issues as specified in the NDAА:¹⁸

1. Al-Qaеda core’s current relationship with affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time
2. The current objectives, capabilities, and overall strategy of Al-Qaеda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how they have changed over time
3. The operational and organizational structure of Al-Qaеda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.

The evolution of Al-Qaеda

Sixteen years after its attacks on September 11, 2001, Al-Qaеda finds itself in a much-changed world. The group has suffered losses and setbacks, but it has also adapted to respond to global and regional developments. To observe Al-Qaеda’s extensive geographic presence today is not to overstate the group’s success. It has had major setbacks over the years, such as the crushing defeat of AQI between 2006 and 2008. It has also not succeeded in carrying out a significant attack on U.S. soil since 9/11. But an objective comparison of where the organization operated in 2001

¹⁸ The information in this section was derived from a comparative case-study analysis of Al-Qaеda “core,” six affiliates, and the Al-Qaеda-associated Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines; and how they have evolved since their inception. To read the complete case study for any, or all, of the eight entities, please refer to Appendices B through I.

as compared to where it is in 2017, as well as of its relative size, shows that the number of places where it operates and the scope and scale of its presence in many of those places has irrefutably expanded.

Al-Qaeda's development has moved through three phases since 9/11, which we discuss below. First, the "Vanguard" phase represents the group in the lead-up to the 9/11 attacks and its actions following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Second, in the "Flexible Franchise" phase, Al-Qaeda core established affiliates from Iraq to the Sahel. Third, in the "Localism" phase, which continues today, the group reacts and adapts to the instability and conflict that has emerged in the wake of the uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, the death of Bin Laden, and the rise of ISIS.¹⁹

Phase 1: Vanguard (1998–2004)

The first phase focused on Osama Bin Laden, the son of a Saudi businessman. Bin Laden used his sizeable family wealth to establish Al-Qaeda with ideological input from Abdullah Azzam, "an architect of international jihad."²⁰ In 1998, Bin Laden merged into his group Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), "which supplied Al-Qaeda with some of its most disciplined and resourceful militants."²¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, EIJ's leader, became Al-Qaeda's deputy leader.

Operational and organizational structure

During its Vanguard phase, Bin Laden was at the top of a cadre of jihadi veterans that sought out—and were sought by—local causes to support with financing, training, and fighters. The 9/11 Commission referred to the group as "the general headquarters for international terrorism."²² Although Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and the core were operationally based in Afghanistan, the group had a dispersed network from the beginning. Al-Qaeda emissaries were spread from East Africa to Indonesia in search of opportunities.

In some respects, during this phase Al-Qaeda resembled a venture capital firm: like-minded jihadis brought terror attack plans and local agendas to Bin Laden's

¹⁹ These three phases are not rigidly defined by the timeline below. For example, a hallmark of the Vanguard phase is spectacular attacks in the West, but such plots continued to unfold after the Flexible Franchising phase began in late 2004. Similarly, the group established new affiliates after the Flexible Franchising phase. However, these phases display Al-Qaeda's trajectory from 9/11 to the present.

²⁰ See Appendix B.

²¹ See Appendix B.

²² Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, 67.

associates, who decided whether they were worth the organization's time. At the urging of core leadership, Bin Laden would agree to fund initiatives or offer guidance and other support.

Strategy

For Al-Qaeda, "victory" is the establishment of a Muslim caliphate that will lead a global clash against the West. To achieve this, Al-Qaeda must both collapse the international system of independent Muslim-majority states and convince Muslim populations to replace their current governance with that of strict Islamic law (Sharia). In this phase, to achieve this, Al-Qaeda sought to:

- Discredit, undermine, and eventually replace the current Western-dominated international order with a pan-Islamic caliphate based on its interpretation of Sharia
- Remove U.S. presence from what it considers Muslim lands and U.S. support to current governments in these countries by attacking the U.S. homeland and Americans and American interests abroad
- Overthrow local and national governance structures in Muslim lands and replace them with governance based on its interpretation of Sharia

Unique to Al-Qaeda as a revolutionary terrorist organization was the belief that it could not achieve its objective of toppling local regimes without weakening support for those regimes from the West—and specifically from the United States. Al-Qaeda's *theory of victory*, therefore, was that *weakening U.S. support for local regimes would allow the group to topple those regimes*. The group's theory of victory for weakening U.S. support for local regimes was to target U.S. interests, which would lead to U.S. disengagement from the Middle East. Bin Laden concluded that the 9/11 attacks would force a U.S. retreat.

Convincing Muslims to accept Al-Qaeda's revolutionary agenda required focusing their attention on the alleged abuses by non-Islamic regimes and the international system that abets, or stands by in the face of, such abuse. The objectives and capabilities used to achieve this strategy would be primarily in the realm of information operations (IO), including extensive propaganda. This is what journalist Fouad Hussein referred to as "the awakening," in which Al-Qaeda would "provoke the U.S. into declaring war on the Islamic world and thereby 'awakening' Muslims."²³

²³ Bill Roggio, "The Seven Phases of The Base," *FDD's Long War Journal*, Aug. 15, 2005, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2005/08/the_seven_phase.php.

Objectives

During this phase, in support of its strategy, the group's objectives were to target U.S. and Western interests and carry out attacks in their homelands and against Western partner nations. The 9/11 attacks followed the 2000 USS *Cole* bombing, the 2000 attempted bombing of the USS *The Sullivans*, and the 1998 near-simultaneous bombings outside the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. After 9/11, Al-Qaeda carried out attacks in Tunisia (2002), Morocco (2003), Turkey (2003), Spain (2004), and the United Kingdom (2005).

The 9/11 attacks were so shocking that Bin Laden publicly denied Al-Qaeda's responsibility until 2004.²⁴ In interviews conducted and statements released after 9/11, Bin Laden did say that America deserved the assault on its homeland, praising the anonymous good Muslims that carried out the attacks, framing 9/11 and other spectacular attacks as natural responses to U.S. and Western foreign policy.²⁵ The mental image of the World Trade Center towers falling in New York played in a constant loop. For Al-Qaeda, a secondary objective was justifying the horror of it to Muslims—in Muslim-majority countries and in the West.

Al-Qaeda wanted to convince Muslim audiences that the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was unjustified aggression. At the same time, the organization needed to sustain its infrastructure as much as possible after the U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks. Despite this pressure, Al-Qaeda “was able to maintain at least some aspects of its hierarchical structure.”

Capabilities²⁶

During its Vanguard phase, Al-Qaeda attacked U.S. and Western diplomatic, military, transportation, and economic targets, using an array of improvised weapons. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were carried or worn by attackers; vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) carried massive payloads; boat-borne IEDs were used to target U.S. Navy ships; and, in the 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda's suicide-pilots turned aircraft into a sort of “guided missile.”

²⁴ “Bin Laden Claims Responsibility for 9/11,” *Fox News*, Oct. 30, 2004, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2004/10/30/bin-laden-claims-responsibility-for-11.html>.

²⁵ Christopher M. Blanchard, *Al-Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology*, Congressional Research Service, RL32759, 2007, 4-5, footnote 17, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32759.pdf>.

²⁶ Al-Qaeda uses its capabilities to achieve—or try to achieve—its objectives in support of strategic goals. Our focus across the phases is on Al-Qaeda's kinetic capabilities. Additionally, we highlight the group's non-kinetic capabilities that both drive its kinetic operations (e.g., its training facilities) and support its objectives (e.g., its information operations).

Critical to its ability to operate during this phase was the safe-haven that the group maintained in Afghanistan until October 2001. Through the hospitality of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda operated training camps where the group could transfer warfighting and terrorist skills, as well as provide indoctrination, to recruits. Like Silicon Valley for tech startups, Afghanistan provided a space where foreign jihadis could set up shop near Bin Laden's operations and attempt to attract support for their own ventures.

The loss of the group's safe-haven after the 9/11 attacks made Al-Qaeda communications more difficult, both within the group and between it and the outside world. In 1998, prior to the East Africa bombings, Bin Laden recorded an interview with ABC News; in 1999, a Pakistani reporter sat down with Bin Laden for *Time*. Bin Laden was already a wanted man, but once the U.S. manhunt for him commenced, it was more difficult for him to disseminate statements and publicize intentions.

Al-Qaeda's messaging was necessary to the group's broader strategy: convincing the general Muslim population to support its vision and to intimidate the United States. In terms of recruitment, as Al-Qaeda declared in its 1998 declaration of "Jihad against Jews and Crusaders:"

We—with Allah's help—call on every Muslim who believes in Allah and wishes to be rewarded to comply with Allah's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. We also call on Muslim ulema, leaders, youths, and soldiers to launch the raid on Satan's U.S. troops and the devil's supporters allying with them, and to displace those who are behind them so that they may learn a lesson.²⁷

Phase 2: Flexible Franchise (2004–2010)

As this phase's title suggests, Al-Qaeda began lending its name to regional affiliates, in order to project its continued survival, and even expansion, in the face of the U.S.-led Global War on Terror. Not all the franchises were created equally, and the "mechanism" for franchising was different from one to the next. Both affiliates in Africa—AQIM and al-Shebab—took years to prove their value, and even after pledging allegiance to Al-Qaeda there was a gap before they were formally merged into the organization. On the other hand, Al-Qaeda perhaps rushed to close the deal that created its Iraqi branch (AQI).

²⁷ Usama Bin-Muhammad Bin-Ladin et al., "World Islamic Front Statement: Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," Federation of American Scientists, Feb. 23, 1998, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>.

A key turning point in this phase was also the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, which eventually led to the conditions where AQI could establish a foothold and attract jihadis from across the Middle East and beyond to fight the United States in the heart of the Middle East. The U.S. toppling of a secular regime in Baghdad also put the United States at war in two Muslim countries, which was a boon to the narrative of a “clash of civilizations” on which Al-Qaeda fed. Even if the invasion of Afghanistan was viewed as justified, international opinion was strongly against the Iraq war—thereby isolating Washington and diminishing post-9/11 goodwill.

Operational and organizational structure

During this phase, Al-Qaeda core remained hierarchical. However, more broadly, the group became a networked organization, moving to a hub-and-spoke structure through Al-Qaeda’s second-tier leadership.²⁸ Instead of Bin Laden and his team offering independent support to like-minded groups and individuals, Al-Qaeda initiated formal relationships with local and regional jihadi movements that branched out from the core “hub.” Bin Laden and other core leaders, hiding in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region and inside Iran did provide direct orders to Al-Qaeda’s regional affiliates, but they generally conducted a more hands-off leadership approach, offering strategic guidance on operations and targeting.²⁹

²⁸ Leah Farrall, “How Al-Qaeda Works: What the Organization’s Subsidiaries Say About Its Strength,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2011), accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-asia/2011-02-20/how-Al-Qaeda-works>.

²⁹ Peter Margulies and Matthew Sinnott, “Crossing Borders to Target Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates: Defining Networks as Organized Armed Groups in Non-International Armed Conflicts,” in *Yearbook of International Humanitarian Law 2013* (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2015), 319-345, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-038-1_12.

Strategy

In this phase, Al-Qaeda's strategy was to:

- Discredit, undermine, and eventually replace the current Western-dominated international order with a pan-Islamic caliphate based on its interpretation of Sharia
- Remove U.S. presence from what it considers Muslim lands and U.S. support to current governments in these countries by attacking the U.S. homeland and Americans and American interests abroad
- Expand its brand and presence across Muslim-majority countries by establishing affiliates
- Overthrow and replace local and national governance structures in Muslim lands and replace them with governance based on its interpretation of Sharia

The U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks required Al-Qaeda to adjust its theory of victory. Its end goal continued to be a caliphate and war with the West. However, instead of forcing a U.S. retreat, Al-Qaeda's successful and devastating attacks in New York and Virginia drew the United States further into the Muslim world. U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban government that provided safe-haven to Al-Qaeda, and they invaded Iraq to counter the nexus of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, and to begin democratizing the region.

Bin Laden's hypothesis proved false: the 9/11 attacks did not cause the United States to cut ties with its traditional regional allies. After the attacks, there were even more U.S. troops in the Middle East, and the United States was even more committed to using force in the region. Al-Qaeda's theory of victory had to change, and the group seized the opportunity to adapt its strategy. Instead of scaring off the "paper tiger," Al-Qaeda would *bleed and bankrupt Washington into retreat*. Instead of referring to Beirut and Mogadishu, Bin Laden would highlight the U.S. experience in Vietnam and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.³⁰

The U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were framed by Al-Qaeda messaging as a war against Islam and a U.S. occupation of Muslim lands. This furthered the group's efforts to convince sympathetic Muslim populations that there was a clash of civilizations and that Al-Qaeda stood on their side.

³⁰ "Transcript: Translation of Bin Laden's Videotaped Message," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 1, 2004, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A16990-2004Nov1.html>.

From the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda's leadership was on the run and in hiding. Having lost its Afghanistan safe-haven, the group needed a new strategy for its survival. Al-Qaeda opted to display a continued and expanding presence by establishing formal affiliates. Throughout its Vanguard phase, Al-Qaeda had offered financial and logistical support to various jihadi causes. From 2004 forward, Bin Laden leveraged these ties to franchise Al-Qaeda across the Middle East and North Africa. According to the *Yearbook of International Humanitarian Law 2013*:

Affiliates were expected to undertake at least some attacks against Western interests—not necessarily through so-called external operations, but at least within their area of local and regional operations. Typically, the center did not micromanage the activities of its franchises. Instead, it sought to exercise strategic influence, nudging its partners in the direction of targets that reflect the interests of the West.³¹

The affiliate structure allowed Al-Qaeda to take advantage of collapsed regimes, failed states, and ungoverned spaces in Africa, Iraq, and Yemen. The establishment of affiliates did not follow a standard mechanism or timeline. Most “emerged during the course of local conflicts and only later swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda.”³² These groups built from previous relations between Al-Qaeda core leaders and local jihadist militants, and negotiations over affiliation could last years, even decades. In contrast, the group's Yemen affiliate (AQAP) grew out of a merger between cells of Al-Qaeda core members operating in Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Below, we discuss the specifics of the affiliates' emergence.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq (est. 2004)

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi received some funding from Al-Qaeda to establish training facilities in western Afghanistan. In the lead up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi and his Arab fighters moved to the autonomous Kurdish area of northern Iraq, perhaps at the suggestion of Al-Qaeda leadership. Once the U.S.-led coalition toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraq became the prime theater for jihad—a “crusader” force occupying Muslim lands.

³¹ Margulies and Sinnot, “Crossing Borders to Target Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates.”

³² AQIM, formerly known as the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), grew out of an Islamist faction fighting the Algerian regime in the 1990s. AQIM swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2006. Carla E. Humund, “*Al-Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*,” Congressional Research Service, R43756, Aug. 11, 2016, accessed Jan. 13, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43756.pdf>.

Zarqawi had established a terrorist and insurgency infrastructure in the heart of Iraq. Bin Laden did not trust Zarqawi, but Al-Qaeda could not be absent from the fight. In October 2004, Zarqawi's Tawhid wal Jihad rebranded itself as Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (more commonly known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, AQI) after Zarqawi struck a deal and formally pledged fealty to Bin Laden.

See Appendix D for more information on Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (est. 2007)

In the 1990s, Al-Qaeda leadership provided some funding to the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria. A breakaway group, the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (which is commonly referred to as the "GSPC" its French acronym), sought to reestablish ties with Al-Qaeda, and emissaries from the latter toured GSPC training camps in 2001-2002. As the Algerian civil war wound down, GSPC leader Abd al-Malik Droukdel needed a way for the group to maintain relevance.

The GSPC moved its operations towards Algeria's south and the expansive Sahel region. The group pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2003 and formally merged into the organization in 2006. In 2007, GSPC rebranded itself as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

See Appendix C for more information on Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (est. 2009)

AQI and AQIM were pre-existing but independent groups that had prior ties to Al-Qaeda and rebranded themselves after formally pledging allegiance to Bin Laden. In Yemen, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was established in 2009 by what could be considered Al-Qaeda core members operating in Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Al-Qaeda and its veteran jihadis had a long presence in Yemen, and the group's core drew heavily from the Saudi population—some of whom returned home after 9/11. Following a series of attacks in Saudi Arabia in 2003, the government managed to eliminate the group's network inside the kingdom by 2006. Concurrently in 2006, Bin Laden's personal secretary Nasir al-Wuhayshi escaped from prison in Sanaa and rebuilt Al-Qaeda's organization in Yemen. AQAP was a merger of Wuhayshi's leadership and Al-Qaeda's credentials with the master bomb-making skillset of Saudi national Ibrahim al-Asiri.

See Appendix E for more information on Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Al-Shebab (pledged allegiance in 2008; formally merged with Al-Qaeda in 2012)

The Somali jihadi group Al-Shebab provides another example of an independent, local insurgent group tying its fate to Al-Qaeda. Like Tawhid wal Jihad and the GSPC,

Al-Shebab and a predecessor jihadi group, Al-Ittihad Al-Islami (AIAD), had earlier ties to Al-Qaeda and its core emissaries and operators in East Africa. According to the group, Somali fighters who fled Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks formed Al-Shebab shortly after their return.

Under the new leadership of Ahmed Godane, in 2008, the group privately pledged allegiance to Bin Laden. Godane's move resulted in praise, training, funding, and recruitment benefits from Al-Qaeda's network. In 2012, Al-Shebab formally declared a merger with Al-Qaeda affiliates.

See Appendix F for more information on Al-Shebab.

Objectives

During this phase, Al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate (AQI) was directly engaged with U.S. and coalition forces and was laying the groundwork for the establishment of an Islamic emirate in the place of the toppled secular Iraqi regime.

Al-Qaeda and its Iraqi affiliate also sought to isolate the United States from its coalition partners and Arab allies through regional and external attacks. Zarqawi's men attacked the United Nations headquarters and the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad. In 2005, AQI carried out near-simultaneous attacks on three hotels in Amman and fired rockets from Aqaba on the Israeli resort city of Eilat and two U.S. Navy ships docked in the Red Sea.

In Europe, the 2004 Madrid bombings helped push the party of Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Azner, a Bush ally, out of power in elections three days later. The Iraq War was already greatly unpopular in Spain, and the new government promptly withdrew its forces. Another coordinated attack, the 2005 London bombings, also targeted a coalition ally.

On the non-kinetic front, Al-Qaeda used the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and several abusive episodes there (e.g., the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib), for both recruitment and propaganda. Core leadership did not always agree with AQI's strategy, but the ongoing conflict in Iraq fit Bin Laden's warnings of another Vietnam.

During this Franchising phase, Al-Qaeda's affiliates supported the organization's objectives in some ways more than in others. The affiliates' main objectives related to their local areas, focusing on security forces and civilian government targets. Only AQAP attempted to attack the U.S. homeland, and none of the affiliates targeted U.S. interests outside of their local area of operations. All the affiliates, except for Al-Shebab, targeted local U.S. interests to varying degrees of complexity. For example, AQI was responsible for significant U.S. casualties in Iraq from IEDs and shooting attacks, whereas AQIM merely kidnapped the occasional American when the opportunity presented itself.

All the affiliates also conducted at least one attack in a neighboring country during this phase. Only Al-Shebab and AQI attempted to control territory and establish governance. AQI was also an outlier in its use of sectarianism. As noted in Appendix D, Al-Qaeda's leadership believed that targeting Shia in Iraq was a distraction from fighting the U.S. occupier—whereas AQI leadership argued that it needed to stoke a civil war in order to achieve its strategic goals.

Capabilities

Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda—especially its Yemen affiliate—experimented with explosive elements that could evade ever-more-capable detection systems and processes. In 2006, the British disrupted a plot to down trans-Atlantic aircraft with liquid explosives. In 2009, AQAP's Asiri sent his own brother on a suicide mission in a failed attempt to kill the Saudi interior minister with an IED surgically implanted in his brother's body. From 2009 to 2012, Asiri designed two “underwear bombs” and fitted explosives in printer cartridges to be airtailed to the United States. In one instance, the device failed to detonate (over Detroit); the other two plots were disrupted at advanced stages by Saudi intelligence.

The U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks cost Al-Qaeda its safe-haven in Afghanistan. During the Franchising phase, the group carved out new safe-havens from which to plot attacks against the West and the more stable regional regimes. The group covered a wider geographic area—but the entire network continued to be under pressure from U.S. forces and allied and partner nations. This appears to have impacted Al-Qaeda's training capability. Despite the sophisticated plots that were conceived, Bin Laden continued to urge more attacks in the United States and the West, and voiced disappointment that his affiliates were unable to carry them out.

In its Vanguard phase, and since its original founding, Al-Qaeda had provided inspirational, financial, and logistical support to a wide array of jihadi insurgent groups. In its Franchising phase, it directly waded into these insurgencies. In Iraq, Zawahiri and others encouraged Zarqawi's successor to prepare the popular and political scenes for Islamic rule. However, core leaders were caught off guard in October 2006, when AQI subsumed several smaller Islamist militant groups and declared itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

By the end of this phase, AQI's governance experiment had failed: by 2008, U.S. forces and Iraqi tribal militias had driven the group—a “state” in name only—to ground; in April 2010, a U.S. airstrike killed the Egyptian head of AQI and the Iraqi head of ISI. But, as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a figure unknown to Al-Qaeda core, took over ISI, the signs of a rebellious affiliate were clear.

One capability used by all Al-Qaeda's affiliates is the person-borne improvised explosive device (PBIED), or suicide bomber. It is worth noting that the first suicide bombing in Somalia, where the practice had been considered taboo, occurred in

2008, after Al-Shebab had pledged allegiance to (though before it formally merged with) Al-Qaeda.

The 9/11 attacks displayed Al-Qaeda's interest in targeting the aviation sector. In December 2001, Richard Reid attempted to detonate a bomb hidden in his shoe aboard a flight from Paris to Miami.³³ Then, in August 2006, the UK government disrupted a plot to detonate liquid explosives on trans-Atlantic flights.³⁴ These failed attempts prompted significant changes to a globalized industry of business and tourist travel, and added security costs to airlines and local and national airport authorities.

Even so, Al-Qaeda continues to adapt to international airport security protocols, attempting to overcome measures put in place to disrupt the previous plot. In 2009, AQAP attempted to blow up an aircraft over Detroit with an explosive device, hidden in an operative's underwear, which had evaded security inspections in Ghana and the Netherlands.³⁵

In terms of non-kinetic capabilities, three of the four affiliates (Al-Shebab being the exception) conducted anti-American information operations. Relatedly, while Al-Qaeda messaging emphasized recruitment—especially calling on Muslims to join the jihad in Iraq—another propaganda development took place in this phase.

While Al-Qaeda and some of its affiliates—particularly AQAP and AQI—still plotted complex terrorist attacks, the group sought to inspire Muslims in the West to carry out attacks in their home countries. This fit Al-Qaeda's founding ideology: terrorizing the West, particularly the United States, is the duty of every Muslim. Beginning in this phase, Al-Qaeda encouraged sympathizers in the West to carry out low-tech attacks in their communities. This was especially the case for AQAP, which deployed Yemeni-American preacher Anwar al-Awlaqi and an English-language magazine, *Inspire* (first published in June 2010) to prompt sympathetic audiences in the West. Awlaqi and Samir Khan, *Inspire's* publisher, were raised in the United States and knew how to address American Muslims—especially youth.

Awlaqi was operational, as well as inspirational. In addition to handling Nigerian Abu Farouk Abdul Mutallab, who perpetrated the attempted 2009 aviation attack, the

³³ CNN Library, "Richard Reid Fast Facts," CNN, Dec. 26, 2016, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/25/us/richard-reid-fast-facts>.

³⁴ "Agent infiltrated terror cell, U.S. says," CNN, Aug. 11, 2006, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/08/10/us.security/index.html>.

³⁵ Scott Shane, "Inside Al-Qaeda's Plot to Blow Up an American Airliner," *The New York Times*, Feb. 22, 2017, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/us/politics/anwar-awlaki-underwear-bomber-abdulmutallab.html>.

preacher's online sermons prompted U.S. Army Major Nidal Hasan to reach out directly. Under the guise of conducting research into radical psychology, Hasan wrote emails to Awlaqi, "in which he asked whether those attacking fellow soldiers were martyrs."³⁶ In November 2009, Hasan fired over 200 rounds at U.S. soldiers inside the Fort Hood Soldier Readiness Processing Center, killing 13 and injuring 32.

Inspire magazine, which published its 16th issue in November 2016, seeks both to encourage "lone-wolf" attacks and to transfer how-to knowledge to unskilled individuals intent on violence. One of the magazine's most infamous articles, "Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom" (from its first issue), provided step-by-step instructions for building improvised explosive devices with household items.³⁷

Phase 3: Localism (2011-present)

Today, Al-Qaeda continues to adjust to the Arab Spring events that unfolded in 2011, beginning with the January ouster of Tunisian strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, which prompted protests, uprisings, revolutions, and civil wars across Arab-majority countries. The deterioration of the security environments in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen provided oxygen to Al-Qaeda affiliates and like-minded groups, allowing them to delve even deeper into local conflicts. Perhaps no affiliate's fortunes reversed as drastically as those of AQI, which pushed into Syria and—from a safe-haven there—launched successive attacks against the government in Baghdad. The rapid growth of its Iraqi affiliate was not, however, a boon to Al-Qaeda. Instead, the group that now calls itself the Islamic State has provided Al-Qaeda with a new strategic challenge—not a Western attempt to defeat the group, but a competing group claiming the mantle of global jihadist insurgency.

Operational and organizational structure

As this phase has unfolded, Al-Qaeda has become a flat, distributed, networked organization. The core "hub" in the previous phase's structure has diminished and affiliates have begun to act more independently. The individual franchises focus on local conflicts, and Al-Qaeda's leadership seeks opportunities to take advantage of local and regional opportunities. Over this phase, the affiliates have become

³⁶ Billy Kenber, "Nidal Hasan sentenced to death for Fort Hood shooting rampage," *The Washington Post*, Aug. 28, 2013, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nidal-hasan-sentenced-to-death-for-fort-hood-shooting-rampage/2013/08/28/aad28de2-0ffa-11e3-bdf6-e4fc677d94a1_story.html.

³⁷ "al-Qa'idah in the Arabian Peninsula releases its first English language magazine 'Inspire'," *Jihadology*, Jun. 30, 2010, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <http://jihadology.net/2010/06/30/al-qa%E2%80%99idah-in-the-arabian-peninsula-releases-it-first-english-language-magazine-inspire>.

increasingly responsive to local contexts, with minimized effort or ability to target the United States and the West.

Al-Qaeda's brand has also diminished, first because of the excessive brutality of its Iraq affiliate, and second, because of that same affiliate's break with Al-Qaeda and challenge for jihadi dominance. In part as a response to the first issue, Al-Shebab did not take on the Al-Qaeda name when it formally merged in 2012. Similarly, Al-Qaeda's offshoot in Syria hid its ties to AQI and later claimed to break ties with Al-Qaeda in order to gain local support. Even the most prominent affiliate, AQAP, started using another name for internal activities in Yemen: Ansar al-Sharia. In response to the second issue, Al-Qaeda wanted to push out its brand. Its newest affiliate in South Asia, established in 2014, called itself Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent.

Strategy

Today, Al-Qaeda seeks to:

- Discredit, undermine, and eventually replace the current Western-dominated international order with a pan-Islamic caliphate based on its interpretation of Sharia
- Remove U.S. presence from what it considers Muslim lands and U.S. support to current governments in these countries by attacking the U.S. homeland and Americans and American interests abroad
- Overthrow and replace local and national governance structures in Muslim lands and replace them with governance based on its interpretation of Sharia
- Become deeply enmeshed in local conflicts, increase its role in local governance, and expand territories
- Position itself as “less extreme” in comparison to ISIS and outlast the rival group

Al-Qaeda's adapted theory of victory for the eventual achievement of an expansive caliphate with which to fight the West proved more accurate in its second phase. The long, costly wars in the Middle East were at least partially responsible for a U.S. military and policy pullback from the Middle East. Of course, the theory proved false, in that U.S. retrenchment did not result in Al-Qaeda successfully toppling—or even weakening—U.S. allies or partners in the Islamic world. However, the uprisings and civil conflicts that swept from Tunisia across North Africa and the Middle East from December 2010 onward shook the regional landscape.

In none of these flare-ups and conflagrations was Al-Qaeda the kindling or the initial spark, but the group and its affiliates were well positioned to pour fuel on the fire.

To take the analogy one step further, during this phase—ongoing as of this writing—Al-Qaeda also plays fireman: taking advantage of the unrest to provide public services as a way of promoting Islamic governance.

The strategy of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates has been to take advantage of instability and conflicts that broke out in the wake of the Arab “awakening” to establish territorial control and Islamic governance. Al-Qaeda sought to capitalize on local and regional conflicts and popular dissatisfaction to overthrow and ultimately replace local and national secular governments in Africa, Syria, and Yemen. Although these uprisings occurred independently of Al-Qaeda, the group was positioned to take advantage because, broadly speaking, these revolts were a public reaction to the very government deficiencies on which Al-Qaeda had focused attention: authoritarianism, corruption, and perceived illegitimacy.

At the same time, Al-Qaeda suffered two strategic setbacks during this phase. First, in May 2011, the United States succeeded in hunting down and killing Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan. The trove of documents captured in that raid on Bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound revealed that Al-Qaeda’s homebound leader had been more strategically and operationally involved in the organization than was previously assessed.

Second, during regional upheaval against the old guard, Al-Qaeda’s Iraqi affiliate rebelled as well. It established its own caliphate before Al-Qaeda—the Islamic State (referred to by the current U.S. administration as ISIS), in June 2014. Thus, the organization’s former best-known affiliate is now Al-Qaeda’s chief competitor for recruits, allegiance, and global attention. And, by these measurements, ISIS is winning.

Some subject matter experts with whom CNA analysts spoke believe Al-Qaeda has responded to the ISIS element by taking a “strategic pause” in its targeting of the United States. U.S. policymakers, they conclude, are consumed by ISIS—against which Washington is leading a broad international coalition. Al-Qaeda is keeping its head down, focusing on rebuilding itself regionally, and waiting for the U.S.-led coalition to defeat ISIS while fostering a new reputation as “moderate extremists.”³⁸ Others disagree, noting that Al-Qaeda would target the United States in any way possible if it had the capability to do so. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the group’s leader since Bin Laden’s demise, continues to exhort targeting the United States and its allies.

³⁸ Bruce Hoffman, “The Global Terror Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration,” *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 11 (November/December 2016): 1-7, accessed Feb. 10, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-global-terror-threat-and-counterterrorism-challenges-facing-the-next-administration>.

Another possibility is that Al-Qaeda has deprioritized external attacks because they are less necessary to its near-term goals. Looking across the previous phases of Al-Qaeda, external attacks were not an end in their own right but a strategy to achieve that end: toppling non-Islamic regimes to establish a caliphate. Since 2011, a number of Arab regimes have tottered or collapsed—including Egypt, a U.S. ally, and Yemen, an important U.S. counterterrorism partner—and the United States did not intervene to stabilize them. If the United States is not propping up the supposedly illegitimate regimes, establishing a caliphate no longer requires attacking the United States.

Subject-matter experts fall into two basic camps as to whether the United States should worry less about Al-Qaeda if its actions are limited to the regional level. The first camp argues that protecting the homeland is the priority and U.S. officials can sleep easy if Al-Qaeda is not targeting the homeland or the homelands of our Western allies. The other camp disagrees for both near- and long-term reasons. In the near term, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates will still wreak havoc on regional allies and partners as well as direct U.S. interests such as embassies, military installations, and corporations. In the long term, if the West simply acquiesces to letting Al-Qaeda establish a caliphate, that expansive and revolutionary “nation”—in Al-Qaeda’s vision—will declare war on the West.

Despite Zawahiri’s words, external attacks may not be Al-Qaeda’s primary strategy. However, where it can, the group still plots attacks on the United States and the West to further burden Western nations with costly security measures, in order to continue fomenting a clash of civilizations, and to lay the groundwork for its eventual war with the West once the caliphate is established.

In the meantime, Al-Qaeda is integrating itself with local populations to build support for its vision of Islamic governance and an eventual caliphate.³⁹ Al-Qaeda has also continued to expand. We discuss its new affiliates below.

Al-Qaeda in Syria (est. 2012, separated from AQI in 2013)

When the Syrian uprising began in 2011, AQI (then known as ISI) took advantage of the ungoverned space along the Iraqi-Syrian border to reconstitute its strength. ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi also dispatched a deputy, Syrian Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, to exploit AQI ties and seek opportunities in the conflict. Originally known as Jabhat al-Nusra (Support Front) upon establishment in 2012, Jolani’s group tried to mask its Al-Qaeda links. Given multiple name changes in its five-year existence, we simply call the group Al-Qaeda in Syria.

³⁹ Robert Ford, “The Fatal Flaw in Trump’s ISIS Plan,” *The Atlantic*, May 11, 2017, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/trump-turkey-erdogan-kurds-isis-syria-raqqa/525963>.

The technical abilities of AQS fighters helped transform Syria from an uprising to a civil war. This success, as well as ISI gains in Iraq, led Baghdadi to call for Nusra Front's absorption into his newly branded Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in April 2013. Jolani refused, publicly pledging allegiance to Zawahiri and appealing to Al-Qaeda's leader to solve the dispute. In June 2013, Zawahiri responded that AQS and AQI should remain separate on their respective sides of the border.

See Appendix H for more information on Al-Qaeda in Syria.

Loss of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (2014)

ISIS leader Baghdadi rejected Zawahiri's order, and the group continued to seize territory in northeast Syria. Al-Qaeda attempted to mediate between the two branches, and in late 2013 the groups did cooperate tactically against the Syrian regime. However, in January 2014, AQS joined with Syrian rebel groups in a failed bid to dislodge ISIS from eastern Syria.

On February 2, 2014, Al-Qaeda publicly broke ties with its Iraqi affiliate, declaring that the organization was "not responsible for [ISIS's] actions."⁴⁰

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (est. 2014)

No official Al-Qaeda affiliate followed Baghdadi out the door. However, when the ISIS leader declared himself Caliph in June 2014 and called for broad allegiance, a number of Al-Qaeda associated groups flipped and offered their support. ISIS had momentum, and Zawahiri responded by declaring a new affiliate, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, in September 2014.

According to Zawahiri, AQIS is a conglomeration of smaller Al-Qaeda associated groups from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Some of the founders of AQIS were members of Al-Qaeda core, while other individuals and their groups supported core operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the declaration that this disparate network was a new affiliate appeared to be more about the appearance of expansion in the face of the ISIS threat.

See Appendix G for more information on Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent.

⁴⁰ Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, The Brookings Institution, 2015, 29, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf>.

Objectives

Al-Qaeda seeks to embed its affiliates within their local environments. As Zawahiri wrote in his 2013 treatise, “General Guidelines for Jihad”: “We cooperate on what we agree and advice [sic] and correct each other on what we disagree.”⁴¹ Likely reflecting on the Iraq experience, where AQI’s harsh treatment of other Sunni Iraqis cost the group popular support, Al-Qaeda’s leader called on affiliates to avoid targeting local populations, including Shia Muslims and religious minorities.

As part of this “Localism,” Al-Qaeda’s affiliates have been involved in activities that would help transform societies toward the organization’s vision of Islamic law. This followed Zawahiri’s guidance, which called on Al-Qaeda’s followers to place “stress upon the importance of brotherhood based on Islam and the unity of all Muslim lands.... This will serve as a prelude to the establishment of the Caliphate.”⁴²

In addition to Zawahiri’s strategic guidance, Al-Qaeda’s affiliates have operated with more independence and fluidity during this phase. Both AQAP and AQS are helping the organization transition to its next phase. Among the affiliates, AQAP is the first among equals, at the vanguard of Al-Qaeda’s “brand.” The Yemen affiliate’s activities are at the heart of what Al-Qaeda does: plotting attacks on the West and forming local relationships. During this phase, AQAP also has communications links to—and even operational relationships with—the group’s other affiliates.

The Syrian civil war also provided Al-Qaeda a magnet for jihadi recruitment and fundraising that had not existed since the darkest days of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Jolani turned to Zawahiri to settle the former’s conflict with ISIS leader Baghdadi. Perhaps out of an abundance of caution due to how Al-Qaeda lost the narrative in Iraq, Zawahiri responded to Jolani’s distress call by dispatching much of the core leadership to Syria. These veteran figures are focusing on the local conflict—with the potential for another regional government to topple—and are laying the groundwork for a post-ISIS revival. According to U.S. government statements, this group also continues to be involved in plotting external attacks against the West.

Aspects of this phase reflect the venture capitalism of the Vanguard phase: with the collapse of security states in North Africa, a number of hardened Al-Qaeda veterans fled prisons, reconnected with their former comrades, and fostered new ties with local jihadi cells in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. None of these groups became Al-Qaeda affiliates; more important to the organization than these local groups calling

⁴¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “General Guidelines for Jihad,” *Jihadology*, Sep. 14, 2013, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf>.

⁴² Ayman al-Zawahiri, “General Guidelines for Jihad.”

themselves Al-Qaeda—which might draw undesired international attention—was that they were following Al-Qaeda’s strategy of setting the scene for Islamic emirates.

The Localism phase, as its title suggests, has featured the various affiliates focusing more on their local environments than on external operations in the West. Once again, only AQAP has plotted, and attempted to inspire, U.S. homeland attacks (although open-source reporting suggests that U.S. activities disrupted an AQS plot against Western civil aviation). Primarily because states have collapsed, but perhaps also to compete with ISIS, Al-Qaeda's affiliates have become much more involved in attempts at governance in this phase. With the exception of AQIS, all the affiliates (including AQI) have controlled some amount of territory during this phase and have established or conducted governance activities. Four of the six affiliates have used the opportunity to dispense assistance and/or services to the local population.

Capabilities

The Localism phase is defined by Al-Qaeda taking advantage of civil unrest in the broader Middle East. In addition to targeting local U.S. interests (as in the prior phase, with Al-Shebab being the exception), local attacks have been framed as supporting local Sunni populations and opposing tyranny, corruption, and (in the case of AQIS) blasphemy. AQI has fallen out of Al-Qaeda's orbit, but AQS and AQAP have begun using sectarianism for a much more targeted purpose—against the Assad regime and its Hizbullah backer in Syria, and against the Houthis in Yemen.

During this phase, Al-Qaeda affiliates have increased their targeting of the aviation sector. In the previous phase, only AQAP was actively plotting attacks against aircraft. In this phase, AQAP, AQS, and Al-Shebab each have plotted—and Al-Shebab has unsuccessfully executed—attacks using hidden explosives aboard aircraft. Each of these plots may have required input from AQAP bomb-maker Asiri, who is still at large, but even so they have displayed the group’s diversification in terms of where it deploys such sophisticated devices. The only attack that Al-Qaeda has claimed in the West during this phase is the January 2015 assault on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. The attackers were brothers, who had received weapons training in Yemen and met with Awlaqi in the summer of 2011.⁴³ However, it is unclear how much—if any—planning, funding, or direction AQAP provided to them.⁴⁴

⁴³ Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, “Both Brothers Behind Paris Attack Had Weapons Training in Yemen: Sources,” Reuters, Jan. 11, 2015, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-yemen-idUSKBN0KKOF620150111>.

⁴⁴ Tim Fernholz, “The Unanswered Questions After AQAP Takes Credit for the Charlie Hebdo Attacks,” Quartz, Jan. 14, 2015, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <https://qz.com/326588/the-unanswered-questions-after-aqap-takes-credit-for-the-charlie-hebdo-attacks/>.

The hypothesis that Al-Qaeda is taking a “strategic pause” from external operations is possible, but of course impossible to prove. Indeed, it would seem to contradict Al-Qaeda’s central ideology. In the opening lines of Zawahiri’s 2013 directive, Al-Qaeda’s leader emphasizes that the U.S. is his group’s primary “military” target.⁴⁵ Concurrent with Zawahiri’s guidance, some Al-Qaeda veterans that he dispatched to Syria were reportedly involved in external operations. The so-called Khorasan Group, led by Kuwaiti national Muhsin al-Fadhli, was and is involved in plotting attacks against the West and the U.S. homeland, according to U.S. officials. In the absence of successful Al-Qaeda-directed attacks during this phase, it is worth considering whether the group is disrupted to the point that it can no longer execute external operations.

In addition to the Paris attack, Al-Qaeda continued to inspire anti-American violence. AQAP’s Awlaqi and Khan were killed by a U.S. drone strike in September 2011. However, Awlaqi’s sermons are still available online, and *Inspire* has continued publication without Khan. Awlaqi and Khan were reportedly the motivation behind the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, in which two brothers followed the instructions in that first issue of *Inspire* and ended up killing three and injuring over 250 with IEDs made from pressure cookers.⁴⁶ All of this suggests that the kinetic targeting of propagandists has limited effectiveness.

Since 2015, Al-Qaeda’s media products have featured Hamza Bin Laden, a favored son of the group’s late founder. Some analysts speculate that the younger Bin Laden’s occasional appearances suggest he is being groomed as a figurehead to replace current Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁴⁷ Others speculate that Al-Qaeda is using Hamza Bin Laden to appeal to those who might otherwise be recruited by ISIS.⁴⁸ Despite its disagreements with Al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden remains a revered figure even for ISIS leadership. Unlike his father, in his released audio statements the younger Bin Laden has promoted smaller, lone-wolf style attacks—like those carried out by ISIS supporters and encouraged by AQAP propaganda for several years.⁴⁹ In a

⁴⁵ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “General Guidelines for Jihad.”

⁴⁶ Cord Jefferson, “Here’s the Jihadist Magazine That Taught the Boston Bombers to Kill,” *Gawker*, Apr. 23, 2013, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <http://gawker.com/heres-the-jihadist-magazine-that-taught-the-boston-bom-478605581>.

⁴⁷ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “Al-Qaeda in 2017” Workshop, Mar. 1, 2017.

⁴⁸ Joby Warrick and Souad Mekhennet, “Bin Laden’s son steps into father’s shoes as Al-Qaeda attempts a comeback,” *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2017, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/bin-ladens-son-steps-into-fathers-shoes-as-Al-Qaeda-attempts-a-comeback/2017/05/27/0c89ffc0-4198-11e7-9869-bac8b446820a_story.html.

⁴⁹ Thomas Joscelyn, “Hamza bin Laden offers ‘advice for martyrdom seekers in the West,’” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, May 13, 2017, accessed Jun. 15, 2017,

July 2016 recording, Hamza says that Al-Qaeda and its adherents are no longer “besieged in Afghanistan” and that “followers today number in the hundreds of thousands,” pointing to the spread of Al-Qaeda affiliates, the ISIS network, and other jihadist groups from central Africa to South Asia.⁵⁰ Such a statement holds out ISIS as a follower of Osama Bin Laden’s movement and may hint at Hamza Bin Laden’s interest in heading a broader jihadist network down the road.

Meanwhile, almost all the affiliates are conducting IO in their local environments. As an outcome of poor or weak governance in the countries in which Al-Qaeda affiliates operate, Al-Qaeda has had a significant increase in safe-havens across the region at various points in the current phase. In the previous phase, only AQIM operated for any period of time generally unmolested in its environment. Since 2011, AQAP, AQI/ISI, AQIM, and AQS have all been afforded periods of such relief.

Al-Qaeda’s relationship with its affiliates

A reasonable question to ask is the extent to which Al-Qaeda remained centralized once it began franchising. Most affiliates depend on Al-Qaeda leadership for general strategic guidance, and there is evidence of affiliates carrying out direct instructions from Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and other core leaders. However, much of the published correspondence from Bin Laden leaves the impression of disappointment with his subordinate groups. In one letter, Bin Laden lamented that even AQAP, the affiliate most actively attempting external attacks, was not trying hard enough.⁵¹ Table 7 presents our assessment of the relationships between Al-Qaeda “core” and its affiliates.

<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/05/hamza-bin-laden-offers-advice-for-martyrdom-seekers-in-the-west.php>.

⁵⁰ Thomas Joscelyn, “Osama bin Laden’s son says Al-Qaeda has grown despite 15 years of war,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, Jul. 10, 2016, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/osama-bin-ladens-son-says-Al-Qaeda-has-grown-despite-a-decade-and-half-of-war.php>.

⁵¹ Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined? Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 2012, 29, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CTC_LtrsFromAbottabad_WEB_v2.pdf.

Table 7. Summary of Al-Qaeda affiliates' relationships with the Core

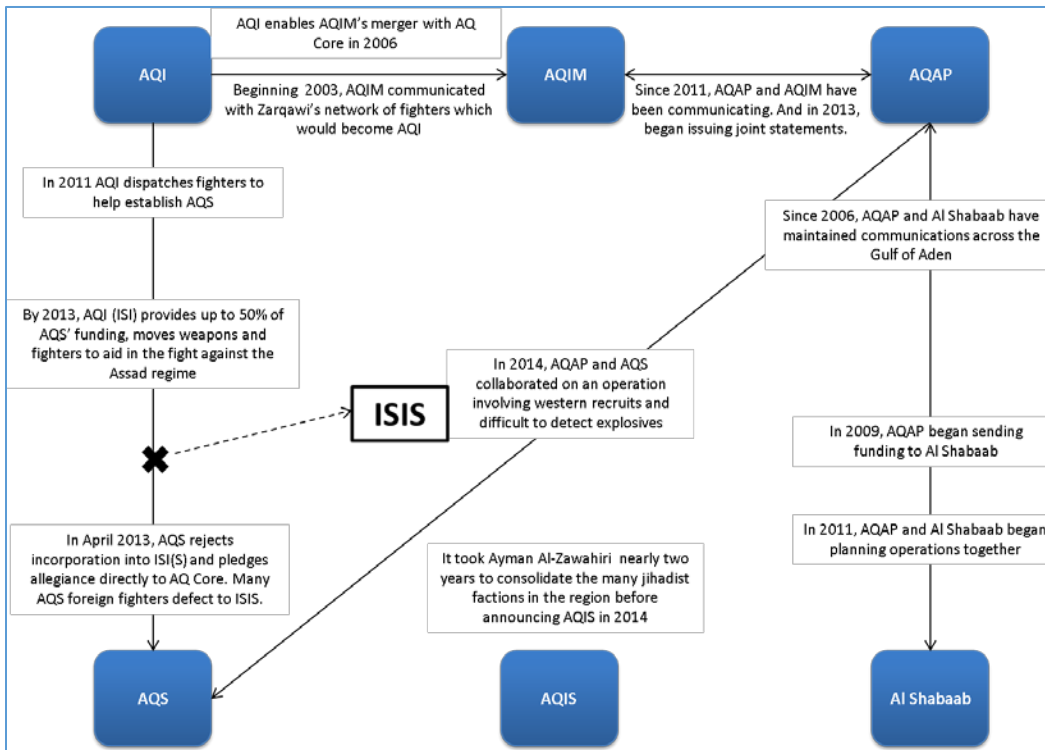
Affiliate	Current status	Over time
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq had its relationship voided by Al-Qaeda in February 2014	<p><i>Rise and Sectarian War, 2004-2006:</i> On occasion, AQI followed direct orders from Al-Qaeda core. However, it frequently ignored orders from core leadership. At one point, Ayman al-Zawahiri requested money from the Iraqi affiliate: it is unclear whether such a transfer was made.</p> <p><i>Declaration of an Islamic State, 2006-2009:</i> AQI followed general guidance from Al-Qaeda core early in this phase, but then ignored orders.</p> <p><i>From ISI to ISIS to end of AQ ties, 2009-2014:</i> Once AQI declared itself an Islamic state, the Iraqi group ignored orders from AQ core up until the formal rupture of relations in February 2014.</p>
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb follows general guidance from Al-Qaeda core	Throughout its existence, AQIM only followed general guidance from Al-Qaeda core. As noted in the attached case study, "Decisions within AQIM continue to occur primarily at the battalion level, and battalion commanders regularly buck the orders of [AQIM's leader], to say nothing of those coming from al-Zawahiri."
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula follows general guidance from Al-Qaeda core	<p><i>Rebirth in Yemen, 2006-2011:</i> AQAP is considered one of the closest affiliates to Al-Qaeda core. It was established by core veterans, who were based in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, including the affiliate's founding leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi. With key Al-Qaeda core veterans within its decision-making leadership, AQAP followed both general guidance and direct orders from Al-Qaeda leadership.</p> <p><i>Arab Spring, 2011-2014:</i> In addition to following both general guidance and direct orders from Al-Qaeda leadership, Wuhayshi was named overall Al-Qaeda deputy leader in 2013.</p> <p><i>Civil war, 2014-present:</i> Wuhayshi continued to serve as Al-Qaeda core's deputy leader until his death, by U.S. drone strike, in 2015. Without core veterans involved in its local leadership, there is no evidence available that AQAP followed direct orders from Al-Qaeda leadership. The Yemeni affiliate does follow general guidance issued by Al-Qaeda core.</p>
Al-Shebab	Al-Shebab follows general guidance from Al-Qaeda core. Recently, there has been open-source	<p><i>Insurgency, governance, and the "golden age," 2008-2010:</i> After initially pledging allegiance to Al-Qaeda, but before formally merging into the organization, Al-Shebab followed general guidance from Al-Qaeda core.</p> <p><i>Fracturing, factionalism, and territorial loss, 2010-2013:</i> During this phase, which included the formal</p>

	documentation of Al-Shebab receiving and following direct orders from Al-Qaeda leadership	<p>merger of the Somali group into Al-Qaeda, Al-Shebab continued to follow general guidance from the core. There is also evidence that Al-Shebab followed direct orders issued by Al-Qaeda leadership.</p> <p><i>Expanded regional focus and return to insurgency, 2013-present:</i> To this day, Al-Shebab continues to follow general guidance from Al-Qaeda core. Recently, there has been open-source documentation of Al-Shebab receiving and following direct orders from Al-Qaeda leadership.</p>
<p>Al-Qaeda in Syria</p> <p>Al-Qaeda in Syria has key Al-Qaeda core veterans within its decision-making leadership</p>	<p><i>Tensions with ISI, 2013-2014:</i> Soon after AQS reached out to Al-Zawahiri regarding tensions with AQI (which first established AQS), Al-Qaeda's leader dispatched key Al-Qaeda core veterans to serve within AQS's decision-making leadership. As such, AQS followed direct Al-Qaeda orders from its earliest moments of independence from AQI.</p> <p><i>Break from ISIS, 2014-2015:</i> During this phase, AQS had key Al-Qaeda core veterans within its decision-making leadership. It followed direct orders from Al-Qaeda core.</p> <p><i>Jaish al-Fateh coalition and Syrian ceasefire, 2015-2016:</i> During this phase, AQS had key Al-Qaeda core veterans within its decision-making leadership. It followed direct orders from Al-Qaeda core. Additionally, Al-Qaeda's financial infrastructure assisted in providing funding to AQS. This was particularly helpful because AQS had received 50 percent of its budget from AQI, prior to their dispute.</p> <p><i>Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, a "break" from AQ core, 2016:</i> AQS leader Jolani publicly announced its break from Al-Qaeda core—while sitting next to a core veteran. The apparent decision was also approved by Al-Qaeda's deputy leader, Abu Khayr al-Musri, who was himself based in Syria. Despite the announcement, AQS still had key Al-Qaeda core veterans within its decision-making leadership and followed direct orders from Al-Qaeda core.</p> <p><i>HTS Coalition, 2016-present:</i> AQS still has key Al-Qaeda core veterans within its decision-making leadership.</p>	
<p>AQIS</p> <p>Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent has Al-Qaeda core members within its decision-making leadership</p>	<p><i>Formation and early ambitions, 2014-2015:</i> Al-Qaeda core members were involved in the founding of AQIS, which was announced by Zawahiri himself. In this beginning phase AQIS followed direct orders and received money from Al-Qaeda core.</p> <p><i>Small-scale attacks and relative silence, 2015-present:</i> Al-Qaeda core members continue to be involved in AQIS's decision-making leadership, although the nature of the affiliate suggests that its organization is broken into regional nodes. Overall, the group follows general guidance from Al-Qaeda core.</p>	

Al-Qaeda affiliates' relationships with each other

An assessment of the affiliates' ties to one another is important for understanding Al-Qaeda's structure and how it has evolved over time. It also puts into question the concept of the "core" and what it means today. Figure 4 presents this assessment.

Figure 4. Al-Qaeda affiliates' relationships with each other



Source: P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Zack Gold, CNA.

In answer to the questions in the NDAA, Table 8 summarizes how Al-Qaeda has evolved and changed over time.

Table 8. Summary of Al-Qaeda’s strategy, objectives and capabilities

Phase	Structure	Strategy	Objectives	Capabilities
Vanguard (1998-2004)	Hierarchical	Discredit, undermine, and eventually replace the current Western-dominated international order with a pan-Islamic caliphate based on its interpretation of Sharia	Plotted and executed spectacular attacks against the United States, its allies, and western interests	Executed complex terrorist attacks on a global scale
		Remove U.S. presence from what it considers Muslim lands and U.S. support to current governments in these countries by attacking the U.S. homeland and Americans and American interests abroad	Used attacks and propaganda to drive a wedge between Muslims and the West	Maintained safe-haven in Afghanistan until October 2001
Flexible Franchising (2004-2010)	Networked, hub-and- spoke	Overthrow and replace local and national governance structures in Muslim lands and replace them with governance based on its interpretation of Sharia	After 9/11, made efforts to survive U.S. invasion of Afghanistan	Conducted information operations (IO) targeting Western and Muslim audiences
		Discredit, undermine, and eventually replace the current Western-dominated international order with a pan-Islamic caliphate based on its interpretation of Sharia	Executed attacks against U.S. allies and partners to isolate America in its Global War on Terror	Provided training, funding, and guidance to other jihadi fighters and groups
		Remove U.S. presence from what it considers Muslim lands and U.S. support to current governments in these countries by attacking the U.S. homeland and Americans and American interests abroad	Sought to drag U.S. forces into a quagmire in Iraq and lay groundwork for an Islamic emirate	Supported insurgency and fomented civil war in Iraq
		Expand its brand and presence across Muslim-majority countries by establishing affiliates	Encouraged its affiliates to plot attacks against U.S. and western homelands and interests	Deployed IEDs, PBIEDs, and VBIEDs in support of local insurgent and terrorist attacks
			Affiliates plotted and	Developed explosive devices that could bypass detection
				Targeted the aviation sector repeatedly
				Used IO to recruit foreign fighters for Iraq and other

		Overthrow and replace local and national governance structures in Muslim lands and replace them with governance based on its interpretation of Sharia	executed attacks inside states neighboring their areas of operations	affiliates Deployed U.S.-born members to inspire "lone wolf" attacks in the West Had not recovered significant safe-haven lost after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan
Localism (2011-Today)	Flat, distributed network	<p>Discredit, undermine, and eventually replace the current Western-dominated international order with a pan-Islamic caliphate based on its interpretation of Sharia</p> <p>Remove U.S. presence from what it considers Muslim lands and U.S. support to current governments in these countries by attacking the U.S. homeland and Americans and American interests abroad</p> <p>Overthrow and replace local and national governance structures in Muslim lands and replace them with governance based on its interpretation of Sharia</p> <p>Position itself as "less extreme" in comparison to ISIS and outlast the rival group</p>	<p>Embeds its affiliates within local conflicts</p> <p>Controls territory, establishes safe-haven, and conducts governance activities</p> <p>Provides guidance and support to unaffiliated local jihadi groups</p> <p>Dispatches core leaders to Syria</p>	<p>Conducts local information operations targeting Sunni populations</p> <p>Uses IO to encourage "lone wolf" attacks in the West</p> <p>Supports an insurgency in Syria</p> <p>Targets the aviation sector repeatedly with explosive devices that could bypass detection</p> <p>Has recovered significant safe-haven in Africa, Syria, and Yemen</p> <p>Has been unwilling or unable to successfully carry out a directly executed terrorist attack in the U.S. homeland or the West</p>

Challenges Al-Qaeda presents to the United States and its interests

Al-Qaeda and its affiliates conduct activities—i.e., present challenges—that directly impact the United States and its interests. U.S. efforts to counter the group should prioritize these activities to protect and defend the homeland and U.S. interests abroad. Based on our comparative examination of Al-Qaeda’s and its affiliates’ activities across the organization, we identified five challenges that the organization poses to the United States and its interests. These are presented in Table 9; the red font denotes specific examples of these challenges in the past.

Table 9. Summary of Al-Qaeda challenges to the United States

Challenges	Definition	Examples
Conduct attacks on U.S. interests	Attack U.S. homeland	1998 attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania
	Attack U.S. regional interests	2000 attack on USS <i>Cole</i>
	Attack U.S. local interests (e.g., U.S. embassies and Americans in country)	2001 9/11 attacks
		2009 “Underwear bomber”
Conduct attacks on U.S. allies (within and outside region)	Attack Western interests	Ongoing attacks on UN mission in Mali
	Attack local interests that represent the West	2003 attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad
	Attack local/regional interests (governments, economic centers, academic institutions, etc.)	2004 Madrid attacks
	Attack local security/military/law enforcement	2005 attacks on London transit 2005 AQI hotel attacks in Amman, Jordan 2015 Al-Shebab attack on Garissa University in Kenya
Attempt to overthrow local and national governments in partner countries and replace with AQ governance	Foment instability and strife by attacking sectarian or civilian targets	AQI targeted attacks and brutality against Shia population in Iraq
	Control territory; expand territory	AQIM part of jihadi alliance that took over and ruled northern Mali in 2012
	Provide support/assistance to local population	In 2015, AQAP administered Sharia in Mukalla, Yemen, and provided humanitarian and civic services
	Establish Sharia rule and courts, conduct governance activities	

Conduct messaging/propaganda activities	<p>Discredit the Western order</p> <p>Disseminate AQ-brand Islam as "true" version of Islam</p> <p>Malign local governments as illegitimate</p> <p>Promote narrative that Muslims are victims of U.S./Western aggression, abuse</p>	<p>From 2001, AQ's "Al-Sahab" produces videos providing spiritual guidance, recruitment and propaganda. Affiliates have their own media outlets</p> <p>In 2010, AQAP launches <i>Inspire</i> magazine, targeting Western Muslims</p>
Man, train, & equip	<p>Recruit, convince followers to join jihad in person, online, etc.</p> <p>Train members of the group and provide information/advice to actual/potential followers/attackers.</p> <p>Acquire funding, weapons, and other materiel.</p>	<p>Until 2001, Al-Qaeda openly operated training camps in Afghanistan. Today, AQ affiliates still train fighters</p> <p>After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Al-Qaeda's network funneled funds, arms, and fighters to Zarqawi's network—which became AQI</p> <p>AQ affiliates, AQIM especially, have earned millions of dollars ransoming hostages</p>

Findings

With the specific questions from the NDAA in mind, we offer the following findings concerning Al-Qaeda and how it has evolved since 2001:

- Al-Qaeda has kept a focus on the same core goals that it had in 2001 most notable of which is the establishment of a global caliphate. The organization has also added goals and adjusted its strategy over time in response to counter-terrorism actions against it and changes in the environments in which it operates.
- To do this, the organization continues to conduct a long-term, patient campaign utilizing terrorist and insurgent tactics against both the "near enemy" (apostate Muslim regimes) and the "far enemy" (the United States and the West).
- Al-Qaeda today is a larger, more agile, and more resilient organization than it was in 2001. It is also operating in more locations now than it was 16 years ago. In 2001, Al-Qaeda members numbered in the hundreds, the core of the group was in Afghanistan, and the organization had only a limited network of emissaries in a handful of other countries. Today, there are five Al-Qaeda

affiliates in over 10 Muslim-majority countries and the group claims tens of thousands of followers.

- Al-Qaeda is no longer the hierarchical organization it was in the years after 2001, or even a “hub and spoke” type organization. Today, Al-Qaeda is a flat, decentralized organization in which most of the affiliates have strong connections with other affiliates (the possible exception between AQIS). The concept of “core” Al-Qaeda is waning in utility, as many of the original members of Al-Qaeda and its other leaders today have moved out of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and co-located themselves with some of the affiliates (most notably AQAP and AQS).
- Al-Qaeda is a learning, adaptive, resilient organization. It has adapted and evolved significantly and continuously since 9/11, having learned from its own experiences and from those of others. For example, AQS and AQAP are exercising more tolerant forms of governance now in Syria and Yemen, respectively, than Al-Qaeda has done in the past (e.g., Al-Qaeda in Iraq). Today, Al-Qaeda appears to be placing increased emphasis on addressing local concerns and meeting the demands of the people in the areas in which it operates.
- The emergence of ISIS (an Al-Qaeda offshoot), presents both obstacles and opportunities for Al-Qaeda. ISIS is arguably the vanguard of global jihad today and the group has amassed an impressive following and significant resources in only a few short years. However, ISIS has also drawn the bulk of the attention and resources of the U.S.-led global counterterrorism effort in recent years, which has reduced the pressure on Al-Qaeda in other areas.
- Al-Qaeda may be biding its time to regenerate and regroup and prove that its patient approach remains the true mantle of global jihad. Recent reports, as well as recent statements from Al-Qaeda, indicate that the organization is grooming the next generation of its leadership via the jihad in Syria, Yemen, and other locations. Notable among these due to his lineage is Hamza Bin Laden, one of Osama Bin Laden’s sons.
- Al-Qaeda appears to be more focused on achieving success in local and regional conflicts against its “near enemies,” but the relatively reduced level of emphasis on attacking the United States and the West directly should not be mistaken for a shift in strategic goals. As mentioned above, Al-Qaeda retains both the goals and the key components of its campaign to achieve those goals, to include conducting attacks against the United States in order to drive it from Muslim lands.

Table 10 summarizes the changes in Al-Qaeda’s strategy over its three phases.

Table 10. Summary of Al-Qaeda’s Strategy

Phase 1 Vanguard (1998-2004)	Phase 2 Flexible Franchising (2004-2010)	Phase 3 Localism (2011-present)
<p>Discredit, undermine, and eventually replace the current Western-dominated international order with a pan-Islamic caliphate based on its interpretation of Sharia Law</p> <p>Remove U.S. presence from what it considers Muslim lands and U.S. support to current governments in these countries by attacking the U.S. homeland and Americans and American interests abroad</p> <p>Overthrow and replace local and national governance structures in Muslim lands and replace them with governance based on its interpretation of Sharia Law</p>	<p><i>Same as Phase 1</i></p> <p>ADD: Expand its brand and presence by establishing affiliates and fusing with local conflicts</p>	<p><i>Same as Phase 1</i></p> <p>ADD: Become deeply enmeshed in local conflicts, increase its role in local governance, expand territories</p> <p>Position itself as “less extreme” in comparison to ISIS and outlast the rival group</p> <p>Prepare the next generation of AQ leaders (e.g., Hamza Bin Laden)</p>

Part II: Assessment of local and regional security environments

Part I of our assessment discussed Al-Qaeda’s evolution. That process did not occur in a vacuum. Al-Qaeda has evolved through its own actions and decisions, but it has also changed in response to external forces. Actions by the United States and its partners are one such external force, but to effectively understand the impact of U.S. efforts to counter Al-Qaeda, we must consider another key variable: the shifting local and regional security conditions that have strongly affected the organization’s trajectory. Many of the countries where Al-Qaeda operates—and the broader regions in which these countries sit—have become increasingly politically, socially, and economically unstable over the past decade and a half.

As extensive research on terrorist movements would suggest,⁵² Al-Qaeda has adapted to these changes and has often exploited them to its benefit. Al-Qaeda has taken advantage of crises to recruit, train, spread propaganda, plan and execute attacks,

⁵² For a summary of this research, please refer to: Jonathan Schroden, et al., *Asking the Right Questions: A Framework for Assessing Counterterrorism Actions*, CNA DRM-2015-U-012261-Final, February 2016.

and even govern populations. In this section, we will examine how the security environment has shifted, how those shifts have increased the vulnerabilities that, when present, make a country or region more susceptible to Al-Qaeda, and how Al-Qaeda has exploited those vulnerabilities to establish footholds and expand. We also examine how these vulnerabilities can hurt the effectiveness of U.S. efforts.

Shifting security environments

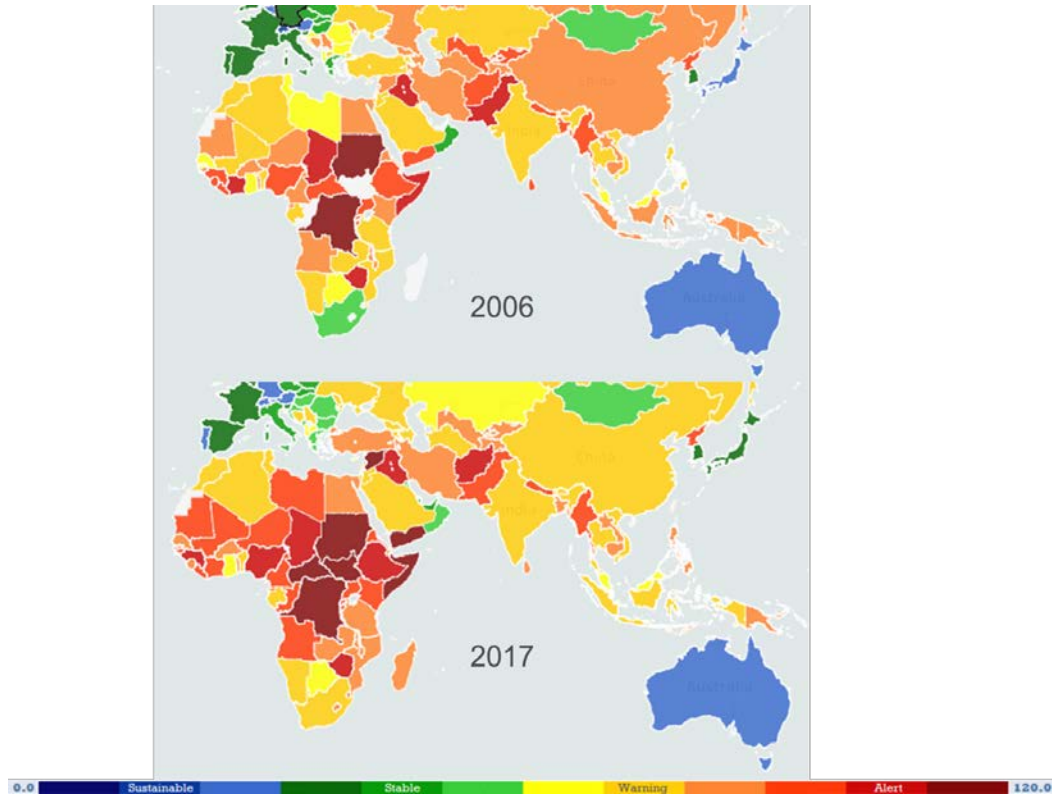
In recent years, numerous states in the regions where Al-Qaeda operates or seeks to operate have become more fragile. There are numerous metrics or indices that can be used to illustrate these trends,⁵³ but for the sake of simplicity, we rely here on the *Fragile States Index*, a widely-used, annual report published by the Fund for Peace that captures current and emerging economic, social, and political pressures on the stability of states around the world.⁵⁴ Figure 5 shows the index ratings for the regions of the world of most relevance to Al-Qaeda. The map at the top shows the ratings from 2006, the first year the index was compiled. The map at the bottom shows the ratings from 2017. As the scale at the bottom of the figure indicates, blue/green colors are states deemed to be stable, while yellow, orange, and red colors indicate increasingly weak and fragile states. Comparison of these two maps show clear, deteriorating trends in the stability of many states in Africa, and a number in the Middle East (most notably Yemen and Syria).

A number of factors contribute to these trends, as we discuss in more detail in our case studies of Al-Qaeda's affiliates in Appendices C through I. These include trends such as shifting demographics, youth bulges, and migrations of populations across much of Africa, the outbreak of civil wars in places like Syria and Yemen, and the failures (or absence) of stabilization efforts in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. These conditions have weakened many of the states in Africa and the Middle East in recent years, and Al-Qaeda has been able to exploit these weakened states, by working to take advantage of vulnerabilities in their security environments. In the next section, we discuss in detail how Al-Qaeda has been able to do this.

⁵³ See Schroden, *Asking the Right Questions: A Framework for Assessing Counterterrorism Actions*, for an overview of these metrics and sources.

⁵⁴ The Fragile States Index is available at <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/>.

Figure 5. State fragility in 2006 and 2017



Source: Fragile States Index, The Fund for Peace

Al-Qaeda's exploitation of security vulnerabilities

By conducting a comparative analysis of our case studies on Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates, we identified seven vulnerabilities that have emerged or worsened in key countries where Al-Qaeda and its affiliates have established or expanded their presence since 2001 (Table 11). These vulnerabilities weaken the security of a country, leaving it prone to exploitation by Al-Qaeda. Some combination of these vulnerabilities applies to all of the countries that Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates operate within. Most suffer from five or more. The table defines each vulnerability and provides details about where they apply. In addition, it gives examples of where and when the vulnerability was part of the operating environment (all overlap with Al-Qaeda's presence in the country).

Here, we discuss vulnerabilities at the national level, but it is important to understand that even within highly vulnerable and crisis-torn countries, the presence of a vulnerability, and Al-Qaeda's success in exploiting it, varies at the local level. Al-

Qaeda has often been most successful not just in vulnerable countries, but in certain localities within those countries. Except for its Somali affiliate al-Shebab, Al-Qaeda has never captured the capital city of any country; rather it has thrived in locations with aggrieved populations and a weak state presence, such as Iraq’s Anbar Province, eastern Syria, southern Yemen, and northern Mali.

Table 11. Security vulnerabilities

Vulnerability	Definition	Examples
Internal conflict	Ongoing internal violence at the local/communal, regional, or central level(s). Can take different forms, to include: sectarian fighting, civil war, insurgencies, and separatist movements	Syria: civil war (2011-present) Yemen: civil War (2015-present) Afghanistan: insurgency (2002-present) Somalia (1991-present) Iraq (2004-2007, present)
History of violent Jihadism	A long-standing history of jihadi movements, opposed to the government, within the population in which Al-Qaeda can tap and build	Yemen: Jihadi groups (1990s) Afghanistan/Pakistan (1980s to the present)
Collapse or partial-collapse of the central government	The central government is not operating effectively due to an external invasion or an internal coup, uprising, revolution, insurrection, etc. In this case, governments do not have control of their national territory or their borders, and face violent opposition	Syria (2011-present) Yemen (2015-present) Mali (2012-present) Iraq (2003-present) Afghanistan (2002-present)
Government illegitimacy	A significant portion of the population does not view the central government as the legitimate authority, but sees it as a foreign puppet, a sectarian regime, a corrupt failure, and/or an oppressive tyrant	Iraq: Shia-dominated government, backed by United States Syria: Minority Alawite regime in Sunni majority country Afghanistan: U.S. brokered “National Unity Government” in the wake of highly flawed elections
Demographic instabilities	Trends that leave large portions of the population economically vulnerable, such as youth bulges, ethno-sectarian competition/violence, refugee populations, internally displaced peoples (IDPs), and mass urbanization	Iraq: Shia/Sunni strife Syria: Urbanization Mali: Youth bulge, Tuareg rebellions Yemen: Youth bulge, sectarian tensions, displacement of populations as part of the ongoing conflict Afghanistan: Large IDP populations in Pakistan and Iran (now being forced back into Afghanistan)

Security sector ineffectiveness	Problems within the security sector, including lack of capacity/capability and professionalism within the security forces, weak institutions for security and defense, and corruption	<p>Mali: Extensive corruption within government and military</p> <p>Iraq: Sectarianism and corruption led to the collapse of the U.S.-trained Iraqi Army</p> <p>Afghanistan: Afghan security forces have been steadily losing ground in recent years</p> <p>Yemen: The Yemeni security forces have effectively collapsed</p>
Neighbor in crisis	When a neighboring country is undergoing significant internal violent strife/conflict or is in a state of conflict with a 3rd country	<p>Syria (Iraq, 2003-present)</p> <p>Iraq (Syria, 2011-present)</p> <p>Mali (Algeria, 1991-2002)</p> <p>Afghanistan (Pakistan, 2002-present)</p>

Snapshots of Al-Qaeda’s exploitation of security vulnerabilities: Yemen and Mali

Two brief snapshots illustrate how Al-Qaeda benefits from rising vulnerabilities. In Yemen, Al-Qaeda started to resurge in 2006, when many leading figures escaped from a prison in the capital. But Al-Qaeda’s recruitment pool and political influence remained relatively small until the Arab Spring, which triggered a complex crisis in Yemen and exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities such as state weakness, internal conflict, demographic instability, and security sector ineffectiveness. As longtime ruler Ali Abdullah Saleh first battled to remain in power, and then formally stepped down, and finally re-emerged as a spoiler, AQAP found new opportunities. AQAP began to control some territory and launched a popular front, Ansar al-Sharia, which widened the group’s recruitment by promising moral and incorruptible governance. As Yemen plunged into civil war in 2014, with intensifying conflict between the government and the Houthis (a Shi’i rebel group), AQAP exploited the chaos to expand its bid for territorial control. At a more local level, AQAP has had the most success building support and holding territory in southern Yemeni cities such as al-Mukalla, Abyan, and Zinjibar. In such cities, AQAP has benefited from a power vacuum (since 2011, the government has frequently struggled to project power beyond the capital, and the Houthis’ base is in northern Yemen) and from the history of jihadism in southern Yemen dating back to the 1990s.

In Mali, AQIM and its local allies benefited from the complex crisis that tore the country apart in 2012. After years of separatist rebellions led by sections of the Tuareg ethnic group, and after years of corruption in a weak and poor state, the year 2012 brought collapse: a renewed Tuareg-led rebellion in the north prompted a junior officers’ coup in the capital. The resulting political chaos and security vacuum helped AQIM and its allies capture substantial territory in the northern part of the country. AQIM’s influence was felt in the north rather than in the south because of the weakness of the state in the north, and because of the long-term efforts AQIM

had made to build ties with Tuareg and Arabs, two key ethnicities in the north. During the jihadist occupation of northern Mali in 2012-2013, AQIM had its strongest presence in Timbuktu and Gao, two cities where it had well-developed relationships with local power brokers. Even after a French-led military intervention ended jihadist control of the north, internal conflicts continued there amid persistent state weakness, and AQIM and its allies continued to undermine prospects for peace.

Rising vulnerabilities do not automatically benefit Al-Qaeda

Although Al-Qaeda typically benefits when security vulnerabilities increase, there have been settings in which vulnerabilities have worked against Al-Qaeda. In Iraq, the chaos caused by the insurgency and the violence that Al-Qaeda's affiliate inflicted, even on sympathetic Sunni tribes, paved the way for the "Anbar Awakenings"—a tribal backlash, and one of the developments that led to Al-Qaeda's near-defeat in Iraq in 2007-2010. In Syria, the drawn-out devastation and violence of the civil war, as well as the complexities of political negotiations and rivalries among Syrian anti-regime rebels, played a role in causing Al-Qaeda's affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fath al-Sham to formally break with Al-Qaeda core in 2016. Although many analysts have interpreted that break as a disingenuous and calculated move on the part of both Al-Qaeda core and Jabhat Fath al-Sham, it could also be read as a sign that Syria's vulnerabilities were becoming so profound as to work against the interests of Al-Qaeda core—and that, for the sake of its own interests, Jabhat Fath al-Sham ultimately came to pursue political compromises that many Al-Qaeda hardliners found unacceptable.

Additionally, not every vulnerable or collapsing country offers a hospitable environment to Al-Qaeda: a history of jihadism and a pre-existing network of local jihadists are often crucial ingredients that Al-Qaeda must have in order to benefit from chaos. Notably, one does not see Al-Qaeda benefiting from recent, complex, and severe crises in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, where there is no history of jihadism.

Even where there are enthusiastic local jihadists and high-level vulnerabilities in the security environment, Al-Qaeda sometimes has difficulty taking advantage of them. For example, it made several attempts to foment chaos in Nigeria from the early 2000s on, and both Al-Qaeda core and AQIM had contact with the group that became known as Boko Haram—but Boko Haram's leaders Muhammad Yusuf (1970-2009) and Abubakar Shekau (born about 1968) proved deeply unreliable and difficult to control. The difficulties Al-Qaeda had with these would-be Nigerian partners likely reflect, in part, the fact that almost no Nigerians trained or fought with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and so there were no networks of trust in place to smooth interactions between Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram. An AQIM-supported Boko Haram splinter group, Ansaru, showed relatively little military capacity or recruiting potential, and Boko Haram (never a formal affiliate) eventually pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015.

For Al-Qaeda to effectively exploit current and emerging security vulnerabilities, it must continue to adapt and shift to changes in the operational environment and know how it can use them to its advantage. In other words, it must make a deliberate effort to identify and pursue developments that will support its goals. As these examples show, Al-Qaeda has done this effectively in many places, but there are examples of cases where critical ingredients for Al-Qaeda's expansion have been missing, or where Al-Qaeda has misread aspects of the environment and the results have been deleterious for the organization.

Not vulnerable? Al-Qaeda's failure in Saudi Arabia

Notably, some countries that Al-Qaeda has targeted have proven relatively resilient. The foremost example is Saudi Arabia, the land of Osama Bin Laden's birth and the home of numerous Al-Qaeda members. Although Bin Laden harshly criticized Saudi Arabia over its government's decision to lean on American support for security during the Gulf War, and although Al-Qaeda mounted a serious campaign of attacks inside Saudi Arabia in the early 2000s, the group failed to make significant headway in the kingdom. Critically, Saudi Arabia proved less vulnerable than other countries when it came to security force effectiveness: Saudi Arabian forces effectively dismantled Al-Qaeda's presence in their country between 2002 and 2006. The overall strength of the state and the relative stability of the society seem to have prevented Al-Qaeda from gaining substantial popular support; indeed, many Saudi Arabian citizens appeared to be appalled by Al-Qaeda's targeting of Westerners and civilians in the early 2000s.

Impact on U.S. efforts against Al-Qaeda

In addition to creating opportunities that Al-Qaeda can potentially exploit via the presence of vulnerabilities in the security environment, worsening stability and security conditions also negatively impact the United States' ability to combat Al-Qaeda directly. For example, in recent years, the U.S. has prioritized efforts to work "by, with, and through" national governments that have an Al-Qaeda presence in or near their countries. But deteriorating security conditions across the regions shown in Figure 5 mean that such an approach is often infeasible (either in total or to the extent desired by the U.S.), either because such a government does not exist (e.g., Yemen), is not one with whom the U.S. would partner (e.g., Syria), is predatory, corrupt, and/or incompetent (e.g., Afghanistan), or is unlikely to ever have the capacity to secure its own territory (e.g., Mali).

Deteriorating security conditions in these parts of the world have at times resulted in the loss of U.S. access (e.g., forward operating locations) for counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda, including intelligence gathering, training and advising foreign counterterrorism forces, and direct strikes against Al-Qaeda members. An example of this was the withdrawal of U.S. SOF from Yemen in 2015. Of at least equal

significance is that worsening security conditions (combined with decreased U.S. risk tolerance in the wake of the Benghazi Consulate attack of 2012) have hampered the ability of U.S. diplomats to engage at-risk populations and for U.S. development professionals to assist communities most in need of assistance. Such communities often pose an attractive target of recruitment for Al-Qaeda and like groups.

Findings

With the specific questions from the NDAA in mind, we offer the following findings concerning the evolution of local and regional security environments and the associated impact on Al-Qaeda and the United States:

- In the years since 2001, many of the countries in the Middle East and Africa have become increasingly politically, socially, and economically unstable. The worsening conditions in many of these countries have led to a host of vulnerabilities in their security environments, such as internal conflicts, government corruption and illegitimacy, collapse of governing regimes, and neighboring states in crisis. These conditions, combined with demographic trends such as youth bulges and population migrations, have created opportunities for movement and expansion that Al-Qaeda has exploited. Key locations where Al-Qaeda has done so include Syria, Yemen, the Sahel region of Africa (especially Mali), Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Southeast Asia.
- Al-Qaeda can exploit security vulnerabilities in weak or failing states, though its success in doing so still requires skilled approaches. Al-Qaeda's ability to take advantage of these conditions is enhanced when it has a pre-existing presence or relationships with disaffected populations or groups in a country, or when it can establish such a relationship.
- Al-Qaeda has benefitted from slow, negative trends in security conditions, or security vulnerabilities, but its largest gains have occurred when there are sharp and rapid deteriorations. For instance, AQ's strongest affiliates today are AQAP and AQS, which exist in the midst of the civil wars in Yemen and Syria, respectively. Additionally, AQI instigated a civil war in Iraq and its strength increased considerably as that civil war increased in intensity.
- Worsening trends in security conditions can significantly hinder U.S. government efforts to counter Al-Qaeda. This has been the case for both "by, with, and through" approaches working with the governments of affected countries (in which we have lost effective partners) and for U.S. unilateral counterterrorism actions (in which we have lost our operating base or access for U.S. diplomatic and development personnel).

- Al-Qaeda is not the only organization that takes advantage of security vulnerabilities; other jihadi groups (including ISIS) also exploit them, as exemplified in Libya in 2014.⁵⁵

Part III: Assessment of U.S. efforts against Al-Qaeda since 2001

This section of the report addresses the fourth requirement mandated by the NDAA, to provide “an analysis of the activities that have proven to be most effective and least effective at disrupting and dismantling Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.”

This section of the report has three parts. First, we provide a historical overview and analysis of U.S. counterterrorism policy and strategy. Although the focus is on the 2001-2016 period, we offer a broader context that includes the “pre-history” of current counterterrorism—that is, U.S. counterterrorism before the attacks on 9/11. In this analysis, we identify strategic objectives, key counterterrorism instruments (both civilian and military), and changes as well as continuities in the U.S. response to Al-Qaeda. Second, we provide some broad observations on the U.S. government’s institutional and operational successes and failures against Al-Qaeda. Third, we provide the results of our operational-level assessment of U.S. efforts against Al-Qaeda. In our assessment, we identify the prominent approaches the DOD has taken; analyze what aspect of the Al-Qaeda problem set these approaches address, and derive conclusions about what has been effective and what has not.

Overview of the U.S. counterterrorism strategy

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, were the worst attacks on U.S. territory since the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, and the most lethal in the history of international terrorism. September 11 was a radical discontinuity by virtually every standard—the scale, the costs, and the psychological, social, and political traumas that ensued. “Before 9/11” and “after 9/11” became the most important demarcation in recent American history.

⁵⁵ ISIS has proven particularly effective at exploiting security vulnerabilities, as demonstrated by the three countries where it has established the strongest foothold (going so far as to establish a physical caliphate) over the past three years: Iraq, Syria and Libya. When ISIS was on the offensive, all three countries were wracked by internal conflict, suffered deep challenges to internal governance, and had large aggrieved populations that faced a multitude of economic challenges such as high unemployment and a lack of educational opportunities.

September 11th drove counterterrorism to the top of the list of U.S. national security priorities and led the United States to pursue international terrorism with an unparalleled energy and dynamism. The United States took a series of bold steps in relatively quick succession: it wiped out the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, arguably the world's first "terrorist-sponsored state";⁵⁶ invaded Iraq and instituted "regime change" there, at least in part because of fears that Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime was intent on providing terrorists with weapons of mass destruction;⁵⁷ and instituted a global "manhunt" to apprehend Al-Qaeda leaders, cadres, and even foot soldiers. But with the Bush administration, and the subsequent administration of President Barack Obama, continuity as well as change characterized U.S. approaches to countering the threat of international terrorism.

Counterterrorism before 9/11

On September 25, 1972, U.S. President Richard M. Nixon established the Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism, the first formal U.S. government mechanism aimed at countering that kind of national security threat—one that was seen as particularly acute in the aftermath of the 1972 Munich Olympic games, where 11 Israeli athletes were murdered by Black September, a Palestinian terrorist group.⁵⁸

Every subsequent president would promote policies, programs, and actions intended to combat terrorism.⁵⁹ Important counterterrorism instruments have included diplomacy, economic sanctions, assistance to foreign internal security forces, intelligence liaison and information sharing, and, on occasion, covert action. Under President Ronald Reagan, conventional military force entered the counterterrorism

⁵⁶ International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, "*Perspectives on Radicalisation and Political Violence: Papers from the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence*," January 17-18, 2008, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1234516938ICSRPerspectivesonRadicalisation.pdf>, accessed March 5, 2017.

⁵⁷ Joseph Cirincione, "*Origins of Regime Change in Iraq*," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 19, 2003, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2003/03/19/origins-of-regime-change-in-iraq>, accessed May 12, 2017; and Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S Ismael, *Iraq in the Twenty-First Century: Regime Change and the Making of a Failed State* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015).

⁵⁸ Tim Naftali, *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); and Chris Barber, "*The Dawn of American Counterterrorism Policy*," Richard Nixon Foundation, September 6, 2016, <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2016/09/the-dawn-of-american-counterterrorism-policy/>, accessed May 20, 2017.

⁵⁹ Lynn E. Davis, Gregory F. Treverton, Daniel Byman, Sara Daly, and William Rosenau, "*Coordinating the War on Terrorism*," RAND Corporation, March 2004, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2005/RAND_OP110.pdf, accessed May 1, 2017.

repertoire, with air strikes directed against the Libyan dictator, Colonel Muammar Gadhafi, in retaliation for the April 5, 1986 terrorist attack on a West Berlin discotheque that killed two U.S. servicemen.⁶⁰ The administration of President Bill Clinton enhanced the use of “extraordinary rendition,” that is, the practice of quietly apprehending suspected terrorists and transporting them to another state, typically their home countries, for interrogation (which often included torture).⁶¹

Although terrorism and counterterrorism periodically generated intense high-level U.S. government attention—during “crises” involving U.S. hostages, for example—this focus was typically short lived. When considered across the entire period from the early 1970s until 9/11, terrorism was a low-priority threat for both Democratic and Republican administrations.

In retrospect, this prioritization was both understandable and reasonable. After all, pre-9/11 administrations faced threats as diverse as Soviet military policy, nuclear proliferation, and so-called ethnic conflict. Although the United States employed an array of “kinetic” and “non-kinetic” countermeasures to terrorism, the main U.S. thrust was in the realms of law enforcement, transnational legal measures, and prosecutions.⁶² To be sure, terrorism was considered a threat to international peace and security—but one most effectively dealt with through primarily legal processes.⁶³

⁶⁰ Joseph T Stanik, *El Dorado Canyon: Reagan’s Undeclared War with Qaddafi*, U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2002.

⁶¹ James D. Boys, “What’s So Extraordinary About Extraordinary Rendition?” *International Journal of Human Rights* 15, no. 4; and American Civil Liberties Union, “Fact Sheet: Extraordinary Rendition,” undated, <https://www.aclu.org/other/fact-sheet-extraordinary-rendition>, accessed April 19, 2017.

⁶² See for example “United States v. Usama Bin Laden case brief, 92 F. Supp. 2d 189 (S.D.N.Y., 2000),” <http://www.lawschoolcasebriefs.net/2012/04/united-states-v-usama-bin-laden-case.html>, accessed April 23, 2017; “The Trial of Omar Abdel Rahman,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1985, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/03/opinion/the-trial-of-omar-abdel-rahman.html>. Accessed May 1, 2017; and Simon Reed and Giles Foden, “A New Breed of Terror,” *The Guardian* (London), September 12, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/12/september11.usa1>, accessed May 4, 2017.

⁶³ Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*.

Global war on terror⁶⁴

Although it would be years before Al-Qaeda publicly took credit for the 9/11 attacks, the administration of President George W. Bush quickly concluded that Osama Bin Laden’s organization was responsible. In his speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, Bush painted a chilling picture of a network of ruthless terrorists at work in more than 60 countries around the world.

In that speech, Bush proclaimed a “war” against Al-Qaeda. But the president also insisted that this new war would not be against Al-Qaeda alone, and that the conflict would not end “until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”⁶⁵ To bring about the defeat of terrorism, the president vowed to marshal “every resource at our command—every means of diplomacy, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war.”⁶⁶ He also identified the need for more robust measures to defend the American people within the United States, calling for, among other things, the creation of an Office of Homeland Security, a White House coordinating body whose director would shortly go on to head the new Department of Homeland Security.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Journalistic and personal accounts of the war on terror include Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned Into a War on American Ideals* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009); Garrett M. Graff, *The Threat Matrix: The FBI at War in the Age of Global Terror* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011); John Yoo, *War by Other Means: An Insider’s Account of the War on Terror* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006); and Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

⁶⁵ The White House, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” September 20, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>, accessed April 18, 2017.

⁶⁶ This repertoire would also come to include the extraterritorial Guantanamo Bay detention facility, as well as “black sites”—that is, secret facilities abroad where suspected terrorists were interrogated and, according to many critics, tortured. Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI), *Globalizing Torture: CIA Secret Detention and Extraordinary Rendition* (New York: OSJI, 2013), <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/globalizing-torture-20120205.pdf>, accessed May 20, 2017; and Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Testimony of Cofer Black, former chief of the DCI’s Counterterrorism Center, CIA, “Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities Before and After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001,” Sep. 26, 2002, http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2002_hr/092602black.html, accessed May 5, 2017.

⁶⁷ *Brief Documentary History of the Department of Homeland Security: 2001-2008*, United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS), undated, <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:K8VlXKDEwoJ;https://www.hsdl.org/%3Fview%26did%3D37027+%&cd=17&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>. Key priorities for the new department including securing the country’s air transportation system, more

Bush framed this campaign in explicitly ideological terms. Terrorists, he claimed, “hated our freedom,” and were, in fact, the direct descendants of the fascists, Nazis, and totalitarians that had wreaked havoc across the world during much of the twentieth century.⁶⁸ At the same time, Bush was careful to avoid any perceptions that this new war was a civilizational struggle or a battle against Islam. The teachings of Islam are “good and peaceful,” the president said, adding that “those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme in the name of Allah.”

This speech provided the framework for the administration’s conduct of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) for the rest of Bush’s time in office—and even into the next administration. Naturally, the publicly articulated U.S. counterterrorism strategy underwent a variety of refinements. For example, the first *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, issued in 2003, included cautionary language that warned Americans that they were in a protracted campaign that would not end as it had against the country’s Nazi and fascist foes: “Victory against terrorism will not occur as a single, defining moment. It will not be marked by the likes of the surrender ceremony on the deck of the USS *Missouri* that ended World War II.”⁶⁹

Preventing another 9/11 was paramount. Toward this end, the Bush administration would pursue what it called “areas of action”: attacking terrorists and their ability to operate; denying terrorists the support of “rogue states”; and preventing the emergence of sanctuaries that could serve as “a base and launching pad for terror.”⁷⁰ At the same time, the administration stressed the need to address the underlying conditions it believed were the ultimate sources of terrorist violence perpetrated by Al-Qaeda and other groups.

Kinetic actions were described as short-term measures intended to buy the space and time required to counter terrorism’s ideological underpinnings and the presumed root causes of violence. In the judgment of the Bush administration, it was only

robust border controls, ensuring the continuity of government, and supporting state and local “first responders.” See for example United States Senate, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Testimony of DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff, March 1, 2006 (video), <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/hearings/the-department-of-homeland-securitys-budget-submission-for-fiscal-year-2007>, accessed May 10, 2017.

⁶⁸ The White House. “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People.” September 20, 2001.

⁶⁹ The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, February 2003, https://www.cia.gov/news-information/cia-the-war-on-terrorism/Counter_Terrorism_Strategy.pdf, accessed May 12, 2017.

⁷⁰ The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, September 2006, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/wh/71803.htm><https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/wh/71803.htm>, accessed April 24, 2017.

through the spread of democracy—“the antithesis of terrorist tyranny”—that the United States, its allies, and friends such as “non-violent Muslims” could hope to prevail.⁷¹

For the Bush administration, the promotion of democracy would sometimes have to come at the barrel of a gun, as in Iraq and Afghanistan—described by one strategist (apparently without irony) as “armed social work.”⁷² Indeed, many civilian agencies not ordinarily associated with security became hitched to the growing counterterrorism apparatus.⁷³ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), in addition to supplying foreign aid around the world, played a quasi-security role by supplying counterterrorism training and equipment in countries like Kenya.⁷⁴ The Department of the Treasury targeted terrorist fundraising and financial transactions, gathered intelligence, and enforced sanctions.⁷⁵ Even the Food and Drug Administration claimed a counterterrorism role.⁷⁶

The war with no name

The public’s weariness over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the broader, apparently never-ending global war on terror, played no small part in the election of Barack Obama in 2008.⁷⁷ President Obama vowed to chart a new course in the Middle

⁷¹ The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, September 2006.

⁷² David Kilcullen, “Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency,” *IO Sphere*, Summer 2006, http://www.au.af.mil/info-ops/iosphere/iosphere_summer06_kilcullen.pdf accessed April 22, 2017.

⁷³ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice provided a policy framework for the intentional blurring of once sharply delineated organizational responsibilities when she declared in January 2006, that it was no longer possible “to draw neat, clear lines between our security interests, our development efforts and our democratic ideals.” Department of State, “Transformational Diplomacy,” January 18, 2006, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/59306.htm>, accessed April 18, 2017.

⁷⁴ Graham Ellison and Nathan W. Pino, *Globalization, Police Reform and Development: Doing it the Western Way?* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 51.

⁷⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Terrorism and Illicit Finance,” April 20, 2015, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illicit-finance/Pages/default.aspx>, accessed May 15, 2017.

⁷⁶ United States Food and Drug Administration, “Counterterrorism Activities,” July 24, 2003, <https://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Testimony/ucm115065.htm>, accessed May 20, 2017.

⁷⁷ Journalistic and personal accounts of counterterrorism during the Obama administration include Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011); Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014); Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, *Counterstrike: The Untold Story of America’s Secret Campaign Against Al-Qaeda* (New York: Times Books, 2011); and Peter L. Bergen, *Manhunt: Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2012).

East, tame American interventionist impulses, shutter the Guantanamo Bay center, and bring the Global War on Terror to an end. Two days after assuming office, Obama issued an executive order that formally prohibited the harsh interrogation practices his predecessor had authorized.⁷⁸ On May 2, 2011, Osama Bin Laden was killed in Pakistan—at the very least, a symbolic victory in the campaign against what the administration was now calling “violent extremism.”⁷⁹

In a speech on May 23, 2013, Obama declared that the Global War on Terror was effectively over. Rather than waging a war without fixed boundaries, against an apparently limitless array of what the previous president had referred to as “evil-doers,”⁸⁰ the United States would mount persistent, “targeted efforts to *dismantle* [italics added for emphasis] specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America.”⁸¹ Al-Qaeda, rather than all groups with “global reach,” would be the central target of U.S. counterterrorism efforts.⁸² Intelligence-sharing, law enforcement cooperation, and prosecutions would be at the center of this effort. But the campaign would not be limited to these tools. In those remote regions where terrorists were beyond the reach of the state—as in Somalia, Yemen, or Pakistan—the United States would take “lethal, targeted action against Al-Qaeda and its associated forces, including with remotely piloted aircraft commonly referred to as drones.”⁸³

⁷⁸ Executive Order 13491 of January 22, 2009, Ensuring Lawful Interrogations. The American Presidency Project, undated, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=85669>, accessed May 12, 2017.

⁷⁹ Nicholas Schmidle, “Getting Bin Laden,” *The New Yorker*, August 8, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/08/08/getting-bin-laden>, accessed May 25, 2017.

⁸⁰ The White House, “Remarks by the President Upon Arrival,” September 16, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>, accessed May 9, 2017.

⁸¹ The White House, “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University,” May 23, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>, accessed March 21, 2017.

⁸² This held until the spring of 2013, when the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, an Al-Qaeda offshoot, emerged and rapidly began receiving much of the administration’s counterterrorism attention. For more on ISIS, see William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: Picador, 2016); and Bruce Hoffman, “The Coming ISIS-Al-Qaeda Merger,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-29/coming-isis-al-qaeda-merger>, accessed April 24, 2017.

⁸³ The White House, “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University,” May 23, 2013.

For many observers, the counterterrorism approach the president outlined in May 2013 appeared to represent a sharp break with the previous administration, and a return to some measure of stability and moderation after the all-out global war on terrorism waged under President Bush. But in many respects, continuity rather than change characterized the Obama strategy. Preventing a catastrophic attack on the U.S. homeland remained the paramount objective.⁸⁴ Like Bush before him, Obama had inherited a common set of tools, policies, and activities, to be “dialed up” or “dialed down” as the president and his lieutenants deemed appropriate.

Take the case of drone strikes, a signature feature of the Obama administration’s campaign against Al-Qaeda. Obama employed them much more aggressively—an estimated 506 strikes between 2009 and 2016, as opposed to a total of 50 under his predecessor.⁸⁵ Obama did represent a change—he publicly acknowledged what had been a “covert” activity under Bush. But such “targeted killings” were a well-established counterterrorism tool by the time Obama reached office. Similarly, while Obama’s predecessors relied on U.S. special operations forces (SOF) to counter terrorism (e.g., it was U.S. Special Forces, along with Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) paramilitary teams, that constituted the initial invasion force of Afghanistan in the months following 9/11), Obama significantly increased the role and centrality of U.S. SOF in countering terrorism around the globe. The President’s increasing reliance on SOF can be seen in a number of metrics, most notably in the end strength and budget of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), which increased 53 percent and 370 percent between 2001 and 2016, respectively.⁸⁶

Also like his predecessor, Obama sought to build the capacity of friendly regimes to combat non-state threats—a U.S. policy instrument used since the late 1940s, albeit not always for the explicit purpose of counterterrorism.⁸⁷ Like Bush, Obama

⁸⁴ See for example The White House, *National Security Strategy*, February 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf, accessed May 11, 2017.

⁸⁵ Micah Zenko, “Obama’s Embrace of Drone Strikes Will Be a Lasting Legacy,” *The New York Times*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/01/12/reflecting-on-obamas-presidency/obamas-embrace-of-drone-strikes-will-be-a-lasting-legacy>, accessed March 13, 2017.

⁸⁶ U.S. SOCOM, *2016 Fact Book*, available at: http://www.socom.mil/News/Documents/2016%20Fact%20Book_Web.pdf, accessed March 16, 2016; and, Andrew Feickert, *U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report RS21048, November 19, 2015.

⁸⁷ Nina M. Serafino, *Security Assistance and Cooperation: Shared Responsibility of the Departments of State and Defense*, Congressional Research Service, May 26, 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44444.pdf>, accessed May 20, 2017; William Rosenau, *US Internal Security Assistance and South Vietnam: Insurgency Subversion, and Public Order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); and Department of State, *Office of Antiterrorism*

maintained sanctions regimes against state sponsors of terrorism, shared intelligence with friends and allies, and used foreign assistance funds to address underlying causes of terrorism. Finally, like his predecessor, Obama sought to counter the ideational elements that powered violent jihadism. The administration, both overtly and covertly, produced “counter-messaging” aimed at thwarting Al-Qaeda propaganda, and, as under Bush, the State Department, the Pentagon, and other agencies searched for what proved to be an elusive “counter-narrative” capable of undermining the jihadist appeal.⁸⁸ The struggle against Al-Qaeda went on as before—with different degrees and points of emphasis, to be sure, but not of a dramatically different character. Bush’s Global War on Terror might be over, but what some observers called “the war with no name” simmers on.⁸⁹

At the time of the writing of this report, U.S. counterterrorism under President Donald Trump has a decidedly military-centric character.⁹⁰ The administration has to date continued Obama’s heavy emphasis on the use of SOF, and it has sought to remove some of the constraints that Obama placed on those forces by delegating authorities previously held by the White House to the Secretary of Defense and by declaring additional countries as “areas of active hostilities.”⁹¹ Strikes on al-Shebab militants in Somalia on June 11, 2017, are believed to have been the first conducted under the Trump Administration’s “relaxed targeting rules for counterterrorism operations” in that country.⁹² Government officials also announced in May 2017

Assistance, 2012 Fiscal Year in Review, undated, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/215593.pdf>, accessed May 11, 2017.

⁸⁸ Department of State, “The Role of Public Diplomacy in Countering Violent Extremism,” March 27, 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/remarks/2013/206708.htm>, accessed May 30, 2017; and Hunter Pribyl-Huguelet, “American Failures in Crafting Counter-Narratives to Islamic Terrorism,” *Chicago Policy Review*, April 10, 2017, <http://chicagopolicyreview.org/2017/04/10/american-failures-in-crafting-counter-narratives-to-islamic-terrorism/>, accessed May 25, 2017.

⁸⁹ Michael Hirsh and James Oliphant, “Will Obama End the War on Terror?” *Defense One*, February 28, 2014, <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2014/02/will-obama-end-war-terror/79618/>, accessed May 19, 2017, accessed April 17, 2017.

⁹⁰ Stephen Tankel, “Trump’s Plan to Defeat Terrorism is Self-Defeating,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 6, 2017.

⁹¹ These restrictions are contained in a Presidential Policy Guidance (PPG) document, “Procedures for Approving Direct Action Against Terrorist Targets Located Outside the United States and Areas of Active Hostilities,” May 22, 2013, https://www.justice.gov/oip/foia-library/procedures_for_approving_direct_action_against_terrorist_targets/download, accessed June 11, 2017.

⁹² Charlie Savage, Helene Cooper, Eric Schmidt, “U.S. Strikes Shabab, Likely a First Since Trump Relaxed Rules for Somalis,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2017.

that the administration is “taking a fresh look at the entire U.S. National security strategy, to include the counter-terrorism mission – which is especially important since no such strategy has been produced publicly since 2011.”⁹³

It is within this strategic background that our assessment dives into the effectiveness of the United States’ current and past activities and programs to successfully achieve the consistently stated goal across multiple administrations to “defeat” Al-Qaeda. As noted earlier, we will focus our discussion here on DOD activities as the centerpiece of U.S. counterterrorism efforts since 2001.

Assessment of U.S. efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda

Since 2001, the DOD has essentially been the lead agency in the U.S. government’s efforts to defeat Al-Qaeda. We acknowledge that many other U.S. government agencies contribute to this effort, but as successive strategic, operational, and even tactical documentation reveals, Al-Qaeda has historically been framed as a national security issue for the United States that requires a military response, with other entities playing mostly supporting roles. This assessment focuses on the tools that the DOD has applied against Al-Qaeda to understand which have been effective and which have not, and under what circumstances. In looking across the DOD’s actions against Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates, we identified activities and programs that fall into eight categories, which we call “approaches.” For each approach, we also identified the rationale behind that approach—why the United States uses it and what outcomes the U.S. hopes to achieve by its use. These approaches are:

- **Attack the network:** The U.S. attacks and removes the Al-Qaeda network’s key nodes (e.g., high-value individuals) in order to disrupt the network’s ability to operate and to degrade its capabilities. Attacking the network includes direct action (e.g., kinetic missions such as raids and strikes from manned or unmanned aircraft); isolating the network (e.g., interrupting foreign fighter flows and disrupting terrorist financing); and capture/detention/interrogation operations to remove fighters from the battlefield and generate intelligence for future operations.
- **Security cooperation / build partner capacity:** The United States provides partner nation forces with training and equipment in order to increase their capability and capacity to conduct effective counterterrorism operations

⁹³ Jonathan Landay and Warren Strobel, “Exclusive: Trump counterterrorism strategy urges allies to do more,” Reuters, May 7, 2017.

against Al-Qaeda (These are also called “train and equip” programs, or, when the Department of State is in the lead, “security assistance”).

- **Regime change and stabilization operations:** The United States conducts major combat operations in order to remove regimes that support terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, to deny space for the group to operate, and to provide a platform for direct action, security cooperation, and stabilization activities.
- **Advise, assist, and accompany:** The United States supports partner nation security forces with operational advice and assistance in order to improve the capability and capacity of those forces to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda. In some cases, U.S. forces also accompany partner nations’ security forces in order to bolster their will and capability to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda.
- **“Third party” partners:** The United States partners with or supports third-party entities who conduct counterterrorism operations. Working with these partners amplifies U.S. unilateral actions, generates additional access or information, and reduces resource requirements for the United States. Examples include working with an ally (e.g., France against AQIM), international organizations (e.g., the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) against al-Shebab), or local forces (e.g., Sunni tribal elements as part of the Al Anbar Awakening movement).
- **Messaging / counter-messaging:** The United States provides, promotes, and supports messaging that conveys its values, interests, intentions, and justifications in order to generate support for U.S. counterterrorism activities. The United States also provides, promotes, and supports messaging that counters Al-Qaeda’s ideology, intentions, and justifications in order to degrade support for Al-Qaeda’s vision and operations.
- **Intelligence and information sharing:** The United States promotes sharing of intelligence and information among U.S. government agencies and with allies and partner countries, in order to accelerate, improve, and better coordinate counterterrorism operations.
- **Building networks and partnerships:** The United States engages with and synchronizes a wide array of partner organizations and countries as part of a coordinated, cooperative, or even coalition approach to counterterrorism in order to enable the other elements of the U.S. approach (e.g., by increasing resources, access, and reach). Two prominent activities are military diplomacy and civil affairs operations, and the Global SOF Network (a persistent, distributed SOF posture in order to improve strategic reach and increase our ability to rapidly respond to or interdict threats posed by Al-Qaeda).

In the remainder of this section, we describe each approach, provide examples of how it has been applied, and present a qualitative assessment of when and how it has been effective or ineffective. Given time and resource constraints—and the 16-year timeframe covered by this study—we were unable to assess each of these approaches to the level of depth that might be expected of a formal programmatic evaluation. Rather, we relied on a variety of mostly qualitative data sources, including interviews with over 40 subject matter experts and current and former high-ranking U.S. government officials, to inform our assessment.

Approach 1: Attack the network

Description

Attacking the network includes a range of kinetic (i.e., potentially lethal), non-kinetic, and supporting activities against Al-Qaeda. Kinetic activities include direct action raids to kill or capture Al-Qaeda operatives and strikes (from manned or unmanned aircraft) to kill them.⁹⁴ Non-kinetic activities include those by law enforcement and financial agencies to disrupt international terrorist travel and money flows. Supporting activities for these efforts include generating intelligence (e.g., via interrogations or other collection methods), mapping the Al-Qaeda network, and analyzing those maps to identify key nodes to be targeted by kinetic or non-kinetic actions. These activities together constitute what has been described as the “F3EAD” process (i.e., find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, disseminate).⁹⁵

The rationale for this approach is that if the United States attacks and removes the Al-Qaeda network’s key individuals (e.g., leaders, financiers, planners, or facilitators), it will disrupt the network’s ability to conduct operations and degrade its capabilities (potentially to the point of defeat). The United States attacks the Al-Qaeda network both unilaterally and in conjunction with partner countries.

Application

The DOD has made attacking the network its primary counterterrorism focus since 2001, and this approach continues to be the centerpiece of U.S. counterterrorism actions today.

⁹⁴ Statement by General Raymond Thomas III to the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, May 2, 2017. See page 6. Accessed May 18, 2017, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS26/20170502/105926/HHRG-115-AS26-Wstate-ThomasR-20170502.PDF>.

⁹⁵ Charles Faint and Michael Harris, “F3EAD: Ops/Intel Fusion “Feeds” the SOF Targeting Process,” *Small Wars Journal*, January 31, 2012, accessed June 26, 2017, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/f3ead-opsintel-fusion-%E2%80%9Cfeeds%E2%80%9D-the-sof-targeting-process>.

Beginning with Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in 2001, U.S. forces sought to defeat Al-Qaeda through decapitation of its leadership, i.e., “cutting the head off the snake.”⁹⁶ Military operations sought to find and capture or kill Al-Qaeda leaders, including Osama Bin Laden and his immediate subordinates (the so-called “core Al-Qaeda”). Although Osama Bin Laden was not killed at Tora Bora in December 2001 when U.S. forces closed in on the Al-Qaeda leader and hundreds of his fighters, U.S. forces had significant success against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, killing hundreds of Al-Qaeda members during initial OEF operations.⁹⁷ However, the United States withdrew significant resources and attention from targeting core Al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2003 to focus on Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), thereby reducing pressure on this part of the Al-Qaeda network and allowing it to regenerate capacity. In 2008-2009, as the U.S. “surge” in Iraq concluded, and with the shift in priority of newly-elected President Obama back to Al-Qaeda core, the United States refocused its efforts and resources on targeting Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and especially in Pakistan (as evidenced by a significant increase in the number of drone strikes there).⁹⁸ These operations were successful at disrupting and degrading core Al-Qaeda, most notably via the killing of Osama Bin Laden himself on May 2, 2011.

In Iraq from 2004-2008, attacking the network became the hallmark of U.S. and partner efforts to defeat AQI. U.S. forces conducted persistent operations against AQI that included targeting and killing or capturing AQI leaders, planners, facilitators, and supporters, eventually resulting in the death or detention of thousands of AQI personnel. During that time, raids on the ground were a key feature of the approach: by August 2006, Task Force 714 (the key counterterrorism unit) was conducting some 300 raids a month—a dramatic increase from the 18 raids per month conducted in August 2004.⁹⁹ Task Force 714 used an intelligence-driven, decentralized, and highly networked approach to propel the F3EAD cycle.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Richard W. Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom October, 2001-March 2002*, CMH Pub 70-83-1; and The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>.

⁹⁷ Seth Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of Al Qaeda Since 9/11* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), p. 55.

⁹⁸ According to drone strike data from a number of sources aggregated by the Council on Foreign Relations, more drone strikes were carried out in Pakistan in 2009 than during the entire 2004-2008 period. See: Micah Zenko, *Obama’s Final Drone Strike Data*, Council on Foreign Relations, January 20, 2017, accessed June 26, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/blog-post/obamas-final-drone-strike-data>,

⁹⁹ Richard Shultz, *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organization A Case Study of Task Force 714 in Iraq*, Joint Special Operations University, JSOU Report 16-6, The JSOU Press

In the years since the conclusion of OIF, U.S. military efforts to attack the Al-Qaeda network have expanded into numerous other countries beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, as the Al-Qaeda organization has spread. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States had a significant footprint on the ground, whereas U.S. operations elsewhere have emphasized a “light footprint” approach with attacks against Al-Qaeda affiliates in Yemen, Pakistan, Syria, Somalia, and Libya being conducted via manned or unmanned aircraft or raids from offshore platforms. The U.S. posture for these activities has been to operate out of land-based “hubs” located in key locations around the world or via U.S. Navy platforms, but to not be permanently based in these countries. Figure 6 shows where the United States has conducted lethal strikes against Al-Qaeda since 2001.¹⁰¹

In addition to the expansion of U.S. lethal strikes against Al-Qaeda, another trend in the U.S. application of the attack-the-network approach has been to increasingly favor “kill” missions over “capture” ones. During the Bush administration, Al-Qaeda operatives were often captured, kept alive, and then transferred to detention camps in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Guantanamo Bay for interrogation. Keeping these detention centers open posed numerous legal challenges for the U.S. government, and in some cases detention facilities became centers for radicalization and jihadi recruiting and training.¹⁰² Camp Bucca in Iraq, for example, once housed well-known Al-Qaeda operatives such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who later became the leader of ISIS.¹⁰³

MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, 2016. https://www.sofx.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/JSOU16-6_Shultz_TF714_final1.pdf, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Shultz, *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organization A Case Study of Task Force 714 in Iraq*, Joint Special Operations University, JSOU Report 16-6.

¹⁰¹ The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Database on U.S. drone strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia, Accessed June 15, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-01/drone-wars-the-full-data>.

¹⁰² Benjamin Wittes et al., “The Risks of Releasing Detainees,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 2009.

¹⁰³ Terrance McCoy, “How the Islamic State evolved in an American Prison,” *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2014.

Figure 6. Countries with U.S. strikes against Al-Qaeda in 2001 (top), 2008 (middle), and 2016 (bottom)



Source: The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, database on U.S. drone strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia, Accessed June 15, 2017.

Note: Countries with U.S. strikes against AQ (blue), ISIS (red), or both (purple).

Assessment

The U.S. attack-the-network approach has been effective in some ways and in some specific cases against Al-Qaeda, but it has not defeated the organization.

We assess that the attack-the-network approach has been effective in the following ways:

- In the cases where it has been persistently applied, it has put pressure on Al-Qaeda and has effectively disrupted the organization by forcing its key

members to “keep their heads down.” These actions have in some cases pushed the organization into a more reactive mode, making it harder for Al-Qaeda groups to take the initiative to plan and execute attacks, particularly outside their immediate operating environment (e.g., against the U.S. homeland). Examples of this include efforts against core Al-Qaeda post-2008 and those against AQI in the 2004-2008 timeframe.

- If used early against a group that has not yet gained significant momentum, the attack-the-network approach can blunt progress being made by the group to organize, plan, and conduct operations. For example, U.S. airstrikes against the Khorasan Group (part of AQS) in 2015 and against AQAP in 2017 effectively countered a potentially imminent threat to the United States and its interests.¹⁰⁴
- In cases where this approach has been applied with a tempo that outpaced the Al-Qaeda network’s ability to respond and reconstitute itself, it has strongly contributed to the dismantling of Al-Qaeda groups. The most notable of these examples is that of AQI, where the United States was ultimately able to employ an attack-the-network approach at such a pace that it dismantled that organization.

We assess that the attack-the-network approach has not been effective in the following ways:

- It has not, in and of itself, led to the defeat of Al-Qaeda core or any of its affiliates. The closest this approach came to defeating any part of Al-Qaeda was when it was applied against AQI in the 2007-2008 timeframe. But because this approach does not address any of the underlying conditions that give rise to an Al-Qaeda presence (e.g., vulnerabilities in the local or regional security environment), it is not independently capable of consolidating the gains that may accrue from its use.
- It has often resulted in civilian casualties.¹⁰⁵ While the DOD’s application of this approach has been consistently refined over time, there remains

¹⁰⁴ Carla H. Humud, *Al-Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, Congressional Research Service, August 11, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Numerous organizations have investigated civilian casualties resulting from drone strikes, though exact numbers are difficult to verify. See: The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, “Database on U.S. drone strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia,” <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-01/drone-wars-the-full-data>; *Counting Drone Strike Deaths*, Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic, October 2012, <http://www.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/human-rights-institute/files/COLUMBIACountingDronesFinal.pdf>; and “Civilian Casualties & Collateral

uncertainty associated with its application (e.g., since Al-Qaeda members do not wear uniforms or readily identify themselves, and often hide among civilian populations). This uncertainty brings with it the risk of collateral damage, to include civilian casualties. The Obama administration strove to minimize these via the imposition of “near certainty” standards for the use of lethal force, but even these stringent requirements could not completely remove this risk.¹⁰⁶

- It has placed a heavy—and increasing—burden on SOF and the intelligence community, as the application of this approach has expanded in time and space. Numerous experts expressed their concerns as to whether this approach is sustainable over the long term, and in his most recent congressional testimony, the commander of SOCOM stated that the current pace of SOF deployments is unsustainable.¹⁰⁷
- The emphasis on “kill” missions over “capture” missions evident in recent years has resulted in missed opportunities to gather and exploit intelligence, and thereby accelerate the F3EAD cycle. As one expert told us, “Capture operations are underutilized. Mostly we kill [members of Al-Qaeda], but the few cases where we have captured someone have been great. We get tons of information from them.” Another expert suggested that the United States in recent years has effectively truncated the F3EAD cycle after the “finish” step.

Approach 2: Security Cooperation/BPC

Description

“Security cooperation/building partner capacity” refers to a range of security assistance programs and activities that seek to build indigenous capacity and capability within partner countries’ military and security forces to counter Al-Qaeda. Specific activities within this approach that are focused on countering terrorism include training and equipping foreign security forces through a variety of programs. Some of these are led by the State Department as security assistance programs (under Title 22 of the U.S. Code); these include foreign military financing (FMF) and

Damage,” Lawfare Blog, undated, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/civilian-casualties-collateral-damage>.

¹⁰⁶ Presidential Policy Guidance, “Procedures for Approving Direct Action Against Terrorist Targets Located Outside The United States and Areas of Active Hostilities,” May 23, 2013, accessed June 26, 2017, https://www.justice.gov/oip/foia-library/procedures_for_approving_direct_action_against_terrorist_targets/download, page 1.

¹⁰⁷ “U.S. Special Operations Command,” Senate Armed Service Committee Hearing, May 4, 2017, verbal exchange between General Raymond Thomas III and Senator John McCain (R-AZ).

foreign military sales (FMS). Others are led by DOD and are conducted as security cooperation programs (under Title 10 of the U.S. Code). These include the so-called 1206 program,¹⁰⁸ the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund (CTPF),¹⁰⁹ the Support to Foreign Forces program (section 1208 of the 2005 NDAA),¹¹⁰ and the Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF).¹¹¹

The rationale behind this approach is that by building partner capacity within partner nation security forces, those forces will become more effective at conducting activities to counter Al-Qaeda since they will be better trained, have better skills, and have more effective equipment/weapons. As those forces increase in ability, the United States should be able to transition security responsibility for various geographic areas to those forces, thereby allowing the U.S. forces to withdraw from that area.

Application

While the term “building partner capacity” formally came into use in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), this approach has been centrally featured in DOD counterterrorism activities since 2001 (though as a tool of U.S. foreign policy, it

¹⁰⁸ Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006 authorizes the President to “direct the Secretary of defense to conduct or support a program to build the capacity of a foreign country’s national military forces...” See “National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Year 2006,” public law 109-163, January 6, 2006.

¹⁰⁹ The CTPF was originally proposed by President Obama during a speech at the United States Military Academy at West Point on May 28, 2014. The fund is meant to provide “the ability to enable partner nations to deter and defeat terrorist threats.” See “Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund,” Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year 2017, February 2016, accessed June 26, 2017, http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2017/FY2017_CTPF_J-Book.pdf. The Department of State also has CTPF funding which it uses to CTPF funding which uses to improve the capacities of civilian-led entities such as police and border security forces in key countries, See “U.S. State Department Programs and Initiatives” Department of State Website, accessed August 2, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/programs/index.htm#CTPF>.

¹¹⁰ Section 1208 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005 authorizes the Secretary of Defense to expend resources to “provide support to foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals engaged in supporting or facilitating ongoing military operations by United States special operations forces to combat terrorism.” See “National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Year 2005,” public law 108-375, October 28, 2004.

¹¹¹ Kathleen J. McInnis, Nathan Lucas, *What is Building Partner Capacity? Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, December 18, 2015.

has been in use for much longer). Over the past 16 years, the U.S. emphasis on this approach has continued to grow.¹¹²

The DOD has conducted security cooperation/BPC activities with all of the countries where there is (or has been) an Al-Qaeda affiliate and with many of these countries' neighbors in order to bolster their capability to address the threat from Al-Qaeda. Most notably, during the war in Iraq, BPC was a central feature of U.S. plans to eventually withdraw, and the United States spent considerable time and resources building the Iraqi Army, the Iraqi Police Force, and the specialized Counter Terrorism Service (CTS). In Afghanistan, the United States has spent tens of billions of dollars building the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF, which includes army, police, border, and special operations forces), and BPC remains a central feature of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. Today, the DOD uses the CTPF to conduct BPC activities worldwide, to the tune of 1 billion dollars in FY17.¹¹³

Assessment

We assess that the U.S. use of security cooperation/BPC has been effective against Al-Qaeda in some specific cases and under certain conditions:

- In those cases where the DOD has engaged in long-term, patient, and persistent BPC activities, this approach has yielded capable partner forces that have then conducted effective operations against Al-Qaeda (though typically with some degree of continued U.S. assistance). The most often-cited examples are the Iraqi CTS and the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSE, which includes the Afghan Commandos), though the United States has also developed highly capable SOF units in both Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).¹¹⁴ The patient application of this approach allows for sustained development, relationship building, values transfer, and leadership growth and development, all of which are central to developing an effective partner force.
- In those cases where the provision of equipment has been tailored and calibrated to the true needs and sustainment capabilities of the host nation forces, this approach has led to effective improvement of the operational

¹¹² McInnis and Lucas. *What is Building Partner Capacity? Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service.

¹¹³ "Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund," Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year 2017, February 2016, accessed June 27, 2017, http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2017/FY2017_CTPF_J-Book.pdf.

¹¹⁴ David Witty. *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, The Brookings Institute, Center for Middle East Policy, March 16, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-iraqi-counter-terrorism-service/>.

capabilities of partner forces (e.g., some of the programs executed under the 1206/1208/1209 authorities and the CTPF have shown success¹¹⁵).

- Those cases in which the individuals being trained have been removed from the midst of a combat environment have often proved to be more effective. Examples cited during our interviews included training of Afghan pilots conducted in the United States; also, the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program was routinely cited as an effective means of developing future leaders.

Its positive aspects notwithstanding, we assess that this approach has also proved ineffective in a number of instances:

- In cases where the U.S. has attempted to use this approach in the midst of conflict, it has typically returned results that fail to meet expectations.
- In cases where the United States has failed to tailor the equipment provided to the partner force in terms of the latter's ability to employ, maintain, or sustain the equipment, or when the U.S. has failed to provide equipment that is adequately suited for the geography or climate of the local environment, this approach has been ineffective. Again, the most prominent case of this is Afghanistan, where the United States has in numerous instances provided the ANDSF with equipment that it cannot properly employ, maintain, or sustain, only to see that equipment going unused or misused.¹¹⁶
- In some cases where the United States has failed to maintain oversight of the equipment provided to the partner force, some or all of the equipment provided has eventually fallen into the hands of terrorist groups. A notable example is the amount of equipment left behind by the Iraqi Army and eventually captured by ISIS during the latter's blitzkrieg into Iraq in 2014 (this included up-armored vehicles and sizeable stores of weapons and

¹¹⁵ Eric Thompson and Patricio Asfura-Heim, *Assessments of the Impact of 1206-Funded Projects in Selected Countries: Lebanon, Pakistan, Yemen, São Tome and Príncipe*, CNA CRM D0017988.A4/1REV, July 2008.

¹¹⁶ Jonathan Schroden et al, *Independent Assessment of the Afghan National Security Forces*, CNA. DRM-2014-U-006815-Final. January 2014. Accessed July 18, 2017, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/DRM-2014-U-006815-Final.pdf; also, a number of products generated by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) have also touched on this issue. See, for example, John F. Sopko, Letter from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Subject: Afghan Air Force C-130 Aircraft to U.S. Secretary of Defense and senior military leaders, July 20, 2014.

ammunition).¹¹⁷ Another example was the failed initial train-and-equip program for Syrian rebels in the spring of 2015. On multiple occasions, trainees were forced to surrender their U.S.-supplied equipment and weapons to the Nusra Front to secure safe passage.¹¹⁸

- In instances where the U.S. has failed, or was unable, to take a persistent, patient approach to BPC—resulting in ad hoc or episodic activities—the results have been less successful or ineffective. An example of this is Pakistan, where the U.S. was involved for several years in efforts to train the Pakistani Frontier Corps but had to stop after the souring of U.S.-Pakistani relations in 2012.¹¹⁹ Another example is Mali; there, U.S. train-and-equip programs were too episodic and brief to bring about lasting changes in Malian units. Part of this resulted from a coup in Mali in 2012 which, for legal reasons, resulted in a suspension of U.S. assistance.¹²⁰
- In cases where the United States has cycled myriad units through a country as trainers—as opposed to using a set rotation of units—the results of BPC efforts have been less effective. For example, the Afghan Commandos have been consistently trained by a specific U.S. SOF unit, which has allowed for better relationship building between advisors and the partner units. Afghan Army units, on the other hand, have not had a consistent set of partner advisor units, which has been a contributing factor to their slower development.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Memlik Pasha, “ISIS Stole Some Shiny New Weapons From the Iraqi Army,” Vice News, July 10, 2014, accessed June 27, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qbew4m/isis-stole-some-shiny-new-weapons-from-the-iraqi-army-989; and “Taking Stock: The Arming of Islamic State,” *Amnesty International*. Report MDE 14/2812/2015, December 2015, accessed June 27, 2017, file:///C:/Users/powella/Downloads/MDE1428122015ENGLISH.PDF.

¹¹⁸ Paul McLeary, “The Pentagon Wasted \$500 Million Training Syrian Rebels. It’s About to Try Again,” *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2016, accessed June 27, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/18/pentagon-wasted-500-million-syrian-rebels/>.

¹¹⁹ William Rosenau, “*Irksome and Unpopular Duties*”: *Pakistan’s Frontier Corps, Local Security Forces, and Counterinsurgency*, CNA DOP-2012-U-0000299-Final, May 2012.

¹²⁰ Simon J. Powelson, *Enduring engagement yes, episodic engagement no: lessons for SOF from Mali*, Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive, 2013-12, http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/38996/13Dec_Powelson_Simon.pdf?sequence=1.

¹²¹ Jonathan Schroden, et al. *Independent Assessment of the Afghan National Security Forces*, CNA DRM-2014-U-006815-Final, January 2014; Jonathan Schroden et al., *Independent Assessment of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, CNA DRM-2015-U-011557-Final, November 2015; Jonathan Schroden, Megan Katt, and Alexander Powell, *Capabilities and Costs of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, CNA DRM-2016-U-014385-Final, December 2016.

Approach 3: Regime change and stabilization operations

Description

In this approach, the United States forcibly removed and replaced governing regimes in other countries. In some cases, the U.S. also occupied those countries and conducted counterterrorism and stabilization operations after the overthrow of the regime. The rationale behind this approach was to remove regimes that the U.S. believed were supporting Al-Qaeda (or other terrorist groups and activities) and to replace them with regimes that would not do so, in order to deny Al-Qaeda (and other terrorist groups) geographic space and other support.

Application

This approach was used most clearly in the response to the 9/11 attacks in Afghanistan, wherein the United States invaded that country (albeit with a relatively small force) and overthrew the Taliban regime, which had been providing Al-Qaeda with safe havens for a number of years. The U.S. subsequently engaged in a long campaign of counterterrorism and stabilization operations, which continue (albeit at reduced scale) today. The U.S. maintains a robust counterterrorism presence in Afghanistan despite the 2014 drawdown in troop numbers, with troops targeting senior Al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan primarily using manned and unmanned aircraft.¹²²

This approach was also used in Iraq during OIF. While the linkage of that effort to Al-Qaeda was limited at first, it grew as AQI ignited, and then took advantage of, sectarian violence in that country—notably, a Sunni-Shi'i civil war and a substantial Sunni insurgency that empowered AQI. The U.S. subsequently engaged in sustained counterterrorism and stabilization operations until 2011, when it withdrew the bulk of its forces from Iraq.¹²³

Assessment

Today, the central governments in both Iraq and Afghanistan face challenges to their stability, including deep issues regarding their legitimacy to govern. They struggle to effectively govern their population, maintain control of their territory, and render

¹²² Carla E. Humud, *Al-Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, CRS Report R43756, August 11, 2016.

¹²³ This approach was also used in Libya, though that effort was not tied directly to Al-Qaeda. The United States has conducted counterterrorism operations in Libya in the wake of Gadhafi's overthrow (against both Al-Qaeda and ISIS), but it has thus far not conducted stabilization operations in that country.

basic goods and services (including basic security) to their populations. Governance in these countries remains weak at best, and corrupt and ineffective at worst. Internal conflicts in the form of insurgencies that involve multiple parties exist in both countries, and Al-Qaeda or its offshoots retain a presence in both.

The extended U.S. military presence in both countries has provided significant fodder to the narratives of Al-Qaeda and its spinoffs that the United States is an occupying force that seeks to conquer Muslim lands. In the cases where U.S. troops were forward deployed in large numbers, this approach also provided accessible targets for members of Al-Qaeda who wanted to kill Americans (e.g., there are reports that during the insurgency in Iraq, jihadi fighters from neighboring countries such as Syria and Kuwait would cross the border into Iraq just to target Americans).¹²⁴

Looking back on these examples, we assess that this approach was effective in the following ways:

- In the Afghanistan example, the U.S. invasion removed a primary safe haven for Al-Qaeda, and initial U.S. operations there dealt the organization a significant blow in terms of attrition of fighters and reduction in the group's freedom of action.
- In the Iraq example, the United States did eventually discern how to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against AQI, which were significantly enabled by a number of factors related to the large-scale presence of U.S. forces. We identified these factors as:
 - Unfettered freedom of action for U.S. SOF
 - Authorities for action delegated to tactical levels
 - Significant levels of resources and cooperation (in terms of personnel, materiel, funding, and non-military U.S. government support—for example, intense and novel support to SOF from the intelligence community and other elements of the U.S. government)
 - A platform for community engagement and provision of security or military support to key leaders of “awakening” movements
 - A tolerance for detaining (at least temporarily) large numbers of individuals suspected of having ties to AQI

¹²⁴ Bill Roggio, “Iraq’s Western Borders, North to South,” *The Long War Journal*, February 12, 2006.

We assess that this approach, as applied by the United States since 2001, has been ineffective in the following ways:

- Many of the experts we interviewed cited the invasion of Iraq as the single worst action the United States has taken with respect to the war against Al-Qaeda to date. As justification for this statement, they cited the fact that Al-Qaeda had only a minimal presence in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion but was able to capitalize on the resultant insecurity in that country to significantly grow and expand in both size and reach. These experts also cited the Iraq invasion as a significant distraction from the focus on core Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which reduced pressure on that part of the organization and allowed it to reconstitute.
- In the Iraq example, while the United States was eventually able to decimate AQI, the experts with whom we spoke stated that the withdrawal of U.S. forces and premature termination of U.S. stabilization operations there in 2011 removed pressure on the remnants of AQI and on the government of Iraq to address grievances in the Sunni communities in which AQI had found support. Both of these issues eventually enabled the resurgence of terrorism in Iraq, now in the form of ISIS (whose lineage is direct from AQI).
- In both the Iraq and Afghanistan examples, a large-scale U.S. presence in the country served as a rallying cry for foreign jihadists to travel to fight U.S. forces in those countries. And in both cases, the United States was unable to secure the borders of those countries to prevent the influx or outflow of such fighters (e.g., the U.S. failed to prevent the escape of Al-Qaeda leaders, most notably Osama Bin Laden, into Pakistan during the battle at Tora Bora, and large numbers of foreign fighters were able to travel to Iraq to join AQI).¹²⁵
- The Iraq and Afghanistan cases have also been extremely costly to the United States, in terms of both blood and treasure. To date, the U.S. has expended

¹²⁵ Bill Roggio, "Iraq's Western Borders, North to South," *The Long War Journal*, February 12, 2006.

over a trillion dollars on these efforts¹²⁶ and has lost thousands of personnel to the wars in these countries.¹²⁷

Approach 4: Advise, assist, and accompany

Description

In this approach, “advise and assist” refers to U.S. support to partner nation security forces in the form of trainers and advisors who provide operational advice and assistance to improve the capability of those forces to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda. In some cases, U.S. advisors also “accompany” partner nation security forces during the conduct of actual operations.

The rationale behind the advise-and-assist approach is that it will improve the capability of partner forces to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda to the point where those forces eventually become independently capable of doing so and no longer need U.S. support. The rationale for U.S. forces to accompany partner nations’ security forces is that the presence of such advisors bolsters the will of partner forces to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda.

Application

Since September 2001, U.S. SOF—typically via a small-team, light-footprint approach—have been conducting advise, assist, and, accompany missions with myriad partner nations as part of the global campaign against Al-Qaeda. Such countries include Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Pakistan, Indonesia, and the Philippines.¹²⁸ In addition to the application of this approach by U.S. SOF, U.S. conventional military forces have conducted significant advise, assist, and accompany activities, most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan.

¹²⁶ Neta C. Crawford, “US Budgetary Costs of Wars through 2016: \$4.79 Trillion and Counting: Summary of Costs of the US Wars in Iraq, Syria Afghanistan and Pakistan and Homeland Security,” *Costs of War*, Watson Institute, Brown University, September 2016. <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2016/Costs%20of%20War%20through%202016%20FINAL%20final%20v2.pdf>

¹²⁷ Catherine Lutz and Ken Macleish. “US & Allied Killed,” *Costs of War*, Watson Institute, Brown University, February 2015. <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/military/killed>.

¹²⁸ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “This is where American Special Operations forces are helping advise U.S. allies,” *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2016; interviews with U.S. government officials.

Assessment

We assess that the application of this approach has been effective in the following ways:

- As with the train-and-equip approach described above, those cases where the United States has employed persistent, patient, and prolonged advise-and-assist activities have proven to be most effective. The most commonly cited examples of this are the Iraqi CTS and Afghan Commandos, though several officials also cited U.S. efforts to develop a Somali partner force and U.S. efforts in the Philippines (i.e., via the Joint Special Operations Task Force – Philippines, or JSOTF-P) as being effective and having the characteristics of a patient, deliberate approach. For example, the U.S. played an essential supporting role in helping the Philippines’ armed forces counter the Abu Sayyaf Group from 2000 to 2014. With U.S. assistance, the Philippines’ armed forces were able to target ASG leaders, weaken the network, and reduce local population recruitment. Over the period of U.S. support, there was a reduction in ASG-initiated attacks, a decline in the number of ASG militants, and a measurable reduction in local support for ASG.¹²⁹
- In some of the successful applications of this approach, experts cited the use of professional advisors (e.g., Army Special Forces) and sustained sourcing of these advisors from the same U.S. units (e.g., the Army SF Groups) as being critical to the effectiveness of these efforts.
- Numerous experts noted that accompany missions are most effective when advisors are given authorities to be fully engaged with the partner force, at least up until the “last terrain feature.”¹³⁰

We assess that the application of this approach has been ineffective in the following ways:

- As a corollary to the bullet above, those applications of this approach in which the United States was unable to maintain a persistent application of this approach proved to be less effective or ineffective. Examples of this include U.S. efforts to advise and assist the Pakistani Frontier Corps or security forces

¹²⁹ Linda Robinson, Patrick B. Johnston, and Gillian S. Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, RAND Corporation, 2016.

¹³⁰ We encountered debate on this point, with some experts believing that such operations are most effective when U.S. advisors can accompany the partner force throughout the operation and others believing that these missions are most effective when the partner nation force is observed by the local population to be the ones executing the “actions on target.”

in Yemen. In the latter case, for instance, not only did the Yemeni government prove to be an unreliable partner for counterterrorism (by allegedly diverting U.S. counterterrorism funding to its conflict with the Houthi population group), the DOD was ultimately unable to track a large percentage of the equipment that it had given to the Yemeni security forces.¹³¹

- Numerous experts and prior studies have concluded that this approach is less effective (or may be ineffective) when it is conducted by untrained or ad hoc advisors, who often come from non-advisory-focused conventional military units or by military personnel who are not adequately trained or do not have the requisite skill sets to be effective advisors.¹³²

Approach 5: “Third-party” partners

Description

Over the years, the U.S. has worked with “third party” partners, which refer to a range of actors and entities that are not the host nation’s government. There are many countries and entities who are also actively countering Al-Qaeda that want to work with the U.S. in a variety of arrangements, including cooperating and coordinating on training efforts with the host nation forces; receiving U.S. training and equipment; and/or working together on the battlefield in combined operations.

The rationale behind this approach is that by working with a third party, efforts to counter Al-Qaeda will be enhanced via additive or complementary capabilities to those that can be provided by the United States. In addition, this approach can lessen the burden on U.S. forces, thereby allowing U.S. resources to be more broadly applied to countering Al-Qaeda or other adversaries.

Application

Current examples of the U.S. working with a third-party entity in an effort to counter Al-Qaeda include working with French forces in Mali to combat AQIM, leveraging the presence of NATO forces in Afghanistan to allow U.S. forces to focus on counterterrorism operations against core Al-Qaeda and AQIS, and partnered operations with the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), which has included

¹³¹ Craig Whitlock, “Pentagon loses track of \$500 million in weapons, equipment given to Yemen,” *The Washington Post*, 17 March, 2015.

¹³² See, for example: William Rosenau and Carter Malkasian, *Criteria for Measuring U.S. Advisor Effectiveness in Afghanistan*, CNA DWP-2012-U-000492-Final, March 2012 and William Rosenau et al., *United States Marine Corps Advisors: Past, Present, and Future*, CNA DRM-2013-U-005404-Final, August 2013.

Kenyan, Ethiopian, Ugandan, and other forces, in Somalia.¹³³ Past examples have included the U.S. working with non-state local forces, such as the Northern Alliance (an amalgamation of Afghan groups from the north of Afghanistan) to overthrow the Taliban regime, and Sunni tribal elements in Al Anbar province, Iraq, as part of the “Awakening” movement in that country.

Assessment

We assess that the application of this approach has been effective in the following ways:

- In the case of AQIM (e.g., in Mali), the United States provided limited but critical support to the French-led intervention (Operation Serval) in 2013 that successfully dislodged rebels and Al-Qaeda fighters from the north of that country. The U.S. has continued to support French-led efforts to counter Al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups in the Sahel. In this case, France has both significantly greater national interests, and better relationships, in this region given its history of involvement there. The U.S. provision of critical enabling capabilities to French operations has improved the sustainability of those operations at relatively low cost to the United States.¹³⁴
- In Afghanistan, the United States was able to leverage the presence of large numbers of NATO forces to free up some U.S. capabilities to combat Al-Qaeda directly. In addition, numerous NATO and other third-party countries contributed their own SOF, which were used to develop Afghan special police forces which are currently conducting effective high-risk arrest and terrorism response activities in Kabul and other populated areas of Afghanistan.¹³⁵
- From 2001 to 2003, the U.S. partnered with the Northern Alliance and tribal warlords to successfully push Al-Qaeda and the Taliban out of Afghanistan, providing partnered forces with close air support and advice on operational planning.¹³⁶ In Iraq, the U.S. successfully partnered with tens of thousands of Sunni tribal members in Al Anbar province and several other Sunni-majority

¹³³ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Missy Ryan, “US Special operations force extends Yemen mission against Al-Qaeda,” *The Washington Post*, June 17, 2016.

¹³⁴ Eric Schmitt. “U.S. Military Offers Support, but Not Troops, to Aid France in Africa,” *The New York Times*, 12 May 2017. Accessed 26 June 2017.

¹³⁵ Jonathan Schroden et al. *Independent Assessment of Afghan National Security Forces*, CNA, February 2014.

¹³⁶ Richard W. Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, CMH Pub 70-83-1, page 11.

provinces to deny space to AQI and to provide a “hold” force for U.S.-led “clearing” operations.

We assess that the application of this approach has been ineffective in the following ways:

- There have been instances of third-party partners pursuing their own interests above the mutual interests of the third-party and the United States. One contemporary example is in Yemen, where the U.S. has been supporting Saudi Arabia’s Operation Decisive Storm and working with UAE forces. While these operations at least ostensibly target AQAP forces in Yemen, at times they have given AQAP freer rein in that country.¹³⁷
- When the U.S. has relied on non-state armed groups as a partner, it has sometimes then failed to persuade the host nation government to effectively integrate these forces into state security structures or to effectively demobilize, disarm, and reintegrate them. The primary example of this was the failure of the Iraqi government to integrate the “Sons of Iraq” (Sunni tribal elements that participated in the Awakening movement) into the Iraqi Security Forces, as was initially promised.¹³⁸

Approach 6: Messaging/counter-messaging

Description

Attempts to counter Al-Qaeda’s ideology through messaging and counter-messaging have been a key part of the U.S. strategy to defeat Al-Qaeda since 2001 in all of the theaters in which the United States has fought the organization. The rationale behind this approach is that by providing, promoting, and supporting messaging that conveys U.S. values, interests, intentions, and justifications to populations in countries where Al-Qaeda operates or recruits, the U.S. can generate support for its counterterrorism activities against Al-Qaeda. Additionally, by providing, promoting, and supporting messaging that counters Al-Qaeda’s ideology, intentions, and justifications, the U.S. hopes to degrade support for Al-Qaeda’s vision, recruiting, and operations.

¹³⁷ “Yemen’s al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base,” International Crisis Group, February 2, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-al-qaeda-expanding-base>

¹³⁸ Patricio Asfura-Heim, *Risky Business: The Future of Civil Defense Forces and Counterterrorism in an Era of Persistent Conflict*, CNA CRM-2014-U-008881, October 2014.

Application

The DOD contributes to this approach largely through military information support operations (MISO).¹³⁹ MISO includes a wide range of activities, such as dropping leaflets, personal communications, printed media campaigns, and radio broadcasting. The U.S. also conducts what some have termed “web operations” (WebOps), which involve teams of military personnel engaged on social media and other internet platforms to directly counter Al-Qaeda narratives and messages. Representatives from the military also work with their civilian counterparts within the U.S. government overseas to craft and disseminate messages in the countries in which Al-Qaeda operates or recruits.

Assessment

We assess that the application of this approach has been effective in the following ways:

- Numerous experts cited instances when the United States has enabled local voices to be heard against Al-Qaeda’s ideology as being particularly effective. One common example cited was the use of so-called “Radio in a Box” devices in Afghanistan to provide a platform for local Afghan voices to speak out against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban (this was cited as particularly compelling when it involved former jihadists speaking about why they left the fight). Another example cited was the use of fixed and mobile loudspeakers to deliver addresses by moderate clerics and local government officials in various parts of Iraq.
- In the Philippines, U.S. information operations (IO) were conducted in conjunction with Philippine forces to increase popular support for the Philippine government and reduce safe-havens for ASG.¹⁴⁰

We assess that the application of this approach has been ineffective in the following ways:

- The vast majority of experts with whom we spoke cited this approach as being the one in which the United States has generally been the least effective overall. Some reasons given for this were that the United States:

¹³⁹ Most of the specifics about the DOD’s MISO activities are classified, limiting what can be addressed in this report. DOD cyber operations to deny use of the internet to Al-Qaeda also contribute to this approach, but for reasons of classification we do not address such operations in this report.

¹⁴⁰ Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*.

- Lacked an understanding of local audiences
- Over-engaged in “tit-for-tat” discussions about U.S. versus Al-Qaeda narratives on social media platforms
- Failed to devise and deliver a consistent, proactive, and positive U.S. narrative
- Did not put enough emphasis on the empowerment of local voices as opposed to Western ones
- Placed too much emphasis on U.S. counterterrorism operations (e.g., via press reports highlighting the killing of Al-Qaeda and other terrorist group members worldwide).

Finally, U.S. efforts to speak authoritatively about the “nature of Islam” or to directly counter Al-Qaeda’s ideology by identifying “good” and “bad” strains of Islam were also cited as being particularly ineffective.

Approach 7: Intelligence and information-sharing

Description

Since September 2001, the United States has increasingly emphasized the promotion of the sharing of intelligence and information among U.S. government agencies and with allies and partner countries to accelerate, improve, and better coordinate counterterrorism operations. The rationale behind this approach is that with more information and intelligence being shared across a wider network of government and non-government organizations, U.S. efforts to counter Al-Qaeda will be more effective.

Application

The most visible application of this approach has been in the creation of numerous combined joint interagency task forces (CJIATFs). These entities bring together members from all of the U.S. military services (“joint”), other U.S. government agencies (“interagency”), and other countries (“combined”) to focus on a particular part of the Al-Qaeda network or a particular aspect of Al-Qaeda activities (e.g., foreign fighters). Other applications of this approach include: deliberate shifts in some facets of the intelligence community to “write for release” (i.e., to downgrade the classification of their assessments and/or make them more widely sharable); the creation of new intelligence-sharing agreements, or the expansion of existing ones, with other countries; and the expansion of coalition network systems such as the

Battlefield Information Collection and Exploitation System (BICES)¹⁴¹ and the Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange System (CENTRIXS).¹⁴²

Assessment

We assess that the degree of attention and focus within the U.S. government on improving information sharing with other U.S. government agencies has, on the whole, been effective in improving the government’s ability to do this. Numerous current or former senior U.S. government officials that we interviewed for this study commented on the remarkable advances in intelligence and information sharing that has occurred in the years since 2001—some even described the progress in this approach as unprecedented in U.S. history. Those officials described the application of this approach as particularly effective in the following ways:

- The continued and expanded use of the CJIAF model was routinely cited as a particularly effective application of this approach.
- The emphasis in some parts of the intelligence community to write for release, along with efforts to create blanket coalition release authorities and to use coalition networks (as opposed to U.S. national systems) was cited as an effective way to promote and enable information/intelligence sharing.
- In addition to placing members within CJIAF organizations, the placement of liaison officers with other U.S. government and/or foreign entities (e.g., via SOCOM’s Special Operations Liaison Officers (SOLOs) or via the State Department’s Political Advisor (POLAD) program) was cited as being a particularly good practice for fostering information sharing.
- The expansion and/or broadening of U.S. government intelligence-sharing agreements with foreign countries was also cited as effective.

We assess that the application of this approach has been ineffective in the following ways:

- Much of the information (and virtually all of the intelligence) being shared among the various entities described above is classified at some level. Increased sharing of classified information carries with it attendant risks which have not always been effectively mitigated. Leaks from those trusted to

¹⁴¹ “BICES — Archived 06/2003.” Accessed, June 26, 2017, https://www.forecastinternational.com/archive/disp_pdf.cfm?DACH_RECNO=474.

¹⁴² Jill L. Boardman and Donald W. Shuey, “COMBINED ENTERPRISE REGIONAL INFORMATION EXCHANGE,” April 2004, accessed 26 June 2017, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/ccrp/centrixs.pdf>.

view and share this information—Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden being among the more notable cases—have at times increased risk to U.S. personnel or the success of U.S. operations. When these leaks have crossed U.S. government agencies (e.g., Manning—a member of DOD—leaking State Department cables), they have at least temporarily eroded trust between those agencies.¹⁴³

- The U.S. government has been notoriously ineffective at archiving its own operational information. Early in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, for example, units would often deploy and redeploy with their own computers, whose hard drives would then be wiped clean upon their return to home station. This has resulted in the loss of considerable information and institutional knowledge over time. There were some examples of focused attempts to address this—the most notable being the implementation and use of the Combined Information Data Network Exchange (CIDNE) database¹⁴⁴ to document operational events in Iraq and Afghanistan—but those examples are limited in number and even CIDNE did not become widely used in Iraq until 2007 and Afghanistan until 2009.

Approach 8: Building networks and partnerships

Description

While the United States' initial operational response to the attacks of 9/11 (i.e., the invasion of Afghanistan) was unilateral, over time, the U.S. has increasingly emphasized the use of coalitions and partner networks in its war against Al-Qaeda, seeking to work with friends, partners, and allies around the globe. The rationale for this approach is that if the U.S. works with partners and allies as part of a collective approach to fighting Al-Qaeda, the overall effort will be more effective, and less resource-intensive, and will be viewed internationally as more legitimate than if the U.S. were to fight Al-Qaeda unilaterally.

Application

There are numerous ways that the DOD has executed this approach. One has been the use of “military diplomacy,” which is direct engagement with partner-nation defense, security, and military actors and entities to forge strong relationships, to build trust and a common perception of the enemy, and to generate and maintain

¹⁴³ In this particular case, the State Department curtailed linkages between its classified systems and those of the DOD, thereby limiting access across the two agencies.

¹⁴⁴ “CIDNE - Operational Intelligence - ISS.” *ISS Inc.*, accessed 26 June 2017. <https://www.issinc.com/cidne/>.

access for counterterrorism operations. Another has been the creation and maintenance of coalitions. For its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States assembled two separate international coalitions—the Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF–I) and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), respectively—to conduct these operations. Today, the U.S. continues to work with a large number of partners cooperatively to fight Al-Qaeda, both multilaterally and bilaterally. A third way the DOD implements this approach is via the so-called “Global SOF Network,” which involves a web of U.S. SOF liaison entities at government and non-government entities around the world.

Assessment

We assess that the application of this approach has been effective in the following ways:

- The United States’ emphasis on building and maintaining coalitions for its operations against Al-Qaeda has helped maintain the support of the international community of nations for sustained counterterrorism operations around the world. These efforts have also helped impart legitimacy to the U.S. counterterrorism operations in other countries.
- While the DOD has significant strategic reach via offshore basing platforms, often the United States requires overflight and access permissions from other countries in order to effectively conduct operations against Al-Qaeda. The U.S. focus on coalition building and diplomacy has been mostly successful at generating and maintaining the access that the United States needs for its military operations (with some notable exceptions as described below).
- The use of coalitions has been successful at reducing the overall cost of counterterrorism operations for the United States, as well as for other countries involved in the fight against Al-Qaeda.
- The Global SOF Network (and other liaison networks like it) has helped the U.S. maintain a persistent sensory presence around the world, in order to identify new areas of, or shifting patterns in, Al-Qaeda activity. It has also enabled some of the other U.S. approaches (e.g., information/intelligence sharing).

We assess that the application of this approach has been ineffective in the following ways:

- The use of coalitions to combat Al-Qaeda has often resulted in challenges in maintaining unity of effort among the coalition members. U.S. partners often have differing views of the Al-Qaeda threat and the best approaches to deal with that threat, or different national interests than the United States. In some instances, coalition partners of the U.S. have been reluctant (or have refused) to conduct certain types of operations (e.g., kill/capture missions), which has

at times hampered the overall effectiveness of coalition operations. One example of this was in Afghanistan, where many nations put “caveats” on the employment of their forces that specifically prohibited them from participating in direct counterterrorism activities.

- In some instances, the United States has invested significant resources—time, money, and political capital—in trying to build partner relationships, with limited or no success. The most notorious of these efforts has been the U.S. attempt to work with Pakistan against Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups.¹⁴⁵ This relationship has vacillated from one in which the U.S. provides billions of dollars in aid to Pakistan and the latter allows U.S. military forces to operate within its territory (e.g., for security cooperation activities with the Pakistani Frontier Corps), to one in which the U.S. calls extremist organizations (e.g., the Al-Qaeda friendly Haqqani Network) a “veritable arm of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency.”¹⁴⁶ More recently, serious accusations of Pakistani support to Al-Qaeda, and specifically to Osama Bin Laden, have emerged.¹⁴⁷

Findings

Having analyzed the U.S. government’s counterterrorism strategies, the approaches that the DOD has used counter Al-Qaeda, and the ways in which each approach have been most and least effective, we now present broad observations at the institutional and operational levels. By “institutional,” we refer to activities that focus on processes and organization, and on the way the campaign against Al-Qaeda is conducted. By “operational,” we mean how effective the DOD has been at reaching its stated operational objectives for Al-Qaeda: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat. We will first discuss the institutional findings, followed by the operational ones.

¹⁴⁵ For more information on the history of U.S. foreign assistance to Pakistan and the challenges to the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, which was particularly thorny in 2011 after the death of Osama Bin Laden, please refer to: Susan B. Epstein and K. Alan Kronstadt, *Pakistan: U.S. Foreign Assistance*, Congressional Research Service, July 1, 2013, (accessed July 4, 2017) <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41856.pdf>.

¹⁴⁶ Elisabeth Bumiller and Jane Perlez, “Pakistan’s Spy Agency Is Tied to Attack on U.S. Embassy,” *The New York Times*, September 22, 2011, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/world/asia/mullen-asserts-pakistani-role-in-attack-on-us-embassy.html>.

¹⁴⁷ Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda in Flight*, Bloomsbury USA, 2017.

Institutional findings:

- **The United States has made significant progress in moving from a “stove-piped” approach to a comprehensive “whole-of-government” approach to countering Al-Qaeda, and countering terrorism in general.** At the time of the September 11 attacks, U.S. government agencies tended to not communicate and share information on a regular basis with each other—this was not institutionalized. In the early years of the GWOT, it became apparent that Al-Qaeda had many dimensions that could not all be addressed through the use of lethal force, and so other U.S. government agencies became increasingly involved. They took on whatever aspects of the Al-Qaeda threat aligned with their mission or capabilities. For example, the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have played a critical role in addressing the diplomatic and developmental issues associated with countering Al-Qaeda efforts; the Department of the Treasury has been on the forefront of tracking and disrupting Al-Qaeda financing; and the Department of Justice has been in the lead for the myriad legal issues associated with capturing and prosecuting Al-Qaeda members. The intelligence community has been critical to a range of issues, most of which contribute to the DOD’s ability to understand Al-Qaeda, identify and track its members, and ultimately kill or capture them. In addition, new entities were created, such as the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), and they have grown and developed over time. Today, while the DOD remains the primary actor in most operations against Al-Qaeda, it is with the vital participation of other U.S. government agencies, which share information and intelligence while each pursues its own piece of the broader counterterrorism effort.
- **The United States has established key partnerships and worked cooperatively with countries around the world to counter Al-Qaeda.** These arrangements have ranged from formal coalitions such as those assembled for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to a variety of cooperative multilateral and bilateral arrangements. Beginning with the administration of President George H.W. Bush, the U.S. government has framed Al-Qaeda and its offshoots as a threat not just to the United States but also to its partners and allies around the world. It has also recognized that given the transnational nature of Al-Qaeda, countering the organization requires partnerships with governments in places where Al-Qaeda is present or seeks to be. The Department of State has played a critical role in pursuing and solidifying these relationships through diplomatic means, but the DOD has also contributed significantly to maintaining and nurturing these relationships, particularly when it comes to forging relationships with defense officials in partner countries.

- **The United States has developed a highly effective and efficient set of counterterrorism forces, which operate through a combination of intelligence and special operations forces, coupled with continued innovation and improvement.** Arguably, the combination of U.S. SOF and its intelligence community today make up the largest and most capable counterterrorism force the world has ever known. This, combined with the unparalleled strategic reach of the U.S. military, allows the United States to strike members of Al-Qaeda in almost any part of the globe—once it has identified where those individuals are. The United States has significantly increased the size and resources of these forces: the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) today has 70,000 personnel (a 53 percent increase from 2001) and a budget of \$10.8 billion dollars (a 370 percent increase from 2001).¹⁴⁸ Further, it has created entirely new capabilities (such as remotely piloted armed aircraft) to enable a more efficient, lethal, and discriminatory approach to countering terrorist groups.
- **The United States has failed to learn that regime change without effective stabilization operations creates enormous opportunities for Al-Qaeda (and other like-organizations) both in the targeted country and in neighboring countries.** The U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan—and subsequent failure to effectively and enduringly stabilize those countries—have created lasting instabilities in the regions in which those countries sit, which Al-Qaeda has used to its benefit. But even the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan did not prevent the United States from supporting the overthrow of the Ghaddafi government in Libya. Doing so led to a vacuum of security in that country and a chain of events that has destabilized the Sahel region of Africa and presented AQIM with new opportunities.
- **The United States has failed to develop a proactive, consistent, and compelling narrative that can effectively compete with the narrative that Al-Qaeda uses to advance its cause and to gain new recruits and followers.** To date, the U.S. government has been primarily focused on counter-messaging approaches that seek to discredit Al-Qaeda's narrative, as opposed to proactive messaging to put forth a compelling, competing narrative of its own. This is admittedly a difficult task, especially given the widely varying interests and positions of the United States' allies and partner nations in the fight against Al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, the U.S. failure in this regard was cited nearly

¹⁴⁸ U.S. SOCOM, *2016 Fact Book*, available at: http://www.socom.mil/News/Documents/2016%20Fact%20Book_Web.pdf; and, Andrew Feickert, *U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report RS21048, November 19, 2015.

unanimously by the many experts we interviewed for this study as the greatest weakness of the U.S. campaign against Al-Qaeda.

- **The United States has failed to adequately and consistently align its approaches in ways that address the full spectrum of challenges that Al-Qaeda poses to the U.S. and the security vulnerabilities that Al-Qaeda exploits in countries where it currently operates or seeks to expand.** While DOD is not the only U.S. government entity involved in the fight against Al-Qaeda, the predominance of U.S. government resources for this effort go to the DOD and military operations, which remain the centerpiece of the U.S. government strategy for defeating Al-Qaeda. The approaches that DOD employs (described above) primarily center on the United States (or a U.S. partner or surrogate) directly attacking Al-Qaeda. The DOD's efforts to build the security forces of countries where Al-Qaeda operates or seeks to operate may be necessary, but they are insufficient to address the array of security vulnerabilities that Al-Qaeda exploits—vulnerabilities that have worsened in parts of the Middle East and Africa since 2001.
- **The United States has failed to fundamentally appreciate the resilience of Al-Qaeda as an organization, as a brand, and as a movement.** Given the vast amount of blood and resources the U.S. has expended in the fight against Al-Qaeda since 2001, it seems counterintuitive that the group exists today as a larger, more geographically dispersed, and more resilient organization than it was in 2001. The fact that Al-Qaeda has effectively absorbed 16 years of U.S. military efforts against it and found ways to exploit opportunities to expand along the way suggests that the United States has fundamentally underestimated the resilience of Al-Qaeda and the pool of sentiment that the group taps into across Muslim-majority countries.

Operational findings:

- **There has not been another terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland anywhere near the scale of the attacks of 9/11.** DOD and other U.S. government agency efforts have kept a level of pressure on Al-Qaeda that has frustrated the group's ability to plan, resource, and execute large-scale terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland.
- **In the early years of the war in Afghanistan, U.S. forces were effective at disrupting core Al-Qaeda, driving its leadership into hiding, and depriving the organization of what had been its main base of operations in Afghanistan.** For the few years immediately following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda was significantly weakened in that country.
- **In Iraq in the 2006-2008 timeframe, U.S. forces were able to almost completely dismantle AQI.** The alignment of the five key factors identified

above eventually allowed the United States to conduct counterterrorism operations against AQI at a rate that exceeded the latter's ability to adapt and regenerate. This led to the decimation of the group's members and near-total dismantling of that organization.

- **The DOD has had success building capacity in some partner nation security forces.** Prominent examples of this include the Iraqi CTS, the Afghan Commandos, and the special operations forces of both Jordan and the UAE. Looking across these efforts, we identified the following conditions that appear common to U.S. success:
 - The partner unit is a formal entity of the national government (and not a militia or other non-state actor)
 - The partner government has the same, or a similar, perception of the Al-Qaeda threat as the United States does and has similar interests when it comes to addressing that threat
 - The United States provides weapons and materiel that are appropriate to the culture, skill levels, and maintenance and sustainment capabilities of the partner
 - The U.S. efforts at building partner capacity are sustained from year to year and involve repeat deployments from the same units (i.e., they are not ad hoc or episodic)
- **The United States has not effectively consolidated gains in the few instances where it has had success against Al-Qaeda.** In Iraq, partially as a result of the surge of an additional 20,000 troops, the U.S. dismantled and nearly destroyed AQI: “By early 2008, 2,400 AQI members had been killed and 8,800 captured—greatly diminishing its active membership, previously estimated at 15,000.”¹⁴⁹ By 2011, the threat from AQI was deemed low enough for the United States to withdraw its remaining military presence from that country. Yet only three years later, the remnants of AQI had reconstituted their organization through recruitment and mergers to the point where the group could capture large swaths of Syria and Iraq as the organization now called ISIS. While many of the reasons for this comeback stem from actions taken by the Iraqi government, there is little question that the withdrawal of U.S. forces

¹⁴⁹ M.J. Kirdar, *AQAM Futures Project Case Studies Series: Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2011, Web, 24 Nov. 2014; see also, Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, “The Islamic State,” updated April 14, 2017.

from Iraq in 2011 ceded U.S. influence in that country, both politically and militarily.

In Afghanistan, the initial U.S. invasion degraded Al-Qaeda, by killing much of its leadership and removing its main base of operations in that country. However, the United States failed to consolidate these gains, in large part because it shifted its attention and the bulk of its resources to Iraq in 2003. By 2009, the situation in Afghanistan was bad enough that the United States decided to “surge” forces there to address the resurgent Taliban (and Al-Qaeda) threat. U.S. and coalition military efforts again inflicted heavy damage on these groups in the years that followed, but the drawdown of the vast majority of these forces by the end of 2014 removed significant U.S. influence and capabilities from that country.

- **The United States has failed to stop the spread of Al-Qaeda.** Al-Qaeda core suffered setbacks in the early years of U.S. military actions in Afghanistan, but from 2004 to 2010, Al-Qaeda established four new regional affiliates: AQI (2004), AQIM (2007), AQAP (2009), and al-Shebab (pledged allegiance in 2008, and formally merged in 2012). In the years that followed, Al-Qaeda lost AQI as an affiliate when it splintered off as the Islamic State of Iraq (now ISIS), but it established two new ones: AQIS (2014) and AQS (2015). Today, Al-Qaeda is much larger, more geographically dispersed, and more ingrained throughout Muslim-majority countries than it was in 2001—a level of progress that is all the more impressive when viewed in the face of 16 years of U.S. and global counterterrorism operations against the group.
- **The United States has been unable to replicate the conditions that allowed it to almost completely dismantle AQI in its fight against any of the other Al-Qaeda affiliates.** Above, we presented factors that we identified as critical to the near-defeat of AQI in the 2006-2008 timeframe. Given that this is a single case in the U.S. fight against Al-Qaeda, we cannot definitively conclude that all of these factors would be required to replicate this success in U.S. efforts against other Al-Qaeda affiliates. However, in looking at the state of U.S. government actions against the current crop of Al-Qaeda affiliates, it is clear that at best only a few of these factors are, or have been, present in U.S. efforts against Al-Qaeda affiliates outside of Iraq.

Discussion and requirements for disrupt, dismantle, defeat

The NDAA calls for us to provide recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, but it does not define these terms—nor are

there commonly accepted definitions for them across the U.S. government. As a result, we reviewed a number of sources and established the following definitions, which we will use in this discussion:

- **Disrupt:** Al-Qaeda is unable to conduct attacks against the U.S. homeland or U.S. interests abroad (e.g., U.S. embassies, U.S. military facilities, U.S. personnel operating overseas).
- **Dismantle:** Al-Qaeda has been reduced to a point where it is no longer a coherent, functioning entity operationally and tactically.
- **Defeat:** Al-Qaeda does not have the capability and will to fight the United States and its partners.

Assessment of U.S. government effectiveness at *disrupting* Al-Qaeda

The United States has primarily emphasized approaches that aim to disrupt Al-Qaeda (especially since 2011) and has been generally effective at doing so.

An examination of the U.S. successes against Al-Qaeda reveals that its approaches to the group have primarily aligned with the aim to disrupt it. The DOD has developed impressive counterterrorism forces with the capability to effectively keep consistent pressure on Al-Qaeda and its affiliates abroad. Using kinetic and non-kinetic approaches, the DOD has effectively disrupted Al-Qaeda and its affiliates by attacking and removing the Al-Qaeda network's key nodes, thereby impeding its ability to conduct attacks on the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests abroad. In addition, it has built effective interagency and international coordination, worked with partners to gain information, intelligence, and access, and built capacity in foreign units to fight Al-Qaeda abroad—all these activities have contributed to protecting the United States from attacks at home and significant attacks on targets overseas. We identified the following notable examples of U.S. disruption of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates:

- AQ core, 2008-2017, Afghanistan/Pakistan
- AQIM, 2013, Mali (French led)
- AQI, 2005, Tal Afar, Iraq
- Al-Shebab, 2010-2013, Somalia (AMISOM led)
- AQIS, 2014-2017, Afghanistan/Pakistan.

Requirements for disrupting Al-Qaeda

If the United States continues to pursue a strategy that emphasizes “disrupting” Al-Qaeda in order to reduce the short-term risk of an attack on the U.S. homeland and its interests abroad, it should recognize the following serious shortcomings associated with this strategy:

- **The approaches that the United States takes to disrupt Al-Qaeda do not address the range of security vulnerabilities that have emerged (and in some cases are getting worse), in the places where Al-Qaeda operates or seeks to expand.** The U.S. government approaches to disrupt Al-Qaeda address the immediate challenges that Al-Qaeda poses to the United States, most of which are operational in nature (the threat of an attack, for example). But they do not address the vulnerabilities in the security environment that Al-Qaeda has exploited to further its aims. If the United States continues down this path, it should do so with the understanding that these vulnerabilities will persist, and, if recent trends hold, will likely continue to worsen. The United States could attempt to address some of these vulnerabilities more aggressively, such as by increasing efforts to find a political settlement to the civil wars in Yemen and Syria, but it should do so as part of an overall strategy against Al-Qaeda.
- **A continued emphasis on disruption will come at significant additional costs and may not be sustainable over time.** The level of resources that the United States has invested in dedicated counterterrorism forces and operations since 2011 has been steadily increasing, as evidenced by the end-strength of SOCOM (which has increased from roughly 60,000 personnel in 2011 to nearly 70,000 today) or its base budget, which has increased from \$6.2 billion in 2011 to \$7.9 billion in 2017.¹⁵⁰ And yet, since 2011, Al-Qaeda has continued to expand its presence globally, establishing two new affiliates during that time. These trends, when combined with worsening security vulnerability trends in many countries of the Middle East and Africa, suggest that the United States may need to steadily increase its investments in counterterrorism forces just to maintain Al-Qaeda in a disrupted state. While some may see this as simply the price to be paid for homeland security, our interviews and previous work on SOF have identified a widespread view among members and leaders of that community that the current pace of SOF deployments is not sustainable over the long term. Indeed, on May 4, 2017, U.S. Army General Raymond “Tony” Thomas, commander of SOCOM, testified before Congress that:

¹⁵⁰ “United States Special Operations Command,” *Operation and Maintenance Overview Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Estimates*, February 2016, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) / Chief Financial Officer. http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2017/fy2017_OM_Overview.pdf.

Special Operations Forces are the main effort, or major supporting effort for US [Violent Extremist Organization]-focused operations in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, across the Sahel of Africa, the Philippines, and Central/South America—essentially, everywhere Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are to be found.¹⁵¹

As part of his testimony, General Thomas raised the issue of sustainability of these efforts, pointing out that elite forces have been in “continuous combat over the past 15 and a half years.”¹⁵² This point becomes particularly concerning when considering that Al-Qaeda (and its affiliates and offshoots) is not shrinking in response to these efforts, but rather has expanded.

- **Continued or increased efforts aimed at “disruption” will not necessarily put the United States on a path to dismantling, and ultimately defeating, Al-Qaeda; in some cases, it could have the opposite effect.** Al-Qaeda’s growth and expansion into new areas has continued in spite of U.S. efforts to disrupt the organization to date. This suggests that disruption in an overall general sense is not leading to the defeat or even dismantling of Al-Qaeda. And in some cases, our study suggests it may be contributing to the group’s resilience. The United States conducts certain activities with the short-term goal of disruption in order to protect the homeland that may have the long-term effect of feeding the conditions that allow for Al-Qaeda’s continued survivability and even growth. Among the most cited examples is when civilians are killed during U.S. operations to target Al-Qaeda members. Over the years, a multitude of studies and polls have supported the idea that U.S. counterterrorism operations that kill civilians feed resentment and anger in the populations from which Al-Qaeda seeks support, and can create the desire to seek revenge within those populations.¹⁵³ In addition, theories of network adaptation that underlie the U.S. government’s “attack the network” approach

¹⁵¹ Statement by General Raymond A. Thomas III, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) before the Senate Armed Services Committee, May 4, 2017.

¹⁵² Tim O’Connor, “U.S. Commander Says Soldiers are Suffering from over Fifteen Years of War,” *Newsweek*, May 5, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/where-us-special-forces-commander-suffering-world-595645>.

¹⁵³ An example of such a study is *Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians From U.S. Drone Practices in Pakistan*, published in September 2012 by the International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic, Stanford Law School and the Global Justice Clinic, NYU School of Law. This report presents the results of a comprehensive, data-driven analysis of the impact of drone strikes on the population in Pakistan. <https://law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/default/files/organization/149662/doc/slspublic/Stanford-NYU-LIVING-UNDER-DRONES.pdf>.

suggest that actions against a network that occur more slowly than the network can adapt may actually stimulate the network to increase its overall resiliency. We assess that this is likely the case in most of the U.S. government's efforts against Al-Qaeda affiliates today.

All of these observations taken together suggest that the degree of the Al-Qaeda problem is likely to continue to increase in the near term and therefore the requirement for U.S. forces to disrupt the group will also likely continue to increase. In addition, we identified numerous instances where removal of sustained pressure against Al-Qaeda resulted in the resurgence of the group. These include:

- AQ core, 2003-2007, Afghanistan/Pakistan
- AQIM, 2014-2017, Mali/Burkina Faso
- AQI (ISI/ISIS), 2012-present, Iraq/Syria
- AQAP, 2012-2017, Yemen
- Al-Shebab, 2013-2017, operations external to Somalia.

As a result, if the U.S. government decides to pursue a strategy of continued disruption, we assess that it would need to:

- Largely continue its current approaches to Al-Qaeda, but prepare itself—and the American public—for the likelihood of increased costs in both blood and treasure to maintain Al-Qaeda in a disrupted state.
- Conduct additional analysis to determine how much further it can expand its current approaches to countering terrorism before the forces tasked with these missions reach a breaking point.

Assessment of U.S. government effectiveness at *dismantling* Al-Qaeda

The U.S. has had some successes in dismantling Al-Qaeda, but none has been sustained.

In our study, we identified a number of cases in which the United States (and often its partners) has been able to dismantle a part of Al-Qaeda. These are:

- AQ core, 2001-2002, Afghanistan
- AQI, 2009-2010, Iraq
- AQAP, 2003, Yemen (Yemen led)

- AQAP, 2002-2006, Saudi Arabia (Saudi led)
- ASG, 2000-2014, Philippines (Philippine led)

However, in each of these cases, the group in question has been able to resurge, due to a variety of factors. In the case of AQ core, the U.S. removed pressure from the group by diverting the assets needed to do so to Iraq for OIF in 2003. In the case of AQI, by the end of 2011, the U.S. felt confident enough in its victory over that group to withdraw its forces from Iraq. But these gains proved only temporary, and by 2014 the remnants of AQI (along with a host of new recruits and merged groups) surged back into Iraq as ISIS due to the continued presence of strong vulnerabilities in Iraq's security environment. In the case of AQAP, while the Saudis have been able to keep that group from operating or having a presence in their country, severe vulnerabilities in the security environment of Yemen have allowed the group to take hold and expand there. And in the special case of ASG, while the Philippine government has been able to disrupt that group, ASG's embrace of ISIS has led to a recent degree of resurgence, at least in part due to the continued existence of security vulnerabilities in that country.

Taking these observations into consideration, if the U.S. government decides to pursue a strategy that aims to fully dismantle Al-Qaeda, we assess that the following would need to occur:

- First, the U.S. government would need to become seized of the mission to dismantle Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and *all* of the relevant U.S. government agencies would need to dedicate resources and capabilities to this mission.
- Second, the United States would need to take steps to dramatically increase the tempo of its targeting operations against Al-Qaeda's affiliates. This would likely entail accepting significantly increased risks to the lives of our special operators, diplomats, and development and intelligence personnel, as well as those of civilians in the countries where Al-Qaeda currently exists.
- Third, the United States would have to dismantle each of Al-Qaeda's affiliates, as well as sever linkages between them (e.g., fighter movement, money flows, and communications), in order to dismantle the larger Al-Qaeda organization.
- Fourth, U.S. partners, including host countries and third-party entities, would also need to be incorporated into this approach in a way that would ensure access and lead to cooperative and coordinated activities all working towards the same goal.
- Fifth, the United States would need to plan ahead so that if the dismantling operations proved successful, it could consolidate the gains from this

approach by addressing the local and regional security vulnerabilities that give Al-Qaeda latitude for action, in order to prevent the resurgence of the group.

- Finally, for this approach, the U.S. government would need to prepare itself—and the American public—for the likelihood of significantly increased costs in both blood and treasure.

Requirements for dismantling Al-Qaeda

Specific to these considerations, if the U.S. government chooses to pursue a policy focused on trying to fully dismantle the Al-Qaeda organization, we assess that it would need to:

- Create an operational plan focused on Al-Qaeda (as opposed to all terrorist groups everywhere) with a goal of isolating each affiliate and conducting high-tempo counterterrorism operations to dismantle each part of the organization. This plan would need to be tailored to address the operational differences between the affiliates and the contextual nuances that accompany each one. To enable these operations, the United States would need to:
 - “Surge” resources to reinforce ongoing counterterrorism efforts focused on Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. This would likely entail greater use of conventional U.S. military forces to bolster U.S. SOF (who are stretched thin) and greater use of agencies such as the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL), USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), and the Department of the Treasury’s Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (TFI).
 - Establish well-defined rules of engagement and limits for collateral damage, and push authorities for military action within those guidelines down to the lowest politically acceptable levels within the DOD. In addition, the restrictions placed on U.S. diplomats in the wake of the Benghazi incident would need to be rescinded such that these individuals can get off embassy compounds and out of capital cities in order to engage relevant local entities and populations.
 - Establish a CJATF to focus on severing the linkages between Al-Qaeda’s affiliates (i.e., personnel movement, money transfers, and communications). Expanding on Operation Gallant Phoenix (OGP) may be an efficient means of doing this.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Statement by General Raymond A. Thomas III, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) before the Senate Armed Services Committee, May 4, 2017.

- Strive to establish and maintain counterterrorism platforms that are as close to the areas in which Al-Qaeda is operating as possible. In some instances (e.g., Yemen, Syria, Pakistan), this may entail revisiting U.S. policies regarding “boots on the ground” and/or require strong diplomatic efforts to regain access.
- Reconsider the balance of emphasis that has been placed on “kill” missions relative to “capture” missions. This necessarily entails working through how the United States would legally handle increased numbers of Al-Qaeda detainees.
- Design a new, proactive messaging campaign that considers how to amplify the values and ideas shared by the West and much of the Muslim world, relying in part on local Islamic voices, in an effort to counter Al-Qaeda’s ideological narratives. The United States would need to designate and resource a single entity (e.g., the State Department’s Global Engagement Center) to serve as the focal point for these efforts, with robust funding and support from all relevant U.S. government agencies.
- Conduct thorough interagency reviews of the security vulnerabilities of the countries where Al-Qaeda currently has a presence, along with those countries most likely to be targeted by Al-Qaeda for future expansion. These reviews would need to identify these countries’ most pressing security vulnerabilities, and the United States should work with each country (via the U.S. country team) to identify proactive measures that could be taken (potentially with U.S. support) to address them, so as to consolidate any successes gained from the actions recommended above or prevent Al-Qaeda’s expansion into new areas. Such measures might include:
 - Strengthening border security forces
 - Strengthening internal police and intelligence forces
 - Strengthening platforms for moderate voices to deliver proactive, positive messages
 - Security sector reform and defense institution building
 - Economic stimulus and development at the local level, as well as national economic reforms
 - Strengthening government accountability (via internal institutions or civil society organizations)

- Invest in maintaining and strengthening our international alliances and partnerships, most notably those with governments and non-government organizations that share U.S. interests and goals with respect to Al-Qaeda.

These requirements may sound like a tall order, and indeed they are in terms of the additional investment the United States would have to make in order to pursue this goal. But our assessment of the U.S. track record against Al-Qaeda to date suggests that this level of activity and investment would be required if the U.S. is to dismantle Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and prevent the resurgence of these groups.

Assessment of U.S. government effectiveness at *defeating* Al-Qaeda

The United States has not defeated Al-Qaeda core or any of its affiliates, and it is not clear that the United States—at the strategic level—has a vision for what that defeat would look like or how to bring it about.

In looking across the history of U.S. efforts against Al-Qaeda, there are no examples in which the United States has caused Al-Qaeda to lose the capability and the will to continue fighting. The United States has not yet defeated Al-Qaeda or any of the affiliates we examined in this assessment. In addition, as part of this assessment we were unable to identify a consensus view among current or former U.S. government officials as to what the defeat of Al-Qaeda would look like in practice, or how the United States might go about accomplishing that goal.

Requirements for defeating Al-Qaeda

If the U.S. government decides to pursue the complete defeat of Al-Qaeda, we assess that the U.S. government would need to:

- Devise a vision for what “defeat” of the group would look like, both politically and practically, and then ensure that this vision is promulgated and pursued by the entirety of the U.S. government, so that all U.S. entities are synchronized and aligned in their mission against Al-Qaeda. The United States would also need to share this vision with its partner nations and organizations, and use it as a lens through which to identify common and divergent interests among these entities.
- Create and resource a strategy to bring about the vision for Al-Qaeda’s defeat. As part of this strategic planning process, the United States would need to critically examine its current assumptions that the DOD should be the lead agency for this effort, and that the three goals articulated by the NDAA—disrupt, dismantle, and defeat—are a linear process. Additionally, the United States would need to clearly address how to defeat both Al-Qaeda’s capability

and its will to fight. The requirements for dismantling Al-Qaeda that we identify above largely address its capability, but the United States would need to think much more deeply about how to effectively address Al-Qaeda's will. To date, the United States has spent billions of dollars on programs and activities specifically aimed at addressing the issues that it believes drive people to join and fight for Al-Qaeda. These programs have focused on countering the group's ideology, providing alternatives through economic development and education, and attempting to improve governance in the parts of the world where it thrives. While it is difficult to assess whether Al-Qaeda would be even stronger today in the absence of these efforts, what is clear is that they have yet to remove the will of Al-Qaeda members to fight or the will of men and women to join the organization.

- Prepare for a protracted fight against Al-Qaeda and like-organizations. While the objective of dismantling Al-Qaeda could conceivably be achieved on a timescale of years, the U.S. experience with Al-Qaeda over the past two decades suggests that true defeat of the group is likely to take decades more. The U.S. government would need to be realistic in both its own plans and programs—taking a long-term and persistent approach to the challenges that Al-Qaeda poses—and its communications with the American public. After 16 years of largely military actions against Al-Qaeda, Americans are weary of this fight. But the U.S. experience with Al-Qaeda to date has shown that whether we want to continue fighting this group or not, the group maintains a strong will to continue fighting us.

Conclusion of independent assessment and recommendations

The war between Al-Qaeda and the United States government has been one of notable gains and significant setbacks on both sides for nearly two decades. While both entities publically state the same goals as they did in 2001, the approaches that each are taking today suggest that both sides have learned, adapted, and evolved their thinking, organizational structures, and activities according to their experiences—especially in recent years.

In this assessment, we have addressed the relationships, strategy, objectives, capabilities, and structure of Al-Qaeda; the impact of changing security environments across much of Africa and the Middle East on Al-Qaeda and U.S. efforts to counter the group; and how the U.S. government has been most and least effective against Al-Qaeda to date. Per the NDAA requirement, we have also provided the U.S. government with the actions that it would need to take to disrupt, dismantle, and

defeat Al-Qaeda—which we believe are distinct, and not linearly escalating, goals. Having completed these assessments, we conclude the following:

- **Current U.S. efforts are more aligned with the direct threat that Al-Qaeda poses to the United States and less to the security conditions, or vulnerabilities, that Al-Qaeda exploits to survive and expand.**
- **U.S. government efforts to date have not defeated Al-Qaeda. The current U.S. strategy—centered on military approaches and anchored in the assumed linear goals of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating the organization—is unlikely to do so.**
- **Dismantling Al-Qaeda would entail a commitment of U.S. resources well beyond those committed today.**
- **Continued disruption of Al-Qaeda is likely to require increasing resources as security environments continue to weaken in many parts of the world where Al-Qaeda operates and seeks to operate.**

Based on these findings, we conclude that *the current U.S. strategy toward Al-Qaeda is unlikely to attain the United States' desired goals*. Therefore, *we recommend that the U.S. government should undertake a new review of its policy goals and overarching strategy against Al-Qaeda*. This review should take a fresh look at Al-Qaeda and the environments in which it operates, or seeks to operate, as they exist today. This review should also critically examine U.S. strategic goals with respect to Al-Qaeda and like groups, the resources required to achieve those goals, and the political and domestic appetite for sustaining them. It should also examine the balance of roles across U.S. government agencies and the timelines and metrics required for success. The U.S. has been battling Al-Qaeda primarily militarily for 16 years and yet the group is stronger and present in more places today than it was in 2001. Clearly, the U.S. needs a renewed approach.

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Appendix A: List of Organizations Contacted

As part of this independent assessment, we engaged individuals at the following organizations:

- American Enterprise Institute
- Central Intelligence Agency, Counterterrorism Center (CIA/CTC)
- Georgetown University
- Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)
- National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)
- National Security Council - Counterterrorism
- New America Foundation
- New York City Police Department - Counterterrorism Task Force
- Office of the Director of National Intelligence – National Intelligence Council (NIC)
- Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense – Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD-SO/LIC)
- Office of the Undersecretary of Defense – Intelligence (USD-I)
- Stanford University
- U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM)
- U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC)
- U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM)
- U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM)

- U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM)
- U.S. Special Operations Command – Africa (SOCAF)
- U.S. Special Operations Command – Central (SOCCENT)
- Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Former U.S. government officials:

- Former Assistant Secretary of Defense – SO/LIC
- Former Commander, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)
- Former Commander, SOCOM
- Former Commander, USASOC
- Former Director, National Counter Terrorism Center - Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning (DSOP)

Appendix B: Case Study of Al-Qaeda “Core”

Overview

Founded in Afghanistan in 1988, Al-Qaeda (“the Base,” in Arabic) is a global jihadi enterprise composed of two major components: a “core” (sometimes referred to as “Al-Qaeda Central”) and five major regional affiliates or “franchises.” The core was responsible for some of the deadliest and most audacious attacks in the history of modern terrorism, including the near-simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 that killed 224 people and wounded more than 5,000; the October 2000 suicide attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen that killed 17 sailors and wounded another 39; and the coordinated attacks on September 11, 2001 that killed nearly 3,000 and wounded 6,000 others.

Leadership and structure

The size of Al-Qaeda’s core has fluctuated over time. Recent estimates suggest that Al-Qaeda Central has fewer than 1,000 members, many of whom have sanctuary in remote parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁵⁵ By most accounts, the core is tightly knit, despite the fact that U.S. operations against “high value targets” have required the continuous refreshment of its upper ranks. At one time, the core had an elaborate structure that included military and information committees. The origins

¹⁵⁵ Some senior Al-Qaeda figures have decamped to Syria: Zawahiri’s deputy, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, was killed in a targeted strike in Idlib Province in February 2017; “Al-Qaeda’s Deputy Leader Reportedly Killed by US Drone Strike in Syria,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), February 27, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/27/Al-Qaedas-deputy-leader-reportedly-killed-us-drone-strike-syria/>, accessed March 11, 2017. Two Al-Qaeda affiliates, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), quickly issued a joint statement eulogizing al-Masri: “AQAP and AQIM Eulogize Zawahiri Deputy Abu al-Khayr al-Masri,” SITE Intelligence Group, March 2, 2017.

and development of this structure is discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections on the history of Al-Qaeda Central. How much, if any, of this structure still exists remains an open question among experts.¹⁵⁶

Relationships with affiliates/command and control

Al-Qaeda affiliates, as defined by one leading authority on terrorism, are “those groups that have taken the Al-Qaeda name and/or whose leaders have sworn loyalty to the Al-Qaeda core leader who, in turn, has acknowledged that oath.”¹⁵⁷ Scholars, policymakers, and intelligence officials disagree about how much control the core exerts over its franchises today.¹⁵⁸ But there is consensus that at a minimum Ayman al-Zawahiri, the core’s leader and former second in command to Osama Bin Laden, provides strategic guidance to the groups that make up the Al-Qaeda firmament.

Zawahiri (and Bin Laden before him) sometimes expressed deep frustration over the behavior and direction of affiliates, most notably in the case of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI’s depredations under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a thuggish, barely literate Jordanian ex-convict, threatened to tarnish the Al-Qaeda “brand.”¹⁵⁹ In a letter written in 2010, Bin Laden bemoaned “miscalculations” by “Mujahidin spread out into many regions,” particularly the killing of Muslims during the course of operations.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Kangil Lee, *Does Al-Qaeda Central Still Matter?* International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism, January 2015, accessed February 17, 2017, http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rev_RUNI.2015.n37.49599.

¹⁵⁷ Daniel Byman, “Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al-Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations,” *Security Studies* 23, no. 3 (2014): 435. Byman notes that formal affiliation among terrorist groups is a relatively rare phenomenon. Such affiliation can create opportunities (such as expansion), but can also impose costs (such as “brand tarnishing” as a result of unpopular affiliate actions).

¹⁵⁸ For a range of views, see U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Homeland Security, “The Rise of Radicalism: Growing Terrorist Sanctuaries and the Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” November 18, 2015, <https://homeland.house.gov/hearing/the-rise-of-radicalism-growing-terrorist-sanctuaries-and-the-threat-to-the-u-s-homeland/>, accessed March 1, 2017; and Leah Farrell, “How Al-Qaeda Works,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011.

¹⁵⁹ Emily Hunt, *Zarqawi’s ‘Total War’ on Iraqi Shiites Exposes a Divide among Sunni Jihadists*, Policywatch 1049, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 15, 2002, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/zarqawis-total-war-on-iraqi-shiites-exposes-a-divide-among-sunni-jihadists>, accessed March 3, 2017; and “Al-Qaeda Disowns ‘Fake Letter,’” BBC News, October 13, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4339912.stm.

¹⁶⁰ SOCOM-2012-0000019-HT, quoted in Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, May 2012), pp. 11-12.

While affiliates may not always comply with the expressed wishes of Al-Qaeda Central, they do appear to continue to turn to Zawahiri and his top lieutenants for high-level direction. In the words of one specialist writing in 2013, “regional affiliates of the ‘system of systems’ still look to their core Al-Qaeda . . . for overall theological inspiration and strategic guidance, along with tactical support, training, and resourcing.”¹⁶¹ Yet providing such guidance and support is not a simple matter. In the judgment of policymakers and scholars, the relentless campaign of targeted strikes and other measures against senior leaders in their refuges in the hinterlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan have seriously degraded the core’s ability to meet and communicate with the affiliates.¹⁶²

Ideology and goals

Al-Qaeda militants dream of establishing a new Islamic state, modeled on the medieval caliphate. The restored caliphate would be ruled in accordance with sharia law and would include all current and former Muslim lands stretching from Southeast Asia to Western Europe. Ultimately, the caliphate would serve as a platform from which the entire world would be brought to Islam.¹⁶³

But for Al-Qaeda, unlike ISIS, this is a long-term objective.¹⁶⁴ Like ISIS, Al-Qaeda employs extreme violence, sometimes on a mass scale (such as the attacks of September 11, 2001). But Al-Qaeda’s violence typically is instrumental, finely calibrated, and ultimately, more pragmatic. “Military operations,” as the core calls terrorist activities, are intended to reinforce political messages and promote political aims. The core has always been alert to the possibility that attacks could alienate the

¹⁶¹ Martin Rudner, “Al-Qaeda’s Twenty-Year Strategic Plan: The Current Phase of Global Terror,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36 (2013): p. 957.

¹⁶² Authors’ discussions with senior U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) official, Arlington, Virginia, March 10, 2017; and Daniel Byman, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, March 1, 2017. Targeted strikes and raids have killed senior figures such as Ilyas Kashmiri, Abu Yahya al Libi, Atiyah Abd al Rahman and Abu Zaid al Kuwaiti—and of course, Osama Bin Laden on May 2, 2011, in Abbottabad, Pakistan. See also Reza Jan, “Al-Qaeda Isn’t on Its Heels,” May 27, 2014, accessed March 10, 2016, <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/Al-Qaeda-isnt-on-its-heels.316841/>.

¹⁶³ Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 65.

¹⁶⁴ Like many other religious and secular violent extremist organizations throughout history, Al-Qaeda nurtures what the scholar J. Bowyer Bell termed the “revolutionary dream,” an all-encompassing vision that helps the group “to shape reality, to foster an armed struggle, to fuel irregular war [and to] seek legitimacy by rewriting history”; J. Bowyer Bell, *Dragonwars: Armed Struggle and the Conventions of Modern War* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1999), p. 49.

Muslim “masses”—hence its insistence on vetting major plots, and its opposition to sectarian killings, as in the case of the AQI’s killing of Muslims. Indeed, Al-Qaida Central has tried to distance itself from other jihadists at war in Syria, letting ISIS face the wrath of coalition military forces while building a new reputation as “moderate extremists.”¹⁶⁵

The United States has always held a central position in Al-Qaeda’s demonology.¹⁶⁶ America is the pre-eminent evil spirit at war with Islam, a global oppressor and international bully, and the puppet master manipulating apostate regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, and elsewhere.¹⁶⁷ As Bin Laden declared in 1998, “the United States itself is the biggest mischief maker, terrorist, and rogue in the world, and challenging its authority will be a good deed in Islam in every respect.”¹⁶⁸

But where many saw unparalleled American power and hegemony, Bin Laden detected in the U.S. weaknesses, fissures, and the seeds of its own destruction apparent to those who were willing to look carefully. Using Mao Zedong’s famous phrase, Bin Laden dismissed American soldiers as “paper tigers” who cut and run when faced with motivated adversaries, as in Somalia, Lebanon, and Vietnam.¹⁶⁹

From 1992 until his death, Bin Laden exhorted fellow Muslims to kill Americans. In 1996, Bin Laden and Zawahiri arranged for an Arabic media outlet in London to publish a self-described “fatwa,” declaring that it was the “individual duty for every Muslim who can do it “to kill Americans—in effect, a declaration of war against the

¹⁶⁵ Bruce Hoffman, “The Global Terror Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration,” *CTC Sentinel*, November/December 2016, accessed February 10, 2017, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-global-terror-threat-and-counterterrorism-challenges-facing-the-next-administration>.

¹⁶⁶ See for example “Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders: World Islamic Front Statement,” February 23, 1998, <https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>, accessed February 28, 2017.

¹⁶⁷ In a message delivered in late May 2008, Abu-Yahya al-Libi described this purported war against Islam: “It is a war that targets all of the strongholds of Islam. It invades homelands and penetrates minds and thoughts. It dares to shed blood exactly as it dares to destroy beliefs and tamper with the sacred; “The Moderation of Islam and the Moderation of Defeat,” Open Source Enterprise (OSE), FEA20080521688868, May 21, 2008.

¹⁶⁸ JMW, “FBIS Document: Ten Years of Osama Bin Laden Statements,” Bin Laden Quotes Blog, February 27, 2004, <http://binladenquotes.blogspot.com/2004/02/fbis-document-10-years-of-osama-bin.html>, accessed February 21, 2017.

¹⁶⁹ “Usama bin Laden: American Soldiers are ‘Paper Tigers,” *Middle East Quarterly*, December 1998, accessed January 22, 2017, <http://www.meforum.org/435/usama-bin-laden-american-soldiers-are-paper-tigers>.

United States.¹⁷⁰ By 1998, Bin Laden succeeded in defining and distinguishing the Al-Qaeda brand. Rather than vowing to attack Israel, or striking at local tyrants (the “near enemy”), as other extremists urged, Bin Laden stressed the centrality of the American foe—the source of grievances across Muslim-majority countries, the “head of the snake,” the “far enemy.”¹⁷¹

The need to weaken and destroy America is an enduring Al-Qaeda trope. In “General Guidelines for Jihad” (2013), Zawahiri laid out the chain of logic supporting this approach:

The purpose of targeting America is to exhaust her and bleed her to death, so that it meets the fate of the former Soviet Union and collapses under its own weight as a result of its military, human, and financial losses. Consequently, its grip on our lands will weaken and its allies will begin to fall one after another.¹⁷²

Like revolutionary armies throughout history, Al-Qaeda is pursuing a strategy of attrition, playing a long game, hoping to sap the will of the godless Americans, the “worshippers of the cross,” the “pigs and monkeys,” the Jews, and other adversaries in order to continue the struggle.¹⁷³

Funding

For most of its history, the core’s finances were robust, at least by the standards of many armed groups. Al-Qaeda used cash to support other jihadi groups, build alliances, and contribute to the overall struggle against perceived enemies, near and far.¹⁷⁴ Wealthy individuals in the Persian Gulf countries who made up the so-called

¹⁷⁰ Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, pp. 47.

¹⁷¹ Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, pp., 48.

¹⁷² Ayman al Zawahiri, “General Guidelines for Jihad,” 1434 (2013), accessed January 22, 2017, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf>.

¹⁷³ Hoffman, “The Global Terror Threat”; and Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, eds., *Al-Qaeda in its Own Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 241.

¹⁷⁴ Daniel Byman, *Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 156.

Golden Chain were major benefactors.¹⁷⁵ Since 9/11, anti-money laundering standards, financial controls, and sanctions imposed by the United Nations and other bodies and countries have helped restrict the flow of at least some of this funding.¹⁷⁶

Evolution

Phase one: Origins (1988–1996)¹⁷⁷

Al-Qaeda was established by Osama Bin Laden, scion of an immensely rich Saudi family of Yemeni origins, and Abdullah Yusef Azzam, a Palestinian Sunni scholar and an architect of international jihad whose motto was “Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogues.”¹⁷⁸ In the Afghan crucible of Soviet occupation, a “militant brotherhood without borders” had been forged, and in the judgment of Bin Laden and Azzam, it could be repurposed after the defeat of the Soviet forces, which by 1998 appeared imminent.¹⁷⁹ Initially, Afghan *mujahideen* (“holy warriors”), both Arab and non-Arab, would have as their targets “infidel” governments that were oppressing Muslims in places like Palestine, the Philippines, and Chechnya.

¹⁷⁵ Juan Zarate, *Treasury's War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), p. 80.

¹⁷⁶ U.S. Department of the Treasury, *National Terrorist Financing Risk Assessment: 2015*, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illicit-finance/Documents/National%20Terrorist%20Financing%20Risk%20Assessment%20%E2%80%93%2006-12-2015.pdf>.

¹⁷⁷ In addition to the other works cited in this case study, accounts of the origins and development of Al-Qaeda include Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2003); and John Gray, *Al-Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern* (New York: The New Press, 2005).

¹⁷⁸ Quoted in Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 53. Azzam's importance to Bin Laden, and the development of Al-Qaeda in general, can hardly be overstated. According to the scholar Youssef Aboul-Enein, Azzam should be regarded as “the Clausewitzian theorist of Islamist militancy, who combines a lethal understanding and destructive interpretation of Islamic law and history, with destructive interpretations of the French and Russian revolutions”; Youssef Aboul-Enein, Azzam, “The Late Sheikh Abdullah Azzam's Books: Part III: Radical Theories on Defending Muslim Land Through Jihad,” *Combating Terrorism Center Guest Commentary*, undated, accessed April 12, 2017, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Azzam_part_3.pdf.

¹⁷⁹ Anonymous [Michael Scheuer], *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, Inc., 2002), 107.

In 1991, Bin Laden accepted the invitation of Hassan al Turabi, an Islamist leader and a key figure in the National Islamic Front regime in Sudan, to relocate to that country, where Bin Laden established a wide array of business and terrorist enterprises.¹⁸⁰ Support flowed to terrorists in East Asia, Africa, the former Soviet Union, and the Balkans through front organizations such as the Benevolence International Foundation, which supported embattled Muslims and foreign fighters in Bosnia and Herzegovina. International pressure on Sudan led to Bin Laden's expulsion in 1996 and a return to Afghanistan.

Phase two: The road to 9/11 (1996–2001)

Now fully merged with Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad—which supplied Al-Qaeda with some of its most disciplined and resourceful militants—Al-Qaeda had become what the 9/11 Commission called “the general headquarters for international terrorism,” with a complex global web of connections, relationships, and allies.¹⁸¹ At this stage in its development, according to the 9/11 Commission, Al-Qaeda was a “hierarchical top-down group with defined positions, tasks, and salaries.”¹⁸² It had attracted followers as far afield as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Bin Laden was in effect a world citizen—a cosmopolitan, globe-trekking “Davos Man,” but with a Koran and a Kalashnikov rather than a Filofax and a BMW.¹⁸³

Thus far, Bin Laden and the core had devoted most of their energies to supporting other jihadis in their various national and regional struggles. But Bin Laden and his chief aides were also contemplating more direct involvement in strikes against the “head of the snake.” After years of meticulous planning and preparation, Al-Qaeda operatives conducted a near-simultaneous attack on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. In January 2000, Yemeni Al-Qaeda members attempted unsuccessfully to bomb the USS *The Sullivans*, anchored in Yemen's port of Aden. But ten months later, Al-Qaida members, in a boat loaded with high explosives, pulled alongside the USS *Cole*, moored in the Aden harbor for a scheduled refueling. The explosion blew a 40-foot hole in the side of the vessel, with lethal effect.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, pp. 57.

¹⁸¹ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 67.

¹⁸² *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 67.

¹⁸³ Peter Bergen *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the World of Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001) p 196.

¹⁸⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, “Al-Qaeda Associates Charged in Attack on USS Cole, Attempted Attack on Other U.S. Naval Vessels,” May 15, 2003, accessed February 25, 2017, https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2003/May/03_crm_298.htm.

The planning, conduct, and immediate and longer-term consequences of the 9/11 attacks have been the subject of many narratives, memoirs, and analyses. On one level, 9/11 might be judged a failure for the Bin Laden enterprise: retribution was all but inevitable. Al-Qaeda's symbiotic relationship with the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan—"the world's first terrorist-sponsored state"—was obliterated by U.S. airpower, Special Operations Forces, and paramilitary units.¹⁸⁵ Al-Qaeda's training camps, a considerable source of capable personnel for "military" operations, were destroyed. Al-Qaeda's most important sanctuary was eliminated, and its members forced to flee for their lives into neighboring Pakistan.

At the same time, Bin Laden had succeeded in terrifying the world's greatest power. In a single morning, a tiny band of suicidal militants had contributed to the deaths of thousands of "infidels," and in so doing, showed that the "head of the snake" was vulnerable to just several sufficiently righteous, motivated, and trained jihadis.¹⁸⁶ The 9/11 Commission was surely correct when it concluded that "September 11, 2001 was a day of unprecedented shock and suffering in the history of the United States. The nation was unprepared."¹⁸⁷

Phase three: Franchise mode (2002–2014)

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the Bush administration's broader "Global War on Terror" aimed above all else at preventing the emergence of a major sanctuary from which to mount another 9/11-style attack on the homeland. OEF shattered Al-Qaeda's organizational and operational base, but this was only a temporary setback. Beginning on April 11, 2002, with the bombing of a synagogue in Tunisia, Al-Qaeda operatives carried out major attacks in Casablanca (May 16, 2003), Istanbul (December 20, 2003), Madrid (March 11, 2004), and London (July 7, 2005). The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 created new opportunities for Al-Qaeda, which framed Operation Iraqi Freedom as a Western grab for oil-rich Muslim lands,

¹⁸⁵ International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, *Perspectives on Radicalisation and Political Violence: Papers from the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence*, January 17-18, 2008, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1234516938ICSRPerspectivesonRadicalisation.pdf>.

¹⁸⁶ The 9/11 attacks failed to wreck the U.S. economy, a stated goal of Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. Moreover, New York proved to be highly resilient in economic terms. However, "subsequent anti-terrorist initiatives at home and abroad were more costly than the direct damage caused by the attack"; Adam Z. Rose and Brock S. Blomberg, *Total Economic Consequences of Terrorist Attacks: Insights from 9/11* (2010), accessed March 5, 2017, http://research.create.usc.edu/published_papers/190.

¹⁸⁷ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, executive summary.

and as a further assault on Islam itself. Moreover, the core apparently was able to maintain at least some aspects of its hierarchical structure. If captured Al-Qaeda documents offer any indication, the core was highly bureaucratized, with distinct military, communications, and administration and finance committees.¹⁸⁸

At the same time, the Al-Qaeda core sought to expand by establishing affiliates. Some of these groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), had emerged during the course of local conflicts, and only later swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda.¹⁸⁹ Others were more “organic” Al-Qaida entities—Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), for example, was the product of a merger between various Al-Qaeda groups active in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Core-affiliate interactions reportedly took place through second-tier leaders who head communications committees at Al-Qaeda Central and within the franchises.¹⁹⁰

Affiliates were expected to undertake at least some attacks against Western interests—not necessarily through so-called external operations, but at least within their area of local and regional operations. Typically, the center did not micromanage the activities of its franchises. Instead, it sought to exercise strategic influence, nudging its partners in the direction of targets that reflect the interests of the West.¹⁹¹

But affiliates resisted at least some of the core’s entreaties. As mentioned earlier, al-Zawahiri repeatedly urged Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to end its sectarian killings. And although Al-Qaeda core was willing to give franchisees some leeway in fulfilling the mandate to strike local interests, the core was unwilling to grant *carte blanche*. Documents captured from Bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound reveal the leader’s deep concerns about the operational focus of the affiliates. For example, in one communication Bin Laden issued a stern rebuke to Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the leader of AQAP—widely considered the most dangerous of the franchises. In Bin Laden’s

¹⁸⁸ See, for example, “Harmony Program,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, document AFGP-2002-000078, undated, accessed February 12, 2017, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/harmony-program>.

¹⁸⁹ AQIM, formerly known as the Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), grew out of an Islamist faction fighting the Algerian regime in the 1990s. AQIM swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2006; Carla E. Humund, *Al-Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, Congressional Research Service, R43756, August 11, 2016, accessed January 13, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43756.pdf>.

¹⁹⁰ Leah Farrall, “How Al-Qaeda Works,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-asia/2011-02-20/how-al-qaeda-works>.

¹⁹¹ Peter Margulies and Matthew Sinnot, “Crossing Borders to Target Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates: Defining Networks as Organized Armed Groups in Non-International Armed Conflicts,” *Yearbook of International Humanitarian Law*, February 2, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-038-1_12.

judgment, Wuhayshi's jihadis spent too much time attacking Yemeni security forces and not enough on targeting Westerners and Western interests.¹⁹²

Phase four: Whither Al-Qaeda Core?

Al-Qaeda core's balance sheet is a complicated one.¹⁹³ The core has had major setbacks during the past fifteen years. The death of Bin Laden on May 2, 2011 was, if nothing else, a devastating symbolic blow to the global movement he had helped to create. For the time being at least, Afghanistan is not the sanctuary it was before the fall of the Taliban state. Authorities have detected and disrupted serious Al-Qaeda plots against Western targets, such as the attempt by "underwear bomber" Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to bring down Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on Christmas Day, 2009.¹⁹⁴ But the organization has been unable to repeat any of the terrorist "spectaculars" it carried out in the years between 1998 and 2005. In the judgment of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Al-Qaeda Central is staggering under the counterterrorism blows inflicted upon it:

[T]he group's cohesiveness the past three years has diminished because of leadership losses from counterterrorism pressure in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the rise of other organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) that serve as an alternative for some disaffected extremists. The 2015 deaths of Nasir al-Wahishi and Abu Khalil al-Sudani, two of al-Qa'ida's most experienced top leaders, has hindered the organization's core functions.¹⁹⁵

Far-flung franchisees now operate outside of the core's control, sometimes with negative consequences for the Al-Qaeda brand, which has become toxic, even among some otherwise like-minded extremists.¹⁹⁶ For many would-be jihadists, Al-Qaeda, led

¹⁹² Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?*, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, NY, May 2012.

¹⁹³ Brian Michael Jenkins, "Fifteen Years After 9/11: A Preliminary Balance Sheet," September 21, 2016, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT458.html>.

¹⁹⁴ United States Department of Justice, "Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab Sentenced to Life in Prison for Attempted Bombing of Flight 253 on Christmas Day 2009," February 16, 2012, accessed March 15, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/umar-farouk-abdulmutallab-sentenced-life-prison-attempted-bombing-flight-253-christmas-day>.

¹⁹⁵ National Counterterrorism Center, "Terrorist Groups: Al-Qa'ida," undated [2015], accessed March 2, 2017, https://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al_qaida.html.

¹⁹⁶ Robin Wright et al., *The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Beyond*, United States Institute of Peace and the Wilson Center, December 2016/January 2017, accessed February 15, 2017,

by a charisma-challenged, low-wattage figure like Zawahiri—hunkered down and in survival mode in the wild borderlands of Pakistan—seems to have considerably less luster when compared with a cutting-edge jihadi group like ISIS.

Yet for decades, Al-Qaeda has demonstrated that it is nothing if not resilient, agile, and tenacious, with a remarkable self-replicating ability.¹⁹⁷ According to one estimate, Al-Qaeda has a presence in nearly two dozen countries—three times as many as before 9/11. More than 15 years later, and despite the best efforts of the most powerful nations on earth, Al-Qaeda is still in the terrorism game.¹⁹⁸

Security vulnerabilities in Afghanistan

The tables below summarize the security vulnerabilities in Afghanistan during two different time periods: 2001-2003 (Table 12) and 2009-2017 (Table 13).

Table 12. Security vulnerabilities in Afghanistan (2001-2003)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal Conflict	Following the swift removal of the Taliban regime from power in late 2001, Taliban members melted away in the face of superior U.S. airpower. For the next two years (during the initial phase of OEF) the Taliban remained quiet in their activities. Despite this, the country of Afghanistan continued to suffer from internal conflict resulting from the destruction of the former regime and the continued hunt for Al-Qaeda.
History of Violent Jihadism	The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a lightning rod, bringing together jihadist militants from across the world. The relationships that many jihadists made with one another while in Afghanistan were lasting. ¹⁹⁹
Partial /	The Taliban regime, which had ruled Afghanistan since 1996, fell from

<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/The-Jihadi-Threat-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-and-Beyond.pdf>. Indeed, shortly before his death, Bin Laden reportedly considered “re-branding” Al-Qaeda. “Reading the Abbottabad Papers: Rebranding Al-Qaeda,” *The Economist*, May 4, 2012, accessed January 22, 2017, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/clausewitz/2012/05/reading-abbottabad-papers>.

¹⁹⁷ Jason Burke, *The New Threat: The Past, Present, and Future of Islamic Militancy* (New York: The New Press, 2015), 16.

¹⁹⁸ Bruce Hoffman, “The Global Terror Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration.” *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 11 (November/December 2016): 1-7.

¹⁹⁹ “The Abu Sayyaf-Al-Qaeda Connection,” ABC News, December 20, 2001.

Collapse of Government	power with relative ease following U.S. intervention after the September 11, 2001 attacks. An Afghan Interim Authority was set up in December 2001, which lasted through June 2002, at which point an Afghan Transitional Authority was elected. ²⁰⁰
Government Illegitimacy	Given the lack of an Afghan government capable of providing security throughout the country, and the fact that the previous government (however illegitimate it was) had been deposed, the Afghan Interim Authority faced questions about its future.
Demographic Instabilities	Afghanistan faces numerous difficulties stemming from its demographics, starting with a general lack of knowledge. There has never been a complete national census taken in Afghanistan. ²⁰¹ Furthermore, the country contains many different ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara, and Uzbeks. Finally, Afghanistan has a very young population, with over 60% of Afghans under the age of 24, according to the <i>CIA World Factbook</i> . ²⁰²
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Following the overthrow of the Taliban regime, there were no Afghan security institutions. ISAF was set up in December 2001 to provide security in and around Kabul. Provincial reconstruction teams were created to provide stability in locations around the country. In October 2003, the UN extended ISAF's mandate to cover the entire country. ²⁰³

²⁰⁰ "Afghan Government," Institute for the Study of War. <http://www.understandingwar.org/>

²⁰¹ Ali Karimi, "Afghanistan's Demographic Drought," *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2014.

²⁰² "Afghanistan," *CIA World Factbook*, updated May 30, 2017.

²⁰³ "History," Resolute Support Mission website, accessed at <http://www.rs.nato.int/history.html>.

Table 13. Security vulnerabilities in Afghanistan (2009-2017)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal Conflict	Afghanistan has faced an armed insurgency since the Taliban were removed from power in 2001. As of November 2016 the Long War Journal estimated that the Taliban controlled 42 districts out of 407, and contested 55. ²⁰⁴ Additionally, the presence of multiple terrorist groups capable of carrying out attacks (including the Islamic State) exacerbates violence in the country.
History of Violent Jihadism	The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a lightning rod, bringing together jihadist militants from across the world. The relationships that many jihadists made with one another while in Afghanistan were lasting. ²⁰⁵
Government Illegitimacy	Many people view the current Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as corrupt and illegitimate. Under the current power-sharing agreement, the National Unity Government brings together two political rivals, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah to share power. In practice, however, President Ghani and CEO Abdullah are using their appointments to appoint allies, increasing partisanship across the board. ²⁰⁶
Demographic Instabilities	Afghanistan faces numerous difficulties stemming from its demographics, starting with a general lack of knowledge. There has never been a complete national census taken in Afghanistan. ²⁰⁷ Furthermore, the country contains many different ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara, and Uzbeks. Finally, Afghanistan has a very young population, with over 60% of Afghans under the age of 24, according to the <i>CIA World Factbook</i> . ²⁰⁸
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Afghan Government security institutions are unable to exert control over its entire population or land mass, as evidenced by the amount of territory controlled by the Taliban. Additionally, continued insider attacks by militants posing as members of Afghan security institutions further reduces confidence in the ability of the security sector to protect the Afghan people. ²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ Bill Roggio, "Afghan government 'has lost territory to the insurgency,'" *The Long War Journal*, February 1, 2017.

²⁰⁵ "The Abu Sayyaf-Al-Qaeda Connection," ABC News, December 20, 2001.

²⁰⁶ *Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Government*, International Crisis Group, Report N° 285, 10 April 2017.

²⁰⁷ Ali Karimi, "Afghanistan's Demographic Drought," *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2014.

²⁰⁸ "Afghanistan," *CIA World Factbook*, updated May 30, 2017.

²⁰⁹ Javid Ahmad, "What Drives Insider Attacks in Afghanistan?" *Foreign Affairs*, April 5, 2017.

U.S. approach to Al-Qaeda core

The U.S. approach to countering Al-Qaeda core is summarized below. As above, the tables differentiate between the approaches taken in 2001-2003 (Table 14) and 2009-2017 (Table 15).

Table 14. U.S. approach to Al-Qaeda Core (2001-2003)

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Following the liberation of Afghanistan, U.S. attention turned to locating remaining pockets of AQ fighters in the country. U.S. elements conducted a series of raids on enemy positions in different parts of the country. One example is Operation Valiant Strike.²¹⁰
“Third Party” Partners (Northern Alliance/Tribal Elements)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. partnered with the Northern Alliance (a force of opposition fighters operating in the north of the country) and tribal warlords to push Al-Qaeda and the Taliban out of Afghanistan and retake the country. U.S. SF provided partnered forces with close air support (CAS) and helped them plan operations.²¹¹ U.S. forces also partnered with forces loyal to Hamid Karzai forces in the south, training and equipping them to retake Kandahar.²¹² U.S. and coalition forces partnered with Afghan militias during Operation Anaconda to destroy AQ elements in Shahi Kowt, Kandahar Province.²¹³
Intelligence and Information Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. established a Task Force which included an interagency intelligence fusion cell.²¹⁴
Civilian Military	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After the overthrow of the Taliban regime, CENTCOM established a Combined Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force to coordinate

²¹⁰ “U.S. Troops Raid Afghanistan in Hunt for Al-Qaeda,” Fox News, March 20, 2003, accessed at: <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2003/03/20/us-troops-raid-afghanistan-in-hunt-for-Al-Qaeda.html>.

²¹¹ Richard W. Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, CMH Pub 70-83-1, page 11.

²¹² Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, page 21.

²¹³ Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, page 32.

²¹⁴ Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, page 20.

Operations	relief efforts. ²¹⁵ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Throughout the country, Provincial Reconstruction Teams included civil affairs soldiers tasked with, among other things, carrying out small scale reconstruction projects and assessing humanitarian conditions.²¹⁶
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Table 15. U.S. approach to AQ core (2009-2017)

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	The U.S. maintains a robust CT presence in Afghanistan despite the drawdown in troop numbers, with approximately 2,000 out of the remaining 9,800 troops performing counterterrorism combat missions as of 2017. These troops target senior Al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan primarily using manned and unmanned aircraft. ²¹⁷
Advise, Assist, and Accompany	The U.S. partners primarily with Afghan SOF to conduct CT operations. This partnership can range from training and advising the Afghan forces, to accompanying them during the operation. ²¹⁸
Train & Equip Partner for CT	The U.S. partners primarily with Afghan SOF to conduct CT operations. This partnership can range from training and advising the Afghan forces, to accompanying them during the operation. ²¹⁹
Security Sector Reform	Under the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission, Coalition advisors work with the relevant Afghan ministries to help ensure that Afghan security forces follow the rule of law and act in accordance with Afghanistan's constitution." ²²⁰ This also includes addressing issues of corruption.
Major Combat Operations – Invasion / Occupation	Under President Obama, the U.S. saw a drastic increase in the number of troops in Afghanistan. While the majority was undertaking counterinsurgency (COIN), there was a persistent CT effort in Afghanistan. This continued after the drawdown, becoming Operation Freedom's Sentinel in 2015. ²²¹

²¹⁵ Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, page 19.

²¹⁶ Center for Army Lessons Learned, *Afghanistan Provincial Reconstruction Team: Observations, Insights, and Lessons*, No. 11-16, February 2011.

²¹⁷ Carla E. Humud, *Al-Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, CRS Report R43756, August 11, 2016.

²¹⁸ *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Report to the United States Congress*, Lead Inspector General for Overseas contingency Operations, July 1, 2016-September 30, 2016.

²¹⁹ *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Report to the United States Congress*.

²²⁰ *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Report to the United States Congress*.

²²¹ "Operation Freedom's Sentinel," Defense Procurement and Acquisition Policy website, accessed at: http://www.acq.osd.mil/dpap/pacc/cc/operation_freedom_s_sentinel.html.

Support Host Nation Ability to Own the Battlespace	The U.S. and Coalition forces help the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan control its territory to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a safe-haven from which Al-Qaeda can launch attacks.
Counter Threat Financing	The U.S. targets Al-Qaeda's finances through sanctions administered by the Office of Foreign Assets Control in the Treasury Department. Sanctions are meant in part to prevent terrorists from accessing the U.S. financial systems. ²²²

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQ core?

During the initial phase of Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan the U.S. succeeded in both **disrupting and partially dismantling** Al-Qaeda Core. U.S. superior airpower overwhelmed the group and, along with U.S. direct action, split Al-Qaeda forces. Many Al-Qaeda leaders were removed from the battlefield, and the group's ability to carry out attacks was seriously reduced. Remaining Al-Qaeda senior leadership (including Bin Laden) was forced into the mountains at Tora Bora. However, Bin Laden was able to escape into neighboring Pakistan. While the U.S. continued to pursue Al-Qaeda leaders using direct action (ostensibly with Pakistani assistance), there are questions surrounding how much effort the Pakistani government contributed.

U.S. success in disrupting and partially dismantling the group can in large part be attributed to Al-Qaeda Core's hierarchical organizational structure at the time. With Bin Laden on the run and given operational security concerns, other Al-Qaeda operatives received little to no instructions for how to proceed. Overall, the light footprint approach pursued by the U.S., which heavily leveraged partner forces, combined with Al-Qaeda's top-down nature, resulted in strongly disrupted group in the years following the September 11 attacks. However, despite weakening the group, the U.S. was unable to **defeat** Al-Qaeda Core. The group went underground and rebuilt while the U.S. turned its attention to Iraq.

- By the time the U.S. shifted its attention back to Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda had changed, diffusing as an organization and forming several external affiliates.

²²² Carla E. Humud, *Al-Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, CRS Report R43756, August 11, 2016.

The direct action approach of targeting leaders in the organization has since seen diminishing returns. Today, Al-Qaeda Core is considered by many to be resurgent, with its leadership based in Pakistan. It has demonstrated a lasting relationship with militant groups in the region. While the group has not carried out any major attacks on the west since September 11, it is neither **defeated nor dismantled**. It has, however, likely been **disrupted** due to probable limitations in communication and training.

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQ core?

Afghanistan's history of violent jihadism can be ascribed in large part to the actions of Bin Laden and the other mujahedeen who entered the country to fight the Soviets in the 1980s. Therefore, inasmuch as Al-Qaeda Core is the brainchild of Osama Bin Laden, "Al-Qaeda" as an idea may plausibly be viewed as contributing to violent jihadism in Afghanistan. However, the rise of Al-Qaeda Core as an organization in Afghanistan can most directly be attributed to the permissive environment engendered by the Taliban in the mid-1990s. Had the Taliban movement rejected Bin Laden and his followers after he was expelled from Sudan, Al-Qaeda would not have gained a foothold in the country. The actions of Al-Qaeda (specifically, the September 11 attacks) did result in the collapse of the Taliban regime; however, this was a favorable outcome in the eyes of the United States, which viewed the Taliban as illegitimate rulers anyway. While Al-Qaeda, through its actions, contributed to deteriorating security conditions in Afghanistan over the last 15 years, the group did not cause the vulnerabilities found in the environment.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

During the early years of OEF-Afghanistan, the U.S. took a light footprint approach. The Taliban regime was toppled with minimal U.S. presence in the country. U.S. elements partnered with Afghan militias, providing them with overwhelming airpower to push the Taliban and Al-Qaeda out of the country. This was supplemented with U.S. unilateral direct action to target Al-Qaeda leaders, and some limited civilian-military operations to provide humanitarian aid to those in need. By the time Hamid Karzai was elected President in 2004, the U.S. had shifted its attention to Iraq, which became the main effort; and NATO had taken control of ISAF in Afghanistan. Beginning in 2008 under President Bush, and increasing in 2009 under President Obama, the U.S. shifted its attention back to Afghanistan. Under the mandate of counterinsurgency, troop numbers rose significantly, and the U.S. put more effort into building the Afghan security forces, security sector reform, and supporting Afghanistan's ability to control the battlespace. Unilateral direct action

sharply increased during this time period, as the U.S. maintained a substantial force posture in Afghanistan.

Appendix C: Case Study of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Overview

Leadership and structure

AQIM originated in Algeria and has substantial Saharan operations. It is led by an emir, Algerian national Abd al-Malik Droukdel. He works with the Shura (Consultative) Council and the Council of Notables, all based in Algeria. AQIM is organized into battalions, which have several dozen fighters in them at any given time.²²³ Battalion commanders have considerable independence, especially in the Sahara.²²⁴ In the mid-2000s, AQIM's Saharan battalions—particularly Tariq ibn Ziyad and the Veiled Men—competed against one another and at times disobeyed Al-Qaeda

²²³ Andrew Lebovich estimates the size of Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Veiled Men Battalion at 40 fighters in 2011, based on French press reports of the deposition of a Mauritanian AQIM member. See "A Look Inside AQIM," *Al-Wasat*, January 15, 2012, <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/01/15/a-look-inside-aqim/>.

²²⁴ Mohammed Mahmoud Abu al-Ma'ali, *Al-Qaeda and Its Allies in the Sahel and the Sahara*, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, May 1, 2012, pp. 3-4, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ResourceGallery/media/Documents/2012/4/30/2012430145241774734Al%20Qaeda%20and%20its%20allies%20in%20the%20Sahel%20and%20the%20Sahara.pdf>.

Central's leadership.²²⁵ AQIM's northern Algerian battalions are generally considered weaker than their Saharan counterparts.²²⁶

AQIM has undergone various schisms and rapprochements. In 2011, a Mauritanian-led group broke away, calling itself the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA).²²⁷ In December 2012, the Veiled Men Battalion split from AQIM, rebranding itself Signers in Blood (Al-Muwaqqi'un bi-l-Dam). In August 2013, the Veiled Men and MUJWA merged to form a new group, al-Murabitun. In late 2015, AQIM reincorporated al-Murabitun, perhaps to present a united front against ISIL.²²⁸ In March 2017, a new coalition called Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (The Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims) unified AQIM's Saharan battalions, al-Murabitun, and two Malian jihadist groups, Ansar al-Din (Defenders of the Faith) and the Masina Liberation Front. The group is led by Malian national and long-time AQIM ally Iyad Ag Ghali, who reports to Droukdel.²²⁹

There are two small breakaway units that pledged allegiance to ISIL and have not been reintegrated into AQIM: Jund al-Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate), based in northern Algeria, was created in September 2014. Islamic State in the Greater Sahara pledged allegiance to ISIL in al-Murabitun's name in May 2015, but was disavowed by al-Murabitun's leader.²³⁰ Neither group has posed a significant challenge to AQIM so far.

²²⁵ Andrew Lebovich, "Look Inside AQIM," *Al Wasat*, January 15, 2012, <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/01/15/a-look-inside-aqim/>.

²²⁶ Andreas Hagen, *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Leaders and Their Networks*, AEI Critical Threats Project, March 2014, slide 22, <http://www.slideshare.net/CriticalThreats/aqim-leaders-and-their-networks>.

²²⁷ Wolfram Lacher and Guido Steinberg, "Spreading Local Roots: AQIM and Its Offshoots in the Sahara," in *Jihadism in Africa: Local Causes, Regional Expansion, International Alliances*, ed. Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber, 69-84 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2015), pp. 76-77, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2015_RP05_sbg_web.pdf.

²²⁸ Andrew Lebovich, "The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-hotel-attacks-and-militant-realignment-in-the-sahara-sahel-region>.

²²⁹ See the group's founding statement, available at <http://jihadology.net/2017/03/02/new-video-message-from-jamaah-nu%E1%B9%A3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimin-founding-statement/>.

²³⁰ "Sahara Islamist Leader Belmokhtar Dismisses ISIS Pledge: Report," *Al Arabiya/Reuters*, May 17, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/africa/2015/05/17/Sahara-Islamist-leader-Belmokhtar-dismisses-ISIS-pledge-report.html>.

Relationship with the core

In the early 1990s, AQIM's indirect predecessor, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), was in loose contact with Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who gave the group some funding. In the mid-1990s, the GIA and Al-Qaeda had a falling out.²³¹ AQIM's direct predecessor, the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), broke away from the GIA in 1998. After some initial efforts at joining in 2000, the group re-established connections with Al-Qaeda.²³² In 2001–2002, an Al-Qaeda emissary toured the GSPC's camps.²³³

In 2003, the GSPC pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda.²³⁴ The GSPC developed ties to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), taking strategic and tactical guidance from AQI's Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, with whom Droukdel corresponded starting in 2004. Al-Zarqawi helped to facilitate the GSPC's merger with Al-Qaeda.²³⁵

²³¹ Mohamed Mokeddem, *Les Afghans algériens: De la Djamaâ à la Qa'ida*, trans. Mehenna Hamadouche (Algiers: Editions ANEP, 2002), pp. 185-190; and Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Long Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), p. 17.

²³² Abu Akram Hisham, "Al-Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Yamani: Rihlatuhu ila al-Jaza'ir wa-Qissat Istishhadihi [Shaykh Abu Muhammad the Yemeni: His Journey to Algeria and the Story of His Martyrdom]," *Ifriqiya al-Muslima*, 30 December 2015, p. 3, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/abucc84-akram-hishacc84m-e2809cmessages-from-the-mujacc84hid_s-notebook-2-shaykh-abucc84-muhcca3ammad-al-yamanicc84-his-trip-to-algeria-and-the-story-of-his-martyrdom22.pdf. See also Agence Nouakchott d'Information, "Amir 'Katibat al-Mulaththamin' Khalid Abu al-'Abbas fi Muqabala Muthira ma'a Akhbar Nuakchut [The Emir of the Veiled Men Battalion, Khalid Abu al-Abbas, in an Interesting Interview with Nouakchott News]," 9 November 2011, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/khc481lid-abc5ab-al-abbc481s-mukhtc481r-bin-mue1b8a5ammad-bilmukhtc481r-interview-with-nouakchott-news-ar.pdf>.

²³³ Abu Akram Hisham, "Al-Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Yamani: Rihlatuhu ila al-Jaza'ir wa-Qissat Istishhadihi [Shaykh Abu Muhammad the Yemeni: His Journey to Algeria and the Story of His Martyrdom]," *Ifriqiya al-Muslima*, 30 December 2015, p. 3, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/abucc84-akram-hishacc84m-e2809cmessages-from-the-mujacc84hid_s-notebook-2-shaykh-abucc84-muhcca3ammad-al-yamanicc84-his-trip-to-algeria-and-the-story-of-his-martyrdom22.pdf.

²³⁴ Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Al-Qa'ida and the Jihadi Dynamics in the Sahel," Middle East Institute (National University of Singapore), *Insight* 91, February 13, 2013, https://mei.nus.edu.sg/index.php/website/new_TMPL/Al-Qaida-and-the-Jihadi-Dynamics-in-the-Sahel.

²³⁵ Nicholas Schmidle, "The Saharan Conundrum," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 13, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html>.

The GSPC formally merged with Al-Qaeda in 2006 and adopted the name AQIM in January 2007.²³⁶ Bin Laden blessed the merger, but it was managed by al-Zawahiri.²³⁷ The GSPC was weak at the time of the merger, lacking weapons, popular support, and morale.²³⁸ Droukdel may have hoped that the merger would solidify his control over GSPC battalions and bring other North African jihadist groups under his control, but neither hope was realized.²³⁹

Though under Al-Qaeda's banner, AQIM's ties to Al-Qaeda core were loose. Initial funding from the core, estimated at several hundred thousand dollars, allowed AQIM to perpetrate the December 2007 suicide bombing at the United Nations building in Algiers.²⁴⁰ The merger boosted recruitment, quickly drawing about twenty Moroccans and several dozen Mauritians to AQIM's Saharan units.²⁴¹ Yet AQIM functioned largely autonomously.²⁴² Al-Qaeda core sometimes sought to give AQIM strategic guidance, but AQIM sometimes rejected the advice. For example, Al-Qaeda core insisted that AQIM make political demands when negotiating with European governments over hostages, rather than just seeking ransom payments.²⁴³ Al-Qaeda

²³⁶ "Algerian Extremists Pledge Allegiance to Al-Qaeda," AFP, October 22, 2003, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2003-10-23/algerian-extremists-pledge-allegiance-to-Al-Qaeda/1497716>; and Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 128.

²³⁷ Mekhennet et al., "Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline From Al Qaeda." *The New York Times*, June 7, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01algeria.html>; and, "An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html>.

²³⁸ See Younis al-Mauritani's letter to Al-Qaeda Central, dated August 19, 2007 (signed Salih al-Mauritani, one of his aliases), translated and declassified by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in January 2017, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Addendum%20to%20the%20report%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Moghreb.pdf>.

²³⁹ Lianne Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*, Combating Terrorism Center, April 2007, p. 6 and p. 8, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Kennedy_GSPC_041207_update.pdf.

²⁴⁰ Nicholas Schmidle, "Saharan Conundrum." *The New York Times Magazine*, February 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html>

²⁴¹ Al-Mauritani letter to Al-Qaeda Central, p. 4.

²⁴² Geoff Porter, "The Impact of Bin Laden's Death on AQIM in North Africa," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, May 1, 2011, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-impact-of-bin-laden%E2%80%99s-death-on-aqim-in-north-africa>.

²⁴³ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud," September 26, 2010, recovered at Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and declassified by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, May 20, 2015, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud%2026%20September%202010.pdf>. See also "Gist of Conversation October 11," recovered at bin Laden's compound and declassified by ODNI on

core also advised AQIM “to avoid being occupied with [fighting] the local security forces,” and to instead concentrate on fighting Americans in the region.²⁴⁴ In neither case did AQIM closely follow these suggestions. The death of Bin Laden and the elevation of al-Zawahiri to overall leadership of Al-Qaeda did not bring Al-Qaeda core and AQIM demonstrably closer.²⁴⁵ Decisions within AQIM continue to occur primarily at the battalion level, and battalion commanders regularly buck the orders of Droukdel, to say nothing of those coming from al-Zawahiri.

In the split between Al-Qaeda and ISIL, AQIM has sided firmly with Al-Qaeda and al-Zawahiri. AQIM has also moved closer to AQAP. Since 2014, the two groups have released several joint statements, one of them a condemnation of ISIL.²⁴⁶ AQIM has clashed with ISIL’s would-be affiliate in the Sahara, but AQIM leaders still hope to reabsorb the defectors, and they use relatively conciliatory language about ISIL’s local supporters.²⁴⁷

Ideology and goals

AQIM’s predecessors sought to overthrow the Algerian state and replace it with their hardline version of an “Islamic” state. Whereas the GIA turned against the Algerian population, the GSPC concentrated on attacking military targets. AQIM has retained the GSPC’s strategy, and Droukdel has said that AQIM’s objective for the Maghreb region is “to rescue our countries from the tentacles of these criminal regimes that

May 20, 2015, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Gist%20of%20conversation%20Oct%2011.pdf>.

²⁴⁴ “Letter Addressed to Atiyah,” document recovered at Osama bin Laden’s compound, declassified by ODNI, May 20, 2015, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20Addressed%20to%20Atiyah.pdf>.

²⁴⁵ William McCants, “How Zawahiri Lost Al-Qaeda,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 19, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/how-zawahiri-lost-Al-Qaeda/>.

²⁴⁶ Adam Taylor, “The Dispute Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Has Devolved to Name-Calling,” *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/02/the-dispute-between-Al-Qaeda-and-the-islamic-state-has-devolved-to-name-calling/?utm_term=.5e0045ddcd33. A January 2016 statement threatened Saudi Arabia. See SITE Intelligence Group, “AQAP, AQIM Threaten KSA in Joint Statement on Prisoner Execution,” January 10, 2016, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/aqap-aqim-threaten-ksa-in-joint-statement-on-prisoner-executions.html>.

²⁴⁷ “Abu al-Hammam fi Awwal Muqabala Lahu ba’d al-Tadakhkhul al-Faransi bi-Mali [Abu Hammam in His First Interview after the French Intervention in Mali],” *Al Akhbar*, January 10, 2016, <http://alakhbar.info/intrep/interv/13563-2016-01-10-18-02-56.html>.

betrayed their religion, and their people.”²⁴⁸ AQIM vehemently rejects French influence and Western influence generally. Influential Saharan battalion commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar stated in a 2006 interview that AQIM’s violence in the Sahel was responding to the growing U.S. military presence there, perhaps referring to the United States’ Pan-Sahel Initiative, which ran from 2002 to 2005, and its successor program, the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership.²⁴⁹

Yet since the mid-2000s, AQIM has seemed to acknowledge that the overthrow of the Algerian state is now a remote dream at best. By most accounts, Algeria’s internal security organs are among the most capable on the continent. Additionally, although the GSPC’s initial move into the Sahara may have been motivated by survival and a desire to rebuild its financial strength and manpower, the “Sahara-ization” of the GSPC/AQIM led the group to focus heavily on trans-Saharan crime, including kidnappings and drug smuggling.²⁵⁰

The jihadist occupation of Mali in 2012-2013 evoked bitter internal debate within AQIM concerning strategy. Droukdel rebuked local commanders, warning them that by rushing to impose a hardline version of shari’a, they were antagonizing civilians, potential political allies, and key tribes.²⁵¹ For his part, Belmokhtar complained that AQIM was insufficiently ambitious: “Over the course of a decade, we have not seen a proper military attack, despite extraordinary financial capabilities. Our work has been limited to the routine of kidnappings, of which the mujahidin are getting bored.”²⁵²

French-led operations shattered the northern Malian jihadist emirate in 2013. Since then, AQIM has operated as a clandestine terrorist group, seeking to stage spectacular attacks and to lay the groundwork for future jihadist emirates in North

²⁴⁸ “An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html>

²⁴⁹ Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, “Hiwar ma’a al-Qa’id Khalid Abi Abbas - Amir al-Mintaqa al-Sahrawiyya li-l-Jama’a al-Salafiyya li-l-Da’wa wa-l-Qital, [Dialogue with the Leader Khalid Abi Abbas (Mokhtar Belmokhtar) - the Emir of the Desert Region for the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat,” May 5, 2006, http://www.ilmway.com/site/maqdis/MS_37048.html.

²⁵⁰ Andrew Lebovich, “Trying to Understand MUJWA,” *Al Wasat*, August 22, 2012, <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/08/22/trying-to-understand-mujwa/>.

²⁵¹ Letter from Abdelmalek Droukdel to local AQIM fighters in Timbuktu, 2012, recovered by the Associated Press in 2013, available at http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/Al-Qaeda-manifesto.pdf.

²⁵² AQIM, “Al Qaida Belmokhtar Letter,” dated October 3, 2012 and released by Associated Press in 2013, p. 26; available at: http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-belmokhtar-letter-english.pdf.

Africa and the Sahara. Some AQIM leaders claim that AQIM is succeeding in its goals, or is at least thwarting France's ambitions in the Sahel.²⁵³

AQIM has shown limited inclination to carry out attacks in the United States and Europe, despite the precedent of the GIA's attacks on France in 1994 and 1995. AQIM has kidnapped Westerners and has attacked foreign assets in North Africa and the Sahara, including embassies, United Nations buildings, and UN peacekeepers. Yet AQIM has rarely attempted to kidnap Americans, and has not directly attacked U.S. military personnel in the region. Given that the United States has a policy of not paying ransoms, its citizens are not as vulnerable as are Canadian and European nationals—except for Americans working in the energy sector, who may be caught up in AQIM attacks on infrastructure. Finally, AQIM has shown little interest in mobilizing “remote-controlled” attacks in the United States or Europe, in the manner that AQAP and ISIL have.

Funding

Much of AQIM's funding has come from kidnappings for ransom, beginning with a reported \$6 million ransom paid after its first major kidnapping in 2003.²⁵⁴ Between 2008 and 2012, AQIM kidnapped 39 Westerners in the region. With European governments paying amounts anywhere up to \$10 million per hostage, AQIM has amassed upwards of \$50 million.²⁵⁵ AQIM's wealth may have declined since 2013—defeat in Mali, as well as a decline in European tourism in the Sahara, has hurt AQIM's ability to kidnap Europeans and obtain ransoms. As of February 2017, AQIM held some eight foreigners in the Sahara.²⁵⁶ AQIM has long been suspected of smuggling contraband goods and illicit drugs in the Sahara and North Africa, but the evidence is thin regarding AQIM's participation in drug trafficking.²⁵⁷

²⁵³ “Abu al-Hammam fi Awwal Muqabala Lahu ba'd al-Tadakhkhul al-Faransi bi-Mali [Abu Hammam in His First Interview after the French Intervention in Mali],” Al Akhbar, 10 January 2016, <http://alakhbar.info/intrep/interv/13563-2016-01-10-18-02-56.html>.

²⁵⁴ “Newspaper: Berlin Paid Ransom to Free Hostages,” *Deutsche Welle*, August 6, 2004, <http://www.dw.com/en/newspaper-berlin-paid-ransom-to-free-hostages/a-1289545>.

²⁵⁵ Lacher and Steinberg, “Spreading Local Roots,” p. 70. See also Rukmini Callimachi, “Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-Al-Qaedas-patron.html?_r=0.

²⁵⁶ @MENASTREAM, tweet, February 8, 2017, <https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/829508858074783746>.

²⁵⁷ Lacher, “Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel.” See also Sahara Medias, “Entretien avec Lemine Ould Mohamed Salem, journaliste mauritanien, auteur de «Le

Evolution

Phase one: Prehistory (1991–2003)

During the 1990s, Algeria experienced a civil war following the military's annulment of the 1991–1992 parliamentary elections. The government fought diverse factions of Islamists and jihadists. In the midst of the war, the forerunners of AQIM were two jihadist groups, the GIA and its offshoot the GSPC. Starting in 1996, the GIA's brutality—including massacring civilians and assassinating prominent Islamists—alienated many of its supporters.²⁵⁸ The GSPC broke away from the GIA in 1998, promising to refocus the jihad on the Algerian state. In the late 1990s, Algeria's civil war wound down, and mainstream Islamist fighters accepted a government amnesty; the GIA and GSPC were marginalized. The GIA faded after the death of its leader Antar Zouabri in 2002. In November 2004, Algerian forces arrested the last known emir of the GIA, which by then had been largely superseded by the GSPC.²⁵⁹

Between its founding in 1998 and 2003, the GSPC had limited capabilities. Between 2000 and 2003, it released a newsletter called *Sada al-Qital* (The Echo of Combat). Issues of the newsletter featured reports on GSPC raids against military installations,²⁶⁰ but the group remained small.

Phase two: The early Saharan turn (2003–2006)

After the GSPC broke with the GIA, and after Algeria's civil war wound down, the GSPC made a “Saharan turn,” increasing its operations in southern Algeria and the Sahara in order to ensure its own survival and to compensate for its inability to

Ben Laden du Sahara, sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar»,” November 6, 2014, http://fr.saharamedias.net/Entretien-avec-Lemine-Ould-Mohamed-Salem-journaliste-mauritanien-auteur-de-Le-Ben-Laden-du-Sahara-sur-les-traces-du_a5145.html.

²⁵⁸ Umar Abd al-Hakim [Abu Mus'ab al-Suri], *Mukhtasar Shahadati 'ala al-Jihad fi al-Jaza'ir 1988-1996* (self-published, 2004), p. 6.

²⁵⁹ “Algeria Reveals Rebel Crackdown,” BBC News, January 4, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4144265.stm>.

²⁶⁰ *Sada al-Qital*, available through the Jihadi Document Repository at the University of Oslo.

overthrow the Algerian state.²⁶¹ This period coincided with the GSPC's pledge of allegiance to Al-Qaeda and the increasing contact between the two groups. In 2004, GSPC emir Nabil Sahraoui was killed by Algerian security forces. He was replaced by Droukdel.²⁶²

The Saharan turn began in early 2003, when the GSPC kidnapped 32 European tourists in southeastern Algeria. The hostages were ransomed by the German government, working through Malian national and future AQIM ally Iyad Ag Ghali.²⁶³ The GSPC also began to attack local government targets: in June 2005, the GSPC raided an army post at Lemgheitty, in the far northeastern Mauritanian desert.

As part of its Saharan turn, the GSPC/AQIM established a deep presence in northern Mali, initially led by Saharan commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar. He and Algerian national Yahya Abu Hammam reportedly based themselves in Mali as early as 2003.²⁶⁴ AQIM wooed northern Malian populations through a combination of embedding itself in the smuggling economy that connects Algeria and Mali, and making religious appeals. AQIM commanders and fighters also intermarried with local families; Belmokhtar reportedly married at least one woman in Mali.²⁶⁵ AQIM also cultivated contacts among Malian Arabs and the Tuareg. Additionally, AQIM and its intermediaries built networks of collusion with Malian state officials who tolerated smuggling and kidnapping.²⁶⁶

²⁶¹ Stephen Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group into an Al-Qa'ida Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region," *Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin* 85 (Spring 2010): 12-29, <http://concernedafricascholars.org/docs/bulletin85harmon.pdf>.

²⁶² Cherif Ouazani, "Le Ben Laden du Maghreb," *Jeune Afrique*, September 14, 2009, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/201193/politique/le-ben-laden-du-maghreb/>.

²⁶³ "Ex-Partner of Germany Leads Malian Islamists," Spiegel Online, January 21, 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/leader-of-malian-islamists-once-helped-german-government-a-878724.html>.

²⁶⁴ United Nations Security Council, "Djamel Akkacha," version as of September 9, 2014, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/djamel-akkacha.

²⁶⁵ Agence Nouakchott d'Information, "Amir 'Katibat al-Mulaththamin' Khalid Abu al-'Abbas fi Muqabala Muthira ma'a Akhbar Nuakchut [The Emir of the Veiled Men Battalion, Khalid Abu al-Abbas, in an Interesting Interview with Nouakchott News]," 9 November 2011, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/khc481lid-abc5ab-al-abb481s-mukhtc481r-bin-mue1b8a5ammad-bilmukhtc481r-interview-with-nouakchott-news-ar.pdf>.

²⁶⁶ Mohammed Mahmoud Abu al-Ma'ali, "Al-Qaeda and Its Allies in the Sahel and the Sahara," Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, May 1, 2012, p. 2, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ResourceGallery/media/Documents/2012/4/30/2012430145241774734Al%20Qaeda%20and%20its%20allies%20in%20the%20Sahel%20and%20the%20Sahara.pdf>; Morten Bøås, "Guns, Money

Phase three: Intensive kidnappings in the Sahara, renewed terrorism in Algeria (2006–2011)

The GSPC joined Al-Qaeda in 2006 and became AQIM in 2007. After 2008, AQIM made Mali the epicenter of its kidnapping operations; AQIM used Mali to hold hostages from its kidnappings in Niger; it kidnapped Europeans inside Mali, including four Europeans taken at a desert music festival in January 2009,²⁶⁷ and seized a Frenchman in November 2009.²⁶⁸

AQIM also targeted Mauritania. By 2007, AQIM had established a small, amateurish cell in Mauritania's capital Nouakchott.²⁶⁹ Some of the cell's members murdered four French tourists near Aleg in 2007.²⁷⁰ Subsequent AQIM attacks in Mauritania included a February 2008 raid by gunmen on the Israeli embassy and a nearby nightclub, a September 2008 ambush of Mauritanian soldiers near Zouerate,²⁷¹ an unsuccessful but fatal kidnapping attempt on an American citizen in Nouakchott in June 2009,²⁷² an unsuccessful suicide bombing outside the French embassy in August 2009, the kidnapping of three Spanish aid workers traveling between Nouakchott and Nouadhibou in November 2009,²⁷³ a suicide car bombing at a military outpost near Nema in August 2010,²⁷⁴ and a failed plot to assassinate Mauritanian President

and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, April 28, 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/guns-money-and-prayers-aqims-blueprint-for-securing-control-of-northern-mali>; Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*. The Carnegie Papers. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf.

²⁶⁷ Helen Pidd, "Background: The kidnapping of Edwin Dyer," *The Guardian* (London), June 3, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/03/edwin-dyer-hostage-killed-Al-Qaeda>.

²⁶⁸ "African Al-Qaeda Demands Swap for French Hostage," BBC News, January 11, 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8452500.stm>.

²⁶⁹ Nicholas Schmidle, "Saharan Conundrum," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html>

²⁷⁰ "Tourists Shot Dead in Mauritania," BBC News, December 24, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7159420.stm>.

²⁷¹ Nicholas Schmidle, "Saharan Conundrum." *The New York Times Magazine*.

²⁷² "African Al-Qaeda 'Killed' US Man," BBC News, June 25, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8118328.stm>.

²⁷³ Mark Tran, "Three Spanish Aid Workers Kidnapped in Mauritania," *The Guardian* (London), November 30, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/30/spanish-aid-workers-kidnapped-mauritania>.

²⁷⁴ The Moor Next Door, "Mauritania Car Bombing at Nema," August 24, 2010, <https://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2010/08/24/mauritania-car-bombing-at-nema/>.

Mohamed Ould Abd al-Aziz in 2011.²⁷⁵ AQIM attacks in Mauritania ended in 2011, possibly due to a secret truce between Abd al-Aziz and AQIM.²⁷⁶ Before and after 2011, Mauritania has been a key recruiting site for AQIM.²⁷⁷

During this period, AQIM treated Niger primarily as a zone for kidnappings, including two Canadian diplomats in December 2008,²⁷⁸ seven workers of the uranium mining company Areva in September 2010,²⁷⁹ and two Frenchmen in 2011.²⁸⁰ Toward the end of this period, AQIM developed some ties to jihadist groups in Nigeria. At least three Nigerian jihadists involved with Boko Haram trained with AQIM's Tariq ibn Ziyad Battalion prior to 2009. They put Boko Haram in touch with AQIM senior leadership after the failure of Boko Haram's mass uprising in July 2009. Boko Haram sought training and weapons, especially bomb-making training and materials, from AQIM.²⁸¹ Boko Haram also wrote to Bin Laden asking to join Al-Qaeda,²⁸² but Boko Haram never became an official Al-Qaeda affiliate. AQIM publicly

²⁷⁵ The Moor Next Door, "AQIM Assassination Attempt on O. Abdel Aziz," February 2, 2011, <https://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2011/02/02/aqim-assassination-attempt-on-o-abdel-aziz/>. See AQIM's statement on the attempt here: <http://jihadology.net/2011/02/09/new-statement-from-al-qa%E2%80%99idah-in-the-islamic-maghreb-a-statement-claiming-the-assassination-attempt-of-frances-client-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-uld-abd-al-aziz/>.

²⁷⁶ Mark Hosenball, "Al-Qaeda Leaders Made Plans for Peace Deal with Mauritania: Documents," Reuters, March 2, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-binladen-mauritania-idUSKCN0W356G>. The document in question is available here: <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20about%20matter%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Maghreb.pdf>.

²⁷⁷ The Moor Next Door, "Thoughts RE: Recent AQIM Video," August 29, 2010, <https://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2010/08/29/thoughts-re-recent-aqim-video/>.

²⁷⁸ "Canada: Two Diplomats Missing in Niger," CNN, December 15, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/12/15/canada.un.kidnap/>.

²⁷⁹ "French Nationals Among Seven Workers Kidnapped in Niger," BBC News, September 16, 2010, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-11325749>.

²⁸⁰ "Al-Qaeda Claims Kidnapping of Frenchmen Found Dead," Reuters, January 13, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-niger-qaeda-kidnapping-idUSTRE70C57F20110113>.

²⁸¹ Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd, "Letter from Abdallah Abu Zayd Abd-al-Hamid to Abu Mus ab Abd-al-Wadud," August 24, 2009, translated and published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 19, 2017, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20from%20Abdallah%20Abu%20Zayd%20Abd-al-Hamid%20to%20Abu%20Mus%20ab%20Abd-al-Wadud.pdf>.

²⁸² Abubakar Shekau, "Praise Be to God, the Lord of All Worlds," letter to Osama Bin Laden, likely 2010, translated and published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, March 1, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Praise%20be%20to%20God%20the%20Lord%20of%20all%20worlds.pdf>.

offered Boko Haram assistance in February 2010,²⁸³ and may have trained the Boko Haram suicide bombers who attacked Nigeria's capital of Abuja in two separate incidents in June 2011 and August 2011. However, AQIM also helped establish the Boko Haram breakaway sect Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (better known as Ansaru) in 2011–2012.²⁸⁴ Ansaru publicly criticized Boko Haram's leadership and its willingness to kill civilians.

As it conducted attacks and built local ties in the Sahara and in West Africa, the GSPC/AQIM continued to target northern Algeria. Starting in 2005, the GSPC began to use bombings more frequently.²⁸⁵ AQIM's peak year for high-profile terrorism inside Algeria was 2007. In April 2007, AQIM perpetrated twin suicide bombings in the capital Algiers, targeting the office of then-Prime Minister Abdelaziz Belkhadem and a police station. In December 2007, AQIM conducted another twin bombing in Algiers, targeting the United Nations headquarters and the Supreme Constitutional Court. Another significant year was 2011, when AQIM fighters carried out numerous raids and bombings targeting soldiers and police.²⁸⁶ The Algerian security forces, however, have limited AQIM's presence in northern Algeria.²⁸⁷

In terms of media, the GSPC replaced its newsletter *Sada al-Qital* with a new publication, *Al-Jama'a* (The Group) from 2004–2006,²⁸⁸ but discontinued that publication when the group formally joined Al-Qaeda. After the affiliation, AQIM developed a highly professional media wing called Al-Andalus.

²⁸³ "Hal Tahalafat al-Qa'ida ma'a Buku Haram? [Has al-Qa'ida Allied with Boko Haram?]" Al Jazeera, June 16, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2010/6/16/%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%83%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85>.

²⁸⁴ Abu Usamatul Ansary, "A Message from Nigeria," *Al-Risalah* 4 (January 2017): 18-21, p. 21, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/al-risacc84lah-magazine-4.pdf>.

²⁸⁵ Hanna Rogan, "Violent Trends in Algeria Since 9/11," *CTC Sentinel*, November 15, 2008, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/violent-trends-in-algeria-since-911>.

²⁸⁶ Andrew Lebovich, "AQIM Returns in Force in Northern Algeria," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, September 26, 2011, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/aqim-returns-in-force-in-northern-algeria>.

²⁸⁷ Geoff Porter, "AQIM's Objectives in North Africa," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, February 1, 2011, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/aqim%E2%80%99s-objectives-in-north-africa>.

²⁸⁸ Issues of *Al-Jama'a* are available through the Jihadi Document Repository at the University of Oslo.

Phase four: The Arab Spring and the jihadist occupation of Northern Mali (January 2011–January 2013)

Inside Algeria, the Arab Spring protest movement failed to challenge the regime's stability and did not offer AQIM a political opening. AQIM played no military role in the Tunisian and Libyan revolutions of 2011,²⁸⁹ but the group sought to shape the revolutions there. AQIM worked with local jihadist groups, especially Ansar al-Sharia, in both Tunisia and Libya. In 2012, AQIM launched a small unit in Tunisia, the Uqba ibn Nafi Battalion.²⁹⁰ The battalion publicized its link to AQIM in 2015, and has likely absorbed some members of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), but its "low-level insurgency... has not altered the status quo in Tunisia."²⁹¹ AQIM issued statements supporting the revolution in Libya, and urging Libyans to create an Islamic state.²⁹² Since the Arab Spring, AQIM has used southern Libya as a rear base, training center, and smuggling hub.²⁹³

²⁸⁹ Aaron Zelin and Andrew Lebovich, "Assessing al-Qa'ida's Presence in the New Libya," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, March 22, 2012, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/assessing-Al-Qaeda-presence-in-the-new-libya>.

²⁹⁰ Aaron Zelin, Andrew Lebovich, and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb's Tunisia Strategy," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, July 23, 2013, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-tunisia-strategy>. See AQIM's statements from January 2011 here: https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/statement-from-the-amc4abr-of-al-qc481_idah-in-the-islamic-maghreb-abc5ab-mue1b9a3ab-abd-al-wadc5abd-abd-al-malik-drc5abkdc4abl-in-support-of-the-intifada-of-our-people-in-tunisi.pdf and here: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb-to-our-people-in-tunisia-the-tyrant-has-fled-but-the-infidel-and-tyrannical-system-remains.pdf>.

²⁹¹ Aaron Zelin, "ICSR Insight: Between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in Tunisia," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, May 11, 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/05/icsr-insight-islamic-state-Al-Qaeda-tunisia/>.

²⁹² Abd al-Malik Droukdel/Abu Mus'ab Abd al-Wadud, "Tahni'a bi-Intisar Ahfad 'Umar al-Mukhtar [Congratulations Upon the Victory of the Descendants of Umar al-Mukhtar]," Nukhbat al-I'lam al-Jihadi, October 2011, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/abc5ab-mue1b9a3ab-abd-al-wadc5abd-abd-al-malik-drc5abkdc4abl-congratulations-on-the-victory-of-the-descendants-of-umar-al-mukhtc481r.pdf>. See also Droukdel/Abd al-Wadud, "Nusra li-l-Ahrar Ahfad 'Umar al-Mukhtar [Support for the Free Ones, the Descendants of Umar al-Mukhtar]," Nukhbat al-I'lam al-Jihadi, March 2011, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/abc5ab-mue1b9a3ab-abd-al-wadc5abd-support-for-the-free-descendants-of-umar-al-mukhtc481r.pdf>. Umar al-Mukhtar was an anti-colonial fighter in early twentieth-century Libya.

²⁹³ Sarah Topol, "Guns and Poses," *Harper's Magazine*, December 2014, <http://harpers.org/archive/2014/12/guns-and-poses/>.

Meanwhile, AQIM seized the opportunity to join a rebellion in northern Mali, acting initially as a quiet and minor player, but soon taking center stage as its partners established a short-lived jihadist emirate. During 2010-2011, activists in northern Mali and the diaspora prepared the ground for a separatist Tuareg rebellion. The Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (French acronym, MNLA) formed in October 2011, and proclaimed the goal of establishing an independent state of “Azawad” in northern Mali. When AQIM’s ally and negotiating partner Iyad Ag Ghali failed to secure leadership of the MNLA (or, alternatively, when he rejected the group’s aims), he formed his own group—the jihadist Ansar al-Din.²⁹⁴ These developments allowed AQIM to capitalize on splits within the Tuareg rebel leadership.²⁹⁵

AQIM provided Ansar al-Din with military, financial, and logistical support.²⁹⁶ Ansar al-Din soon joined forces with AQIM and an AQIM offshoot, MUJWA. After Ansar al-Din and the MNLA cooperated between January and March 2012 to capture northern Malian cities, the partnership collapsed. Ansar al-Din proclaimed that its goal was not the MNLA’s vision of separatism but, rather, the imposition of sharia.²⁹⁷ After attempts to work out a truce in April and May, the jihadist groups drove the MNLA out of major northern Malian cities by June.

In January 2013, the jihadist coalition in northern Mali advanced into the country’s central Mopti and Segou regions. The advance provoked a French military intervention, Operation Serval. Together with African partners, especially Chad, the French drove jihadists out of northern Malian cities and began hunting them in the northern Malian desert. The jihadist occupation of northern Mali caused a spike in AQIM’s Saharan and Sahelian recruitment, perhaps to several thousand affiliated

²⁹⁴ Andy Morgan, “Alghabass Ag Intalla - Interview with the Head of the MIA,” Andy Morgan Writes, January 31, 2013, <http://www.andymorganwrites.com/interview-with-alghabass-ag-intalla-head-of-the-islamic-movement-of-azawad-mia/>.

²⁹⁵ Lacher and Steinberg, “Spreading Local Roots,” German Institute for International and Security Affairs: Jihadism in Africa, June 2015, p 69. https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2015_RP05_sbg_web.pdf

²⁹⁶ United Nations Security Council, “Abdelmalek Droukdel,” version as of September 9, 2014, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/abdelmalek-droukdel.

²⁹⁷ Catherine Gouëset, “Tuareg, islamistes, Aqmi: ils se disputent le nord du Mali,” *L’Express*, April 3, 2012, http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/mali-touareg-islamistes-aqmi-ils-se-disputent-le-nord-du-pays_1100847.html.

fighters, but the collapse of the jihadist enclave meant that AQIM's numbers in the Sahara shrank again—perhaps to as low as a few hundred fighters.²⁹⁸

Phase five: Terrorism after the fall of the Malian enclave (January 2013–present)

Since the completion of Operation Serval, French intervention has killed several commanders from AQIM and allied groups, including Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd (killed in February 2013).²⁹⁹ A U.S. drone strike in Libya may have killed Belmokhtar in November 2016.³⁰⁰

Starting in 2013, AQIM and its allies launched a campaign of terrorist attacks in northern Mali and beyond. Within Mali, AQIM now often targets the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). AQIM also works to destabilize the peace process between the Malian government and non-jihadist rebel groups.

Beyond Mali, AQIM and its offshoots and allies—especially Belmokhtar's fighters—have perpetrated several major attacks on hotels and energy infrastructure. Hotel attacks include the November 2015 attack in Bamako, Mali; the January 2016 attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; and the March 2016 attack in Grand Bassam, Cote d'Ivoire. Attacks on energy infrastructure include two incidents: the mass hostage-taking at the Tigentourine gas facility in In Amenas, Algeria by Belmokhtar's unit in January 2013, and Belmokhtar's twin suicide bombings of the Somair uranium mine in Arlit, Niger, and an army barracks in Agadez, Niger, in May 2013.³⁰¹ Starting with

²⁹⁸ Lacher and Steinberg, "Spreading Local Roots," German Institute for International and Security Affairs: Jihadism in Africa, June 2015, p 69. https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2015_RP05_sbg_web.pdf

²⁹⁹ Daniel Flynn, "Al-Qaeda Group Confirms Death of Abou Zeid and Another Leader," Reuters, June 16, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mauritania-aqim-idUSBRE95F0DQ20130616>.

³⁰⁰ Simon Osborne, "Dead or Alive? Why the World's Most-Wanted Terrorist Has Been Killed at Least Three Times," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2016/nov/28/dead-or-alive-mokhtar-belmokhtar-most-wanted-terrorist-killed-three-times>.

³⁰¹ "Niger Suicide Bombers Target Areva Mine and Barracks," BBC News, May 24, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-22637084>.

the Tigentourine attack, Belmokhtar presented these incidents as revenge for the French-led intervention in Mali.³⁰²

AQIM is also involved in intra-jihadist struggles in eastern Libya. AQIM supports Ansar al-Sharia Libya and other AQ-leaning groups against ISIL and the anti-Islamist/anti-jihadist General Khalifa Haftar.³⁰³ Belmokhtar is the most prominent AQIM leader with a recurring presence in Libya. He reportedly set up training camps in southwestern Libya in 2011-2012, which he used to train fighters for the attack on Tigentourine.³⁰⁴ The expulsion of ISIL from Sirte in late 2016 may ultimately benefit AQIM and Ansar al-Sharia Libya.

As Belmokhtar's career since 2013 demonstrates, AQIM has strong capabilities to mount spectacular attacks, but the Al-Qaeda affiliate faces several major pressures simultaneously: even as Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun perpetrated attacks on major energy sites and on urban hotels across northwest Africa from 2013 to 2016, Belmokhtar had repeated brushes with death and may be dead at the time of this writing. In northern Algeria, Droukdel and AQIM's battalions seem incapable of perpetrating major attacks. Region wide, AQIM lacks the ability to hold territory except in conditions of extreme state weakness. Even then, AQIM can take territory only when it enjoys substantial rapport with local jihadists.

³⁰² "Al-Muwaqqi'un bi-l-Dam' Tatawa"ad Mazidan min al-Duwal [The Signers in Blood Threaten More Countries," Al Jazeera, January 21, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2013/1/21/-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D9%82%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84>.

³⁰³ See AQIM, "Mas'alat Hirasat 'Abd al-Jalil wa-Dukhul al-Lajna al-Amaniyya (Darna-Libiya) [The Issue of Guarding Abd al-Jalil and the Entrance of the Security Committee (Darna-Libiya)," May 23, 2015, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/al-qc481_idah-in-the-islamic-maghrib-22ruling-on-guarding-muelb9a3e1b9adafc481-abd-al-jalc4abl-and-entering-the-security-committee-darnah-libya22.pdf; and AQIM, "Bayan bi-Sha'n al-Iqtital al-Jari fi Madinat 'Darna al-Libiyya' [Statement on the Matter of the Ongoing Fighting in the Libyan City of Derna]," July 7, 2015, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/al-qc481_idah-in-the-islamic-maghrib-22on-the-ongoing-fighting-in-the-city-of-darnah-libya22.pdf.

³⁰⁴ Tim Lister, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar: Al-Qaeda Figure Was a Legend Among Jihadists," CNN, June 14, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/14/world/mokhtar-belmokhtar/>.

Security vulnerabilities in Mali

Table 16 below summarizes the security vulnerabilities in Mali, where AQIM has been operating. While it is not the only place where AQIM operates in the Sahel region, we focus on Mali given its importance as a base of operations for the organization.

Table 16. Security vulnerabilities in Mali (2003-2017)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mali's separatist rebellions, led by segments of the ethnic Tuareg group beginning in the 1960s, eventually created a pool of political allies for AQIM in northern Mali. • AQIM's premier local partner became Iyad Ag Ghali, a former rebel. When the fourth Tuareg rebellion began in 2012, AQIM, Ag Ghali, and their partners quickly sidelined separatist rebels and imposed jihadist rule over northern cities. • Even after the French-led Operation Serval ended jihadist rule in early 2013, AQIM and its allies continue to benefit from the multi-sided conflict that still rages in northern Mali • The spread of this conflict into central Mali has empowered AQIM's allies among segments of the Fulani, another important ethnic group.
Weakness of the central government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Malian state has struggled to govern northern Mali since independence. The state's weakness allowed AQIM/GSPC to gain a foothold there in the early 2000s. • The state was not only unable to control crime – certain state officials even colluded with criminals, including AQIM.³⁰⁵ • The weakness of the Malian state triggered events in 2012 that led to state collapse: first, Mali's armed forces began losing battles to separatist rebels; second, junior officers angered at these defeats launched a successful coup against the civilian government in the south; third, the chaos in Bamako helped AQIM and its allies extend

³⁰⁵ Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*, The Carnegie Papers, September 2012, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf, pp. 13-14.

	<p>their control in the north.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since Operation Serval, the state has not been able to impose law and order in northern and central Mali; the continuing chaos benefits AQIM.
Illegitimacy of the central government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Malian state is poor, corrupt, and deeply dependent on foreign aid. Many Malians appear disenchanted with mainstream politicians.³⁰⁶ Such attitudes do not mean that Malians are flocking to AQIM, but this atmosphere does hurt the state's efforts to rebuild legitimacy. • Corruption continues to undermine efforts, both internal and external, to reform and strengthen Mali's armed forces.³⁰⁷
Demographic instability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mali has a high birthrate and a youth bulge (roughly half of the population was under 18 in 2012),³⁰⁸ which may have boosted AQIM's recruitment.
Security sector ineffectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mali's inability to confront AQIM militarily is a symptom of the weakness of the Malian state. Since the late 2000s, when AQIM first became a major security concern in Mali, the country's security forces have struggled to respond to AQIM. • Perhaps recognizing its own weakness, the Malian state has sometimes preferred to make deals with AQIM, especially prisoner exchanges.
Neighbors in crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The origins of AQIM/GSPC in Mali date to the Algerian civil war and that country's crisis in the 1990s and early 2000s. • The Libyan revolution of 2011 contributed to Mali's destabilization by causing flows of fighters and weapons to northern Mali. This situation aided AQIM indirectly, by boosting Tuareg separatists and contributing to chaos in early 2012, and directly, when Libyan weapons reached AQIM.

U.S. approach to AQIM

Table 17 below describes the approaches the U.S. has taken to countering AQIM from 2003-2017.

³⁰⁶ Kamissa Camara, *Mali is becoming a failed state and it is not the jihadists' fault*, Africa Research Institute, November 16, 2016, <https://www.africaresearchinstitute.org/newsite/blog/mali-becoming-failed-state-not-jihadists-fault/>.

³⁰⁷ Michael Shurkin, Stephanie Pezard, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, *Mali's Next Battle: Improving Counterterrorism Capabilities*, RAND Corporation, 2017, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1241/RAND_RR1241.pdf, p. 85.

³⁰⁸ UNICEF, "Statistics," webpage, https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mali_statistics.html.

Table 17. U.S. approach to AQIM (2003-2017)

US Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open sources give little indication that the U.S. has undertaken any unilateral direction action in Mali. However, the April 2012 deaths of three U.S. soldiers in a car crash in Bamako raised questions about the extent of covert U.S. operations in Mali.³⁰⁹ • In 2015, U.S. forces in Bamako participated in the response to the Radisson hotel attack by AQIM and its allies; U.S. forces reportedly helped to move freed hostages to secure locations while Malian forces engaged AQIM gunmen.³¹⁰
Security Cooperation/Building Partner Capacity (Train and Equip)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train-and-equip programs, run through the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), have been the centerpiece of U.S. counter-AQIM efforts in Mali. Mali was an original member of TSCTP's predecessor program, the Pan-Sahel Initiative, and Mali has often been the top recipient of bilateral TSCTP funding since that program's creation in 2005.³¹¹ • 2009 saw a major increase in U.S. involvement in training missions in Mali, reflecting an increase in attacks by AQIM.³¹² Joint Special Operations Task Force – Trans Sahara (JSOTF-TS) began to train and equip special counterterrorism units.³¹³ • The March 2012 coup in Mali prompted, for legal reasons, a suspension of U.S. assistance.³¹⁴ After the elections of July/August 2013, training resumed.
Civil Military Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As part of TSCTP, the U.S. has deployed Civil Military Support Elements (CMSEs) to Mali and other TSCTP countries. For

³⁰⁹ Craig Whitlock, "Mysterious fatal crash provides rare glimpse of U.S. commandos in Mali," *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/mysterious-fatal-crash-provides-rare-glimpse-of-us-commandos-in-mali/2012/07/08/gJQAGO71WW_story.html?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.c7b3e395c48e.

³¹⁰ "Mali attack: Special forces storm hotel to free hostages," BBC, November 20, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34877069>.

³¹¹ Niger was the top recipient for the 2005-2008 period, whereas Mali was for the 2009-2013 period. See <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08860.pdf>, p. 12; and <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/664337.pdf>, second page of document (no page number).

³¹² Simon J. Powelson, *Enduring engagement yes, episodic engagement no: lessons for SOF in Mali*, Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive, 2013-12, http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/38996/13Dec_Powelson_Simon.pdf?sequence=1, p. 7.

³¹³ Powelson, "Enduring engagement yes, episodic engagement no: lessons for SOF in Mali," pp. 17-18.

³¹⁴ Whitlock, "Mysterious fatal crash provides rare glimpse of U.S. commandos in Mali."

	<p>example, a CMSE and USAID delivered humanitarian aid in northern Mali prior to the 2012 crisis.³¹⁵ The CMSE's work involved, among other efforts, helping the Malian Ministry of Health to vaccinate populations in areas seen as vulnerable to AQIM's influence.³¹⁶</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. also deploys Military Information Support Teams (MIST) to TSCTP countries, and has done so at points in Mali.³¹⁷
Support Host Nation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before and after the interruption in assistance, the U.S. has supported the Malian state and civil society in advancing democracy, strengthening governance, and promoting the rule of law. Prior to the 2012 coup, USAID addressed what it saw as root causes of terrorism in northern Mali, and working to increase access to potable water, create jobs for at-risk youth, and disseminate messages of peace through the radio.³¹⁸ • Since the restoration of assistance in 2013, one key U.S. program has been the Security Governance Initiative (SGI). SGI launched in 2014 with the intent of strengthening security and governance to combat and undermine terrorism in Africa. Initial funding for the program was set at \$65 million, and Mali was one of the initial six partner countries.³¹⁹ In Mali, SGI has focused on capacity-building within the Ministries of Defense, Security, and Justice.³²⁰
Messaging/ counter-messaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From 2008-2015, AFRICOM operated a news website called <i>Magharebia</i>, which sought to counter violent extremism in North and West Africa. • Counter-messaging is also done by MIST personnel (see above).
"Third Party" Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since the crisis of 2012-2013, the U.S. has had three key partners

³¹⁵ Jamie Evans-Butler and Lee Cohen, "A Collaborative Approach to Combating Instability in Northern Mali," USAID *Frontlines*, January/February 2012, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/frontlines/democracy-human-rights-governance/collaborative-approach-combating>.

³¹⁶ Major John P. Wishart, "Out of Africa: CMSEs Engage Vulnerable Populations [sic] in West Africa to Counter Influence of Violent Extremist Organizations," Originally published in the October-December 2011 edition of *Special Warfare*, <http://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWmag/archive/SW2404/SW2404OutOfAfrica.html>.

³¹⁷ Jeffrey Swedberg and Steve Smith, *Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) Evaluative Study*, April 15, 2014, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00JXQ3.pdf, p. 18.

³¹⁸ *Strategy Statement: Mali*, USAID, April 30, 2006, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pdacg949.pdf, p. 12.

³¹⁹ "FACT SHEET: Security Governance Initiative," The White House, August 6, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/06/fact-sheet-security-governance-initiative>.

³²⁰ "Security Governance Initiative," State Department, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254115.pdf>, p. 9.

in Mali: France, the European Union, and the United Nations.

- When France launched Operation Serval, the U.S. provided critical logistical support, airlifting French and African soldiers and equipment. The U.S. deployed approximately two dozen soldiers to Mali in 2013, including (as publicly reported) ten soldiers providing “liaison support” in non-combat roles, and another two-dozen stationed at U.S. Embassy Bamako.³²¹
- After Serval ended in 2014 and France transitioned to Operation Barkhane, a region-wide counterterrorism operation, the U.S. continued to provide “aerial refueling, transportation and intelligence assistance” to the French military.³²²
- The U.S. also supports the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali, the key Western-led security sector reform effort in the country since 2013.³²³
- The U.S. has also provided significant support to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which was established in May 2013. By August 2014, the U.S. had given \$115 million to MINUSMA, and had spent an additional \$173 million on “logistical support, training, and critical equipment, such as vehicles and communications, to African peacekeepers deploying to MINUSMA and its predecessor, the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA).”³²⁴

Security Sector Reform

- Prior to 2012, U.S. programs in Mali focused on counterterrorism training rather than security sector reform per se. As noted above, since 2013 the premier security sector reform program in Mali has been the EUTM, in which the U.S. plays a supporting role.
- The above-mentioned SGI program also has a substantial security sector reform component.

³²¹ Craig Whitlock, “Pentagon Deploys a Small Number of Troops to War Torn Mali”, *The Washington Post*, April 2013. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-deploys-small-number-of-troops-to-war-torn-mali/2013/04/30/2b02c928-b1a0-11e2-bc39-65b0a67147df_story.html?utm_campaign=pubexchange_article&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=huffingtonpost.com&utm_term=.d719700709b2

³²² Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Military Offers Support, but Not Troops, to Aid France in Africa,” *New York Times*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/12/world/africa/africa-us-military-aid-france.html>.

³²³ “FACT SHEET: U.S.-EU Cooperation on Common Security and Defense Policy,” The White House, March 26, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/26/fact-sheet-us-eu-cooperation-common-security-and-defense-policy>.

³²⁴ “FACT SHEET: U.S. Support for Peacekeeping in Africa,” The White House, August 6, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/06/fact-sheet-us-support-peacekeeping-africa>.

**Intelligence and
Information Sharing**

- Since at least 2007, the U.S. has conducted intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) including manned and unmanned surveillance flights over the Sahara (including northern Mali).³²⁵ Currently, AFRICOM operates at least four drone facilities with responsibility for conducting ISR in the Sahel-Sahara region; these facilities are in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.³²⁶
- This intelligence is shared with France in support of Operation Barkhane.³²⁷ Open sources do not say whether such information is shared with the government of Mali.

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQIM?

The U.S. has never attempted to **defeat** AQIM. Rather, the U.S. has attempted to enable Mali, France, and other partner governments to **disrupt and dismantle** AQIM. As of early 2017, the U.S. goal seems to be to contain and degrade AQIM by supporting France's Operation Barkhane, the EUTM, and MINUSMA. AFRICOM recognizes its limited role but seeks to do more, including "a more active role in defeating AQIM."³²⁸

For the most part, the U.S. has not directly attempted to **dismantle** AQIM. There has been almost no kinetic network targeting, with two significant exceptions:

³²⁵ Craig Whitlock, "US Expands Secret Intelligence Operations in Africa," *The Washington Post*, June 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-expands-secret-intelligence-operations-in-africa/2012/06/13/gJQAHyvAbV_story.html?utm_term=.6f528c81e39c

³²⁶ Abi Anyadike, "UPDATED: A rough guide to foreign military bases in Africa," *IRIN News*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.irinnews.org/feature/2017/02/15/updated-rough-guide-foreign-military-bases-africa>.

³²⁷ Jim Garamone, "France Deploys Troops Globally in Counter-Extremism Fight," *DoD News*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1050644/france-deploys-troops-globally-in-counter-extremism-fight/>.

³²⁸ "United States Africa Command 2017 Posture Statement," <http://www.africom.mil/media-room/document/28720/africom-2017-posture-satement>, p. 13.

- During Operation Serval, French-led forces killed several AQIM sub-commanders, notably Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd. These efforts relied on U.S. logistical support and perhaps also on U.S. intelligence.
- Beyond Mali, the U.S. and France have both attempted to kill AQIM sub-commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar in Libya; his death would be a blow to AQIM, but it remains unconfirmed.

U.S.-trained Malian forces have been ineffective at **dismantling** AQIM. Malian forces have registered few kills or captures of major AQIM figures. Moreover, the government of Mali's willingness to conduct prisoner exchanges with AQIM undermines the goal of dismantling AQIM; some European governments have paid hostage ransoms to AQIM and may continue to do so, which also complicates effort to dismantle the group.

U.S.-trained Malian forces have also been ineffective at **disrupting** AQIM. The Malian state was unable to prevent AQIM from making social, economic, and political inroads in the north. AQIM kidnapped thirty-nine Westerners in the Sahara between 2008 and 2012,³²⁹ and used Mali as a key holding site for hostages.

The exception to this pattern of failure was Operation Serval. During Serval, U.S. support was critical to French-led efforts to **disrupt** AQIM in 2013. France and its partners, primarily Chad, successfully ended the control that AQIM and allied groups exercised over northern Malian cities.

Since 2013, however, the U.S. and France have not significantly **disrupted** AQIM and allied groups. Having resumed an underground existence, AQIM and its allies periodically carry out high-profile attacks on infrastructure and tourist sites throughout northwest Africa. Within Mali, jihadists are waging a sustained guerrilla campaign against the Malian state, rival armed groups, and MINUSMA. Such attacks have made northern Mali – and, increasingly, central Mali and northern Burkina Faso – extremely difficult to govern. The counterterrorism capacity of Mali's armed forces remains low.

Overall, U.S. efforts to **disrupt** AQIM in Mali have been ineffective for the following reasons.

- Washington *overestimated the Malian state as a partner*, both in terms of its democratic credentials and its effectiveness.

³²⁹ Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber (eds.), *Jihadism in Africa: Local Causes, Regional Expansion, International Alliances*, RP 5, June 2015, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2015_RP05_sbg_web.pdf, p. 70.

- U.S. train-and-equip *programs were ill matched to the capabilities of the Malian armed forces*. U.S. training was initially too episodic and brief to make a lasting difference in Malian units' effectiveness, and U.S. equipment was often too complicated for Malian soldiers to operate.³³⁰
- *TSCTP was poorly implemented*: approximately half of the funds allocated for fiscal years 2009-2013 were not disbursed. Moreover, "TSCTP program managers [were] unable to readily provide data on the status of" the disbursed funds.³³¹ Mali was the top recipient of bilateral TSCTP funding, but only \$24.4 million of the approximately \$40.6 million allocated for Mali was disbursed.³³² Although TSCTP programming in the arena of democracy and messaging had some positive effects on attitudes, such programming did not necessarily reach the most vulnerable populations in the north.³³³ Monitoring and evaluation of TSCTP programs was often poor or nonexistent, making it difficult to gauge such programs' success or failure.³³⁴

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQIM?

With respect to Mali, the only truly new vulnerability to emerge during the 2003-2017 period was the revolution and ensuing turmoil in Libya, which boosted the military capabilities of Tuareg separatists and of AQIM and its allies. Other vulnerabilities are not new, but they did worsen, particularly the weakness of the central state. The interlocking crises of early 2012 (the separatist rebellion and the military coup) were the culmination of long-term trends in Mali - but they were also ruptures that created rare opportunities for AQIM and its allies to hold territory.

³³⁰ Simon Powelson, *Enduring Engagement, Yes, Episodic Engagement, No: Lessons for SOF from Mali*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA. <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/38996>

³³¹ *Combating Terrorism: U.S. Efforts in northwest Africa Would Be Strengthened by Enhanced Program Management*, GAO Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, June 2014, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/664337.pdf>, first page (not numbered).

³³² *Combating Terrorism: U.S. Efforts in northwest Africa Would Be Strengthened by Enhanced Program Management*, p. 16.

³³³ *Combating Terrorism: U.S. Efforts in northwest Africa Would Be Strengthened by Enhanced Program Management*, p. 22.

³³⁴ Swedberg and Smith, *Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) Evaluative Study*, p. 1.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

In many ways, there has been continuity in the U.S. approach to Mali - in the bilateral relationship; the emphasis is on train-and-equip programs, combined with governance and development efforts. After the 2012-2013 crisis, several reviews of TSCTP were undertaken afterwards, but no major changes have been made to TSCTP. SGI is a program largely in line with previous approaches, although it more explicitly prioritizes security sector reform.

What has changed is the extent of the U.S. relationship with third parties in Mali. MINUSMA and the EUTM, both of which the U.S. supports, are new entities, and the U.S. partnership with France has deepened since 2012.

Another trend is the intensification of intelligence collection, particularly through surveillance flights, since 2007 and especially since 2013.

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Appendix D: Case Study of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)

Overview

Founded in 2002, the group that would later become known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) played a major role in the Sunni opposition to the U.S. occupation of Iraq and political domination by the country's Shiite majority. At its height, AQI had an estimated 5,000–10,000 members, a substantial percentage of which came from outside the country.³³⁵ AQI's ideological fanaticism, the alien presence of foreign fighters, and the group's use of extreme violence prompted a backlash within Sunni communities, most notably in Anbar Province. Anti-AQI Sunni resistance grew into what became known as the Awakening. The so-called Sons of Iraq—trained and paid by U.S. forces—combined with the 2007 U.S. troop “surge” and aggressive counterterrorism activities, badly weakened the group. But AQI—now calling itself the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)—was able to rally. The civil war in neighboring Syria helped rejuvenate the group, which rebranded itself once again, now calling itself the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Leadership and structure

Information on AQI's organization, like that of any underground group, remains limited. Yet a few general conclusions are possible: AQI's structure evolved over time. Under the group's first leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, AQI had a “leadership-centric” organizational structure that depended heavily on Zarqawi's purported charisma.³³⁶ Following Zarqawi's death in a U.S. airstrike on June 7, 2006, the group gradually

³³⁵ Kenneth Katzman, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq: Assessment and Outside Links*, Congressional Research Service, August 15, 2008, accessed June 2, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf>.

³³⁶ M.J. Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, Case Study No. 1, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2011, accessed June 1, 2017, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110614_Kirdar_AlQaedaIraq_Web.pdf.

developed a more bureaucratic and institutionalized structure.³³⁷ Instead of central leadership, ISI operational decisions were made regionally.³³⁸

This adaptation would help the group survive efforts to “decapitate” its leadership. At the same time, however, decentralization meant that the organization was heavily dependent on local commanders, many of who were poorly trained and unable to lead effectively when faced with increasing pressure by counterinsurgency forces.³³⁹

Relationship with the core

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi became known to Osama Bin Laden in 1998.³⁴⁰ Bin Laden thought Zarqawi was too hard line, especially in his stance against Shiite Muslims.³⁴¹ Another leading AQ figure, Seif al-Adel, appreciated Zarqawi’s previous attempts to stoke jihadist attacks in Jordan. At Adel’s urging, Bin Laden provided Zarqawi around \$5,000 to establish his own training camp in Herat, Afghanistan.³⁴²

If Zarqawi was too hard line for Bin Laden, Zarqawi felt the opposite about Bin Laden. The ideologically stricter Zarqawi accepted Bin Laden’s money, but he did not pledge fealty to the AQ chief during their time in Afghanistan prior to the 2001 U.S. invasion.³⁴³

During the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Zarqawi and his trainees joined AQ core and the Taliban in fighting against U.S. forces and their domestic allies.³⁴⁴ Zarqawi was not the only foreign jihadist leader to flee Afghanistan for Iran. In a book about Zarqawi, Al-Qaeda’s Adel, who served as a key AQ conduit to Zarqawi, claimed that

³³⁷ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³³⁸ Brian Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, National Security Studies Program Policy Paper (August 2011), New America Foundation, https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/4343-redefining-the-islamic-state/Fishman_Al_Qaeda_In_Iraq.023ac20877a64488b2b791cd7e313955.pdf.

³³⁹ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³⁴⁰ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³⁴¹ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³⁴² Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³⁴³ Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*. Analysis Paper Number 19 (March 2015), Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf>.

³⁴⁴ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

the Jordanian consulted with AQ leadership about moving his operations into Iraq.³⁴⁵ The AQ security chief assisted in the movement of Zarqawi's group into northern Iraq and facilitated the flow of other Arab jihadists through Syria into Kurdish-controlled Iraqi territory.³⁴⁶

In October 2004, Zarqawi formally pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden.³⁴⁷ Al-Qaeda saw its opportunity to benefit from chaos in the heart of Arab-majority countries and to directly engage U.S. forces by acquiring Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (The Monotheism and the Holy War Group), or TwJ. This gave Zarqawi a negotiating advantage over AQ core when it came to the affiliate's strategy. Al-Qaeda eventually accepted Zarqawi's anti-Shia platform and AQI was established without Zarqawi having to compromise. At the same time, Zarqawi benefited from Al-Qaeda's channels of financial and manpower support.³⁴⁸

Tensions developed between AQ core and its new affiliate, particularly with respect to the latter's sectarian attacks. By the summer of 2005, the AQ leadership was concerned that Zarqawi's actions were harming public support for the Al-Qaeda brand—both in Iraq and internationally.³⁴⁹ In letters to Zarqawi, both Zawahiri and another top figure, Atiyya 'Abd al-Rahman, requested that the AQI leader follow guidance from the AQ core. 'Abd al-Rahman advised Zarqawi not to make strategic decisions on matters including sectarian war and external operations without consulting AQ core leadership and other Iraqi jihadist leaders.³⁵⁰

The death of Zarqawi and the growing Sunni backlash against AQI provided Al-Qaeda's core leadership the opportunity to strengthen its influence over the affiliate.³⁵¹ Zarqawi's successor, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, was an Egyptian with close ties to Zawahiri.³⁵² His relationship to Al-Qaeda's deputy leader began in 1982, as a member of Egypt's Islamic Jihad.³⁵³ At the same time, the merger of AQI into ISI

³⁴⁵ Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, p. 119.

³⁴⁶ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³⁴⁷ Daniel Byman, *Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs To Know*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 163-64.

³⁴⁸ Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, pp. 117-118, 123.

³⁴⁹ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³⁵⁰ Atiyya 'Abd al-Rahman, Letter to Zarqawi, 2005, available in English translation at Combating Terrorism Center, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/atiyahs-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2>.

³⁵¹ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³⁵² Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³⁵³ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

blurred the lines of communication between AQ core and the larger Iraqi organization. AQI's Muhajir may have pledged loyalty to Al-Qaeda and vouched for ISI's fealty to the organization.³⁵⁴ However, AQ core appeared neither familiar with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi nor was the ISI leader in direct contact with AQ leadership.³⁵⁵

Both Zawahiri and Seif al-Adel had called for the declaration of an Islamic emirate in Iraq as early as 2005.³⁵⁶ However, Bin Laden and other AQ leaders opposed the declaration of an Islamic "state," as ISI did not have the capability for state-like operations. The failure of such a state-building exercise would be harmful to the reputation of the broader jihadist movement.³⁵⁷ Additionally, AQI did not consult with AQ leadership or with other local actors before declaring its establishment of ISI.³⁵⁸

The declaration of a state forced Bin Laden's hand: either he accept the move or publicize his lack of control over the affiliate's decisions.³⁵⁹ At the beginning of 2007, both 'Abd al-Rahman and Al-Qaeda's Abu Yahya al-Libi published tracts in support of ISI's establishment. Eventually, public support from Bin Laden and Zawahiri followed.³⁶⁰

The AQ core-affiliate relationship deteriorated with the 2010 deaths of Muhajir and Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi. AQ core had no involvement in the selection of ISI's next leader. Once ISI appointed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Al-Qaeda leaders reached out to their interlocutors in Iraq for any information about the new local leadership.³⁶¹ In January 2011, AQ spokesman Adam Gadahn wrote to Bin Laden that core-ISI relations were "effectively cut for a number of years."³⁶² He recommended officially severing ties.

³⁵⁴ Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*.

³⁵⁵ Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, p. 123.

³⁵⁶ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*; and Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, p. 205.

³⁵⁷ William McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, (New York: St. Martin's, 2015), pp. 15-19.

³⁵⁸ Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, p. 205; and Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*.

³⁵⁹ Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, p. 205.

³⁶⁰ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*; and Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*.

³⁶¹ Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, p. 185.

³⁶² Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*.

Ideology and goals

From its founding onwards, AQI embraced a Salafist-jihadist ideology and the belief in the imperative of establishing a new caliphate run in strict accordance with sharia law. Under Zarqawi, AQI stressed the importance of driving out the infidel invaders; extending what al- Ayman al-Zawahiri, the deputy head of Al-Qaeda (AQ) called the “jihad wave” into Iraq’s neighbors; and, finally, attacking Iraq’s ascendant Shiite community and fueling a sectarian civil war.³⁶³ A Sunni-Shia conflict, in Zarqawi’s judgment, would undermine Iraq’s emerging Shiite-dominated government and perhaps force a withdrawal of US occupation forces.³⁶⁴ In addition, Zarqawi hoped to frame AQI as the defender of Sunni populations threatened by Shiite rule.³⁶⁵

After Zarqawi’s death in 2006, AQI continued to fight against foreign occupation and Shia control, and maintain at least a rhetorical commitment to establishing an Islamic state. The group, now calling itself the ISI, worked with renewed vigor to undermine the legitimacy of Iraqi state by stepping up its kinetic attack. As Zarqawi’s successor, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir declared in 2009, that large, courageous, and targeted operations are necessary to break the bones of the infidels.”³⁶⁶

After 2010, ISI renewed its objective to control territory and exercise governance.³⁶⁷ This was a renewal of the Islamic State of Iraq’s attempt to establish governance.³⁶⁸

³⁶³ Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Letter to Zarqawi, 2005. Available in English translation at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2>; Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Analysis Paper Number 19 (March 2015), Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf>; and Kenneth Katzman, *Al-Qaeda: Profile and Threat Assessment*, Congressional Research Service, August 17, 2005, <https://web.cna.org/pdf/DanaInfo=.awxyCgvFjwv+crsreports-3585585>.

³⁶⁴ Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq and Al-Qaeda*, Congressional Research Service, December 7, 2007, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf> p. 11

³⁶⁵ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

³⁶⁶ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

³⁶⁷ Michael Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, Report of the Joint Hearing of the Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Subcommittee and the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 12, 2013, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20131212/101591/HHRG-113-FA18-Wstate-KnightsM-20131212.pdf>, p. 6.

³⁶⁸ Brett McGurk, *Al-Qaeda’s Resurgence in Iraq: A Threat to U.S. Interests*. Report of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, One Hundred Thirteenth Congress, Second Session, February 5, 2014, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20140205/101716/HHRG-113-FA00-Wstate-McGurkB-20140205.pdf>, p 5.

More generally, ISI sought to create an Islamic caliphate beginning in parts of Iraq and Syria and eventually stretching across the Levant.³⁶⁹ ISI also used the Syrian civil war to renew its sectarian conflict.³⁷⁰ In the third phase of its “Breaking the Walls” campaign, ISI set out to reignite Iraq’s sectarian civil war.³⁷¹ By 2012, the group also staked a claim to parts of Syria.³⁷²

Funding

Like many insurgent groups, AQI/ISI relied on a variety of funding streams. In the run-up to the founding of AQI, Zarqawi and Al-Qaeda operatives made contacts with Iraqi intelligence in Syria to mobilize and train foreign fighters who would counter the 2003 U.S. invasion.³⁷³ Later, AQI received funding from dedicated Al-Qaeda channels.³⁷⁴ As of 2009, AQI was essentially self-financing, supporting itself through crimes such as extortion, ransom kidnappings, the theft of oil, and trafficking in stolen vehicles.³⁷⁵

³⁶⁹ Brett McGurk, *Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Iraq: A Threat to U.S. Interests*, p. 1.

³⁷⁰ Daniel Byman, “The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.” Testimony to a joint hearing of the Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Subcommittee and the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 12, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-resurgence-of-Al-Qaeda-in-iraq/>.

³⁷¹ Jessica D. Lewis, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent: The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*. Institute for the Study of War. 2013. http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf. p. 18.

³⁷² Lewis, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent: The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*. p. 9.

³⁷³ Malcolm W. Nance, *The Terrorists of Iraq: Inside the Strategy and Tactics of the Iraq Insurgency 2003-2014* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2015), pp. 45-46.

³⁷⁴ Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 118.

³⁷⁵ Phil Williams, *Criminals, Militias, and Insurgents: Organized Crime in Iraq*, U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, June 2009, accessed June 2, 2017, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/PUB930.pdf>.

Evolution

Phase one: Founding (March 2003–October 2004)

Jordanian national and career criminal Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's years in Afghanistan after the Soviet occupation had earned him respect in jihadist circles. After returning to Jordan in the 1990s, he established a jihadist cell, which landed him and his followers in prison. After his release, Zarqawi returned to Afghanistan.³⁷⁶ After the 2001 U.S. invasion of that country he fled to Iran and from there to Iraq. In Iraq, Zarqawi established TwJ, and led a group of non-Iraqis within an encampment of the Kurdish jihadist group Ansar al-Islam. As U.S. leaders publicized their intention to bring down the regime of Saddam Hussein, Zarqawi went about making contacts in Baghdad and elsewhere in Sunni areas of Iraq. In advance of the 2003 U.S. invasion; Zarqawi began operations in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq.³⁷⁷

After the U.S. invasion, much of Iraq's quarter-of-a-million-member security and military forces contributed to the anti-U.S. insurgency. They were supplemented by Iraqi jihadists and elements of the fallen Baathist regime that helped facilitate the pipeline of foreign jihadists to support the cause.³⁷⁸ At the beginning of 2004, however, the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq was considered minimal.³⁷⁹

In October 2004, Zarqawi affiliated TwJ with Al-Qaeda, changing the group's name to Qaedat al-Jihad fi Balad al-Rafidayn—Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, more commonly known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI.

³⁷⁶ Charles Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State*. Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, no. 13 (November 2014), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/en_web_listter.pdf.

³⁷⁷ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³⁷⁸ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³⁷⁹ Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq and Al-Qaeda*, Congressional Research Service, December 7, 2007, p. 9, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf>

Phase two: Rise and sectarian war (October 2004–October 2006)

In February 2006, AQI bombed the Askari Shrine in Samarra, a holy site housing the remains of two Shiite imams which increased the level of sectarian violence, eventually contributing to a full-scale sectarian civil war.³⁸⁰

Zarqawi did adjust AQI tactics to repair its damaged domestic reputation. In January 2006, the AQI leader established the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC)—of which AQI was a dominant part—to minimize the international Al-Qaeda role in Iraq’s insurgency.³⁸¹ Five local jihadi insurgent groups made up the remainder of the MSC.³⁸² In April 2006, Abdullah Rashid—better known as Abu Umar al-Baghdadi—was named the leader of the MSC.³⁸³ Baghdadi had been an Iraqi security officer before turning toward a strict practice of Islam in the previous decade.³⁸⁴

AQI also shifted from indiscriminate attacks on the Shiite community to targeting only those supporting the central government.³⁸⁵ In Sunni tribal areas of Iraq, AQI had free rein to enforce strict sharia on the population. The insurgent group also brought tribal smuggling activities under its control.³⁸⁶ This provided AQI with a domestic income, but it also set the conditions for a local revolt. Mass-casualty

³⁸⁰ Ches Thurber, “From Coexistence to Cleansing: The Rise of Sectarian Violence in Baghdad, 2003-2007,” *Al-Nakhlah*, Spring 2011.

³⁸¹ “Al-Qaeda: The Many Faces of an Islamist Extremist Threat,” House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2006, https://fas.org/irp/congress/2006_rpt/hpsci0606.pdf. p. 13.

³⁸² Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper Number 19, March 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf>.

³⁸³ Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq and Al-Qaeda*, Congressional Research Service, December 7, 2007, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf>

³⁸⁴ M. J. Kirdar, “Al-Qaeda in Iraq.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Case Study Number 1, June 2011, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110614_Kirdar_AlQaedaIraq_Web.pdf

³⁸⁵ *Al-Qaeda: The Many Faces of an Islamist Extremist Threat*. Report of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2006, https://fas.org/irp/congress/2006_rpt/hpsci0606.pdf. p. 13.

³⁸⁶ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

suicide bombings helped undermine domestic and U.S. confidence that coalition forces could set Iraq on a stable path.³⁸⁷

On November 9, 2005, Al-Qaeda in Iraq carried out coordinated bombings in three hotels in Amman, Jordan.³⁸⁸ While it had the highest profile, this bombing was not AQI's only attack on regional targets. In December 2004, there was a failed AQI suicide attack on the Iraq-Jordan Karama border crossing.³⁸⁹ In August 2005, AQI operatives fired seven rockets from the Jordanian port city of Aqaba at U.S. ships and Israel's Red Sea coastal city of Eilat.³⁹⁰ In December 2005, AQI again fired rockets at Israel—this time from Lebanon.³⁹¹

Phase three: Declaration of an Islamic State and decline (October 2006 to 2009)

On October 12, 2006, Zarqawi's successors declared the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).³⁹² The group announced a cabinet and governance structure, and claimed authority over areas of western Iraq, which was majority Sunni territory.³⁹³ The claimed authority of ISI covered the provinces of Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, and Ninewa, and parts of Babil and Wasat Provinces.³⁹⁴ This was the first time that an AQ affiliate declared territorial control and political rule.³⁹⁵

Baghdadi was named "Commander of the Faithful," giving Al-Qaeda's Iraq operations a local face.³⁹⁶ The new Iraqi face was supported by the group's increasingly Iraqi profile.³⁹⁷ The group's new spokesman was another Iraqi named Muharib al-Juburi,

³⁸⁷ Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq and Al-Qaeda*, Congressional Research Service, December 7, 2007, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf>

³⁸⁸ Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

³⁸⁹ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

³⁹⁰ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

³⁹¹ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

³⁹² Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

³⁹³ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

³⁹⁴ Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, p. 74.

³⁹⁵ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

³⁹⁶ Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*.

³⁹⁷ Myriam Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations." *CTC Sentinel*, June 3, 2010, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/assessing-aqi%E2%80%99s-resilience-after-april%E2%80%99s-leadership-decapitations>.

who was killed the following year.³⁹⁸ In late 2007, Baghdadi proclaimed that Al-Qaeda in Iraq was “officially dissolved in favor of the Islamic State.”³⁹⁹ The concealment of Al-Qaeda’s involvement in the Iraqi jihad was agreed to by AQ core as well. Zawahiri said that “there is nothing in Iraq today called Al-Qaeda. Rather the group Al-Qaeda in Iraq has merged with other jihadi groups into the Islamic State of Iraq....”⁴⁰⁰

In December 2006, Baghdadi specified that ISI consisted almost entirely of Iraqis, claiming that there were only 200 foreign fighters in the group.⁴⁰¹ This declaration may have been intended to downplay ISI’s foreign links and mask the group as a purely domestic one. At the time, the foreign makeup of the group was considered to be less than 10 percent.⁴⁰² If Baghdadi’s figure was accurate, that would suggest a total force structure of over two thousand. Coalition forces also recognized a reduction in the flow of foreign fighters: peaking at 120 per month in 2007 to only 20 a month in 2009.⁴⁰³

Not only did ISI continue Zarqawi’s sectarian war,⁴⁰⁴ but the group also turned on Sunnis—and even other Islamist-oriented militias—that refused to join its coalition.⁴⁰⁵ These actions harmed ISI’s reputation among Iraq’s Sunni population.

By the end of 2006, the Sunni Awakening movement was growing.⁴⁰⁶ The local opposition worked parallel to—and was supported by—the “surge” of U.S. forces. ISI found that Anbar Province was no longer serving as a hospitable base for its operations. Much of the group transplanted to the northern city of Mosul.⁴⁰⁷ Sectarian

³⁹⁸ Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*.

³⁹⁹ Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*.

⁴⁰⁰ Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*.

⁴⁰¹ Kenneth Katzman, “Iraq and Al-Qaeda,” p. 16.

⁴⁰² Kenneth Katzman, “Iraq and Al-Qaeda,” p. 16.

⁴⁰³ Myriam Benraad, “Iraq’s Enduring Al-Qaeda Challenge,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 18, 2009, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-enduring-Al-Qaeda-challenge>.

⁴⁰⁴ Katzman, Kenneth, “Iraq and Al-Qaeda,” p. 13. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf>

⁴⁰⁵ Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, p. 74.

⁴⁰⁶ Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, p. 2.

⁴⁰⁷ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

violence in Iraq declined after 2007.⁴⁰⁸ Pushed out of central Iraq by US forces and the Sunni tribes, many of ISI's remaining operatives escaped to Iraq's north.⁴⁰⁹

ISI's retreat to Mosul allowed it to regroup under favorable conditions. The group was able to exploit tensions among the Sunni Arab, Sunni Kurdish, and Christian populations.⁴¹⁰ It could also attack the latter, continuing its sectarian violence for both propaganda and morale.⁴¹¹ Mosul also had long served as a logistics hub for foreign AQI/ISI recruits arriving via Syria and Turkey.⁴¹²

The combination of popular resistance and U.S. counterterrorism operations damaged ISI's foreign funding and volunteer pipeline.⁴¹³ However, during 2008–2009, ISI managed to reestablish some of its networks in the Sunni tribal areas by exploiting the frustrations of former insurgents who found the central government unresponsive to their needs.⁴¹⁴

Also in 2008–2009, the group again adapted its operations in the military sphere. As a “state,” the group defended its territory. Against U.S. and indigenous forces, this model was unsustainable. Instead, ISI reverted to AQI's earlier model of massive strikes against Iraqi state targets.⁴¹⁵

Phase four: Resurgent terrorist threat (2009–March 2011)

ISI continued to exploit long-standing Sunni grievances against the Shiite-dominated central government. In addition to recruiting aggrieved Sunnis, ISI benefited from the release of detainees that began in 2009—including some who associated with Al-Qaeda detainees and joined the group's activities upon release.⁴¹⁶ By summer 2010,

⁴⁰⁸ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

⁴⁰⁹ Katzman, Kenneth, “Iraq and Al-Qaeda,” p. 15. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32217.pdf>

⁴¹⁰ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

⁴¹¹ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

⁴¹² Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

⁴¹³ Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, p. 2.

⁴¹⁴ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

⁴¹⁵ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

⁴¹⁶ Benraad, “Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations.”

ISI was estimated to consist of approximately three thousand fighters dispersed in localized cells.⁴¹⁷

In April 2010, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi were killed in Tharthar, Salah al-Din Province.⁴¹⁸ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husseini al-Qurashi became the new leader of ISI.⁴¹⁹ Iraqi national al-Nasir Lidin Allah, known as Abu Suleiman, replaced Muhajir as ISI's minister of war—without also gaining the title of head of AQI.⁴²⁰ There is evidence to suggest that both Baghdadi and Abu Suleiman were recruited to ISI while detained by U.S. forces at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq.⁴²¹ Baghdadi had been in U.S. custody from February to December 2004; he had been in ISI since 2006, serving in roles of religious authority.⁴²²

The group's focus on terrorist attacks required less manpower and popular support than did its efforts at governance.⁴²³ Information operations to degrade the Iraqi government's legitimacy were key to ISI's objectives. As U.S. forces in Iraq drew down, ISI propaganda shifted to present the Shiite-led government and its security forces as the new occupying power.⁴²⁴ From summer 2010, ISI began a campaign of targeting Iraqi police and soldiers in Sunni-dominated Iraqi regions.⁴²⁵

ISI used its resurgence in Mosul to regain capabilities in building and deploying massive IEDs. By the middle of 2009, the group projected its strength into Baghdad.⁴²⁶ ISI conducted large-scale terrorist attacks in the Iraqi capital. Throughout 2010, the pace of these operations increased.⁴²⁷

⁴¹⁷ Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations."

⁴¹⁸ Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations."

⁴¹⁹ Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations."

⁴²⁰ Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations," and Kirdar, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*.

⁴²¹ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

⁴²² Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*.

⁴²³ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

⁴²⁴ Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations."

⁴²⁵ Benraad, "Assessing AQI's Resilience After April's Leadership Decapitations."

⁴²⁶ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

⁴²⁷ Fishman, *Redefining the Islamic State*.

Phase five: Resurgence of the state (April 2011-March 2013)

In April 2011, ISI renewed its efforts to portray itself as the defender of Iraq's Sunni Arab population.⁴²⁸ As US troops continued their withdrawal from Iraq, the country's Sunnis became increasingly frustrated by the central government's sectarian policies.⁴²⁹ The group used this grievance as an opening to return more significantly to Anbar Province. After the withdrawal, in December 2011, the Iraqi Security Forces were not capable enough to counter ISI without U.S. support.⁴³⁰

ISI was able to benefit from the large-scale violence in Syria. ISI recruited among the foreign fighters who had flocked to the conflict.⁴³¹ The retrenchment of the Syrian regime also increased freedom of operation for non-state armed groups in eastern Syria. In mid-2011, Baghdadi dispatched ISI leaders to establish al-Nusra Front, as Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. Additionally, some of ISI's organizing moved across the border to use the ungoverned Syrian territory as a safe-haven.⁴³² On March 4, 2013, Syrian rebels—likely with ISI support—took al-Raqqa, capital of the north-central province of the same name.⁴³³

Phase six: Push into Syria, tension with JN, and end of affiliation (April 2013-February 2014)

By the beginning of 2013, ISI was estimated to have fewer than two thousand fighters.⁴³⁴ At the same time, however, its operations were expanding dramatically.

⁴²⁸ Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, p 2.

⁴²⁹ Frederick W. Kagan, *Global Al-Qaeda: Affiliates, Objectives, and Future Challenges*. Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, July 18, 2013, https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/-the-continued-expansion-of-Al-Qaeda-affiliates-and-their-capabilities_134319399831.pdf, p. 4.

⁴³⁰ Kagan, *Global Al-Qaeda: Affiliates, Objectives, and Future Challenges*, p. 4.

⁴³¹ Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, pp. 5-6.

⁴³² Byman, "The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq."

⁴³³ Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*, p. 18

⁴³⁴ Knights, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, p. 6; McGurk, *Al-Qaeda's Resurgence in Iraq: A Threat to U.S. Interests*, p. 7.

After the Syrian regime lost control of Raqqa, in March 2013, ISI moved assets into the governorate to secure the city for its own aims.⁴³⁵

In April 2013, ISI unilaterally declared that it subsumed Nusra Front back into itself. Now operating on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border, the group rebranded as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS).⁴³⁶ Nusra's leadership rejected this merger and instead pledged direct allegiance to Al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁴³⁷

Despite these tensions, in late 2013 ISIS and Nusra cooperated tactically against the Assad regime.⁴³⁸ However, in January 2014, Syria's rebel groups directly fought with ISIS, accusing the group of taking advantage of the Syrian conflict to spread its harsh governance tactic.⁴³⁹ Nusra attempted to mediate between the conflicting sides before joining the secular rebel groups in a failed attempt to dislodge ISIS.⁴⁴⁰

At the same time, ISIS used its territorial base in eastern Syria to takeover territory in western Iraq.⁴⁴¹ On January 1, 2014, the group captured territory in Fallujah and Ramadi, which are major cities in Anbar Province.⁴⁴²

Security vulnerabilities in Iraq

Table 18 below summarizes the vulnerabilities in Iraq from 2003-2014.

⁴³⁵ Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*. p. 18

⁴³⁶ Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*. p. 9.

⁴³⁷ Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*. p. 9.

⁴³⁸ Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*. p. 9.

⁴³⁹ Carla E. Humud et al., *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, Congressional Research Service, R43756, 2014, <http://www.cq.com/pdf/crsreports-4562581>, p. 11.

⁴⁴⁰ Humud et al., *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, p. 11.

⁴⁴¹ Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*. p. 22.

⁴⁴² Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "The Arab Spring and Al-Qaeda's Resurgence," House Armed Services Committee, February 4, 2015, 2014, http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/DGR_Arab_Spring_testimony_final.pdf, p. 12.

Table 18. Security vulnerabilities in Iraq (2003-2014)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 unleashed and produced various internal conflicts, notably a Sunni-Shi'i civil war and a multi-faceted insurgency, including a substantial Sunni insurgency. Both developments initially empowered AQI, which sought to co-opt Sunni grievances and to exacerbate the sectarian conflict.
Illegitimacy of Central Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although turnout was high in the 2005 and 2010 elections, Sunni Arab parties mounted serious boycotts in January 2005 (although they participated in December 2005) and in 2010, suggesting that the government and the political process lacked legitimacy in many Sunni Arabs' eyes at crucial moments. Moreover, the mass constituencies available to Sunni and Shi'i insurgencies indicated that in the early years after Saddam's fall, many Iraqis viewed the state as illegitimate. Many Iraqis saw the state either as a U.S. puppet or as a Shi'i sectarian state. These perceptions benefited AQI, especially in the 2004-2006 period. Nouri al-Maliki's re-instatement as Prime Minister in 2010 (despite his party finishing second in that year's elections) and the increasingly sectarian, pro-Shi'i character of his policies after 2011 reinforced many Sunni Iraqis' suspicions of the state and generated mass Sunni anti-government protests. These developments benefited AQI and helped create the political climate for its comeback.
Demographic Instabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are different estimates of religious demographics in Iraq. One influential estimate from Pew states that Iraq is 51% Shi'i and 42% Sunni.⁴⁴³ Ethnically, Iraq is approximately 75-80% Arab and 15-20% Kurdish,⁴⁴⁴ meaning that approximately half of the Sunnis is Kurds. As noted above, the insurgency overlapped with a sectarian civil war, and there are enduring sectarian tensions in Iraq. AQI benefited from these trends and also from specifically Sunni grievances, given that the fall of Hussein (an Arab Sunni backed by a network of Arab Sunni elites) weakened the position of Arab Sunnis in Iraqi politics and society.
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. decision to disband the Iraqi military in 2003 fueled the insurgency and created severe challenges when it came to building a new military. Despite years of U.S. investment in training and equipment, the Iraqi forces ultimately proved unable to withstand AQI/ISIS when it began to capture territory in Anbar and elsewhere

⁴⁴³ Michael Lipka, *The Sunni-Shia divide: Where they live, what they believe and how they view each other*, Pew Research Center Fact Tank, June 18, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/18/the-sunni-shia-divide-where-they-live-what-they-believe-and-how-they-view-each-other/>.

⁴⁴⁴ "Iraq," *CIA World Factbook* last updated June 21, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>.

in 2014. As noted above, the security sector also took on an increasingly sectarian character under al-Maliki. Key units – including the U.S.-trained Counter Terrorism Service – came to be seen as al-Maliki’s personal soldiers.⁴⁴⁵

Neighbor in Crisis

- Starting in 2011, Syria’s civil war created new opportunities for AQI/ISI to expand its influence, territorial control, and recruitment on both sides of the border. In Syria, AQI/ISI worked to win Sunni support, while in Iraq, AQI/ISI was able to revive its recruitment due to Iraqi Arab Sunni sympathies for Syrian Sunnis.

U.S. approach to AQI

Table 19 below describes the U.S. approach to AQI from 2003-2014.

Table 19. U.S. approach to AQI (2003-2014)

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. took frequent and at times, near-constant unilateral direct action against AQI. The most prominent example of such action was the June 2006 airstrike that killed al-Zarqawi, but raids on the ground were a key feature of the approach: by August 2006, Task Force 714 (the key counterterrorism unit) was conducting some 300 raids a month – a dramatic increase from the 18 raids conducted in August 2004.⁴⁴⁶ Task Force 714 used an intelligence-driven, decentralized approach to propel the F3EAD (find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate) cycle.⁴⁴⁷
Advise, Assist, and Accompany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. and Iraqi forces conducted numerous joint missions against AQI, most prominently the April 2010 raid that killed Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Umar al-Baghdadi.
Security Cooperation / Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After the disbanding of the Iraq military in 2003, the U.S. invested heavily in rebuilding the armed forces and the police. • The U.S. also trained and equipped various Iraqi counterterrorism

⁴⁴⁵ David Witty. *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, The Brookings Institute, Center for Middle East Policy, March 16, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-iraqi-counter-terrorism-service/>.

⁴⁴⁶ Richard Schultz, *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organization*, Joint Special Operations University, Report 16-6, 2016, https://www.sofx.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/JSOU16-6_Shultz_TF714_final1.pdf, p. 4.

⁴⁴⁷ Schultz, *Military Innovation in War*, p. 3.

Partner Capacity (Train and Equip)	units, especially what came to be known as the Counter Terrorism Service.
Security Sector Reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security sector reform began with the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and the program of de-Baathification. From an early point, the top priority for reform became creating a force that could defeat the insurgency,⁴⁴⁸ but many of the early security sector reform (SSR) efforts were unsuccessful under the Coalition Provisional Authority. In June 2004, the Coalition created the Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq (MNSTC-I), which worked with the Iraqi Ministries of Defense and the Interior to rebuild the security forces. MNSTC-I was replaced by United States Forces – Iraq, a training program, in 2010.
Civil Military Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Marines created Civil Military Operations Centers in several key sites in Anbar (Fallujah, Ramadi, Haditha, etc.), the heartland of the Sunni insurgency and a key base for AQI. These Centers had responsibility for matters such as helping civilians obtain identification documents and helping to rebuild Iraqi infrastructure.⁴⁴⁹
Messaging/ counter-messaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. routinely engaged in counter-messaging against AQI. For example, in al-Anbar, Marines were augmented by U.S. Army Special Operations Forces Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) entities who would produce posters, leaflets, billboards, and other media products to denigrate AQI and promote the Iraqi Security Forces. Such programs were replicated elsewhere in Iraq.⁴⁵⁰ Additionally, two alleged messaging programs that have been reported in the press are (1) an early effort to plant stories in the Iraqi press denouncing the insurgency;⁴⁵¹ and (2) a series of efforts to discredit AQI and to track viewership of fake AQI films.⁴⁵²

⁴⁴⁸ Peter Khalil, *Rebuilding and Reforming the Iraqi Security Sector*, The Brookings Institution, Saban Center, Analysis Paper Number 9, July 2006, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/khalil20060713.pdf>, p. ix.

⁴⁴⁹ Lance Cpl. Paul Torres, “One stop shop: CMOC handles needs for Haditha residents,” 1st Marine Division webpage, May 5, 2008, <http://www.1stmardiv.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/541633/one-stop-shop-cmoc-handles-needs-for-haditha-residents/>.

⁴⁵⁰ Author’s personal experience, al-Anbar, Iraq, 2007.

⁴⁵¹ Mark Mazzetti and Borzou Daragahi, “U.S. Military Covertly Pays to Run Stories in Iraqi Press,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 2005, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/nov/30/world/fg-infowar30>.

⁴⁵² Crofton Black and Abigail Fielding-Smith, *Fake News and False Flags*, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, October 2, 2016, <http://labs.thebureauinvestigates.com/fake-news-and-false-flags/>.

<p>Major Combat Operations – Invasion / Occupation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From 2003-2010, the U.S. conducted Operation Iraqi Freedom, which involved a sustained troop deployment to Iraq. One major phase of the operation was the 2007-2008 “surge,” which saw the deployment of over 30,000 additional troops with the aim of fighting the insurgency and restoring security. From 128,300 troops deployed in Iraq in December 2006, levels rose to 166,300 by October 2007, the highest level of the entire war.⁴⁵³ • In 2010, the U.S. transitioned to Operation New Dawn, which focused on stabilization operations and a shift from a primarily military role to a primarily civilian one. The U.S. withdrew almost all troops by December 2011.
<p>Support Host Nation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. made numerous efforts to rebuild, support, and strengthen the Iraqi state. The Coalition Provisional Authority (April 2003-June 2004) was an effort to rebuild the state and administer Iraq during the initial transition period. The U.S. also provided technical and security support for elections in 2005 and 2010. Within AQI-affected areas, starting in 2005 the U.S. pursued “clear, hold, and build” campaigns that sought to restore law and order after expelling AQI and other insurgents. This approach was accelerated during the 2007-2008 surge, and gradually declined as the U.S. prepared to withdraw from Iraq in 2010-2011.

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQI?

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, lack of post-invasion planning, and decisions that immediately followed, triggered a multi-faceted insurgency and created conditions that allowed Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi’s network—the group that became AQI in 2004—to thrive. As the insurgency and AQI grew stronger from 2004-2006, the U.S. government had limited, localized, and sometimes fleeting successes in **disrupting** AQI. For example, early U.S. operations in Fallujah, especially Operation Phantom Fury/Operation al-Fajr in November-December 2004, **disrupted** AQI’s activities in that city and killed numerous low-level operatives, but did not halt the overall increase in violence, including elsewhere in al-Anbar Province. AQI relocated, and learned that fighting open battles with coalition forces was a poor strategy. A more promising counter-AQI initiative was the “clear, hold, and build” campaign in Tal

⁴⁵³ Alan McLean and Archie Tse, “American Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq,” *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/06/22/world/asia/american-forces-in-afghanistan-and-iraq.html?_r=0.

Afar in 2005, which entailed driving insurgents from the city and then attempting to systematically establish the rule of law. “Clear, hold, and build” later became the guiding principle for many counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq.

However, the enduring impact of key U.S. decisions made early in the war—especially disbanding the Iraqi military and pursuing de-Baathification—overshadowed early U.S. efforts to **disrupt** AQI. The very presence of U.S. forces also allowed AQI to draw recruits (both from within Iraq and from a host of other countries) by tapping into Sunni grievances, including outrage toward soldiers perceived as hostile occupiers. The Abu Ghraib scandal, which broke in June 2003, also proved a boon to AQI. Therefore, even amid some tactical successes, the overall security and political situation steadily worsened, enabling the insurgency and boosting recruitment to AQI.

During the initial phase of the insurgency, the U.S. military worked to **dismantle** AQI by removing top commanders, notably Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi in June 2006. His death, however, did not immediately diminish AQI’s capabilities. AQI quickly replaced al-Zarqawi and continued to intimidate Sunni populations in Anbar and elsewhere. When AQI outlasted al-Zarqawi’s death, U.S. approaches shifted to targeting mid-level leaders in order to dismantle the organization and break the chain of command between leaders and foot soldiers.

AQI remained strong until summer 2007,⁴⁵⁴ reflecting the impact of five developments: the Anbar Awakening, which began in late 2006 but took several months to acquire decisive momentum; a greater commitment by the U.S. to protecting and supporting Sunni tribal leaders who opposed AQI; the U.S. troop surge, which began in early 2007; the decline in sectarian violence as Baghdad and other areas became more self-segregated; and the “industrial-strength” counterterrorism operations of Task Force 714.⁴⁵⁵ For a time, these developments proved mutually reinforcing and beneficial for overall security and for the counter-AQI effort.

Together, these trends led to the **dismantling** of AQI by 2009-2010. Worth noting in connection with Task Force 714 was that this success was predicated on an unprecedented level of direct action operations that were enabled by a host of critical factors: a very high level of special operations, intelligence, and monetary resources; almost complete freedom of movement and action across the entirety of the country (most of which also featured easily navigable terrain); authorities for action pushed down to essentially the tactical level; a high degree of tolerance for the (at least temporary) detention of suspected members of Al-Qaeda and collateral

⁴⁵⁴ Jonathan J. Schroden, “Measures for Security in a Counterinsurgency,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 32, issue 5 (2009).

⁴⁵⁵ Schultz, *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organization*, p. 4.

damage; and a number of significant innovations in technical means of gathering and analyzing intelligence. By 2009-2010, U.S. forces were once again focusing on killing senior AQI leaders: in April 2010, Iraqi security forces, supported by U.S. soldiers, conducted a raid that killed top AQI leaders Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Ayyub al-Masri.⁴⁵⁶ In June 2010, General Ray Odierno stated that U.S. and Iraqi forces had killed or captured 34 of AQI's top 42 leaders in Iraq, including key officials in charge of finances and recruitment.⁴⁵⁷

AQI/ISI resurged for two major reasons. First, there was Iraqi politics: after the 2010 elections, Iraqi authorities (with U.S. acquiescence) gave Nouri al-Maliki the first chance to form a government, even though his party had finished second in the elections. After beginning his second term as prime minister, al-Maliki intensified the sectarian, pro-Shi'i character of his government and increasingly antagonized Sunnis (again with some U.S. acquiescence). When al-Maliki targeted and purged prominent Sunni politicians and officials, a Sunni-led opposition protest wave emerged in 2012-2013. These protests were not directed or inspired AQI/ISI, but they directly empowered AQI, especially after al-Maliki cracked down on major Sunni politicians.⁴⁵⁸ AQI/ISI's initial conquests in Fallujah and Ramadi in early 2014 directly followed Iraqi authorities' moves to destroy Sunni protest camps.

Second, the American withdrawal in 2010-2011 meant that the sectarianized Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) took responsibility for security. Shi'i militias' power grew as well. The ISF were not able to prevent AQI from regaining momentum; despite over \$20 billion spent by the U.S. in training and equipping the ISF between 2005 and 2011,⁴⁵⁹ the ISF proved corrupt and weak. Under these circumstances, AQI rebuilt its strength through initiatives such as the "Breaking the Walls" campaign of 2012-2013, where it staged over twenty attacks on prisons with the intent of freeing detained members and sympathizers.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁶ Waleed Ibrahim, "Al-Qaeda's two top Iraq leaders killed in raid," Reuters, April 19, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-violence-alqaeda-idUSTRE63I3CL20100419>.

⁴⁵⁷ Thom Shanker, "Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Neutralized, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/05/world/middleeast/05military.html>.

⁴⁵⁸ Dexter Filkins, "What We Left Behind," *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/28/what-we-left-behind>.

⁴⁵⁹ Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Learning from Iraq*, March 2013, <https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001083907/http://www.sigir.mil/learningfromiraq/index.html>, p. 41; U.S. State Department, "Fact Sheet: U.S. Security Cooperation with Iraq," March 22, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/269040.htm>.

⁴⁶⁰ Jessica D. Lewis, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent*, Institute for the Study of War, September 10, 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/al-qaeda-iraq-resurgent>.

For much of 2011-2013, the U.S. did “its best to ignore the country,” in one expert’s words.⁴⁶¹ However, in December 2013, alarmed about AQI/ISIL’s gains in Iraq, the U.S. supplied 75 Hellfire missiles and some surveillance drones to the Iraqi government.⁴⁶² In 2014, FMF funding provided weapons, ammunition, and other counterterrorism equipment to Iraqi forces.⁴⁶³ The U.S. also pursued new training initiatives for Iraqi counterterrorism forces.⁴⁶⁴ However, the U.S. reportedly declined Iraqi requests for manned and unmanned airstrikes against AQI/ISIL targets in 2013 and early 2014.⁴⁶⁵ The resurgence of AQI/ISIL, as well as broader USG concern about political instability in Iraq, also prompted fresh efforts to engage diplomatically with Iraqi politicians in 2013 and 2014. The U.S. made efforts to work with different segments of the Iraqi political class to address grievances that prompted waves of waves of Sunni protests in 2013.⁴⁶⁶ After ISIL captured parts of Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014, U.S. diplomats worked to encouraged the Government of Iraq to “develop and execute a holistic strategy to isolate and defeat ISIL over the long-term.”⁴⁶⁷ By this time, however, ISIL was breaking with Al-Qaeda, and subsequent developments lie outside the scope of this case study.

⁴⁶¹ Daniel Byman, “The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq,” Testimony before the joint hearing of the Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Subcommittee and the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 12, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-resurgence-of-Al-Qaeda-in-iraq/>.

⁴⁶² Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Sends Arms to Aid Iraq Fight With Extremists,” *The New York Times*, December 25, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/26/world/middleeast/us-sends-arms-to-aid-iraq-fight-with-extremists.html>; and House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing: Iraq,” February 5, 2014, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20140205/101716/HHRG-113-FA00-Wstate-McGurkB-20140205.pdf>, p. 9.

⁴⁶³ “Fact Sheet: U.S. Security Cooperation with Iraq,” U.S. State Department, March 22, 2017. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/269040.htm>.

⁴⁶⁴ House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk,” p. 10.

⁴⁶⁵ Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Said to Rebuff Iraqi Request to Strike Militants,” *The New York Times*, June 11, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/world/middleeast/iraq-asked-us-for-airstrikes-on-militants-officials-say.html>.

⁴⁶⁶ House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk,” pp. 3-4.

⁴⁶⁷ House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk,” p. 7.

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQI?

The most dramatic vulnerability to emerge since the start of the affiliate was the civil war in Syria, which created new opportunities for AQI/ISI, as detailed above.

Within Iraq, one major vulnerability that fluctuated over time was the illegitimacy of the state - if the high point of the state's legitimacy came around 2008-2010, then the overt sectarianism of al-Maliki's government during the 2010-2014 period represented a renewed vulnerability and a key enabling factor for AQI/ISI. After the surge, the U.S. moved to a "by, with, and through" approach - but the chosen partner, al-Maliki, increasingly had divergent interests from those of the United States. When the U.S. withdrew its forces and largely stopped paying attention to the country, Washington ceded nearly all of its leverage over him and therefore his interests took over.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

The main shifts in the U.S. approach came in 2006-2007, when the U.S. supported the Anbar Awakening and conducted the surge; in 2011, when the U.S. completed its troop withdrawal and, to an extent, disengaged politically; and late 2013, when the U.S. began to re-engage amid AQI/ISIL's resurgence.

Appendix E: Case Study of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

Overview

Established in 2009 as a merger of Al-Qaeda units in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, AQAP (Arabic: Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-'Arab) is Al-Qaeda's most prominent formal affiliate. AQAP has a weak presence in Saudi Arabia, because Saudi authorities decimated Al-Qaeda's networks there in 2002–2006. In Yemen, however, AQAP is waging a major insurgency. AQAP has repeatedly attacked Yemen's capital Sanaa. The group has a strong presence in southern areas, with the ability to intermittently control territory.

AQAP has historically been at the forefront of plotting Al-Qaeda's attacks against the West. AQAP plots include the unsuccessful 2009 Christmas Day "Underwear Bombing" and an unsuccessful 2010 plan to put parcel bombs on U.S.-bound airplanes. AQAP also seeks to inspire "lone jihad" attacks in the West. AQAP took credit for the deadly 2015 attack on the Parisian headquarters of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

Leadership and structure

AQAP's emir, Yemeni national Qasim al-Raymi (b. 1978), makes decisions together with the group's Shura (Consultative) Council. Al-Raymi succeeded Yemeni national Nasir al-Wuhayshi (1976–2015) after the latter's death in a U.S. drone strike. Al-Raymi was previously AQAP's deputy leader and military commander.⁴⁶⁸ Al-Wuhayshi, who was Osama Bin Laden's personal secretary before 9/11, rebuilt Al-Qaeda in Yemen after 2006. He was Al-Qaeda's overall deputy during 2013–2015. Other leaders

⁴⁶⁸ Jethro Mullen, "Al-Qaeda's Second in Command Killed in Yemen Strike; Successor Named," CNN, June 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/16/middleeast/yemen-aqap-leader-killed/>; "Profile: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," BBC News, June 16, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11483095>.

include Saudi Arabian national Ibrahim al-Asiri, a bomb-maker,⁴⁶⁹ and Sudanese national Ibrahim al-Qosi, a former bookkeeper for Osama Bin Laden and a former Guantanamo Bay detainee.⁴⁷⁰

Below the emir are regional commanders and heads of functional units, such as media. AQAP's media products, released through its Al-Malahim Foundation, include the English-language magazine *Inspire* (first released June 2010) and the Arabic-language *Sada al-Malahim* ("The Echo of Battles," first released January 2008). Another key unit is the External Operations Team.⁴⁷¹ AQAP also has a "shari'a group" and a "preaching/outreach committee,"⁴⁷² although some analysts suspect that such titles are misleading, and that the group is relatively unstructured.⁴⁷³

The U.S. has killed numerous AQAP leaders. American nationals Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, two key propagandists and external operations planners, died in September 2011 in a U.S. drone strike. Saudi national Said Ali al-Shihri, who was AQAP's deputy emir during 2009-2012, died in late 2012, possibly in a U.S. drone strike.⁴⁷⁴ Other senior leaders were killed in a series of drone strikes in 2015, including Yemeni national Harith ibn Ghazi al-Nazari,⁴⁷⁵ Saudi Arabian national Ibrahim al-Rubaish,⁴⁷⁶ and Yemeni national Nasser al-Ansi.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁶⁹ "Profile: Al-Qaeda 'Bomb Maker' Ibrahim al-Asiri," BBC News, July 4, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11662143>. See also al-Asiri, "The American Globalization Is Falling," *Inspire* 16 (November 2016): 40-47, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/inspire-magazine-16.pdf>.

⁴⁷⁰ Carol Rosenberg, "Freed Guantanamo Convict Returns to the Fight," *Miami Herald*, December 10, 2015, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/guantanamo/article49022855.html>. See also "Interview: Abu-Khubeyb al-Sudani," *Inspire* 15 (May 2016): 50-63, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/inspire-magazine-15.pdf>.

⁴⁷¹ The team regularly contributes articles to *Inspire*. See, for example, "Assassination Operations," *Inspire* 14 (September 2015): 64-71, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/inspire-magazine-14.pdf>.

⁴⁷² See *Sada al-Malahim* 7 (January 2009).

⁴⁷³ Bernard Haykel, "Declaration of Prof. Bernard Haykel," United States District Court for the District of Columbia, *Nasser al-Aulaqi vs. Barack Obama et al.*, October 7, 2010, pp. 4-5, https://www.aclu.org/files/assets/Haykel_Declaration.100810.PDF.

⁴⁷⁴ Mark Mazzetti, "No. 2 Leader of Al-Qaeda in Yemen Is Killed," *The New York Times*, January 24, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/25/world/middleeast/said-ali-al-shihri-qaeda-leader-in-yemen-is-dead.html>.

⁴⁷⁵ Thomas Joscelyn, "Influential AQAP Ideologue Killed in US Drone Strike," *Long War Journal*, February 5, 2015, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/influential_aqap_ide.php.

⁴⁷⁶ Polly Mosendz, "Ibrahim al-Rubaish, Top Al-Qaeda Leader in Yemen, Killed in Drone Strike," *Newsweek*, April 14, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/ibrahim-al-rubaish-top-Al-Qaeda-leader-yemen-killed-drone-strike-322277>.

Since April 2011, AQAP has operated a political militia called Jama'at Ansar al-Shari'a (AAS), "The Society of Supporters/Partisans of Islamic Law."⁴⁷⁸ The U.S. considers AAS part of AQAP, and has targeted AAS leaders: Yemeni national Abu Zubayr Adil al-Abbab, who led AAS, died in a U.S. airstrike in 2012.⁴⁷⁹ Yemeni national Jalal Baleedi/Abu Hamza al-Zinjibari, another senior AAS commander, died in 2016 in a U.S. drone strike.⁴⁸⁰

Before the Arab Spring, AQAP had a few hundred members.⁴⁸¹ By 2014, AQAP and AAS had an estimated 1,000 members.⁴⁸² By 2015, the two groups had as many as 4,000 members.⁴⁸³ The growth of AQAP in recent years has been facilitated by the ongoing internal conflict in Yemen between the Houthis and forces loyal to the government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, as well as the external military intervention in Yemen led by Saudi Arabia.

Relationship with the core

Of the Al-Qaeda affiliates, AQAP has one of the closest relationships with Al-Qaeda core, reflecting the strong personal relationship between Bin Laden and AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi. Al-Wuhayshi served as Bin Laden's private secretary until fleeing

⁴⁷⁷ Dana Ford, "Senior AQAP Leader Nasr Ibn Ali al-Ansi Killed," CNN, May 7, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/07/middleeast/aqap-commander-killed/index.html>.

⁴⁷⁸ Basma Rao, "'Al-Qa'ida' fi al-Yaman...Hafat al-Khatr al-Da'ima...Al-Istratijiyya wa-l-Tahaddi ['Al-Qa'ida' in Yemen...On the Permanent Brink of Danger...The Strategy and the Challenge]," *Al-Arabiya*, February 28, 2013, <http://studies.alarabiya.net/ideas-discussions/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%8A>.

⁴⁷⁹ "Maqatl 'Abu al-Zubayr' al-Mas'ul al-Shar'i li-l-Qa'ida bi-l-Jazira al-'Arabiyya bi-Ghara Amrikiyya fi Shabwa qabla Ayyam ['Abu Zubayr,' al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula's Legal Official, Killed in an American Raid in Shabwah a Few Days Ago]," *Yemen Press*, October 20, 2012, <https://yemen-press.com/news13735.html>.

⁴⁸⁰ Lizzie Dearden, "Al-Qaeda Leader in Yemen Jalal Baleedi 'Killed in Drone Strike'," *The Independent* (London), February 4, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/Al-Qaeda-leader-in-yemen-jalal-baleedi-killed-in-drone-strike-a6852636.html>.

⁴⁸¹ International Crisis Group, *Yemen's Al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base*. Middle East Report 174 (February 2, 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/174-yemen-s-Al-Qaeda-expanding-base>.

⁴⁸² International Crisis Group, *Yemen's Al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base*, p. 9 (note 33).

⁴⁸³ U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015*, June 2016, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258249.pdf>, p. 395.

Afghanistan to Iran, likely in late 2001 or early 2002, where he was arrested and then extradited to Yemen in 2003.⁴⁸⁴

During Bin Laden's lifetime, senior Al-Qaeda core members regularly discussed strategy with AQAP. For example, a July 2010 letter from Atiyya Abd al-Rahman to al-Wuhayshi counseled AQAP to avoid war with the Yemeni government, and instead to "direct all our energy, and our faculties, and our capabilities toward striking the head, and that is America." Atiyya displayed serious concern for al-Awlaki's safety, reflecting his esteem for al-Awlaki as a propagandist.⁴⁸⁵

Al-Qaeda core did have complaints about AQAP. Bin Laden lamented in one letter that he needed "more data from the field in Yemen so as to make it easy for us, with God's help, to take the most appropriate decision regarding escalation or slowing down."⁴⁸⁶ In the same letter, Bin Laden also said that AQAP needed to more carefully manage its media output.⁴⁸⁷ Bin Laden was skeptical of al-Awlaki because he did not know him personally.⁴⁸⁸

Al-Qaeda core closely followed events during the Arab Spring, particularly in Yemen. Al-Qaeda core repeatedly cautioned AQAP against hasty action. In early 2011, al-Wuhayshi wrote to Bin Laden, "If you ever wanted Sanaa, today is the day!"⁴⁸⁹ Bin Laden responded, "The enemy continues to possess the ability to topple any state we

⁴⁸⁴ "Obituary: Yemen Al-Qaeda Leader Nasser al-Wuhayshi," BBC News, June 16, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33150212>.

⁴⁸⁵ Letter from Atiyya Abd al-Rahman to Nasser al-Wuhayshi (Abu Basir), recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and declassified by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), May 20, 2015, p. 1, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/arabic/Letter%20dtd%2018%20JUL%202010%20-%20Arabic.pdf>. See also letter from Atiyya Abd al-Rahman (Mahmud) to Bin Laden (Abu Abdullah), July 17, 2010, translated and declassified by ODNI, May 20, 2015, pp. 1-4, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english2/Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Abu%20Abdallah%20dtd%2017%20July%202010.pdf>.

⁴⁸⁶ Letter from Osama Bin Laden to 'Atiyya 'Abd al-Rahman, August 27, 2010, p. 2, declassified by the Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony Project, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-Usama-Bin-Laden-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-Original.pdf>.

⁴⁸⁷ Letter from Osama Bin Laden to 'Atiyya 'Abd al-Rahman, August 27, 2010, p. 2, declassified by the Combating Terrorism Center's Harmony Project, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-Usama-Bin-Laden-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-Original.pdf>.

⁴⁸⁸ Katherine Zimmerman, *The Al-Qaeda Network: A New Framework for Defining the Enemy*, American Enterprise Institute, Critical Threats Project, September 2013, p. 10, http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/-the-Al-Qaeda-network-a-new-framework-for-defining-the-enemy_133443407958.pdf.

⁴⁸⁹ "Letter from Basir to the Brother in Command," document recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, likely composed in early 2011, p. 1, translated and declassified by ODNI, 1 March 2016.

establish.”⁴⁹⁰ He added, “We are in the preparation stage; therefore, it is not in our interest to rush in bringing down the regime.”⁴⁹¹ Another document from Al-Qaeda core recommended seeking a truce with President Saleh, limiting military actions to defensive operations, and stepping up a campaign of preaching to spread jihadist ideology among Yemenis. Al-Qaeda’s long-term aims in Yemen, Bin Laden argued, should be the same as elsewhere: “exhaust” the United States, then overthrow the local authorities, and then create an Islamic emirate.⁴⁹² AQAP deferred to the core on strategy.

Since 2009, AQAP has pioneered a “new model” for Al-Qaeda’s franchises in which affiliates plan their own external operations and cultivate horizontal relationships with one another.⁴⁹³ Bin Laden’s death initially elevated AQAP’s importance within the Al-Qaeda network. Around July 2013, al-Wuhayshi was named deputy leader for all of Al-Qaeda.⁴⁹⁴ When al-Wuhayshi was killed in 2015, however, the deputy position did not remain with AQAP but, rather, passed to Egyptian national and longtime Al-Qaeda member Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, who was subsequently killed by a U.S. drone in February 2017 in Syria.⁴⁹⁵ It should also be noted that in recent years, Al-Qaeda core leaders have gravitated more toward Syria rather than Yemen.

In terms of other Al-Qaeda affiliates, AQAP has historically had the strongest relationship with Somalia’s al-Shebab, given the two countries’ geographical

⁴⁹⁰ “Letter to Abu Basir,” p. 1, document recovered at Osama Bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, translated and declassified by ODNI, March 1, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20to%20Abu%20Basir.pdf>. See also Nelly Lahoud et al., eds., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?* Combating Terrorism Center Harmony Project, May 3, 2012, pp. 29-35, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB410/docs/UBLDocument16.pdf>.

⁴⁹¹ “Letter to Abu Basir,” p. 3.

⁴⁹² “Give the Tribes More Than They Can Handle,” document recovered at Osama Bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, translated and declassified by ODNI, March 1, 2016, pp. 4-8, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Give%20the%20tribes%20more%20than%20they%20can%20handle.pdf>.

⁴⁹³ Katherine Zimmerman, “AQAP’s Role in the Al-Qaeda Network,” statement before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, September 18, 2013, p. 3, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20130918/101315/HHRG-113-HM05-Wstate-ZimmermanK-20130918.pdf>.

⁴⁹⁴ Barbara Starr, “US Official: Al-Qaeda Core Chief Picks Number Two from Yemeni Affiliate,” CNN, August 5, 2013, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2013/08/05/us-official-Al-Qaeda-core-chief-picks-number-two-from-yemeni-affiliate/>.

⁴⁹⁵ Ali Abdellati and Ellen Francis, “Al-Qaeda Confirms Leader Killed by Drone Strike in Syria,” Reuters, March 2, 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-qaeda-leader-idUKKBN16922Y>.

proximity. In April 2011, U.S. forces arrested Somali national Ahmed Warsame, who was subsequently charged with providing material support to both AQAP and al-Shebab.⁴⁹⁶ AQAP is the senior partner in the relationship, providing explosives training to al-Shebab and acting, especially under al-Wuhayshi, as a conduit between Al-Qaeda central and al-Shebab.⁴⁹⁷ As of 2013, AQAP reportedly hosted hundreds of al-Shebab fighters in Yemen.⁴⁹⁸ AQAP has offered public encouragement to al-Shebab.⁴⁹⁹

Under al-Wuhayshi, AQAP also provided strategic guidance to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) when the latter affiliate was occupying northern Mali in 2012.⁵⁰⁰ In 2014, unverified reports surfaced that AQAP's bomb maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, was working with Jabhat al-Nusra, Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, and even with ISIL.⁵⁰¹

The rise of ISIL has affected AQAP, although ISIL's "provinces" in Yemen are relatively weak. Initially, AQAP celebrated ISIL's battlefield successes and emphasized the need for intra-jihadi unity.⁵⁰² In November 2014, however, ISIL announced its formal expansion into Yemen and Saudi Arabia,⁵⁰³ which prompted AQAP to declare that ISIL's "caliphate" was illegitimate.⁵⁰⁴ At present, ISIL does not pose a major threat to AQAP.

⁴⁹⁶ United States District Court, Southern District of New York, "Warsame Indictment," http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/Warsame_Indictment.pdf; and United States Attorney, Southern District of New York, "Ahmed Warsame Indictment Press Release," July 5, 2011, https://archive.org/stream/215061-ahmed-warsame-indictment-press-release/215061-ahmed-warsame-indictment-press-release_djvu.txt.

⁴⁹⁷ Brian Bennett, "Al-Qaeda's Yemen branch has aided Somalia militants, U.S. says," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jul/18/world/la-fg-bin-laden-somalia-20110718>.

⁴⁹⁸ Rao, "'Al-Qa'ida' fi al-Yaman."

⁴⁹⁹ See Abu 'Ata, "La Tahzunu Ikhwanuna fi Harakat al-Shebab al-Mujahidin [Do Not Be Sad, Our Brothers in the Movement of Mujahidin Youth]," *Sada al-Malahim* 13 (April/May 2010): 56, https://ia800201.us.archive.org/22/items/sada_all/13m.pdf.

⁵⁰⁰ Zimmerman, "AQAP's Role," p. 4.

⁵⁰¹ Ewen MacAskill, "The Saudi Chemist Sparking Fears of 'Invisible' Bombs on Transatlantic Flights," *The Guardian*, July 3, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/03/Al-Qaeda-bombmaker>.

⁵⁰² Robin Simcox, *AQAP's Ideological Battles at Home and Abroad*, Current Trends in Islamist Ideology, January 20, 2015, <https://HUDSON.ORG/research/10949-aqap-s-ideological-battles-at-home-and-abroad>.

⁵⁰³ Islamic State, "Foreword," *Dabiq* 5 (November 2014): 3, <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/isis-islamic-state-magazine-issue-5-remaining-and-expanding.pdf>.

⁵⁰⁴ Simcox, *AQAP's Ideological Battles*.

Ideology and goals

AQAP has several overlapping objectives. First, it shares Al-Qaeda core's goal of weakening the United States and Europe and forcing Western forces to leave Muslim-majority countries. Second, it seeks to create a jihadist emirate in Yemen. A third, often unstated objective is survival and growth amidst civil war and the intense U.S. drone campaign against its leadership.

In terms of attacking the West, AQAP spent 2009–2010 pursuing plots reminiscent of 9/11—namely, suicide attacks on airplanes. Since the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIL, however, AQAP has worked to inspire “lone jihad” attacks in the West. Within the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP works to “target the bases of the Jews and Christians,” and “strike the interests of the enemy...especially the economic interests.”⁵⁰⁵

In terms of building a local emirate, the roots of AAS appeared in 2009. Al-Wuhayshi articulated several “practical steps” toward the goal of implementing AQAP's version of sharia. He urged jihadist scholars to oppose secularism, called on youth to arm themselves, encouraged ordinary Muslims to organize themselves into five-person cells, told influential people to begin calling for the total imposition of shari'a, asked tribal shaykhs to support jihadists, and exhorted ordinary people to continue demanding “justice” from the authorities.⁵⁰⁶ The same year, future AAS leader Abu al-Zubayr al-Abbab laid out a preaching strategy for implementing shari'a. Al-Abbab wanted preachers to convince people that the authorities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia were religiously illegitimate.⁵⁰⁷ Since 2011, AQAP's strategy has involved exploiting the chaos caused by Yemen's Arab Spring while working through AAS to win popular support.

⁵⁰⁵ Al-'Abbab, “Khutuwat 'Amaliyya,” pp. 17-18.

⁵⁰⁶ Abu Basir (Nasser al-Wuhayshi), “Ma al-Wajib Nahw al-Shari'a? [What Is Needed in the Direction of Sharia?]" *Sada al-Malahim* 10 (June/July 2009): 6-7, https://ia800201.us.archive.org/22/items/sada_all/Sada-almala7em10.pdf.

⁵⁰⁷ Abu al-Zubayr al-'Abbab, “Tariquna ila...Tahkim al-Shari'a [Our Road to...Ruling By the Shari'a]," *Sada al-Malahim* 10 (June/July 2009): 12-14, p. 14, https://ia800201.us.archive.org/22/items/sada_all/Sada-almala7em10.pdf.

Funding

AQAP's funding has expanded progressively since Al-Qaeda's rebirth in Yemen in 2006. During the 2006-2011 period, there were serious allegations that the Saleh regime supported Al-Qaeda in Yemen (see below). Collusion with Saleh, and with Yemeni officials in Sanaa, likely continued after Saleh's fall from power.⁵⁰⁸

After 2011, kidnapping became a major funding source for AQAP, which received \$20 million in ransom payments for European hostages by 2013.⁵⁰⁹ AQAP also receives assistance from private companies in Yemen: in 2016, the U.S. Department of the Treasury blacklisted Al Omgly Exchange, a Yemeni money exchange firm, for reportedly helping AQAP.⁵¹⁰

As AQAP intermittently controlled territory in southern Yemen after 2011, it robbed banks, taxed local commerce, and extorted companies. When AQAP seized al-Mukalla in 2015, it stole an estimated \$100 million from the coastal city's central bank, and then earned \$2-\$5 million per day from control of the fuel smuggling trade.⁵¹¹ Some extortion has a "Robin Hood" quality: AQAP funnels some of the payments it receives into services and infrastructure for the poor. These efforts are meant to boost the group's image and win greater popular support. AQAP also pays staff at certain institutions, such as hospitals, when they agree to help the group.⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁸ Nasser Arrabyee, "Saudi-Backed Extremism is Fueling Yemeni Outrage," *Sada*, September 9, 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64528>; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Al-Qa'ida Supporters in Qatar and Yemen," December 18, 2013, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2249.aspx>; and U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusrah Front, AQAP, and ISIL Fundraisers and Facilitators," May 19, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0462.aspx>.

⁵⁰⁹ Ken Dilanian, "Al-Qaeda Group Is Operating on Ransom Money from the West," *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/21/world/la-fg-yemen-ransom-20131021>.

⁵¹⁰ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Financial Supporters of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," November 1, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0601.aspx>.

⁵¹¹ Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning, and Mohammed Ghobari, "How Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen Has Made Al-Qaeda Stronger—and Richer," Reuters, April 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/>.

⁵¹² Elisabeth Kendall, "How Can Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Be Defeated?" *The 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/?utm_term=.d788c54e6883.

Evolution

Phase one (A): Failure in Saudi Arabia (1996–2006)

From the late 1980s on, Al-Qaeda had strong connections to Saudi Arabia and Yemen Aided by Bin Laden's Saudi citizenship and Yemeni origins. Additionally, dozens of Saudis and Yemenis fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s and early 1990s. A few of them joined Al-Qaeda—although it should be noted that, aside from Bin Laden, Egyptians and Libyans were more prominent in Al-Qaeda's early leadership than were Saudis and Yemenis.

Al-Qaeda's early militancy was partly inspired by political developments in Saudi Arabia. In his 1996 "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites," Bin Laden accused the Saudi monarchy of succumbing to unbelief by curtailing Islamic law, accepting military assistance from the United States, and ignoring the 1992 "Memorandum of Advice" from dissident religious scholars.⁵¹³

In 1997, Al-Qaeda attempted to build an organization in Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden deputized a Yemeni-born Saudi Arabian national, Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, to lead the effort. But al-Nashiri's early plots in 1997 and 1998 were foiled by Saudi authorities. In response, Bin Laden shifted strategy, suspending plots in Saudi Arabia and focusing on recruiting more Saudi and Yemeni citizens to travel to Afghanistan. After 9/11, Bin Laden restarted attacks in the Saudi kingdom. At his direction, up to a thousand Saudi Al-Qaeda members returned home. Bin Laden supported two parallel networks: al-Nashiri's, and another led by Saudi national Yusuf al-Uyayri. After planning several attacks, al-Nashiri was arrested in November 2002. Al-Uyayri's group, meanwhile, perpetrated the May 2003 suicide car bombings in East Riyadh that killed thirty-five people at housing units for Westerners. In the ensuing crackdown, al-Uyayri was killed. More Al-Qaeda attacks followed in November and December 2003, but Saudi security forces steadily wore down the movement. In December 2004, Al-Qaeda's Saudi members attacked the American consulate in Jeddah, killing five people, but the Saudi security forces' campaign continued to weaken the group. Also, Al-Qaeda's attacks on Westerners alienated the civilian

⁵¹³ Osama Bin Laden, "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites," 1996, translated by the Combating Terrorism Center, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Declaration-of-Jihad-against-the-Americans-Occupying-the-Land-of-the-Two-Holiest-Sites-Translation.pdf>.

population. In April 2005, a group of the remaining Al-Qaeda leaders were killed. By late 2006, the group was essentially defunct.⁵¹⁴

Phase one (B): Failure in Yemen (1988–2003)

Yemen attracted Bin Laden’s attention as early as 1988, when he began financing jihadism within the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), then an independent, Soviet-aligned country. In the early 1990s, Yemeni veterans of Afghanistan, some of them connected to Bin Laden, formed “Islamic Jihad in Yemen,” a jihadist organization that assassinated Marxist politicians. Islamic Jihad reportedly disbanded in 1994, when its leader received a government position in the newly united Republic of Yemen. A successor of sorts to Islamic Jihad was a new group—the Army of Aden Abyan, which operated training camps in Yemen and plotted largely unsuccessful attacks between approximately 1994 and 1999. Both groups were predecessors of Al-Qaeda in Yemen, which was formed in 1998.⁵¹⁵

Yemen was the site of one of Al-Qaeda’s earliest operations, a hotel bombing (and a second, unsuccessful hotel bombing) on December 29, 1992, targeting U.S. Marines. The attack, in which Islamic Jihad may have participated, was militarily unsuccessful but politically significant, leading to the withdrawal of Marines from Yemen. On October 12, 2000, Al-Qaeda conducted a much more significant attack in Yemen, bombing the USS *Cole* destroyer in Aden’s harbor. The attack killed 17 sailors. The incident followed an unsuccessful plot to attack another destroyer in Aden, the USS *The Sullivans*, on January 3, 2000.

⁵¹⁴ Thomas Hegghammer, “The Failure of Jihad in Saudi Arabia,” Combating Terrorism Center Occasional Paper, February 25, 2010, pp. 11-18, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/CTC_OP_Hegghammer_Final1.pdf; “Profile: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,” BBC; and “Tanzim al-Qa’ida fi Jazirat al-‘Arab [The Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Organization],” Al Jazeera, November 8, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2010/11/8/%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8>. See also “Letter from Abu al-Tayyib,” 29 February 2008, document recovered at Osama Bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, translated and declassified by ODNI, March 1, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20from%20Abu%20al-Tayyib%20dated%2029%20February%202008.pdf>.

⁵¹⁵ Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, ed., *A False Foundation? AQAP, Tribes and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, September 2011), chapter one, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/CTC_False_Foundation3.pdf. See also International Crisis Group, *Yemen’s Al-Qaeda*.

From October 2002 to November 2003, U.S. and Yemeni counterterrorism operations weakened Al-Qaeda in Yemen.⁵¹⁶ In November 2002, a U.S. drone strike killed Abu Ali al-Harithi, a former Bin Laden bodyguard. Al-Harithi is suspected of helping plan the USS *Cole* attack.⁵¹⁷ Yemeni members of Al-Qaeda core were also killed and arrested, such as Abu Muhammad al-Yamani (d. 2002 in Algeria)⁵¹⁸ and Nasir al-Wuhayshi (arrested in Iran ca. 2002).

Phase two: Rebirth in Yemen (2006–2011)

On February 3, 2006, an estimated 23 Al-Qaeda members escaped from the detention center in Sanaa, which was run by Yemen's internal security apparatus, the Political Security Organization.⁵¹⁹ The escapees included al-Wuhayshi and al-Raymi, who together led the re-establishment of Al-Qaeda in Yemen (AQY). AQY soon began attempting major attacks, such as unsuccessful suicide bombings of oil facilities in Marib and Hadramaut Governorates in 2006.⁵²⁰ Other attacks during this period included a 2007 suicide bombing that killed seven Spanish tourists in Marib Governorate, and a 2008 assault on the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa.⁵²¹

AQY benefited as other events deflected attention from it: Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh was focused on the Houthi rebellion in the northwest (see below), and the United States was focused on the war in Iraq.⁵²² There have also been serious

⁵¹⁶ Christopher Boucek, Gregory Johnsen, and Shari Villarosa, *Al-Qaeda in Yemen*, Carnegie Endowment, July 7, 2009, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2009/07/07/Al-Qaeda-in-yemen-event-1372>.

⁵¹⁷ Brian Whitaker and Duncan Campbell, "CIA Missile Kills Al-Qaeda Suspects," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/05/alQaeda.terrorism>.

⁵¹⁸ Abu Akram Hisham, "Al-Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Yamani: Rihlatuhu ila al-Jaza'ir wa-Qissat Istishhadihi [Shaykh Abu Muhammad the Yemeni: His Journey to Algeria and the Story of His Martyrdom]," *Ifriqiya al-Muslima*, December 30, 2015, p. 8, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/abucc84-akram-hishacc84m-e2809cmessages-from-the-mujacc84hid_s-notebook-2-shaykh-abucc84-muhcca3ammad-al-yamanicc84-his-trip-to-algeria-and-the-story-of-his-martyrdom22.pdf.

⁵¹⁹ Fiona Mangan and Erica Gaston, *Prisons in Yemen*, Peaceworks 106 (March 2015), p. 19, United States Institute of Peace, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW106-Prisons-in-Yemen.pdf>.

⁵²⁰ "Yemen 'Fails Oil Plant Attacks,'" BBC News, September 15, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5348074.stm.

⁵²¹ Koehler-Derrick, *False Foundation*, chapter one; BBC News, "Profile: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula."

⁵²² International Crisis Group, *Yemen's Al-Qaeda*.

allegations that Saleh at times tolerated or colluded with AQAP. For its part, AQAP has vigorously denied the allegations, which could seriously damage its credibility.⁵²³

In January 2009, the Saudi and Yemeni branches of Al-Qaeda merged to form AQAP. The merger was partly motivated by a fresh Saudi crackdown, which caused most of Al-Qaeda's remaining Saudi members to flee the kingdom.⁵²⁴ Despite the merger's name, AQAP was a Yemeni organization, with only "a small number of Saudi nationals."⁵²⁵ After the merger, most of AQAP's initial attacks were in Yemen and the West, not in Saudi Arabia. One exception was the attempted assassination of Prince Muhammad Bin Nayef in Jeddah in August 2009.⁵²⁶

Regarding its attacks against the West, a key ideologue and plotter for AQAP was Anwar al-Awlaki (1971–2011), an American citizen of Yemeni descent. After a complex career as a religious leader in the U.S., al-Awlaki left the country in March 2002. Although al-Awlaki's departure has been widely interpreted as a sign of his radicalization, al-Awlaki likely left the U.S. due to his panic when he found out that the Federal Bureau of Investigation knew about his secret visits to prostitutes.⁵²⁷ Subsequently, al-Awlaki based himself briefly in London and then permanently in Yemen. In 2006–2007, he was imprisoned in Yemen for eighteen months due to his violent rhetoric; after his release, he formally joined AQAP.⁵²⁸

Al-Awlaki was involved in several attacks and would-be attacks on the U.S. Some analysts suspect that al-Awlaki was involved in planning the 9/11 attacks, but the available evidence is inconclusive.⁵²⁹ More likely, al-Awlaki started participating in plots only after moving to Yemen. First, in 2008 and 2009, al-Awlaki exchanged emails with American citizen Nidal Hassan, who killed 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas in November 2009.⁵³⁰ It is debatable to what degree al-Awlaki was involved in the

⁵²³ Elias Groll, "The War of Words Between AQAP's Bomb Maker and Al Jazeera," *Foreign Policy*, August 4, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/04/the-war-of-words-between-aqaps-bomb-maker-and-al-jazeera/>.

⁵²⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)," June 19, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/yemen/Al-Qaeda-arabian-peninsula-aqap/p9369>.

⁵²⁵ Haykel, "Declaration," p. 3.

⁵²⁶ "Tanzim al-Qa'ida fi Jazirat al-'Arab," Al Jazeera.

⁵²⁷ Scott Shane, "The Lessons of Anwar al-Awlaki," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/magazine/the-lessons-of-anwar-al-awlaki.html>.

⁵²⁸ Scott Shane, "The Lessons of Anwar al-Awlaki."

⁵²⁹ J.M. Berger, "Did Awlaki Really Help the 9/11 Hijackers?" *Foreign Policy*, January 4, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/04/did-awlaki-really-help-the-911-hijackers/>.

⁵³⁰ David Johnston and Scott Shane, "U.S. Knew of Suspect's Ties to Radical Cleric," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/10/us/10inquire.html>.

planning for the Fort Hood shootings.⁵³¹ Second, al-Awlaki met and coached Nigerian national Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who attempted to detonate an “underwear bomb” on an inbound flight to Detroit on December 25, 2009.⁵³² Third, al-Awlaki was suspected of involvement in AQAP’s 2010 plot to pack bombs on U.S.-bound cargo planes.⁵³³ Al-Awlaki was killed in a U.S. drone strike in September 2011. Another key figure in these plots was Saudi national and AQAP bomb-maker Ibrahim al-Asiri, who remains alive at the time of this writing.⁵³⁴

Phase three: Arab Spring (2011–2014)

In Yemen, anti-regime protests began in January 2011 as part of the Arab Spring. President Saleh attempted to placate protesters, but after suffering injuries in a June 2011 bombing, and facing continued protests throughout 2011, he agreed to step aside in favor of his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi; the transition occurred in February 2012.⁵³⁵ Hadi purged allies of Saleh from the government and the armed forces,⁵³⁶ driving Saleh into opposition.

Yemen’s Arab Spring unleashed an economic and humanitarian catastrophe, with rising poverty, unemployment, inflation, and food insecurity. By 2014, over half of Yemenis needed humanitarian assistance. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia’s expulsions of Yemeni workers reduced remittances, “one of the backbones of Yemen’s fragile

⁵³¹ J.M. Berger, “The Content and Context of Anwar Awlaki’s Emails with Fort Hood Shooter Nidal Hasan,” Intelwire, August 5, 2012, <http://news.intelwire.com/2012/08/the-content-and-context-of-anwar.html>.

⁵³² Peter Finn, “Al-Awlaki Directed Christmas ‘Underwear Bomber’ Plot, Justice Department Memo Says,” *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/al-awlaki-directed-christmas-underwear-bomber-plot-justice-department-memo-says/2012/02/10/gIQArDOt4Q_story.html?utm_term=.017639b75310.

⁵³³ Chris McGreal, “Prime Suspect in Cargo Plane Bomb Plot: Anwar al-Awlaki,” *The Guardian*, October 31, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/31/cargo-plane-bomb-suspect-anwar-al-awlaki>. See also, “Yemen-Based Al-Qaeda Group Claims Responsibility for Parcel Bomb Plot,” CNN, November 6, 2010, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/11/05/yemen.security.concern/?hpt=T2>.

⁵³⁴ On al-Asiri, see Bruce Riedel, *Ibrahim al Asiri: Al-Qaeda’s Genius Bomb Maker*, Brookings Institution, May 8, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/ibrahim-al-asiri-Al-Qaedas-genius-bomb-maker/>.

⁵³⁵ “Arab Uprising: Country by Country—Yemen,” BBC News, December 16, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-12482293>.

⁵³⁶ “Yemen’s New President Purges Army of Old-Regime Loyalists,” *Associated Press*, April 6, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/07/yemen-president-army-regime-loyalists>.

national economy.”⁵³⁷ After the 1991-2010 period, during which gross domestic product (GDP) grew at an annual rate of between 3 percent and 7.7 percent a year, GDP fell 12.7 percent in 2011 and 28 percent in 2015, with minimal growth during 2012-2014.⁵³⁸

AQAP benefited from Yemen’s crisis. Financed by bank robberies and other sources, AQAP offered money to tribes in return for support. The group presented itself as an anti-government, anti-corruption force.⁵³⁹ AQAP was, in its own words, “balancing between starting a full-scale war and between letting the Government and the Houthis finish each other.”⁵⁴⁰

In April 2011, AQAP proclaimed the existence of a new group, Ansar al-Sharia (AAS).⁵⁴¹ AAS leader Abu Zubayr al-Abbab, a long-time AQAP member, explained: “The mujahidin in Yemen are known as the Al-Qaeda organization; regarding the name Ansar al-Sharia, this is the name we are called in the regions we control, so that people understand the aim for which we are fighting.”⁵⁴² AAS is meant to carry out Al-Qaeda’s new global strategy of building popular support and, when possible, taking territory. Starting in May 2011, AAS began to sporadically control some southern Yemeni cities.⁵⁴³ AQAP/AAS also staged major attacks, such as a May 2012 suicide bombing in central Sanaa that killed 96 people, many of them soldiers.⁵⁴⁴

⁵³⁷ Khaled Fattah, “Yemen’s Insecurity Dilemma,” *Yemen Times*, February 11, 2014, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/02/11/yemen-s-insecurity-dilemma-pub-54657>.

⁵³⁸ World Bank, “GDP Growth (Annual %) - Yemen,” accessed 2 March 2017, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=YE>.

⁵³⁹ Rao, “Al-Qa ‘ida’ fi al-Yaman.”

⁵⁴⁰ “Letter from Basir to the Brother in Command,” document recovered at Osama Bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, likely composed in early 2011, p. 2, translated and declassified by ODNI, 1 March 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20from%20Basir%20to%20the%20Brother%20in%20Command.pdf>.

⁵⁴¹ Organizations with the same name, also bearing loose ties to local Al-Qaeda affiliates and members, emerged in 2011-2012 in Tunisia and Libya.

⁵⁴² Abu Zubayr Adil al-Abbab, “Al-Liqa’ al-Sawti ma’a al-Shaykh Abu Zubayr al-‘Abbab [Audio Interview with Shaykh Abu Zubayr al-Abbab],” *Mu’assasat al-Shajara*, 25 April 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=js_fbKJN23s.

⁵⁴³ International Crisis Group, “Yemen’s Al-Qaeda”; Adam Baron, “Ansar al Shariah Driven from Zinjibar in Major Blow to Al-Qaeda Affiliate in Yemen,” *Miami Herald*, 12 June 2012, <http://www.miamiherald.com/latest-news/article1940538.html#storylink=cpy>.

⁵⁴⁴ “Al-Qaeda Claims Deadly Yemen Suicide Blast,” *Al Jazeera*, 21 May 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/05/201252175919491219.html>.

To build popular support, AAS depicted itself as a force for effective governance. Videos showed AAS members bringing electricity to neglected areas and featured interviews with ordinary Yemenis praising the security and order that AAS had allegedly delivered. AAS also presented itself as an organization promoting religious purity. Propaganda showed AAS destroying graves and monuments it considered un-Islamic.⁵⁴⁵ AAS hoped to “steer the people to pay *zakat* [religiously mandated alms] to the mujahidin,” and to offer simple preaching focused on the theme of monotheism.⁵⁴⁶

Ironically, AQAP and AAS gained some ability to recruit because of the U.S. drone campaign. In 2012, one Yemeni critic argued that “drone strikes are causing more and more Yemenis to hate America and join radical militants; they are not driven by ideology but rather by a sense of revenge and despair.”⁵⁴⁷ The drone campaign has also fueled AQAP’s criticisms of the Yemeni government, which AQAP casts as a Western puppet. AQAP has accused the U.S. of secretly ruling Yemen through its Embassy in Sanaa.⁵⁴⁸

Phase four: Houthi rebellion and civil war (2014–Present)

Another boost for AQAP came from Yemen’s civil war, which has heightened sectarian tensions. Such tensions reflect the military successes of the Houthis, a religious and political group from northwestern Yemen’s Saada Governorate. The Houthis follow the Zaydi or “Fiver” branch of Shi’i Islam, which is distinct from the

⁵⁴⁵ Al-Battar Media Foundation, “Nusra li-Ansar al-Sharia bi-l-Yaman [Support for Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen],” December 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/12/09/new-video-message-from-al-battar-media-foundation-support-for-an%E1%B9%A3ar-al-shariah-in-yemen/>.

⁵⁴⁶ Abu al-Zubayr al-‘Abbab, “Khutuwat ‘Amaliyya li-Nusrat al-Jihad fi Jazirat al-‘Arab [Practical Steps for Supporting the Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula],” *Sada al-Malahim* 13 (April/May 2010): 16-18, p. 17, https://ia800201.us.archive.org/22/items/sada_all/13m.pdf.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibrahim Mothana, “How Drones Help Al-Qaeda,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/14/opinion/how-drones-help-Al-Qaeda.html>.

⁵⁴⁸ Jalal Baleedi, “Statement about the Course of the American War in Yemen,” translated into English by Fursan al-Balagh Media, Translation Section, October 2013, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/jalc481l-bulaydc4ab-al-marqishc4ab-abc5ab-e1b8a5amzah-al-zinjibc481rc4ab-22on-the-crimes-of-the-american-war-in-yemen22-en.pdf>.

“Twelver” branch of Shi‘ism followed in Iran. Nevertheless, the Houthis receive significant Iranian support.⁵⁴⁹

The Houthi rebellion against the Yemeni state began in 2004, when Saleh’s government cracked down on the movement and killed its leader, Hussein al-Houthi. Clashes between the Houthis and the government occurred for years in Saada, but the fighting ended temporarily with a 2010 ceasefire. After the Arab Spring began in 2011, the Houthis became one of many groups vying for power. As early as 2011, Houthis were fighting Sunnis in Saada Governorate, taking advantage of the political and security vacuum engendered by the revolution.⁵⁵⁰

A turning point came in 2014, as the Houthis reconciled with Saleh, who was then out of power. Supported by Saleh’s tribal and political allies, the Houthis began to capture territory in northern Yemen.⁵⁵¹ In September 2014, the Houthis captured Sanaa. In February 2015, they dissolved parliament and instated their own “Presidential Council.”⁵⁵² In response, Saudi Arabia launched an anti-Houthi intervention called Operation Decisive Storm; the Saudis are supported by a broad coalition that includes the United States, which provides intelligence and other support to the Saudi-led coalition. The civil war is ongoing at the time of this writing. The Houthis and their pro-Saleh allies control much of the north; the predominately Sunni, pro-government, anti-Houthi forces control much of the south. President Hadi remains in exile in Riyadh.

AQAP/AAS capitalized on growing sectarian animosity and sought to fill governance voids. AQAP increased its media output, presenting itself as a sophisticated and effective military force. During 2014 and 2015, “AQAP... increasingly adopted a bifurcated strategy of targeting Houthis in Houthi areas and government targets in

⁵⁴⁹ Yara Bayoumy and Phil Stewart, “Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Weapons Supply to Yemen’s Houthis via Oman - Officials,” Reuters, October 20, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN12K0CX>.

⁵⁵⁰ Khaled Fattah, “Yemen’s Sectarian Spring,” *Sada*, May 11, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=48095>.

⁵⁵¹ International Crisis Group, *The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa*. Middle East Report 154 (June 10, 2014), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/huthis-saada-sanaa>; Saeed al Batati, “Who Are the Houthis in Yemen?” Al Jazeera, March 29, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/yemen-houthis-hadi-protests-201482132719818986.html>.

⁵⁵² “Yemen’s Houthis Form Own Government in Sanaa,” Al Jazeera, February 6, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/02/yemen-houthi-rebels-announce-presidential-council-150206122736448.html>.

areas where AQAP is strongest.”⁵⁵³ AQAP’s attacks on the Houthis after 2014 contrasted with AQAP’s relative toleration of the Houthis before the Arab Spring. In that earlier period, AQAP had shown some “moderation” vis-à-vis the Houthis so as not to alienate ordinary Yemeni Sunni Muslims who had no grievances toward the Houthis then.⁵⁵⁴ As the civil war increased sectarianism within Yemen, AQAP adapted.

The civil war allowed AQAP/AAS to control territory again for the first time since 2011-2012. Most dramatically, AQAP/AAS seized al-Mukalla, a southern port city of 500,000 and the capital of Hadramaut Governorate, from April 2015 to April 2016 (AQAP/AAS was expelled from al-Mukalla by the Yemeni Army, backed by Emirati troops and Emirati and Saudi special forces).⁵⁵⁵ AQAP’s control of al-Mukalla was made possible by Operation Decisive Storm, during which Yemeni forces were largely withdrawn from the city. With its financial resources and about a thousand fighters in the city, AQAP offered residents a form of law and order, winning significant popular support there.⁵⁵⁶ AQAP also has temporarily controlled other southern cities during the civil war.⁵⁵⁷

AQAP has benefited from Operation Decisive Storm. Beyond al-Mukalla, Saudi Arabia considers defeating AQAP a lower priority than defeating the Houthi-Saleh alliance. AAS fighters have even reportedly fought alongside the forces of the Saudi-led coalition, although in 2016 Emirati forces began to fight AQAP in southern Yemeni areas where the Houthis were no longer a threat.⁵⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the civil war has hindered the U.S. counterterrorism campaign.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵³ Aaron Zelin and Patrick Hoover, “What AQAP’S Operations Reveal About Its Strategy in Yemen,” War on the Rocks, April 23, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/04/what-aqaps-operations-reveal-about-its-strategy-in-yemen/>.

⁵⁵⁴ Barak Barfi, “AQAP’s Soft Power Strategy in Yemen,” *CTC Sentinel*, November 1, 2010, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/aqap%E2%80%99s-soft-power-strategy-in-yemen>.

⁵⁵⁵ “Yemen Conflict: Troops Retake Mukalla from Al-Qaeda,” BBC News, April 25, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36128614>.

⁵⁵⁶ Bayoumy, Browning, and Ghobari, “How Saudi Arabia’s War in Yemen Has Made Al-Qaeda Stronger.”

⁵⁵⁷ Mohammed Mukhashaf, “Al-Qaeda Militants Take Over Two South Yemen Towns, Residents Say,” Reuters, December 2, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-idUSKBN0TLOBQ20151203>.

⁵⁵⁸ International Crisis Group, *Yemen’s Al-Qaeda*, pp. 15-16 (notes 62, 63, and 64).

⁵⁵⁹ Greg Miller, “Al-Qaeda Franchise in Yemen Exploits Chaos to Rebuild, Officials Say,” *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/Al-Qaeda-franchise-in-yemen-exploits-chaos-to-rebuild-officials-say/2015/04/04/207208da-d88f-11e4-ba28-f2a685dc7f89_story.html?utm_term=.ec4a6da2cfbc.

The civil war's effects on AQAP's external plotting are unclear. In 2015, an anonymous U.S. military official stated, "The initial evidence is actually that the Houthi advance has caused [AQAP's] external plotting to be sidelined while they figure out how they're going to deal with ...what appears to be an emerging civil war."⁵⁶⁰ Assessing the status of AQAP's external plots is complicated because of how much emphasis the group now places on inspiring "lone jihad" attacks.⁵⁶¹ For example, in January 2015, AQAP claimed responsibility for the assault on *Charlie Hebdo*.⁵⁶² The brothers who carried out the attack, French nationals Cherif and Said Kouachi, had traveled to Yemen, received weapons training, and met al-Awlaki in July-August 2011.⁵⁶³ It is unclear, however, whether AQAP planned the attack or just "inspired and perhaps funded" it.⁵⁶⁴

Security vulnerabilities in Yemen

Table 20 below highlights key security vulnerabilities in Yemen.

Table 20. Security vulnerabilities in Yemen

Vulnerability	Details
Internal conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to its longer history of internal conflict, including the 1994 civil war between the formerly separate north and south, Yemen has experienced several forms of internal conflict in recent years: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Beginning in 2004, the Houthi Rebellion, which has increased sectarianism in Yemen and consumed the energies of the regime, indirectly benefiting AQAP; ○ Beginning in 2011, the Arab Spring, which weakened central authority, triggered and escalated various internal conflicts, and allowed AQAP to begin holding territory; ○ Beginning in 2014, the civil war between the Houthis and the Hadi

⁵⁶⁰ Miller, "Al-Qaeda Franchise in Yemen Exploits Chaos."

⁵⁶¹ Nasser al-Anisi, "Lone Jihad Between Strategy and Tactic," *Inspire* 15 (May 2016): 42-45, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/inspire-magazine-15.pdf>.

⁵⁶² Jeremy Scahill, "Al-Qaeda Source: AQAP Directed Paris Attack," *The Intercept*, January 9, 2015, <https://theintercept.com/2015/01/09/alwaki-paris/>.

⁵⁶³ Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, "Both Brothers Behind Paris Attack Had Weapons Training in Yemen: Sources," Reuters, January 11, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-yemen-idUSKBN0KK0F620150111>.

⁵⁶⁴ Tim Fernholz, "The Unanswered Questions After AQAP Takes Credit for the Charlie Hebdo Attacks," Quartz, January 14, 2015, <https://qz.com/326588/the-unanswered-questions-after-aqap-takes-credit-for-the-charlie-hebdo-attacks/>.

	<p>government, which has strengthened AQAP; and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Beginning in 2015, the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm against the Houthis, which, especially early on, distracted the attention of Saudi Arabia and Yemeni government forces attention away from AQAP
History of violent jihadism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jihadist and jihadist-leaning groups have periodically arisen in Yemen since the 1990s, laying the groundwork for AQAP
State Collapse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yemen has long been a weak state, but it began to collapse in 2011 with the Arab Spring, when it began to lose control over parts of its territory to the Houthis, AQAP, and other factions. • The civil war accelerated the collapse of the state, with the Houthis capturing Sanaa in September 2014 and President Hadi fleeing to Saudi Arabia in March 2015. • State weakness has allowed AQAP to periodically seize and rule territory, most prominently the southern city al-Mukalla in 2015-2016.
State Illegitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government of longtime ruler President Ali Abdullah Saleh became increasingly unpopular over time. Many Yemenis came to perceive his regime as deeply corrupt and repressive. Saleh eventually fell amid popular protests (and international pressure) as part of the Arab Spring. Saleh, however, was also able for many years to hold together a society with deep fractures – north and south, Sunni and Zaydi Shi'a, etc. The government of Saleh's successor, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, has struggled to project authority and legitimacy. Hadi has also been hobbled by the continued influence of Saleh, who began to undermine Hadi's government from as early as 2012. In 2015, Saleh formally allied himself with the Houthis against Hadi.⁵⁶⁵ • AQAP benefited from these trends in two ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o First, there are credible accusations that Saleh at times colluded with, or at least tolerated, AQAP as part of his efforts to balance competing internal forces and mitigate open opposition to his rule (and to attract counterterrorism funding from the United States and other powers).⁵⁶⁶ o Second, AQAP increasingly offers itself to Yemenis as a supposedly incorruptible, just, accountable form of government that can offer

⁵⁶⁵ "Yemen's Saleh declares alliance with Houthis," Al Jazeera, May 11, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/cloneofcloneofcloneofstrikes-yemen-saada-breach-150510143647004.html>.

⁵⁶⁶ Evan Hill and Laura Kasinof, "Playing a Double Game in the Fight Against AQAP," *Foreign Policy*, January 21, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/21/playing-a-double-game-in-the-fight-against-aqap-yemen-saleh-Al-Qaeda/>.

a form of law, order, and livelihood in conflict-prone areas. Through its popularly-oriented branch Ansar al-Sharia, AQAP explicitly tries to present an alternative to Hadi and to the former Saleh government.

Demographic Instability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With a population of approximately 27 million, Yemen has a major youth bulge (nearly half of the population was under age 18 as of 2012).⁵⁶⁷ As noted above, Yemen also has internal sectarian divides that have worsened considerably since 2004 and especially since 2011. Yemen is also the poorest country in the Arab Gulf region, with 17.5% of the population living below the poverty line in 2011.⁵⁶⁸
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yemen, with U.S. support, had greatly reduced Al-Qaeda’s presence in Yemen by 2003. • But in 2006, AQAP rebounded in large part due to the mistakes and inefficacy of the security forces. That year, key commanders escaped from a major prison run by the intelligence services. • In the ensuing years, Saleh’s attention was often directed toward other problems, and AQAP was able to steadily grow. • When the Arab Spring and especially the civil war presented the opportunity, AQAP was able to overwhelm or chase out local security forces in several key southern areas. Notably, AQAP’s rule of al-Mukalla was ended in 2016 with Emirati forces in the lead, rather than Yemeni forces.

U.S. approach to AQAP

Table 21 below describes the U.S. approach to countering AQAP in Yemen.

Table 21. U.S. approach to AQAP

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	The U.S. has conducted at least 250 drone strikes in Yemen targeting members of AQAP and its predecessors. ⁵⁶⁹ The campaign began in 2009 (there was one, earlier strike in 2002). AQAP leaders who died in such strikes include former emir Nasir al-Wuhayshi (d. 2015). The U.S. has also conducted raids on the ground, most famously the 29 January 2017 joint U.S. –UAE raid in Al-Bayda governorate in which a Navy Seal was

⁵⁶⁷ “At a glance: Yemen,” UNICEF, last update December 31, 2013, https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/yemen_statistics.html.

⁵⁶⁸ “At a glance: Yemen,” UNICEF.

⁵⁶⁹ “Drone Strikes in Yemen,” The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, N.d., <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war/yemen>.

	killed.
Advise, Assist, and Accompany	U.S. forces have advised and assisted Yemeni and third party forces on several occasions, including during the Emirati-led campaign to expel AQAP from al-Mukalla. ⁵⁷⁰
Security Cooperation /Building Partner Capacity (Train and Equip)	The U.S. provided assistance to the Yemeni security forces under 1206 and 1207 in 2009 (\$52.1 million disbursed) and 2010 (\$134.8 million disbursed). The train-and-equip programs were suspended in 2011 during the Arab Spring, and then resumed in 2012 (\$63.3 million disbursed), only to fall again in succeeding years as the assistance program was reviewed amid continued political turmoil. ⁵⁷¹ Much of this assistance focused on counterterrorism training; for example, in 2010 the U.S. and the UK launched a program to create a new counterterrorism police unit. ⁵⁷²
"Third Party" Partners	The U.S. has worked closely with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to disrupt and dismantle AQAP, although Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen has at times boosted AQAP in that the Saudis and Yemeni government forces have concentrated on fighting the Houthis, giving AQAP freer rein.
Security Sector Reform	Security sector reform became a major priority for the Hadi government starting in 2012, as Hadi sought to remove and disempower Saleh's networks within the security forces. The U.S. supported this effort by leveling the threat of sanctions against spoilers connected with Saleh and the Houthis; ⁵⁷³ the Treasury Department sanctioned Saleh himself in November 2014. ⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷⁰ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Missy Ryan, "U.S. forces now on the ground supporting combat operations in Yemen, Pentagon says," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/05/06/u-s-forces-now-on-the-ground-supporting-combat-operations-in-yemen-pentagon-says/?utm_term=.09efa7c47e4b.

⁵⁷¹ United States Government Accountability Office, "Yemen: DOD Should Improve Accuracy of Its Data on Congressional Clearance of Projects as It Reevaluates Counterterrorism Assistance," April 2015, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/669878.pdf>, p. 7.

⁵⁷² Toma Tasovac (ed.), "Britain and US to fund anti-terror unit in Yemen to combat Al-Qaeda," DW, January 3, 2010, <http://www.dw.com/en/britain-and-us-to-fund-anti-terror-unit-in-yemen-to-combat-Al-Qaeda/a-5077975>.

⁵⁷³ Katherine Zimmerman and Sasha Gordon, "Yemen's Military Restructuring: Removing Saleh's Network," AEI Critical Threats Project, December 20, 2012, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/yemens-military-restructuring-removing-salehs-network>.

⁵⁷⁴ Executive Order 13611 of May 16, 2012, Blocking Property of Persons Threatening the Peace, Security, or Stability of Yemen, Federal Register, Vol. 77, No. 97, May 18, 2012, https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/yemen_eo.pdf.

Civilian Military Operations	Special Operations Command Central Forward conducted civil affairs as part of its mission, but few details are available. ⁵⁷⁵ The U.S. military constructed some health facilities in the country. ⁵⁷⁶
Messaging/ counter-messaging	From open sources, it appears that the State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications took the lead in combating AQAP propaganda. ⁵⁷⁷ (The Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) was replaced by the Global Engagement Center in 2016.) Yemen is one country of focus for CENTCOM’s WebOps program, which has been heavily criticized for alleged incompetence and waste, ⁵⁷⁸ but few details are available in open sources regarding the Yemen component of WebOps.
Intelligence and Information Sharing	Up through the early phases of the civil war, U.S. and Yemeni forces collected intelligence against AQAP that enabled drone strikes and raids; al-Anaad airbase was a key intelligence analysis site where U.S. personnel were posted. But the withdrawal of many U.S. personnel in 2015, combined with the chaos of the civil war, greatly reduced intelligence collection. ⁵⁷⁹ In 2015, the U.S. widened its intelligence sharing with Saudi Arabia in order to support Operation Decisive Storm; most of this intelligence has involved the Houthis, ⁵⁸⁰ but increasingly the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and the UAE share intelligence related to AQAP. ⁵⁸¹

⁵⁷⁵ Brian Dodwell and Marielle Ness, “A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Captain Robert A. Newson, Military Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations,” *CTC Sentinel*, February 27, 2015, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-view-from-the-ct-foxhole-an-interview-with-captain-robert-a-newson-military-fellow-council-on-foreign-relations>.

⁵⁷⁶ Sandra A. Scham, *USAID’s Role in Civil/Military Cooperation in Asia and the Middle East An Assessment of Programmatic Implications and Lessons Learned Report on Phase I*, USAID, October 2009, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pdacr565.pdf, p. 77.

⁵⁷⁷ Camille Elhassani, “US state department fights Al-Qaeda in cyberspace,” *Al Jazeera*, May 24, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/americas/2012/05/116116.html>;

⁵⁷⁸ Desmond Butler and Richard Lardner, “US misfires in online fight against Islamic State.” *Associated Press*, January 31, 2017, <https://apnews.com/b3fd7213bb0e41b3b02eb15265e9d292/us-military-botches-online-fight-against-islamic-state>.

⁵⁷⁹ Mark Hosenball, Phil Stewart and Matt Spetalnick, “The US Is Running Out Of Intelligence In Yemen,” *Reuters*, January 29, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-exclusive-us-armed-drone-program-in-yemen-facing-intelligence-gaps--2015-1>.

⁵⁸⁰ Mark Hosenball, Phil Stewart and Warren Strobel, “Exclusive: U.S. expands intelligence sharing with Saudis in Yemen operation,” *Reuters*, April 10, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-yemen-exclusive-idUSKBN0N129W20150411>.

⁵⁸¹ Phil Stewart and Yara Bayoumy, “In Yemen conflict, a window into deepening U.S.-Gulf ties,” *Reuters*, April 27, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-yemen-idUSKBN17T37T>.

**Attack the
Network -
Counter Threat
Finance**

The U.S. Treasury Department has worked to blacklist firms and individuals who fund AQAP.⁵⁸²

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQAP?

- By 2003, with U.S. support, Yemeni authorities had largely **dismantled** Al-Qaeda's network in the country: key commanders had been killed or imprisoned, and Al-Qaeda operations had reached a low point. Across the border in Saudi Arabia, authorities also effectively **dismantled** the group in a series of arrests and raids between 2002 and 2006. As in Yemen, U.S. support was important to the Saudi counter-Al-Qaeda effort.
- Since the 2006 jailbreak that resuscitated the network that became AQAP, however, the U.S. and Yemen's successive governments, and more recently the Saudi-led coalition, have had only limited, partial, and often fleeting successes against AQAP. Yemeni forces were increasingly distracted by the Houthi rebellion toward the end of the decade, and the Arab Spring and civil war allowed AQAP to thrive amid chaos. U.S.-trained Yemeni forces have shown a capacity to **disrupt** AQAP, for example by expelling it from Zinjibar and Abyan in 2012 after AQAP had briefly controlled those towns;⁵⁸³ yet in recent years, Yemeni forces have increasingly required outside help to confront AQAP. Meanwhile, unilateral U.S. actions failed to slow AQAP's growth and likely accelerated it. On the one hand, U.S. strikes have removed over thirty-five top operatives and hundreds of fighters.⁵⁸⁴ On the other hand, these deaths do not amount to a **dismantling** of AQAP, given the organization's ability to replace

⁵⁸² U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Financial Supporters of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," November 1, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0601.aspx>.

⁵⁸³ Adam Baron, "Ansar al Shariah Driven from Zinjibar in Major Blow to al Qaida Affiliate in Yemen," *Miami Herald*, 12 June 2012, <http://www.miamiherald.com/latest-news/article1940538.html#storylink=cpy>.

⁵⁸⁴ "Key Findings: Drone Wars Yemen," International Security, N.d., <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/key-findings.html?country=Yemen>.

top leaders, to grow faster than it is attacked, and even to draw some recruits among Yemenis angered by the U.S. strikes.

- The U.S. and its external partners have had some success in **disrupting** AQAP. U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism cooperation has deepened considerably since the signing of a bilateral counterterrorism agreement in 2008. With AQAP's 2010 cargo planes bomb plot, "Saudi intelligence provided the critical tipoff to the American and European intelligence officials that allowed British and Emirati security personnel to intercept the expertly concealed bombs that were already en route to the United States."⁵⁸⁵ However, especially in the early stages of Operation Decisive Storm, Saudi Arabia appeared to be ignoring or even tolerating AQAP within Yemen.⁵⁸⁶
- In recent years, the UAE has been a key partner: when Emirati-led forces expelled AQAP from al-Mukalla in 2016, the U.S. provided intelligence support and aerial refueling.⁵⁸⁷ As the war in Yemen drags on, Saudi Arabia and the UAE may devote even greater attention to defeating AQAP there.
- Over the long term, there were two key weaknesses in U.S. efforts against AQAP in Yemen. First, the U.S. overrated the Yemeni government as a partner. By the late 2000s, Yemeni leaders were more interested in self-preservation than in actual counterterrorism. As the former commander of Special Operations Command Central Forward Yemen has noted, "President Saleh was absolutely a master of manipulation and he used counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S. as a tool to get what he wanted."⁵⁸⁸ In this atmosphere, U.S. policies were not effectively calibrated to encouraging reform. By 2009, Saleh was allegedly diverting U.S. counterterrorism funding and equipment to support his conflict with the Houthis.⁵⁸⁹ As the former commander has argued,

⁵⁸⁵ Daniel L. Byman, "Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade: The U.S.-Saudi Arabia counterterrorism relationship," Brookings, May 24, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-u-s-saudi-arabia-counterterrorism-relationship/>.

⁵⁸⁶ Bruce Riedel, "Al-Qaida's Hawdramawt Emirate." *The Brookings Institution*. July 12, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/07/12/al-qaidas-hadramawt-emirate/>.

⁵⁸⁷ William Maclean, Noah Browning, and Yara Bayoumy, "Yemen counter-terrorism mission shows UAE military ambition," Reuters, June 28, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-emirates-idUSKCN0ZE1EA>.

⁵⁸⁸ Dodwell and Ness, "A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Captain Robert A. Newson."

⁵⁸⁹ "US: Investigate Counterterrorism Assistance to Yemen," Human Rights Watch, December 11, 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/12/11/us-investigate-counterterrorism-assistance-yemen>.

“Oftentimes a huge shipment of supplies or weapons would arrive at the same time we were trying to play a little hard ball with them and it undermined our efforts. So we argued to zero effect that U.S. assistance efforts should be conditional and adjusted to conditions on the ground.” The same former commander added that U.S.-trained Yemeni counterterrorism forces often remained in the capital Sanaa under the thumb of senior figures, and that those forces lacked the intelligence, supply, and logistical support that might have made them effective.⁵⁹⁰ The Arab Spring undermined U.S. efforts even further. Key U.S.-trained counterterrorism units were controlled by Saleh, and starting in 2012 they were either sidelined by Hadi or remained focused on Saleh’s political priorities.⁵⁹¹

- o Second, there problems with implementation. A U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that as of 2015, 40 percent of DOD train-and-equip items in Yemen had either been delivered late or could not be adequately accounted for.⁵⁹² More problematically, as Yemen’s political chaos increased, by March 2015 the DOD had lost track of more than \$500 million in equipment give to the Yemeni security forces, including “small arms, ammunition, night-vision goggles, patrol boats, [and] vehicles.”⁵⁹³

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQAP?

- Several pre-existing vulnerabilities worsened in such a way that the situation was transformed, largely to AQAP’s benefit. These vulnerabilities include the

⁵⁹⁰ Dodwell and Ness, “A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Captain Robert A. Newson.”

⁵⁹¹ Craig Whitlock, “Pentagon Loses Sight of 500 Millin in Counterterrorism Aid Given to Yemen”, *The Washington Post*, March 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-loses-sight-of-500-million-in-counterterrorism-aid-given-to-yemen/2015/03/17/f4ca25ce-cbf9-11e4-8a46-b1dc9be5a8ff_story.html?utm_term=.3d90c604a27a

⁵⁹² United States Government Accountability Office, “Yemen: DOD Should Improve Accuracy of Its Data,” first (non-numbered) page.

⁵⁹³ Craig Whitlock, “Pentagon Loses Sight of 500 Million in Counterterrorism Aid Given to Yemen,” *The Washington Post*, March 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-loses-sight-of-500-million-in-counterterrorism-aid-given-to-yemen/2015/03/17/f4ca25ce-cbf9-11e4-8a46-b1dc9be5a8ff_story.html?utm_term=.3d90c604a27a

weakness and illegitimacy of the state, and the internal conflict that worsened with the Arab Spring and reached civil war proportions in 2014. One new vulnerability that emerged is as a result of the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm, which has exacerbated internal conflict in Yemen and drawn the attention of the Yemeni security forces away from the fight against AQAP.⁵⁹⁴

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

- Major shifts in the U.S. approach came in 2009 and 2015. In December 2009, the U.S. started its campaign of airstrikes against AQAP, attempting to disrupt and dismantle the organization,⁵⁹⁵ the campaign accelerated after the November 2009 Fort Hood Shooting and the December 2009 attempted “underwear bombing.” One key target was U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, who played a role in both of the aforementioned plots and who was killed by a U.S. drone strike in 2011. Another shift in the U.S. approach came in 2014-2015, when the civil war and Houthi control of key government agencies disrupted the United States’ ability to gather intelligence, conduct counterterrorism operations, and train Yemeni forces.⁵⁹⁶ In February 2015, the U.S. closed its Embassy in Sanaa.⁵⁹⁷ Another shift came with the launch of the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015: the operation has placed the U.S. in an awkward position as it seeks to support a key partner (Saudi Arabia) in a war against the Houthis that is going poorly, and simultaneously to make sure that Saudi Arabia and others in the coalition do not ignore—or, worse,

⁵⁹⁴ Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning and Mohammed Ghobari, “How Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen has made Al-Qaeda stronger - and richer,” Reuters, April 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/>.

⁵⁹⁵ “Yemen: Reported US Covert Action 2001-2011,” The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, March 29, 2012, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/drone-war/data/yemen-reported-us-covert-actions-2001-2011>.

⁵⁹⁶ Greg Miller and Craig Whitlock, “Yemen Crisis Disrupts US Counterterrorism Operations,” *The Washington Post*, January 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-counterterrorism-operations-with-yemen-suspended-officials-say/2015/01/23/03bf8826-a337-11e4-903f-9f2faf7cd9fe_story.html?utm_term=.174dc7789c66

⁵⁹⁷ Mohammed Ghobari, “United States closes its embassy in conflict-hit Yemen,” Reuters, February 10, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-usa-idUSKBN0LE25720150210>.

empower⁵⁹⁸—AQAP. Finally, the inauguration of President Trump brought an increase in the tempo of strikes and raids in Yemen, with more strikes during the new administration’s first 100 days than in all of 2015 and 2016 combined.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁸ Yara Bayoumy, Noah Browning and Mohammed Ghobari, “How Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen has made al Qaeda stronger - and richer,” Reuters, April 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/yemen-aqap/>.

⁵⁹⁹ “Trump's 100 days: US air campaign hammers Yemen with almost a strike a day,” The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, April 27, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-04-27/us-air-campaign-hammers-yemen-with-almost-a-strike-a-day>.

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Appendix F: Case Study of Al-Shebab

Overview

Harakat al-Shebab al-Mujahideen (The Movement of Mujahidin Youth), or al-Shebab, is an Al-Qaeda (AQ)-affiliated violent jihadist group based in southern and central Somalia. With an estimated 6,000–12,000 fighters, al-Shebab is among the largest Islamist armed groups in East Africa.⁶⁰⁰ Key Shebab military targets inside Somalia include the Somali National Army (SNA) and the forces of the United Nations–mandated African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Al-Shebab has demonstrated some ability to mount deadly cross-border operations, such as the September 21, 2013 attack on the upscale Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, where Shebab gunmen murdered at least 67 people and wounded more than 200 others.⁶⁰¹ Although al-Shebab has adherents among Somali diaspora communities in the United States and elsewhere in the West, the group’s ability to conduct sophisticated terrorist attacks outside East Africa is limited.⁶⁰² With support from the United States, Somali and UN forces have made considerable progress against al-Shebab in

⁶⁰⁰ Counter Extremism Project, “Al-Shabab,” accessed January 30, 2017, <http://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-Shabab>.

⁶⁰¹ Lauren Ploch Blanchard, *The September 2013 Terrorist Attack in Kenya: In Brief*, Congressional Research Service, Report R43245, November 14, 2013, accessed May 19, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43245.pdf>; and William Rosenau and Ghassan Schbley, “The Charcoal Connection: U.S. Security Assistance and Kenyan Counterterrorism,” *War on the Rocks*, September 30, 2013, accessed May 20, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2013/09/the-charcoal-connection-u-s-security-assistance-and-kenyan-counterterrorism/>.

⁶⁰² Jonathan Masters and Mohammed Aly Sergie, “Al-Shebab,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 13, 2015, accessed May 15, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/al-Shebab>, accessed May 15, 2017.

recent years.⁶⁰³ But any predictions of the group's demise may be premature. Given the group's considerable resiliency, it is likely that al-Shebab will remain a menacing feature of the region's security landscape.⁶⁰⁴

Leadership and structure

Since 2014, al-Shebab has been led by Ahmed Omar, also known as Abu Ubaydah. Omar succeeded Ahmed Abdi Godane, who was killed by a U.S. airstrike on September 1, 2014. It was under Godane's leadership that the movement was at the height of its administrative, territorial, and military power. But as one scholar has observed, it was also under Godane's time as emir that al-Shebab "fell into decline, losing great swaths of territory and most major urban centers and economic hubs."⁶⁰⁵

As emir, Omar heads both an executive council and a shura council. The later, a consultative body, determines strategy and assigns regional governors and military commanders who operate with relative autonomy. Each region is administered by a local council, comprised of a governor and deputies responsible for finance, administration, and security. Coordination among regional groups is common.⁶⁰⁶ The deputy leader of al-Shebab, Mukhtar Robow (also known as Abu Mansur), was a deputy leader of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), from which al-Shebab emerged in the mid-2000s.

Junior leaders run al-Shebab's media branch, law enforcement, and military operations. Al-Shebab's media branch, al-Kataib (the Brigades), disseminates recruitment videos for international audiences; al-Shebab also operates a radio

⁶⁰³ Sunguta West, "Jahba East Africa: Islamic State Alters the Dynamic of Somalia's Conflict," *Terrorism Monitor* 14, no. 9 (April 29, 2016), accessed May 22, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/jahba-east-africa-islamic-state-alters-the-dynamic-of-somalias-conflict/>; and Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, "U.S.-Trained Somali Commandos Fight al-Shebab," *Voice of America*, July 21, 2014, accessed May 22, 2017, <http://www.voanews.com/a/us-trained-somali-commandos-fight-against-al-Shebab/1968832.html>.

⁶⁰⁴ Cedric Barnes, "Somalia's Al-Shabaab down But far From Out," International Crisis Group, June 27, 2016, accessed May 22, 2017, <http://blog.crisisgroup.org/africa/somalia/2016/06/27/somalias-al-shabaab-down-but-far-from-out/>.

⁶⁰⁵ Christopher Anzalone, "The Life and Death of Al-Shabab Leader Ahmed Godane." *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 9 (September 2014), accessed February 9, 2017, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CTCSentinel-Vol7Iss96.pdf>.

⁶⁰⁶ Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism, "Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen," September 28, 2016, accessed February 13, 2017, <https://janes.ihs.com/TerrorismInsurgencyGroups/Display/1320917>.

station, Radio Andalus,⁶⁰⁷ and periodically operates Facebook and Twitter⁶⁰⁸ accounts. Al-Shebab has two military branches: Jaysh al-Ushr (“army of hardship”), the external military branch; and Jaysh al-Hisbah (“army of morality”), the internal religious police force. The Maktabatu Amniyat (Ministry of Justice and Internal Security) is al-Shebab’s capable and feared intelligence organization, responsible for recruiting spies, assassinating perceived adversaries, and helping to promote and maintain the centralization of power inside the group.⁶⁰⁹

Relationship with the core

Al-Shebab pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden in 2008⁶¹⁰ and became a formal Al-Qaeda affiliate in 2012.⁶¹¹ Like other affiliates within the Al-Qaeda firmament, it has maintained an anti-American stance through its propaganda.⁶¹²

Even before al-Shebab’s formal Al-Qaeda affiliation, the core provided the Somali group with strategic guidance and direction. For example, an August 2010 letter to Bin Laden notes “the pledge of allegiance from our brothers in Somalia,” and highlights that this allegiance requires “jihad for establishing an Islamic Caliphate.”⁶¹³ Al-Shebab also had contact with other affiliates, including Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In 2008, American-born AQAP cleric Anwar al-Awlaki praised al-Shebab for fighting against the U.S.-backed Ethiopian invasion. In 2010, AQAP deputy leader Said al-Shihri encouraged additional engagement between al-Shebab and AQAP. Al-Shebab and AQAP have exchanged fighters and weapons between Yemen and Somalia. Al-Shebab has obtained weapons and learned tactics from AQAP, including use of laptop explosives and car bombs.

⁶⁰⁷ Nel Hodge, “How Somalia’s al-Shebab militants hone their image,” BBC News, June 6, 2014, accessed 3/14/17, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27633367>.

⁶⁰⁸ Hamza Mohamed, “Al-Shabab say they are back on Twitter,” AlJazeera, December 16, 2013, accessed 3/14/2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/12/al-shabab-claim-they-are-back-twitter-2013121610453327578.html>.

⁶⁰⁹ Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 83-84.

⁶¹⁰ Adlini Ilma Ghaisany Sjah, “Tracing Al Shabaab’s Decision to Cooperate with Al-Qaeda in Somalia (2008),” *Journal of Terrorism Research* 5, no. 1 (2014), accessed February 8, 2017, doi: <http://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.827>, <http://jtr.st-andrews.ac.uk/articles/10.15664/jtr.827/>.

⁶¹¹ BBC News, “Somalia’s al-Shabab join Al-Qaeda,” BBC News, 10 February 2012, accessed February 9, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16979440>.

⁶¹² Sjah, “Tracing Al Shabaab’s Decision to Cooperate with Al-Qaeda in Somalia (2008).”

⁶¹³ Azmarai (alias for Osama Bin Laden), “Letter from Osama bin Laden to Shaykh Mahmud,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2010.

Al-Shebab's joining Al-Qaeda had mutual benefits: AQ's presence in East Africa dates to Osama Bin Laden's time in Sudan (1992-1996) and the establishment of cells that perpetrated the August 7, 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. For Al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab became its long-awaited affiliate in East Africa. Through its association with Al-Qaeda, al-Shebab has received training, funding and recruitment benefits.⁶¹⁴ The two groups cooperate on indoctrination, explosives training, and assassinations. AQ plays a role in al-Shebab's leadership, with several foreigners sitting on al-Shebab's executive council.

Ideology and goals

Like other Al-Qaeda affiliates, al-Shebab has both local and international goals. Al-Shebab's national objectives include overthrowing the Somali government, expelling foreign forces from Somalia, and establishing an Islamic state according to its version of sharia law.⁶¹⁵ Al-Shebab's internationalist goals include spreading global jihad and supporting AQ and its affiliates. Labels such as Salafism, Wahhabism, and Takfirism are often used to describe al-Shebab's politico-religious belief system, but as one prominent scholar of the movement cautions, these ideological categories are typically hazy and ill defined.⁶¹⁶

Funding

Al-Shebab's foreign funding comes from AQ, non-Somali sympathizers, and the Somali diaspora. Domestic funding comes from local proselytizing and racketeering. Al-Shebab has generated up to \$100 million per year from donations, fees levied at ports, taxes on goods, checkpoint fees, and extortion. After seizing the port city Kismayo in 2008, al-Shebab received an estimated \$35-50 million annually from the charcoal trade. Even after the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) retook Kismayo in 2012, al-Shebab benefited from the charcoal trade in other areas. Al-Shebab also invests in gold and facilitates cash flows through mobile money transfers. When in power in Mogadishu in 2009-2010, al-Shebab controlled the main Bakara market, taxed farmers, and regulated cross-border smuggling with Kenya. Since 2013, al-Shebab has relied heavily on informal "taxation" and outright extortion.

⁶¹⁴ Sjah, "Tracing Al Shabaab's Decision to Cooperate with Al-Qaeda in Somalia (2008)."

⁶¹⁵ Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism, "Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen."

⁶¹⁶ Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism, "Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen."

Evolution

Phase one: Origins 1990s-2005

Al-Shebab's roots⁶¹⁷ can be traced back to the 1980s and the activities of al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI), a Salafi organization that protested the secularist policies of long-time Somali dictator Siad Barre. AIAI had local goals as well as pan-Islamist objectives.⁶¹⁸ It developed ties to Al-Qaeda in the 1990s.⁶¹⁹ AIAI's leadership included Aden Hashi Ayro, who would become al-Shebab's first leader.

In 1991, Barre was overthrown by a coalition of clan-based rebel groups.⁶²⁰ Clan-based warlords such as Muhammad Farah Aidid dominated southern Somali politics in the 1990s, and AIAI sought to take advantage of the chaos. From 1992-1996, AIAI attempted to build an emirate in the Gedo region, but the project was crushed by Ethiopian forces after AIAI perpetrated several bombings in Ethiopia.⁶²¹ The resulting battle, which likely involved Robow and Ayro, may have been the first time AIAI established contact with Al-Qaeda. In 1998, AIAI was weak, and Ayro went to Afghanistan and allegedly met Bin Laden.⁶²² After 1999, powerful businessmen began

⁶¹⁷ The "phases" used here are adopted from Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶¹⁸ Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012*.

⁶¹⁹United Nations, "Security Council Committee Report Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999) 1989 (2011) And 2253 (2015) Concerning Isil (Da'esh) Al-Qaida And Associated Individuals Groups Undertakings And Entities," United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs, accessed February 9, 2017, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/al-itihaad-al-islamiya/aiai.

⁶²⁰ Jane Perlez, "Insurgents Claiming Victory in Somalia," *New York Times*, January 28, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/28/world/insurgents-claiming-victory-in-somalia.html>.

⁶²¹ International Crisis Group, "Somalia's Islamists," International Crisis Group, December 12, 2005 accessed February 9, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/somalias-islamists>, pp. 7-10.

⁶²² Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012*.

to marginalize the southern warlords.⁶²³ It was during this time that al-Shebab began to take shape.

There are conflicting accounts over the events surrounding the official formation of al-Shebab. Some evidence suggests that a loose organization of like-minded individuals coalesced in the 1990s, including Ayro and Ibrahim Al-Afghani (d. June 2013, killed by fighters loyal to Godane).⁶²⁴ According to a senior Al-Shebab figure, the group officially formed in 2002 after members returned to Somalia from jihadist training camps in Afghanistan.⁶²⁵ Al-Shebab's first attacks date from 2003, when Ayro's fighters killed foreign aid workers and targeted Somalis believed to be working with anti-Shebab counterterrorism networks.⁶²⁶ The formation of al-Shebab was aided by what remained of Al-Qaeda in East Africa. After 9/11, the US continued to target AQ in East Africa in Somalia, in what became known as the "Shadow War" of Mogadishu.⁶²⁷ By 2003, the still ill-defined al-Shebab had a presence in Mogadishu and counted at least several dozen followers.

From 2004-2006 al-Shebab was a militia associated with the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). The popularity of the Islamic Courts was not based solely on ideology but, rather, on popular desires for an alternative to warlords. These courts dated from the late 1990s, but grew in importance in the early 2000s as other forms of governance failed to take root in Somalia. As an alliance between businessmen and Muslim clerics, the courts included a range of ideologies, from moderates to jihadists, including Hassan Dahir Aweys of AIAI. Al-Shebab was one of the radical militias associated with the UIC.⁶²⁸ During al-Shebab's association with the UIC, it publicly denounced terrorism and Al-Qaeda.⁶²⁹

⁶²³ "Conflict in Somalia: Drivers and Dynamics," The World Bank, January 2005, <https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTSOMALIA/Resources/conflictinsomalia.pdf>, pp. 11-12.

⁶²⁴ Nathaniel Horadam, "Profile: Ibrahim Haji Jama Mead (Ibrahim al Afghani)," AEI Critical Threats, November 14, 2011, accessed February 9, 2017, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/somalia/al-shabaab-leadership/ibrahim-haji-jama-mead-afghani-november-14-2011>.

⁶²⁵ "Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen."

⁶²⁶ International Crisis Group, "Somalia's Islamists," p. 11.

⁶²⁷ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012*.

⁶²⁸ International Crisis Group, "Somalia's Islamists," p. 11.

⁶²⁹ Sjah, "Tracing Al Shabaab's Decision to Cooperate with Al-Qaeda in Somalia (2008)."

Al-Shebab's leaders have come from different clans: Ayro from the Ayr (a sub-clan of the Hawiye),⁶³⁰ Godane from the Isaaq,⁶³¹ Umar from the Dir,⁶³² and Robow from the Rahanweyn.⁶³³ As such, the movement attempted to have a multi-clan appeal, which differentiated it from most other groups in Somalia. At the same time, however, al-Shebab's strength in southern Somalia suggests that it recruits heavily among the Rahanweyn and Hawiye clans.⁶³⁴ After building a training center in 2005, al-Shebab began to recruit, expand, and unify.

Phase two: Expansion 2005-2006

A variety of factors contributed to increasing popular support for al-Shebab during this period, including the group's opposition to Ethiopian-supported clans, its criticism of corrupt warlords, the decline of the warlord system, the rise of a business class, and the increased power of sharia courts.⁶³⁵ In February 2006, weakened warlords formed the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter Terrorism (ARPCT) to counter foreign AQ fighters in Mogadishu and to challenge the Islamic Courts. In June 2006, the UIC, with al-Shebab's assistance, defeated the ARPCT and expanded its influence over Mogadishu, along with much of south-central Somalia.⁶³⁶ Al-Shebab benefited: Godane was appointed general secretary of the UIC executive, Ayro was given command of the UIC's combined militia, and Robow was

⁶³⁰ Eric Schmitt and Jeffrey Gettleman, "Qaeda Leader Reported Killed in Somalia," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2008, accessed February 9, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/02/world/africa/02somalia.html>.

⁶³¹ Christopher Anzalone, "The Life and Death of Al-Shabab Leader Ahmed Godane." *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 9 (September 2014), accessed February 9, 2017, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CTCSentinel-Vol7Iss96.pdf>.

⁶³² Sam Cleaves, "Profile: Ahmad Umar (Abu Ubaidah)," AEI Critical Threats, February 17, 2015, accessed February 9, 2017, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/somalia/al-shabaab-leadership/ahmed-umar-abu-ubaidah-february-17-2015>.

⁶³³ Ibn Siqilli, "Harakat al-Shabab & Somalia's Clans," al-Wasat - الوسط, MARCH 8, 2011, accessed February 9, 2017, <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2011/03/08/harakat-al-shabab-somalias-clans/>.

⁶³⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, "Somalia's Clan Families," Council on Foreign Relations, 2002, accessed February 9, 2017, <http://dev-www.cfr.org/somalia/somalias-clan-families/p13315>.

⁶³⁵ Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012*.

⁶³⁶ Emily Wax and Karen DeYoung, "U.S. Secretly Backing Warlords in Somalia," *The Washington Post*, May 17, 2006, 2006, accessed February 9, 2017, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/16/AR2006051601625.html>.

made a key commander.⁶³⁷ In July 2006, Bin Laden called for Muslims to support the UIC. In September 2006, al-Shebab led other Islamic Court militias to take Kismayo, further increasing al-Shebab's revenue. Al-Shebab and UIC successes brought more foreign fighters to Somalia, including former members of Al-Qaeda's cells, and a number of Westerners, including an American, Omar Hammami.

Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia in December 2006, launched with tacit U.S. support,⁶³⁸ contributed to the collapse of the UIC.⁶³⁹ After the dissolution of the UIC, al-Shebab became the premier insurgent group in Somalia. Al-Shebab formally broke with the UIC in 2007, after exiled UIC leadership allied with secular opposition to form the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) in Eritrea. Al-Shebab presented itself as the frontline defense against the secular Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Ethiopian occupation.⁶⁴⁰ In mid-2007, al-Shabaab adopted the formal name Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen and began to focus on leading an insurgency.⁶⁴¹ During 2006–2008, al-Shebab was further integrated into the global jihad framework as a Somali extension of Al-Qaeda.⁶⁴² In 2007–2008, al-Shebab first expressed a desire for global jihad and the restoration of the caliphate.⁶⁴³

Phase three: Insurgency (2007–2008)

Al-Shebab focused on hit-and-run operations, avoiding outright confrontation with the superior Ethiopian forces. Al-Shebab's tactics often have been relatively unsophisticated. Its successes have relied on a permissive, insecure, and poorly governed environment. Al-Shebab often faced limited resistance from poorly armed informal militias. The expansion of al-Shebab's territory was largely the result of taking advantage of an absence of governing authority in the country. Additionally,

⁶³⁷ Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism, "Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen."

⁶³⁸ Mark Mazzetti, "Efforts by C.I.A. Fail in Somalia, Officials Charge," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2006, accessed February 9, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/08/world/africa/08intel.html>.

⁶³⁹ Ken Menkhaus, "There and Back Again in Somalia," Middle East Research and Information Project, February 11, 2007, Ken Menkhaus accessed February 8, 2017, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero021107>.

⁶⁴⁰ Chris Albin-Lackey, "So Much to Fear" *War Crimes and the Devastation of Somalia*, Human Rights Watch, December 8, 2008, accessed February 9, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/12/08/so-much-fear/war-crimes-and-devastation-somalia>.

⁶⁴¹ Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism, "Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen."

⁶⁴² Sjah, "Tracing Al Shabaab's Decision to Cooperate with Al-Qaeda in Somalia (2008)."

⁶⁴³ Sjah, "Tracing Al Shabaab's Decision to Cooperate with Al-Qaeda in Somalia (2008)."

much of al-Shebab's high-casualty attacks have been on lightly defended "soft" targets, where relatively unsophisticated assault tactics proved effective. Al-Shebab has improved its tactical proficiency over time.

During the peak of its insurgent phase, **Al-Shebab took advantage of the proliferation of small arms in Somalia and a variety of medium and heavy weaponry recycled from the Siad Barre regime.**⁶⁴⁴ Al-Shebab targeted national infrastructure, security forces, government administrations, civil society, and identity groups, including Sufi Muslims. Al-Shebab has repeatedly attempted to assassinate Somalia's heads of state and other symbolic figures.⁶⁴⁵ Common tactics included bombing strategic locations, guerilla and terror tactics, and political threats and assassinations. In 2007, most of al-Shebab's attacks were still directed against the Transitional Federal Government. Attack squadrons consisted of seven to eight men who were paid per attack based on the severity and skill required. Al-Shebab also began to attack TFG posts and unoccupied cities, hold them for a few days, and then withdraw, all while advertising their success in the media.

An early Shebab leader, Aden Hashi Farah Ayro, was killed on May 1, 2008 by a U.S. airstrike.⁶⁴⁶ His successor, Ahmed Godane, worked to align al-Shebab more closely with Al-Qaeda, and began using suicide bombers for the first time.⁶⁴⁷ In tactical terms, Al-Shebab's use of suicide bombers signaled that they had adopted an "internationalist position"—their loyalty to international jihadism—as suicide bombings were previously taboo within Somalia.

Aided by clan alliances, al-Shebab continued to conquer territory throughout late 2008. In anticipation of a political settlement between the TFG and other factions, Ethiopia scaled down its forces in Somalia, leading to military victories by al-Shebab both inside Mogadishu and elsewhere in the country. By early 2009, al-Shebab was poised to continue its territorial gains and enter a new phase in its development, that of governance.

⁶⁴⁴ Feisal Omar and Abdirahman Hussein, "Mogadishu car bomb kills five at local government HQ," Reuters, April 11, 2016, accessed February 10, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-blast-idUSKCN0X8109>.

⁶⁴⁵ Mohamed Sheikh Nor, "Somali Lawmaker Injured, Guards Killed in Al-Shabaab Shooting," Bloomberg, April 5, 2016, accessed February 10, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-05/somali-lawmaker-injured-guards-killed-in-al-shabaab-shooting>.

⁶⁴⁶ Osman Warfa, "The Long-Term Effects of Al-Shabaab Terrorism," *The Star* (Nairobi), May 24, 2014, accessed May 21, 2017, http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2014/05/24/the-long-term-effects-of-al-shabaab-terrorism_c942161.

⁶⁴⁷ Counter Extremism Project, "Al-Shabab," accessed January 30, 2017, <http://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-Shabab>.

Phase four: Governance and the “Golden Age” (2009–2010)

The TFG and ARS signed the Djibouti Agreement in late 2008, and Ethiopia withdrew from Mogadishu in January 2009. Afterward, al-Shebab made enormous territorial gains. In early 2009, al-Shebab easily took control of Baidoa, the interim capital of the TFG. However, al-Shebab was unable to dislodge Ugandan and Burundian AMISOM forces from Mogadishu. By mid-2009, al-Shebab controlled most of southern Somalia with a force of approximately 5,000 soldiers.

Al-Shebab’s governance style placed a premium on law, order, and safety, which generated goodwill among a populace accustomed to predatory warlords and corrupt TFG officials. Al-Shebab’s rule was harsh: it enforced sharia, imposed conservative dress, and censored the media. Al-Shebab provided limited humanitarian services in the areas under its control, sometimes working reluctantly with international aid agencies.⁶⁴⁸

Formal institutions within al-Shebab continued to develop, including the Maktabatu Amniyat, which was controlled by Godane and used for internal and external intelligence gathering. The Maktabatu Da’wa spread al-Shebab’s interpretation of sharia. The Maktabatu I’laam, or Ministry of Information, controlled TV and radio stations and websites. The Maktabatu Siyaasada iyo Gobolad (Ministry of the Interior) controlled the *walis* (governors). The Maktabatu Maaliya (Ministry of Finance) controlled taxation. A complex court system also emerged. Multiple training camps were built that focused on hand-to-hand combat and suicide-bomber training. Recruitment pipelines solidified during this time, with ethnic Somalis travelling from the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East to join al-Shebab in Somalia.

In 2009, al-Shebab increasingly directed its propaganda to an international audience,⁶⁴⁹ but its actual military operations remained largely Somali-focused. In Mogadishu, the Somali government faced the constant threat of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), assassination, and kidnapping. Attacks carried out outside of Somalia also reflected Somali-centric issues, including the 2010 coordinated suicide bomb

⁶⁴⁸ Ashley Jackson and Abdi Aynte, “Al-Shabaab engagement with aid agencies,” Humanitarian Policy Group, Policy Brief 53, December 2013, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8749.pdf>.

⁶⁴⁹ Jane’s World Insurgency and Terrorism, “Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen.”

attacks in Uganda,⁶⁵⁰ which aimed to drive Ugandan and Burundian forces out of Somalia, and drive a wedge between them and their support of the TFG.

This period of expansion saw a decisive setback. In September 2010, al-Shebab carried out the “Ramadan Offensive” against AMISOM on Godane’s orders—and over the objections of his senior lieutenants. For al-Shebab, the turn from insurgent tactics to conventional warfare was a disaster, with Robow and Shongole’s forces bearing the brunt of the losses. After the offensive, dissatisfaction with Godane’s leadership grew.

Phase five: Fracturing, factionalism and territorial loss (2010–2013)

Al-Shebab was in crisis after the Ramadan Offensive. Godane’s ability to lead was questioned by other leaders, including Robow and Shongole. Two major points of discord were the tactics used during the offensive, which highlighted al-Shebab’s weakness as a conventional force, and the role of the Amniyat, which functioned largely outside of al-Shebab’s justice system and under Godane’s direct control. Shongole and others publicly stated their opposition to Godane’s choices. Tensions and clan rivalries rose throughout al-Shebab. Shongole criticized Godane for the heavy loss of life and alleged “hidden agendas.” Robow criticized Godane for a perceived disproportionate number of casualties borne by Robow’s reinforcement.⁶⁵¹

Aware of al-Shebab’s growing weakness, AMISOM and the TFG launched an offensive in Mogadishu in February 2011, regaining much territory. Al-Shebab largely withdrew from Mogadishu in August 2011 and renewed its focus on insurgency over conventional warfare. Al-Shebab lost control over much of south and central Somalia because of pressure from AMISOM and Kenyan forces, who invaded southern Somalia in October 2011.⁶⁵² Meanwhile, political circumstances in Somalia changed, although al-Shebab’s core goals did not. The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) was formed in 2012, led by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. Overthrowing the FGS remains a core objective for al-Shebab.

Al-Qaeda’s losses in 2011, particularly the killing of Osama Bin Laden, also hurt al-Shebab. The group held a public memorial service for Bin Laden outside Mogadishu,

⁶⁵⁰ Counter Extremism Project, “Al-Shabab,” accessed January 30, 2017, <http://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-shabab>.

⁶⁵¹ Jane’s World Insurgency and Terrorism, “Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen.”

⁶⁵² BBC News, “Somalia’s al-Shabab rebels leave Mogadishu,” August 6, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14430283>.

where Robow extolled the relationship between Bin Laden and the Somali people and proclaimed their loyalty to new leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. It was at this time that al-Shebab officially declared a merger with Al-Qaeda in February 2012, perhaps in a bid to revive the fortunes of both organizations.

Criticism continued to follow Godane as al-Shebab lost territory. Various pressures, including territorial loss, the departure of foreign fighters to their home countries during the Arab Spring, and a widespread drought, led to a major division in al-Shebab. Godane began to purge those he viewed as disloyal. In 2012, high-profile foreign fighter and U.S. national Omar Hammami issued a video claiming that his life was at risk as a result of “differences that occurred regarding matters of the sharia and matters of the strategy.” A second statement by Hammami said that Godane and other al-Shebab elite lived lavish, un-Islamic lifestyles. The resulting disputes pulled in different commanders and escalated into violence when rival al-Shebab groups, including those loyal to Godane, Robow and Aweys, fought one another. Robow went into hiding and Aweys surrendered to security forces. Shongole continued to clash with Godane but remained part of the group. In 2013, reports claimed Hammami had been killed by al-Shebab militants.⁶⁵³ Though Godane was able to purge internal al-Shebab competition,⁶⁵⁴ his success was short-lived: he was killed by a U.S. airstrike in September 2014.

Phase six: Expanded regional focus and return to insurgency (2013–2017)

After Godane’s death, Ahmad Umar was announced as his successor. In October 2014, al-Shabaab lost control of its last major urban stronghold and access point to the Indian Ocean, the town of Baraawe.⁶⁵⁵ However, the security situation in Somalia is still tenuous, and al-Shebab still has the capacity to launch large-scale attacks against AMISOM and political authorities in Mogadishu.⁶⁵⁶ Al-Shebab still has a strong presence in much of southern Somalia.

⁶⁵³ Jane’s World Insurgency and Terrorism, “Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen.”

⁶⁵⁴ Christopher Anzalone, “The Resilience of Al-Shabaab,” *CTC Sentinel*, April 22, 2016, accessed February 14, 2017, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-resilience-of-al-shabaab>.

⁶⁵⁵ United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2244 (2015): Somalia*, United Nations, 16-16743 (E) 021116 2016, accessed February 14, 2017, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/919.

⁶⁵⁶ United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2244 (2015): Somalia*.

Al-Shebab has continued to use various insurgent tactics within and outside Somalia,⁶⁵⁷ mixing high-profile operations against civilians with the more common operations against AMISOM, the FGS, and opposing militia bases and positions.⁶⁵⁸ Since 2013, al-Shebab has increasingly focused on attacking regional opponents, most notoriously with the September 21, 2013 attack by gunmen on Kenya's Westgate Mall in Nairobi, and the April 2, 2015 attack on Garissa University College in the country's North East Province.⁶⁵⁹ On February 2, 2016, an al-Shebab militant detonated a concealed laptop bomb aboard Daallo Airlines Flight 159. Though the explosion killed only the attacker, the bombing highlights a new level of al-Shebab's terrorist aspirations. Al-Shebab has continued to support like-minded groups inside Kenya, including the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) and the Muslim Youth Center (MYC), which allegedly assisted in the Westgate operation.

Such attacks are also meant to reinforce al-Shebab's ties to Al-Qaeda. Godane stated that the Westgate attack occurred close to the anniversary of 9/11. Additionally, in September 2014, al-Shabaab reiterated its pledge to al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda as part of a statement announcing Godane's martyrdom.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has released several videos entreating al-Shebab to switch its allegiance from Al-Qaeda. Al-Zawahiri has publicly claimed that Godane disapproved of ISIS.⁶⁶⁰ Other sources indicated that Godane developed ties with ISIS militias before his death, however, and received monetary support from ISIS as AQ funding declined.⁶⁶¹ Godane may have been planning a transfer of fighters from Somalia to Syria to fight alongside ISIS.⁶⁶² Al-Shebab has also competed with ISIS for recruits. Defections from al-Shebab have been strongest in the north Somali autonomous region of Puntland. There have been reported defections and arrests, of both local Somalis and foreign fighters, by al-Shebab's Amniyat network in southern Somalia,⁶⁶³ and rising concern that ISIS could team up with other militants in

⁶⁵⁷ Sjah, "Tracing Al Shabaab's Decision to Cooperate with Al-Qaeda in Somalia (2008)."

⁶⁵⁸ UN Security Council, *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2244 (2015): Somalia*.

⁶⁵⁹ Christopher Anzalone, "The Resilience of Al-Shabaab," *CTC Sentinel*, April 22, 2016, accessed February 14, 2017, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-resilience-of-al-shabaab>.

⁶⁶⁰ Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Terrorist Tug-of-War: ISIS and Al-Qaeda Struggle for al Shabab's Soul," *Foreign Affairs*, October 8, 2015, 2015, accessed February 14, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/kenya/2015-10-08/terrorist-tug-war>.

⁶⁶¹ "SOMALIA: Deceased Al Shabab chief had ties with ISIS, sources," RBC Radio, October 30, 2014, 2014, accessed February 10, 2017, <http://www.raxanreeb.com/2014/10/somalia-deceased-al-shabab-chief-had-ties-with-isis-sources/>.

⁶⁶² "SOMALIA: Deceased Al Shabab chief had ties with ISIS, sources," RBC Radio.

⁶⁶³ Anzalone, "The Resilience of Al-Shabaab."

Somalia.⁶⁶⁴ In 2016, a rival faction of al-Shebab led by Abdulqader Mu'min pledged allegiance to ISIS. In an apparent attempt to eliminate that faction, al-Shebab launched a failed amphibious incursion into Puntland on March 13, 2016, resulting in more than 300 members killed in clashes with Puntland and Galmudug Interim Administration forces.⁶⁶⁵ At present, it is still an open question whether al-Shebab will attempt to strengthen ties with ISIS.

Security vulnerabilities in Somalia

Table 22 below summarizes the vulnerabilities in Somalia, where al-Shebab operates.

⁶⁶⁴ Adam Schreck, "Senior Emirati official warns of possibility of Islamic State and al-Shabab collaboration," *Associated Press*. Oct. 29, 2014, 2014, accessed February 10, 2017, <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2014/10/29/uae-official-warns-of-potential-for-is-shabab-link>.

⁶⁶⁵ UN Security Council, *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2244 (2015): Somalia*.

Table 22. Security vulnerabilities in Somalia

Vulnerability	Details
Internal conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somalia is in the midst of a civil war and has been embroiled in conflict since the late 1980s. • Contemporary conflict can be traced to the resistance movements to the Siad Barre regime. After the regime was deposed, multiple actors, including armed factions and clans, competed for power. • United Nations missions (UNOSOM I, UNITAF, UNOSOM II) operated in the country from 1992-1995, largely in a humanitarian capacity, but left before the resolution of the conflict. • By the early 2000s, there were multiple entities competing for power, including the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), and the Transitional National Government (TNC), established in 2000, later known as the Transitional Federal Government (TFC), established in 2004. • From 2004-2006 al-Shebab was a militia associated with the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). The UIC dates from the late 1990s, but grew in importance in the early 2000s as other forms of governance failed to take root in Somalia. The UIC was ideologically distinct from the clans and warlords, and was seen as an alternative source of leadership to the warlords. • In 2006, Ethiopia invaded and the UIC collapsed, leading to the rise of extreme splinter groups including al-Shebab, which continue to fight the Somali government and AMISOM forces. • While some areas of Somalia are somewhat stable, including large swathes of the semi-autonomous north, the south continues to see active fighting.
History of Violent Jihadism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a long history of violent jihad in East Africa, including the area in and around Somalia. Sudan served as the base of Osama Bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda leaders from 1991-1996, and was the site of several terrorist attacks, including the 2002 U.S. embassy bombing in Kenya. • In Somalia, al-Shebab's roots can be traced back to the 1980s and the activities of al-Ittihad al-Islami (AIAI), a Salafi organization that protested the secularist policies of long-time Somali dictator Siad Barre. AIAI had local goals as well as pan-Islamist objectives,⁶⁶⁶ and it developed ties to Al-Qaeda in the 1990s.⁶⁶⁷ AIAI's leadership included Aden Hashi Ayro, who would become al-Shebab's first

⁶⁶⁶ Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶⁶⁷ United Nations, "SECURITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE PURSUANT TO RESOLUTIONS 1267 (1999) 1989 (2011) AND 2253 (2015) CONCERNING ISIL (DA'ESH) AL-QAIDA AND ASSOCIATED INDIVIDUALS GROUPS UNDERTAKINGS AND ENTITIES," United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs, accessed February 9, 2017, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/al-itihaad-al-islamiya/aiai.

	<p>leader.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The formation of al-Shebab was aided by what remained of Al-Qaeda in East Africa.
Partial/Collapse of Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) was established in 2012, assuming power from the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The government struggles to project power across much of the Somalia's southern territory, and President Mohamed Abdullahi "Farmajo" Mohamed could face a crisis of legitimacy if it does not demonstrate progress against al-Shebab⁶⁶⁸ and the impending famine.⁶⁶⁹ • There is a history of government collapse in Somalia. Somalia gained independence from the British and Italians in 1960. In 1969, a coup led by Mohamed Said Barre ousted Somalia's elected government.⁶⁷⁰ Civil war in the 1980s led to the collapse of the government in 1991.⁶⁷¹ Years of relative lawlessness followed where varied groups, including clans, international peacekeepers and violent extremist organizations (VEOs), vied for control.⁶⁷² In May 1991, northern clans declared an independent Republic of Somaliland. Both Somaliland and neighboring Puntland are self-governing, mainly autonomous and largely more stable than southern Somalia.⁶⁷³ In 2012, the FGS was elected through limited, indirect elections. In February 2017, the FGS held a national election, its first since the 2012 transition.⁶⁷⁴
Government Illegitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The new government, though democratically elected, is nascent and untested. It faces enormous social, economic, political and

⁶⁶⁸ Safia Farole, "Somalia's new president now faces 3 big challenges," *The Washington Post*, 3/7/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/07/somalias-new-president-spent-time-in-buffalo-and-now-faces-these-3-challenges/?utm_term=.411872a10341.

⁶⁶⁹ Jeffrey Gettleman, "Drought and War Heighten Threat of Not Just 1 Famine, but 4," *The New York Times*, 3/27/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/27/world/africa/famine-somalia-nigeria-south-sudan-yemen-water.html?mcubz=2&r=0>.

⁶⁷⁰ The Central Intelligence Agency, "Africa: Somalia," *The World Factbook*, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/so.html>.

⁶⁷¹ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Somalia," U.S. Bilateral Relations Fact Sheets, 4/12/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2863.htm>.

⁶⁷² The United Institute of Peace, "The Current Situation in Somalia: A USIP Fact Sheet," 1/30/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/01/current-situation-somalia>.

⁶⁷³ The Central Intelligence Agency, "Africa: Somalia," *The World Factbook*, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/so.html>.

⁶⁷⁴ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Somalia," U.S. Bilateral Relations Fact Sheets, 4/12/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2863.htm>.

	<p>security hurdles to ensure its lasting legitimacy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Historically, clans, warlords and VEOs have gained power and influence during periods where the central government was either absent or lacking in legitimacy.
Demographic Instabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Somalia scores low on most humanitarian development indicators, including governance, internal conflict, economic decline and poverty. Somalia has a high fertility rate despite famine and civil war, and as a result, more than 60% of the population is younger than 25.⁶⁷⁵ Somalia's large youth population lacks educational and employment opportunities and has one of the highest youth unemployment rates. Millions of Somalis are either refugees or IDPs.⁶⁷⁶ There is a drought and impending famine in Somalia,⁶⁷⁷ which will contribute to the demographic and humanitarian crisis. Al-Shebab prevents aid workers from reaching some of the most heavily impacted areas.
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Somali government has been unable to retake or control all of its territory from al-Shebab, warlords and powerful clans, and relies on the aid on allies and partners to ensure its national security.

U.S. approach to al-Shebab

Before the official formation of al-Shebab, the U.S. military had a large presence in Somalia from 1992-1995. During this time the U.S. and other international forces operated under the auspices of the UN as part of the United Nations Operations in Somalia I (UNOSOM I), United Task Force (UNITAF), and United Nations Operation in Somalia II (UNOSOM II), largely in a humanitarian and stabilization capacity.⁶⁷⁸ On October 3, 1993, eighteen U.S. soldiers were killed during an operation to seize high ranking officials from Mohamed Farah Aideed's clan when two Black Hawk helicopters were shot down. This event led President Clinton to set a deadline for the

⁶⁷⁵ The Central Intelligence Agency, "Africa: Somalia," The World Factbook, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/so.html>.

⁶⁷⁶ The Central Intelligence Agency, "Africa: Somalia," The World Factbook.

⁶⁷⁷ David McKenzie and Brent Swails, "Somalia: 'People are dying of hunger...there's no water'," CNN, 3/8/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/07/africa/somalia-famine-untied-nations/>.

⁶⁷⁸ Seth G. Jones, Andrew M. Liepman, and Nathan Chandler, *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia: Assessing the Campaign Against Al Shabaab*, Rand Corporation, 2016, accessed 6/5/2017, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1539.html.

withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia in 1994.⁶⁷⁹ In the late 1990s, Somalia again became a focus of U.S. counterterrorism operations after the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salam, Tanzania, as terrorists thought to have operated out of Somalia.⁶⁸⁰ Interest in Somalia subsequently declined until the rise of al-Shabab and its affiliation with Al-Qaeda in the mid-2000s.

Table 23 below summarizes the approaches the U.S. has taken to counter al-Shabab after its reengagement in the Somalia in the 2000s.

⁶⁷⁹ Seth G. Jones, Andrew M. Liepman, and Nathan Chandler, *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia: Assessing the Campaign Against Al Shabaab*, Rand Corporation.

⁶⁸⁰ Paul D. Williams, "A Navy SEAL was killed in Somalia. Here's what you need to know about U.S. operations there.," *The Washington Post*, 5/8/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/08/a-navy-seal-was-killed-in-somalia-heres-what-you-need-to-know-about-u-s-operations-there/?utm_term=.6553e74328e6.

Table 23. U.S. approach to al-Shebab

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. military has undertaken several unilateral direct actions in Somalia under its counterterrorism mission. These have included: • Direct support to the Somali army mission targeting al-Shebab cells. • Offensive air strikes, including both manned strikes⁶⁸¹ and unmanned drone strikes.⁶⁸² • Varied on-the-ground missions carried out by special operators (both acknowledged and unacknowledged). • Targeting and killing top al-Shabaab leadership, including Ahmed Abdi Godane,⁶⁸³ Abdi Nur Mahdi and Adan Garar.⁶⁸⁴ • Targeting and killing rank-and-file al-Shebab militants in training camps.⁶⁸⁵ • Offensive raids to surgically target senior members al-Shebab⁶⁸⁶ • Designation of southern Somalia as an area of active hostilities. This allows ground forces the ability to call in airstrikes without higher-level

⁶⁸¹ Ty McCormick, "U.S. Attacks Reveal Al-Shebab's Strength, Not Weakness," *Foreign Policy*, 3/9/2016, accessed 6/5/2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/09/u-s-attacks-reveal-al-shebabs-strength-not-weakness-somalia/>.

⁶⁸² Conor Gaffey, "U.S. Troops 'Not on the Frontline' Against Al-Shabab in Somalia: Official," *Newsweek*, 5/11/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/us-troops-frontline-against-al-shabab-somalia-official-607715>.; and Abdi Guled, "First U.S. military member killed in Somalia since 1993," *Chicago Tribune*, 5/5/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-us-military-somalia-al-shabab-20170505-story.html>.; and, Dan Lamothe, "Trump signs off on the Pentagon carrying out offensive strikes in Somalia," *The Washington Post*, 3/30/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/03/30/trump-signs-off-on-the-pentagon-carrying-out-offensive-strikes-in-somalia/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.ef1ee87f781.

⁶⁸³ David Francis, "How the United States is Trying to stop al-Shebab," *Foreign Policy*, 4/2/2015, accessed 6/5/2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/02/how-the-united-states-is-trying-to-stop-al-shebab/>.

⁶⁸⁴ Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the Press Secretary on the Death of Ahmed Godane," The White House: President Barack Obama, 9/5/2014, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/05/statement-press-secretary-death-ahmed-godane>.

⁶⁸⁵ Ty McCormick, "U.S. Attacks Reveal Al-Shebab's Strength, Not Weakness." *Foreign Policy*, March 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/09/u-s-attacks-reveal-al-shababs-strength-not-weakness-somalia/>

⁶⁸⁶ "The Latest: Official: Senior Al-Shabab Members Were Target," *Associated Press*, May 5, 2017, accessed June 5, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-05-05/the-latest-us-military-death-in-somalia-is-1st-since-1993>.

<p>Advise, Assist, and Accompany</p>	<p>approval.⁶⁸⁷</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional forward basing of U.S. forces⁶⁸⁸
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S has been involved in an advise, assist, and accompany mission. This has included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Deployment of U.S. military advisers in Somalia since at least late 2013.⁶⁸⁹ U.S. forces deployed alongside Somali troops.⁶⁹⁰ ◦ Provide assistance to regional counterterrorism forces, including the Somali National Army and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces.⁶⁹¹ ◦ Serving a coordination role between Somali security forces and AMISOM⁶⁹² ◦ Establishment of authorities focused on partnered operations with Somali and African Union troops. ▪ Example: On March 30, 2017, the Pentagon announced President Trump approved a Department of Defense proposal to provide additional precision fires in support of African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Somali security forces operations.⁶⁹³ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Working with other regional and European partners in Somalia.

⁶⁸⁷ Tom O'Connor, "Trump Expands U.S. Military Campaign in Africa with Somalia Offensive ", *Newsweek*, 3/31/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/trump-expand-military-campaign-africa-somalia-offensive-577347>.

⁶⁸⁸ The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Somalia: Reported US Cover Actions 2001-2016," 2/22/2012, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/drone-war/data/somalia-reported-us-covert-actions-2001-2017>.

⁶⁸⁹ Paul D. Williams, "A Navy SEAL was killed in Somalia. Here's what you need to know about U.S. operations there." *The Washington Post*, May 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/08/a-navy-seal-was-killed-in-somalia-heres-what-you-need-to-know-about-u-s-operations-there/?utm_term=.a097003d067c

⁶⁹⁰ Conor Gaffey, "U.S. Troops 'Not on the Frontline' Against Al-Shabab in Somalia: Official." *Newsweek*, May 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/us-troops-frontline-against-al-shabab-somalia-official-607715>

⁶⁹¹ Mark Mazzetti, Jeffrey Gettleman, and Eric Schmitt, "In Somalia, U.S. Escalates a Shadow War," *The New York Times*, 8/16/2016, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/world/africa/obama-somalia-secret-war.html>.

⁶⁹² Carla E. Humud, *Al-Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, Congressional Research Service, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43756.pdf>.

⁶⁹³ Bill Roggio, "US soldier killed battling Al-Qaeda's branch in Somalia," *FDD's Long War Journal*, 5/9/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/05/us-soldier-killed-battling-Al-Qaedas-branch-in-somalia.php>.

<p>Train & Equip Partner for CT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. has trained and equipped Somali forces and AMISOM. • In April 2017 the U.S. military announced a deployment of U.S. forces for logistics training of Somalia's army.⁶⁹⁴ • Training and equipping AMISOM forces Includes financial and material assistance.⁶⁹⁵
<p>"Third Party" Partners (AMISOM, Ethiopia)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to AMISOM and regional partners Ethiopia and Kenya. ⁶⁹⁶
<p>Security Sector Reform</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. provides funds for SSR to the Somali military.⁶⁹⁷
<p>Civilian Military Operations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. participates in civil-military operations (CMO) indirectly by supporting AMISOM, which has stated that CMO is an important force enabler and a means to assist the FGS in stabilizing the country.⁶⁹⁸ • This is not a focus of U.S. DoD.
<p>Messaging/co- inter- messaging</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We were unable to identify examples of this approach in the open literature.
<p>Intelligence and Information Sharing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. forces are involved in surveillance and reconnaissance, in addition to assault and capture operations. ⁶⁹⁹
<p>Established US posture in</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S has established a military presence in theater, including a base in Djibouti to coordinate its operations in East Africa.⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁴ Abdi Guled, "First U.S. military member killed in Somalia since 1993." Chicago Tribune, May 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-us-military-somalia-al-shabab-20170505-story.html>

⁶⁹⁵ Ty McCormick, "U.S. Attacks Reveal Al-Shebabs' Strength, Not Weakness." *Foreign Policy*, March 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/09/u-s-attacks-reveal-al-shababs-strength-not-weakness-somalia/>

⁶⁹⁶ Mark Mazzetti, Jeffrey Gettleman, Eric Schmitt, "In Somalia, U.S. Escalates a Shadow War." New York Times, October 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/world/africa/obama-somalia-secret-war.html>

⁶⁹⁷ Nancy Muigei, *Security Sector Reform/Development in Somalia*, The International Peace Support Training Centre Nairobi, Kenya, 2013, accessed 6/5/2017, http://www.ipstc.org/media/documents/occasional_paper_4-7.pdf.

⁶⁹⁸ African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), "AMISOM engages partners on Civil-Military operations," 5/14/2015, accessed 6/5/2017, <http://amisom-au.org/2015/05/amisom-engages-partners-on-civil-military-operations/>.

⁶⁹⁹ Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Somalia: Reported US Cover Actions 2001-2016." February 2012, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/drone-war/data/somalia-reported-us-covert-actions-2001-2017>

theater to support persistent CT operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The United States also maintains drone intelligence surveillance of Somalia from installations in Ethiopia, Djibouti, and the Seychelles.⁷⁰¹
Support Host Nation Ability to Own the Battlespace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A key goal of U.S. involvement in Somalia has been training Somali forces to control their own battlespace. This has been met with mixed results.

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt al-Shebab?

The U.S. has played a role in **partially disrupting** al-Shebab. The U.S. has **not dismantled or defeated** al-Shebab.

The U.S. has helped to reduce al-Shebab's ability to hold territory by advising, assisting, training, and equipping AMISOM and Somali forces. These forces have successfully ousted al-Shebab from the major strongholds it held in 2010-2011. Al-Shebab still controls rural territory, however, and uses its position to carry out attacks on AMISOM and Somali forces. A reduction in al-Shebab's ability to hold territory is only partially the result of AMISOM and Somali operations, which have on the whole had mixed results. Al-Shebab's ability to hold territory was also diminished by poor strategic and military planning within al-Shebab, including the failed Ramadan Offensive which left al-Shebab weakened and susceptible to AMISOM counter-attacks.

Despite a loss of territory, al-Shebab maintains the ability to carry out coordinated attacks. Al-Shebab has also continued to develop new and more sophisticated attacks. These attacks have included the September 2013 Westgate shopping mall

⁷⁰⁰ Paul D. Williams, "A Navy SEAL was killed in Somalia. Here's what you need to know about U.S. operations there." *The Washington Post*, May 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/08/a-navy-seal-was-killed-in-somalia-heres-what-you-need-to-know-about-u-s-operations-there/?utm_term=.a097003d067c

⁷⁰¹ David H. Shinn, "International Efforts to Counter Al-Shabaab," E-International Relations, 2/20/2012, accessed 6/5/2017, <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/02/20/international-efforts-to-counter-al-shabaab/>.

attack, the April 2015 Garissa University College attack, and the February 2016 attack on a commercial airliner, which used a bomb hidden in a laptop computer.⁷⁰² There are also numerous small-scale yet effective attacks on AMISOM and Somali forces.

It is probable that al-Shebab is in communication with other AQ affiliates, including AQIM and AQAP. There is speculation that the airplane bomb used by al-Shebab in 2016 was either provided by or aided by expertise from AQAP. It is unclear yet unlikely that DoD actions have reduced al-Shebab's ability to acquire weapons and materials given the multitude of large and small scale weaponry available in Somalia after decades of civil war. There is likely a transfer of technology and tactics between al-Shebab and other AQ affiliates, specifically AQAP.

DOD has reduced al-Shebab's ability to train its fighters by effectively targeting training camps. It is unclear as to whether DOD has impacted al-Shebab's ability to recruit as Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) has not been a focus of DOD activity. The U.S. has not effectively disrupted al-Shebab's ability to conduct propaganda activities.

By far the most effective CT tool employed by U.S. DoD has been unilateral direct action through manned and unmanned strikes, as well as on the ground surgical strike operations. These operations have been used to kill and capture al-Shebab leaders. It is unclear, however, what lasting role this has played on physically weakening the network, as leaders are quickly replaced. *Al-Shebab has survived the successful targeting of some of its most instrumental and influential leaders.*

The al-Shebab network has repeatedly splintered into factions, but this is largely due to internal dynamics and differences over ideology, leadership styles and visions for the future. External pressure from the U.S., AMISOM and Somali contributed to but did not cause these splinters. It is unlikely that al-Shebab is fully isolated from other affiliates given an apparent transfer of fighters, funds, tactics, and materials from AQAP and AQIM.

Regionally and locally, the DOD has not focused its resources on large-scale CMO and SSR, which would help in marginalizing al-Shebab from locals. The U.S. may have had secondary impact on marginalizing al-Shebab locally/regionally by supporting AMISOM's CMO activities. However, AMISOM is similarly focused largely on kinetic activities and has deprioritized CMO.

⁷⁰² Robyn Kriel and Susanna Capelouto, "Al-Shabaab claims responsibility for Somalia in-flight jet blast," CNN, 2/13/2016, accessed 6/5/2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/13/africa/somalia-plane-bomb-al-shabaab/>.

Recent attacks indicate that al-Shebab retains the ability to carry out large-scale and complex attacks, in addition to small-scale attacks on AMISOM and Somali forces, and the FGS. Since its territorial loss in 2012, Al-Shebab has avoided overstretching by diminishing its role in local governance, avoiding direct confrontation with AMISOM forces, and focusing on terrorist tactics in Somalia and surrounding countries.

U.S. actions have not led to the defeat of al-Shebab. AMISOM and Somali forces have prevented the spread to al-Shebab into areas they once controlled in southern Somalia, but AMISOM is overstretched and the Somali army remains largely undertrained and poorly equipped for the goal of fully defeating al-Shebab.⁷⁰³ Al-Shebab still de-facto controls large parts of the country even though they have not officially established governance.⁷⁰⁴

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of al-Shebab?

Al-Shebab's ability to control territory, project power and recruit in Somalia is directly aided by underlying vulnerabilities in Somalia that continue to persist, including a nascent and untested central government, an ongoing humanitarian crisis, limited advancement opportunities for Somalia's large youth population and an unstable security environment.

The U.S. DoD has supported actions that have contributed to increased vulnerabilities in Somalia. For instance, the U.S. support of the 2006 Ethiopian invasion led to the collapse of the relatively moderate UIC, contributing to the rise of extremist groups, including al-Shebab.

Somalia has continued to struggle with internal conflict. Though Somalia now has a democratically elected central government, it has yet to prove its legitimacy and ability to govern. A key factor will be how successfully the government can respond to and contain the current drought and impending famine. Al-Shebab has historically taken advantage of crises in Somalia, including droughts and famines, in order to gain territory and undermine the government.

⁷⁰³ Mark Mazzetti, Jeffrey Gettleman, Eric Schmitt, "In Somalia, U.S. Escalates a Shadow War." New York Times, October 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/world/africa/obama-somalia-secret-war.html>

⁷⁰⁴ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Why are efforts to counter al-Shabab falling so flat?," Brookings, 4/5/2016, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/04/05/why-are-efforts-to-counter-al-Shabab-falling-so-flat/>.

Demographic issues continue to drive recruitment to al-Shebab.

Overall, the vulnerabilities in Somalia have been used and exacerbated by al-Shebab, but not created by al-Shebab.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

Though the U.S. has been involved in Somalia since the 1990s (pre-al-Shebab), its engagement has been uneven and discontinuous in accordance with shifting national security and humanitarian interests over the course of five administrations. The U.S. largely disengaged from Somalia after the 1993 Black Hawk Down incident, supporting AMISOM forces indirectly through material and financial support.⁷⁰⁵ Over time, the perceived growing threat from terrorism, the rise of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and the introduction of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) propelled Somalia back into the realm on U.S. strategic security interests. This was demonstrated by increased drone strikes, and later, in-theater operations by U.S. special forces.⁷⁰⁶ Currently, U.S. forces act both independently and in concert with AMISOM, Somali, Ethiopian and other forces on the ground.

During the Obama Administration there was a large increase in the use of drone strikes to target high value targets (HVT) as well as rank-and-file al-Shebab fighters.⁷⁰⁷ There were also unacknowledged on the ground operations.

The Trump Administration has expanded the DoDs resources (including sanctioning precision strikes to support AMISOM and Somali forces) and has relaxed the permissions required for direct action. There are also acknowledged on the ground operations.⁷⁰⁸ These increased resources may be useful as a short term force multiplier, but do not address the underlying vulnerabilities. Addressing underlying

⁷⁰⁵ Peter Dörrie, "23 Years After 'Black Hawk Down,' America Is Back at War in Somalia," *The National Interest*, 8/4/2016, accessed 6/5/2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/23-years-after-%E2%80%98black-hawk-down%E2%80%99-america-back-war-somalia-17930>.

⁷⁰⁶ Peter Dörrie, "23 Years After 'Black Hawk Down,' America Is Back at War in Somalia."

⁷⁰⁷ Ty McCormick, "U.S. Attacks Reveal Al-Shebab's Strength, Not Weakness." *Foreign Policy*, March 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/09/u-s-attacks-reveal-al-shababs-strength-not-weakness-somalia/>

⁷⁰⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, "Statement by Pentagon Spokesman Capt. Jeff Davis on U.S. Counterterrorism Operations in Somalia," 3/30/2017, accessed 6/5/2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/1135338/>.

conditions is largely outside the remit of DOD. DOD operations must ensure they are not, however, exacerbating underlying conditions.

The U.S. DoD has used a similar toolkit throughout its re-engagement in Somalia from 2003 onwards including varied levels of (primarily) (1) HVT and other direct strikes (2) advising, assisting AMISOM/Somali forces (3) training and equipping AMISOM/Somali forces.

Appendix G: Case Study of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)

Overview

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) was founded in late 2014.⁷⁰⁹ While the group seeks to operate across South Asia, including in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indian, Burma, Bangladesh, and Kashmir, its leadership is based in Pakistan, and all of its successful attacks have been carried out in Pakistan or Bangladesh.⁷¹⁰ The group attempted to carry out one high-profile attack on a Pakistani and U.S. naval forces in 2014 that largely failed, and has since carried out a small number of hit-and-run assassinations of secular figures in Bangladesh and Pakistan. American and Pakistani counterterrorism operations have successfully targeted at least ten senior AQIS leaders since its formation.⁷¹¹ The United States designated AQIS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality

⁷⁰⁹ Counter Extremism Project, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)*, accessed January 20, 2017, http://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Al-Qaeda%20in%20the%20Indian%20Subcontinent%20%28AQIS%29-09142016.pdf. As with other jihadist groups, AQIS is known by a variety of names, including Ansar al Islam, Jamaat Qaidat al-jihad fi'shibhi al-qarrat al-Hindiy, Jamaat Qaidat al-Jihad fi'shibhi al-Qarrat al-Hindiya, Organisation of the Base of Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent, Qaedat al-Jihad, and Qaedat al-Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent.

⁷¹⁰ Alastair Reed, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: A New Frontline in the Global Jihadist Movement?* International Centre for Counter-Terrorism-The Hague (ICCT), May 2015, accessed 1/20/2017, doi: 10.19165/2016.2.02, <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ICCT-Reed-Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-May2016.pdf>.

⁷¹¹ Shreya Das, "The Emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent," *International Security Observer*, May 4, 2015, 2015, accessed 3/3/2017, http://securityobserver.org/the-emergence-of-Al-Qaeda-in-the-indian-sub-continent/#_edn1.

Act, and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) per Executive Order 13224.⁷¹²⁷¹³

Leadership and structure

Osama Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, named Asim Omar the emir of AQIS. Omar, likely of Indian origin, is a skilled speaker and noted theologian, and has authored multiple books promoting jihad. He has been previously associated with several jihadi groups, including Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam (HUJI) and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), and was a commander in Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Before being named emir, Omar was the head of Al-Qaeda's sharia committee for Pakistan and a high-ranking media propagandist, assuming this role after previous head propagandist Abu Yahya Al-Libi was killed in a 2012 U.S. drone strike.⁷¹⁴ Choosing an Indian as the emir represents a departure for AQ,⁷¹⁵ and demonstrates an attempt to unify jihadi groups across South Asia.⁷¹⁶ AQ previously attempted to set up a branch in South Asia under the leadership of Ilyas Kashmiri, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2011.⁷¹⁷ Historically, AQ has faced difficulties recruiting jihadis in India itself, and has relied on militants from surrounding countries.

Evidence indicates that AQIS is broken down into regional affiliates: Mainul Islam, chief coordinator for AQIS in Bangladesh, was arrested in Dhaka in July 2015. Shahid Usman, head of AQIS in Karachi, was arrested in December 2014.

Other leadership figures include Ahmad Farouq, who was formerly AQ's head of preaching and media in Pakistan. He was chosen to be deputy emir and a member of the AQIS's executive council. Farouq, who was an American citizen, was killed on January 15, 2015 by a U.S. drone strike.⁷¹⁸ Farouq was mentioned in a 2010 letter to

⁷¹² U.S. Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," accessed January 30, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

⁷¹³ U.S. Department of State, "Individuals and Entities Designated by the State Department Under E.O. 13224," accessed January 30, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/143210.htm>.

⁷¹⁴ Abdul Basit, "Asim Umar—'New Kid on the Block?'" *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 6, no. 10 (2014), accessed 3/2/2017.

⁷¹⁵ Das, "The Emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent."

⁷¹⁶ Basit, "Asim Umar—'New Kid on the Block?'"

⁷¹⁷ Das, "The Emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent."

⁷¹⁸ Anurag Chandran, "Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten," AEI Critical Threats, September 3, 2015, accessed January 20, 2017, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-qaeda-in-the-indian-subcontinent-almost-forgotten>.

Osama Bin Laden from senior AQ commander Atiyah abd al Rahman as “in charge of Al Sahab [AQ’s propaganda arm] in Urdu.”⁷¹⁹ Osama Mahmoud is AQIS’s current spokesman. Atta ur Rahman is a key Pakistani militant. Security officials in Karachi believe that Rahman is the bridge between AQIS and AQ central,⁷²⁰ while Asim Omar may play more of a figurehead role.⁷²¹ Imran Ali Siddiqi, a shura council member, was killed by a U.S. drone strike on October 11, 2014. Another shura member, Qari Imran was killed by a U.S. drone strike in January 2015.

Relationship with the core

There is little information available on the relationship between AQIS and the Al-Qaeda core; although al-Zawahiri’s direct involvement in the selection of AQIS senior leadership suggests that a relatively close relationship exists.

Ideology and goals

It is likely that the ideology and goals of AQIS are closely aligned with those of the AQ core.⁷²² These goals include conducting attacks against the U.S. and its interests in the region, freeing Indian Muslims from persecution, establishing sharia law, establishing a caliphate in the Indian subcontinent, and defending Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban against foreign aggression.⁷²³

Funding

Sources of AQIS funding remain uncertain. It is suspected that AQIS is funded directly from AQ central.⁷²⁴ It has no known autonomous sources of revenue.⁷²⁵

⁷¹⁹ Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, “US killed AQIS deputy emir, shura member in January drone strikes,” Long War Journal, April 12, 2015, accessed 1/19/2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/04/us-killed-aqis-deputy-emir-shura-member-in-january-drone-strikes.php>.

⁷²⁰ Counter Extremism Project, “Atta ur Rahman a.k.a. Naeem Bukhari,” accessed 3/3/2017, <https://www.counterextremism.com/people/atta-ur-rahman-aka-naeem-bukhari>.

⁷²¹ Das, “The Emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent.”

⁷²² Stanford University, “Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent,” Mapping Militant Organizations, accessed 1/20/2017, <https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/615>.

⁷²³ “Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent,” Mapping Militant Organizations.

⁷²⁴ Counter Extremism Project, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)*.

Evolution

Phase zero: The road to AQIS—jihadi groups in the Indian Subcontinent (1980s–2014)

South Asia has a long history of jihadi movements dating back to the 18th century. In the 1980s, South Asia was the key staging ground for the training of jihadi anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan, and contributed to the rise and increased sophistication of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁷²⁶ The first AQ commanders emerged from the veterans of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan. Other jihadi groups that have focused on the link between the Indian Subcontinent and the ultimate battle between believers and nonbelievers include the Pakistani offshoot of the Taliban, TTP; the militant Islamist group Jamaat ul Ahrar; and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).⁷²⁷

In India, the jihadi movement is closely associated with jihadi groups in Pakistan. Most attacks are carried out in the Jammu and Kashmir region, where Azad Kashmir-based militant groups fight to unite the disputed region with Pakistan. Separately, Pakistan-based militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) have conducted multiple attacks within India. The Indian Mujahideen (IM) is perhaps the most well-known India-based militant group, and is considered to be associated with LeT.⁷²⁸

LeT, based in Kashmir, is one of the most powerful of these groups and is responsible for high-profile attacks in India, including the 2001 Indian Parliament attack and the 2008 Mumbai attacks that killed 160 people.⁷²⁹ Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) is reported to have ties with LeT, which has never

⁷²⁵ Reed, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent."

⁷²⁶ Husain Haqqani, "Prophecy & the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent," Hudson Institute, March 27, 2015, accessed 3/3/2017, <https://www.hudson.org/research/11167-prophecy-the-jihad-in-the-indian-subcontinent>.

⁷²⁷ Husain Haqqani, "Prophecy & the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent," Hudson Institute.

⁷²⁸ Anurag Chandran, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten," AEI Critical Threats, September 3, 2015, accessed 1/20/2017, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/Al-Qaeda/chandran-Al-Qaeda-in-indian-subcontinent-backgrounder-september-3-2015>.

⁷²⁹ Bruce Riedel, *Modeled on Mumbai? Why the 2008 India attack is the best way to understand Paris*, Brookings Institution, November 14, 2015 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/11/14/modeled-on-mumbai-why-the-2008-india-attack-is-the-best-way-to-understand-paris/>

carried out an attack against Pakistan.⁷³⁰ Other major groups operating in Kashmir include Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM).⁷³¹

Other militant groups based in Pakistan view Afghanistan as their primary target. These groups operate from Pakistan's semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Chief among these groups is the highly influential Haqqani Network, which is an important part of the Afghan Taliban and has ties with AQ. Militant groups that view Pakistan and the West as their primary targets include TTP, which seeks to overthrow the Pakistani government, but also attacks Western interests.⁷³²

Bangladeshi militant groups are largely focused on establishing an Islamist regime in Bangladesh. These groups include Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Newer groups include Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and Ansar al Islam Bangladesh, which have been responsible for killing several secular bloggers and have strong links to AQIS, to be discussed below.⁷³³

Phase one: Formation and early ambitions (2014–2015)

AQIS was officially founded on September 3, 2014 by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who announced the establishment of new branch of AQ on the Indian subcontinent. The formation of AQIS was announced by al-Zawahiri in the first edition of AQ's magazine *Resurgence*: "[T]his organization is a direct result of the merger of several groups....In guidance [from Zawahiri], the leaders of these Jihadi groups have joined forces to coalesce into ... Jama'ah Qa'eda al jihad in the Subcontinent."⁷³⁴

In a simultaneous video announcement, al-Zawahiri stated that it took more than two years to "gather the mujahedeen in the Indian subcontinent into a single entity."⁷³⁵ The announcement focused on the reconciliation between jihadi groups that had previously fought one another, and referenced several martyred jihadis targeted and killed in U.S. drone strikes over the past decade. The exact groups that merged to form AQIS have never been officially confirmed by AQ.

⁷³⁰ Chandran, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten."

⁷³¹ Chandran, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten."

⁷³² Chandran, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten."

⁷³³ Chandran, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten."

⁷³⁴ Reed, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent*.

⁷³⁵ Ellen Barry, "Al Qaeda Opens New Branch on Indian Subcontinent," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2014 accessed January 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/05/world/asia/al-qaeda-announces-new-branch-on-indian-subcontinent.html>.

AQIS likely comprises groups that have close operational relationships before 2014, including the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, Harakat-ul-Muhajideen, Harakat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami and Brigade 313, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the Indian Mujahideen (a front for Lashkar-e-Taiba), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Turkistan Islamic Party, Junood al Fida, and other groups based in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.⁷³⁶

There is widespread speculation that AQIS was established as a response to a strategic environment that turned against AQ in 2014. Shortly before announcing AQIS's formation, al-Zawahiri had publicly disavowed ISIS, which then unexpectedly conquered vast territory in Iraq and Syria and declared a caliphate. The ISIS conquests became a lure for recruits who otherwise may have considered joining AQ.⁷³⁷ Though al-Zawahiri claimed the formation of AQIS took years of planning and alluded that it did not have to do with ISIS's rise, the reality of ISIS's success has impacted the way AQIS is perceived, which is largely as a reactive attempt to counterbalance ISIS. That is, because AQ was unable to seize new territory or carry out large-scale attacks in the United States or Europe, AQ turned instead to expansion.⁷³⁸ In the video announcing AQIS, al-Zawahiri, Asim Umar and Osama Mahmoud focused on facets of their new branch's ideology that distinguished it from ISIS—without ever mentioning ISIS by name—including the branch's focus on gradual consensus building, as opposed to the implied ISIS method of imposing itself on others.⁷³⁹

Alternatively, AQIS may have formed as part of a strategic readjustment to the drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, which, according to AQ, allows experienced

⁷³⁶ Bill Roggio, "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent incorporates regional jihadist groups," *Long War Journal*, September 5, 2014, accessed January 19, 2017, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/09/analysis_al_qaeda_in.php.

⁷³⁷ Ellen Barry and Mansi Choksi, "4 Young Men Head for Iraq, Citing Fight for Islam, and India Wonders if More Will Follow," *The New York Times*, August 4, 2014, 2014, accessed January 26, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/05/world/asia/india-shaken-by-case-of-muslim-men-missing-in-iraq.html?_r=2&mtref=undefined&gwh=5727E2CAC66194F0B672065BEB8CF6B7&gwt=pay&assetType=nyt_now.

⁷³⁸ Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁷³⁹ Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*.

jihadi fighters to broaden their reach and relocate to South Asia, trading the “far” enemy for the “near” enemy.⁷⁴⁰

In a speech introducing the new branch, AQIS spokesman Osama Mahmoud stated that waging jihad against the United States is its primary goal.⁷⁴¹ In reality, AQIS poses little if any threat to the United States, and its main aim is the liberation of the Indian subcontinent from “infidel” occupation and the restoration of the caliphate through violent jihad.⁷⁴² The Indian subcontinent has significant symbolic value for AQ, as it is the prophesized site in the Hadith of the great battle between believers and nonbelievers called the Ghazwa-e-Hind before the end of days.⁷⁴³

On September 6, 2014, three days after the announcement of AQIS’s founding, the group attempted its first and only large-scale spectacular attack, which was thwarted. AQIS boarded the PNS *Zulfiqar*, a Pakistani Navy frigate, in an attempt to launch missiles on U.S. ships in the Persian Gulf. The attack was allegedly carried out partly by Pakistani naval officers recruited by AQIS. Although AQIS seized the Pakistani ship, the attempt to fire upon the U.S. ships failed. During the attack, three militants and one petty officer were killed. AQIS claimed responsibility for the attack on Twitter. The attack demonstrated the ambitious scale of AQIS, but also its weakness, since it was unable to successfully carry out its premiere operation. AQIS spokesman Osama Mahmoud issued a statement claiming responsibility for the attack on September 10, 2014. In a statement, Mahmoud declared that the attack was “a plan to strike [at] America’s military strength on the seas.”⁷⁴⁴

Phase two: Small-scale attacks and relative silence (2015–Present)

All other AQIS attacks have been much more limited in scope and have consisted of largely hit-and-run assassinations of popular secular figures in Pakistan and Bangladesh, including scholars, bloggers, social activists and authors, as well as attacks on Pakistani police. These kinds of attacks have occurred since 2013. In a May 2015 video, Emir Asim Omar claimed responsibility for the murders of three

⁷⁴⁰ Shaul Shay, “AQIS: Rooting out Al-Qaeda’s New Branch,” *Diplomatist*, October 2014, accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.diplomatist.com/dipom10y2014/article012.html>.

⁷⁴¹ Roggio, “Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent incorporates regional jihadist groups.”

⁷⁴² Das. “The Emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent.”

⁷⁴³ Haqqani, “Prophecy & the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent.”

⁷⁴⁴ Shaul Shay, “Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and ‘Jihad on the Seas,’” *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, November 25, 2014, accessed January 20, 2017, <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1256/Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent>.

prominent Bangladeshis and two notable Pakistanis.⁷⁴⁵ In the video, Omar connects the murders to other terrorist attacks, including the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in Paris, stating that the jihadists “have taught a lesson to blasphemers in France, Denmark, Pakistan and now in Bangladesh.”⁷⁴⁶ The video was released in several languages and includes English subtitles. AQIS appears to collaborate with other jihadi groups in kidnapping and extortion.⁷⁴⁷

It is unclear whether AQIS has fully subsumed local jihadi groups. On several occasions, local militants associated with AQIS have taken responsibility for attacks using the name of their sub-group. These attacks have later been attributed to AQIS. For instance, ABT cleric Jashimuddin Rahmani was one of several defendants found guilty in December 2015 of the murder of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider. ABT members have also been arrested in connection with the murder of liberal blogger Niloy Neel.

AQIS has continued to compete with the Islamic State (IS) for influence in South Asia. In an early 2015 issue of *Dabiq*, IS’s glossy propaganda magazine, AQ defector Abu Jarir ash-Shamali criticizes AQ—and AQIS specifically—impugning Asim Umad and Ahamad Farouq’s ability to lead, and highlighting IS’s goal of controlling the jihadist community in South Asia.⁷⁴⁸

Outlook

Arguably the weakest and least active of the remaining AQ affiliates, AQIS’s threat to the U.S. homeland is minimal. The threat to U.S. interests in the region is also low. AQIS affiliated groups have, however, demonstrated an ability to attack high-profile secular leaders and influencers in Bangladesh, and have attacked security infrastructure and police officers in Pakistan. These low-casualty events are largely symbolic in nature and serve as a reminder of the existence of AQIS, which otherwise

⁷⁴⁵ Ellen Barry, “Al Qaeda Branch Claims Responsibility for Bangladeshi Blogger’s Killing,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2015, accessed January 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/04/world/asia/bangladesh-al-qaeda-indian-subcontinent-attack-on-bloggers.html>.

⁷⁴⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, “Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent leader says attacks on ‘blasphemers’ ordered by Zawahiri,” *Long War Journal*, May 3, 2015, accessed January 30, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/05/Al-Qaeda-in-the-indian-subcontinent-says-attacks-on-blasphemers-ordered-by-zawahiri.php>.

⁷⁴⁷ Chandran, “Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten.”

⁷⁴⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, “The Islamic State’s curious cover story,” *Long War Journal* (2015), accessed March 3, 2017, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/01/al_qaeda_defector_fe.php.

remains relatively quiet. AQIS's ability to gain support and carry out attacks in India has been extremely limited.

If the assumption that AQIS was formed in response to the rise of ISIS is accurate, then the relative decline of ISIS in Iraq and Syria may portend increased funding to AQIS from AQ central. Yet overall, AQIS has failed to carry out a single attack of strategic importance since its failed hijacking of the PNS *Zulfiqa*.

Security vulnerabilities in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan

Table 24 below describes the vulnerabilities in the countries where AQIS has a significant presence, namely Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Table 24. Vulnerabilities in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (2017)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are suffering from internal conflicts. • Afghanistan has faced an armed insurgency since the Taliban were removed from power in 2001. As of November 2016 the Long War Journal estimated that the Taliban controlled 42 districts out of 407, and contested 55.⁷⁴⁹ Additionally, the presence of multiple terrorist groups capable of carrying out attacks (including the Islamic State) exacerbates violence in the country. • Pakistan suffers from internal conflict based in its restive Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where militants attempting to overthrow the Pakistani Government reside.⁷⁵⁰ Attacks planned in the FATA are launched in other parts of the country.

⁷⁴⁹ Bill Roggio, "Afghan government 'has lost territory to the insurgency,'" The Long War Journal, February 1, 2017.

⁷⁵⁰ Reza Jan, "FATA Conflict Maps," American Enterprise Institute Critical Threats Project, February 24, 2010.

<p>History of Violent Jihadism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All three countries have a history of violent jihadism. • The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a lightning rod, bringing together jihadist militants from across the world. The relationships that many jihadists made with one another while in Afghanistan were lasting.⁷⁵¹ • Pakistan played an important role as a staging area for militants attempting to enter Afghanistan in the 1980s. Furthermore, it is suspected that Pakistani ISI aided mujahedeen fighting the Soviets.⁷⁵² • While less pronounced than Pakistan or Afghanistan, Bangladesh has a history of violent jihadism as well. Several Islamic extremist groups were founded in, and operate throughout, Bangladesh. These include Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and Ansar al Islam Bangladesh.⁷⁵³ These groups have demonstrated varying degrees of capability. JMB, for example, carried out a series of coordinated bomb attacks in 2005,⁷⁵⁴ and ABT has murdered secular bloggers and religious minorities. Certain extremist groups operating in Bangladesh date back over 20 years.
<p>Government Illegitimacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many people view the current Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as corrupt and illegitimate. Under the current power-sharing agreement, the National Unity Government brings together two political rivals, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah to share power. In practice, however, President Ghani and CEO Abdullah are using their appointments to appoint allies, increasing partisanship across the board.⁷⁵⁵ • In Bangladesh, the current government under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been accused of using Islamic militancy as a political pretext to crack down on the opposition party.⁷⁵⁶ She has also

⁷⁵¹ "The Abu Sayyaf-Al-Qaeda Connection," ABC News, December 20, 2001.

⁷⁵² Michael Rubin, "Who Is Responsible for the Taliban?" *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, March 2002.

⁷⁵³ Anurag Chandran, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Almost Forgotten*, AEI Critical Threats, September 3, 2015.

⁷⁵⁴ "Nationwide Bombing Campaign in Bangladesh," Jamestown Foundation, Publication: Terrorism Focus Volume: 2 Issue: 16. August 19, 2005.

⁷⁵⁵ "Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Government," International Crisis Group, Report N° 285, 10 April 2017.

⁷⁵⁶ "Bangladesh's prime minister uses piety to mask misrule," *The Economist*, June 1, 2017.

	<p>recently attempted to excuse the actions of Islamists in the country to prevent criticism of her stance towards Islam.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government of Pakistan has long-suffered from questions about its legitimacy. For example, many view the government as military dictatorship that is backed by foreign funder, including the United States, to prop it up.
Demographic Instabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afghanistan faces numerous difficulties stemming from its demographics, starting with a general lack of knowledge. There has never been a complete national census taken in Afghanistan.⁷⁵⁷ Furthermore, the country contains many different ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara, and Uzbeks. Finally, Afghanistan has a very young population, with over 60% of Afghans under the age of 24, according to the <i>CIA World Factbook</i>.⁷⁵⁸
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Afghan Government security institutions are unable to exert control over its entire population or land mass, as evidenced by the amount of territory controlled by the Taliban. Additionally, continued insider attacks by militants posing as members of Afghan security institutions further reduces confidence in the ability of the security sector to protect the Afghan people.⁷⁵⁹
Neighbor in Crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pakistan, which shares a 1,500 mile-long contested border with Afghanistan, deals with spillover violence from the Afghan conflict. This is exacerbated by the relative ease with which militants can move across the border.⁷⁶⁰

U.S. Approach to AQIS

Table 25 below describes the U.S. approach to countering AQIS as of 2017.

Table 25. U.S. approach to AQIS (2017)

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. has utilized unilateral direct action in order to target AQIS leaders in Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁷⁶¹ At least 4 AQIS leaders (as well

⁷⁵⁷ Ali Karimi, "Afghanistan's Demographic Drought," *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2014.

⁷⁵⁸ "Afghanistan," *CIA World Factbook*, last updated May 30, 2017.

⁷⁵⁹ Javid Ahmad, "What Drives Insider Attacks in Afghanistan?" *Foreign Affairs*, April 5, 2017.

⁷⁶⁰ "The Many Paths to Secure Pakistan's Border," STRATFOR, February 1, 2017, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/image/many-paths-secure-pakistans-border/>.

⁷⁶¹ Bill Roggio, "US military kills AQIS leaders, fighters in southern Afghanistan," *Long War Journal*, April 26, 2017; Bill Roggio, "AQIS announces death of 2 senior leaders in US operation," *Long War Journal*, November 21, 2014.

	as a number of the group's rank and file fighters) have been killed since the formation of the group in 2014. ⁷⁶²
Advise, Assist, and Accompany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. partners with Afghan Security Forces to enable CT operations.⁷⁶³ In late 2015, the U.S. conducted a raid with Afghan commandos against an AQIS training camp in southern Afghanistan.⁷⁶⁴
Intelligence and Information Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. has increased intelligence sharing with Bangladesh to help counter terrorism.⁷⁶⁵ This is likely due to the rise of both ISIL and AQIS as forces in Bangladesh. It has been reported that Indian intelligence agencies have worked closely with American counterparts. Their collaboration is said to have led to the State Department designation of AQIS as a foreign terrorist organization."⁷⁶⁶
Train & Equip Partner for CT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As part of the Coalition's train, advise, and assist mission in Afghanistan, Afghan Special Forces are trained for CT missions. In June 2016 the United States announced that Bangladesh would join the U.S. Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, which focuses on "providing CT support to partner nations and augmenting U.S. capability to support partners in CT operations."⁷⁶⁷ However, as of mid-2017, it is unclear if Bangladesh has received any funding from this program.
Establish US Posture in Theater to Support Persistent Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. CT posture in the region, specifically its presence in Afghanistan, indirectly supports counter-AQIS efforts in that country, as demonstrated by the fall 2015 raid on an AQIS training camp in Afghanistan.

⁷⁶² Bill Roggio, "US military kills AQIS leaders, fighters in southern Afghanistan," Long War Journal, April 26, 2017; Bill Roggio, "AQIS announces death of 2 senior leaders in US operation," Long War Journal, November 21, 2014.

⁷⁶³ Brian Dodwell and Don Ressler, "A View from the CT Foxhole: General John W. Nicholson, Commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan," CTC *Sentinel*, February 22, 2017.

⁷⁶⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al-Qaeda's Kandahar training camp 'probably the largest' in Afghan War," Long War Journal, October 31, 2015.

⁷⁶⁵ John Kerry, "Remarks on U.S. - Bangladesh Partnership," U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh, August 29, 2016.

⁷⁶⁶ Shubhajit Roy, "US puts chief of Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent on terror list," Indian Express, July 1, 2016.

⁷⁶⁷ Department of Defense Budget, "Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund: Fiscal Year (FY 2017)," February 2016; <https://bd.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-fifth-u-s-bangladesh-partnership-dialogue/>.

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQIS?

Given the fact that AQIS was only established in 2014, it is difficult to assess the U.S. “approach” as such. There is also a seam issue, which further complicates efforts to assess U.S. efforts. As AQIS operates in some of the same countries as AQ core, it is unclear if actions taken against AQIS leaders are a result of their affiliation with AQIS specifically, or Al-Qaeda in general. U.S. officials have claimed that AQIS and AQ core share a close relationship, but it is unclear to what extent this defines the U.S. approach to the two groups.⁷⁶⁸

The U.S. has had limited success **disrupting** AQIS’ training and ability to control territory, as evidenced by the destruction of a large training camp in southern Afghanistan in late 2015. However, the surprise expressed by coalition military leaders in discovering the camp suggests that there is not a coordinated strategy for searching out AQIS training nodes. Similarly, the U.S. has successfully targeted a number of AQIS leaders, removing them from the battlefield. This may have **dismantled** attack networks, and may help account for the lack of sophistication of AQIS attacks to date.

The U.S. has not **defeated** AQIS, and has failed to eliminate AQIS’s capacity or its will to continue fighting. AQIS has thus far failed to carry out any spectacular (or even truly noteworthy) attacks on the U.S. or its interests. This may cause the U.S. to pay it relatively little attention given the existence of high-threat groups such as AQAP and ISIL. However, it would be a mistake to correlate this reality with actions taken by the U.S. As a relatively new group, AQIS may simply be finding its footing in its area of operations. The presence of ISIL-affiliated and inspired groups in the region may also pose a recruiting problem for AQIS, further reducing its capability to carry out complex attacks.

⁷⁶⁸ Brian Dodwell and Don Rassler, “A View from the CT Foxhole: General John W. Nicholson, Commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan,” CTC *Sentinel*, February 22, 2017.

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQIS?

AQIS emerged as a distinct entity in September 2014. The internal conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan had been going on for many years at that point. Rather than AQIS causing these conflicts, the emergence of AQIS can be attributed in part to the security and governance vacuums the conflicts created. AQIS leadership resides in Pakistan because internal conflict limits the ability of the Pakistani Government to exert influence in the FATA (and due to the history of violent jihadism in that area). However, once established, the presence of AQIS exacerbates violence, which prolongs internal conflict. Similarly, in Bangladesh, Prime Minister Hasina's rejection of the notion of foreign terrorist influence (and her treatment of the opposition party) allowed AQIS space to operate in the country. Continued attacks against religious minorities and secular bloggers further undercut the government's legitimacy. Vulnerabilities prep the environment for the emergence of terrorist groups; once established, terrorist groups continue to degrade the vulnerabilities, making them even more difficult to address.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

AQIS is a relatively new affiliate, and as such there have not been any substantial changes in the U.S. approach to the group. Rather than shifts in policy over time, it may be useful to think about the U.S. approach to AQIS as shifting by country affected. In Pakistan, the U.S. takes a unilateral direct action approach to target the group's leaders. However, the U.S. has been taking a direct action approach in Pakistan to target Al-Qaeda-Core leaders since before the formation of AQIS, so it is not clear how much has truly changed with the creation of AQIS. In Afghanistan, the Coalition trains, advises, assists, and accompanies the relevant Afghan forces to carry out CT raids. The U.S. also acts unilaterally against AQIS in Afghanistan. In Bangladesh and India, the U.S. focuses more on intelligence and information sharing. These differences in approaches are reflective of the unique relationships the U.S. has with the various countries.

Appendix H: Case Study of Al-Qaeda-Syria (AQS)

Overview

Leadership and structure

Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate—previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra (Support Front, JN), and now known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Levant Conquest Front, JFS)—was formed during 2011 and 2012. In August 2011, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of Al-Qaeda in Iraq/Islamic State of Iraq (known today as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) sent Syrian national Abu Muhammad al-Jolani into Syria. Al-Jolani's mission was to exploit jihadist ties and take advantage of the ongoing Sunni uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad.⁷⁶⁹ Al-Jolani, whose real name is Ahmed Hussein al-Shara'a,⁷⁷⁰ had fought with Al-Qaeda in Iraq during the U.S. occupation.⁷⁷¹ He remains the leader of JFS.

JN announced its existence in January 2012, and initially denied that it had ties to either the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) or Al-Qaeda (AQ) core.⁷⁷² The group formally broke ties with ISI in 2013 amid a broader dispute between JN and ISI, and later between ISIL and Al-Qaeda. Seeking to broaden its appeal among other armed Syrian

⁷⁶⁹ Carla E. Humud et al., *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, Congressional Research Service, R43756, 2014, <http://www.cq.com/pdf/crsreports-4562581>, p. 10; and Jennifer Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership: The Case of Syria's Abu Mohammed al-Jolani*, Institute for the Study of War, 2015, <http://post.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The%20Threat%20of%20New%20Al-Qaeda%20Leadership.pdf>, p. 2.

⁷⁷⁰ Martin Chulov, "Al-Nusra Front cut ties with al-Qaida and renames itself," *The Guardian*, July 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/28/al-qaida-syria-nusra-split-terror-network>.

⁷⁷¹ Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 2.

⁷⁷² Charles Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 9 (2015): 13-18, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida-plays-a-long-game-in-syria>.

opposition groups, JN formally broke ties with Al-Qaeda core in July 2016, renaming itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. Most analysts continue to view JFS as a covert Al-Qaeda affiliate, although key pro-Al-Qaeda ideologues are unhappy with what they see as JFS's "dilution" of the jihad in Syria.⁷⁷³ In January 2017, JFS helped form a coalition of jihadist-leaning Syrian rebel groups called Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Group for the Liberation of the Levant, or HTS). HTS is led by veteran Syrian jihadist Abu Jabir Hashim al-Shaykh, who resigned from the Syrian jihadist group Ahrar al-Sham to join HTS. Al-Jolani serves as HTS's military commander.⁷⁷⁴ HTS has upwards of 30,000 fighters, of whom an estimated 18,000 are JFS members.⁷⁷⁵ Ultimately, JFS—one of the most formidable Al-Qaeda affiliates—is best understood not as a unitary organization, but as an ad hoc coalition of militant groups working against a common enemy of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Relationship with the Core

Al-Qaeda core leader Ayman al-Zawahiri saw the Syrian civil war as an opportunity for the global jihadist movement, an opportunity that paralleled the one Iraq had offered a decade earlier.⁷⁷⁶ He was initially content with JN operating as a covert affiliate of Al-Qaeda. Yet the question of JN's chain of command precipitated the break between Al-Qaeda and ISIL and brought JN's allegiance to Al-Qaeda into the open. In April 2013, ISI unilaterally declared that JN was subordinate to it.⁷⁷⁷ To counter ISIL's claims, al-Jolani publicized JN's ties to Al-Qaeda, pledging loyalty directly to al-Zawahiri and requesting his mediation.⁷⁷⁸ In June 2013, al-Zawahiri responded that the Iraq- and Syria-based affiliates should maintain their

⁷⁷³ Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of abu Muhammed al-Maqqadi," *Jihadica*, March 29, 2017, <http://www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad/>.

⁷⁷⁴ BBC Monitoring, "Tahrir al-Sham: Al-Qaeda's latest incarnation in Syria," BBC, February 28, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38934206>.

⁷⁷⁵ Nazeer Rida, "Syria: surfacing of 'Hai'at Tahrir al-Sham' Threatens Truce," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, January 30, 2017, <http://english.aawsat.com/nazeer-rida/news-middle-east/syria-surfacing-haiat-tahrir-al-sham-threatens-truce>.

⁷⁷⁶ Charles Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, Brookings Institution, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/iwr_20160728_profiling_nusra.pdf, p. 11.

⁷⁷⁷ Jessica D. Lewis, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent: The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*, Institute for the Study of War, 2013, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AQI-Resurgent-10Sept_0.pdf, p. 9.

⁷⁷⁸ Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "Al-Qa'ida Uncoupling: Jabhat al-Nusra's Rebranding as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 8 (2016), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida-uncoupling-jabhat-al-nusras-rebranding-as-jabhat-fateh-al-sham>.

organizational and geographic separation.⁷⁷⁹ ISI's al-Baghdadi rejected the order, even after al-Zawahiri dispatched numerous Al-Qaeda leaders to Syria in summer 2013 to attempt to mediate between JN and ISI.⁷⁸⁰

After JN broke with ISI, JN sought to implement al-Zawahiri's vision of Al-Qaeda franchises oriented toward winning popular support. When al-Zawahiri published his "General Guidelines for Jihad" in September 2013, al-Jolani was already following the Al-Qaeda leader's advice for "pragmatic moderation" in the local context.⁷⁸¹ In early 2015, al-Zawahiri wrote to al-Jolani offering strategic guidance to JN for integrating into the local landscape. He called for al-Jolani to stop plotting external attacks from Syria—despite those plotters having been dispatched to Syria by al-Zawahiri himself.⁷⁸² Al-Qaeda core provided expertise to JN, aided the flow of foreign fighters, and gave financial and military assistance.⁷⁸³ Al-Qaeda core also provided religious and ideological legitimacy. Many leading AQ figures held sway over JN's Shura Council, including Al-Qaeda strategist Saif al-Adel, who arrived in Syria from Iran in late 2015.⁷⁸⁴

In early 2016, JN and Al-Qaeda core began publicly discussing the possibility that JN would break ties with Al-Qaeda,⁷⁸⁵ a tactical move that could advance the long-term interests of both groups.⁷⁸⁶ In July 2016, JN formally broke with Al-Qaeda core and rebranded itself as JFS. But the rebranding was not a complete break with Al-Qaeda. Al-Jolani's careful word choice highlighted JN's separation not from Al-Qaeda, but from any "external entity," suggesting that it would continue to work with Al-Qaeda figures inside Syria.⁷⁸⁷ The decision was sanctioned by Al-Qaeda's central command,

⁷⁷⁹ Lewis, *The Breaking the Walls Campaign, Part I*, p. 19.

⁷⁸⁰ Jennifer Cafarella, "Peace-talks between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, November 15, 2014, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2014/11/peace-talks-between-islamic-state-and.html>; Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 14; Lister, "Al-Qaida Plays a Long Game in Syria"; Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership: The Case of Syria's Abu Mohammed al-Joulani*, p. 5.

⁷⁸¹ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁷⁸² Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*. P17.

⁷⁸³ Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*. P20-21.

⁷⁸⁴ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*. P29.

⁷⁸⁵ Al-Tamimi, "Al-Qa'ida Uncoupling."

⁷⁸⁶ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*. P7.

⁷⁸⁷ Al-Tamimi, "Al-Qa'ida Uncoupling."

including figures based in Syria.⁷⁸⁸ Al-Qaeda's deputy leader, Ahmed Hassan Abu al-Khair, commented, "We direct Jabhat al Nusra's central command to move forward in a way that preserves the interests of Islam and Muslims and protect[s] the jihad of the people of Syria."⁷⁸⁹ Abu al-Khair is believed to be in Syria.⁷⁹⁰ JFS continues to benefit from the involvement of high-ranking Al-Qaeda operatives inside Syria, including external operations plotters.⁷⁹¹

Ideology and goals

JN seeks to dominate and reshape the armed opposition within Syria's civil war, with the ultimate goal of toppling Bashar al-Assad and establishing a jihadist emirate in Syria.⁷⁹² Following al-Zawahiri's 2013 "General Guidelines for Jihad," JN hopes to infiltrate the opposition.⁷⁹³ Specifically, JN hopes to embed within revolutionary forces and the Syrian people; work more closely with other Islamic groups, including by creating a nationwide sharia courts operation; and build a power base in strategic Syrian territory.⁷⁹⁴ In this way, JN can embed itself within the Syrian Sunni population and over time transform society to accept Al-Qaeda's vision.⁷⁹⁵ By becoming a part of the Syrian landscape, JN can also take advantage of the void left

⁷⁸⁸ Mona Alami, "Jabhat al-Nusra's rebranding is more than simple name change," Al-Monitor, August 5, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/jabhat-al-nusra-sever-al-qaeda-focus-local-syria.html>.

⁷⁸⁹ United States Institute of Peace, "The Jihadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?" December 12, 2016, <http://www.usip.org/publications/2016/12/11/the-jihadi-threat-4-whither-jabhat-fateh-al-sham>.

⁷⁹⁰ Alami, "Jabhat al-Nusra's rebranding is more than simple name change;" Al-Tamimi, "Al-Qa'ida Uncoupling."

⁷⁹¹ United States Department of Defense, "Statement by Pentagon Spokesman Captain Jeff Davis on US strike against al-Qaida Training Camp in Syria," January 20, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/1055821/state-ment-by-pentagon-spokesman-captain-jeff-davis-on-us-strike-against-al-qaid>.

⁷⁹² Lister, Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra. P10.

⁷⁹³ Jennifer Cafarella, "Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, October 1, 2014, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2014/10/local-dynamics-shift-in-response-to-us.html>.

⁷⁹⁴ Jennifer Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership: The Case of Syria's Abu Mohammed al-Joulani*. Institute for the Study of War, 2015, <http://post.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The%20Threat%20of%20New%20Al-Qaeda%20Leadership.pdf>, p. 4.

⁷⁹⁵ Jennifer Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership: The Case of Syria's Abu Mohammed al-Joulani*, p. 2.

by international efforts to roll back the Islamic State.⁷⁹⁶ In contrast to the Islamic State's efforts to fast-track the creation of a jihadist emirate, JN emphasizes its long-term, localized approach.⁷⁹⁷

The domestic objective of JN's rebranding as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham was to merge with other Syrian Islamist rebel groups that had previously opposed doing so because of JN's ties to Al-Qaeda.⁷⁹⁸ JFS also hoped that by entangling itself closer with other rebel groups, it would insulate itself from U.S. and Russian targeting or—more likely—increase domestic opposition to such targeting.⁷⁹⁹ The rebranding also showed willingness among JN (and even Al-Qaeda) leadership to cut official ties with Al-Qaeda in order to more fully embed with opposition forces and fulfill the longer-term vision of creating an Islamic emirate in Syria and the Levant.⁸⁰⁰

There are limits to JN/JFS's pragmatism. In mid-2014, Sami al-Oraydi replaced al-Juburi as JN deputy emir.⁸⁰¹ A Jordanian hardliner, al-Oraydi was now responsible for JN's religious doctrine.⁸⁰² The promotion of al-Oraydi and removal of other pragmatists increased the group's discourse on implementing sharia and opposing non-Islamist rebel groups—especially those aided by Western states.⁸⁰³

JN has been inconsistent in its position on plotting attacks outside Syria. In January and February 2014, JN carried out bombings in northern Lebanon with the help of the AQ-linked Abdullah Azzam Brigades.⁸⁰⁴ JN framed the attacks as retaliation for Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war.⁸⁰⁵ However, JN also claimed to be avenging alleged wrongs against the Sunni community in Lebanon.⁸⁰⁶ In essence, JN

⁷⁹⁶ Jennifer Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership: The Case of Syria's Abu Mohammed al-Joulani*, p. 5.

⁷⁹⁷ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁷⁹⁸ United States Institute of Peace, "The Jihadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?"

⁷⁹⁹ Al-Tamimi, "Al-Qa'ida Uncoupling."

⁸⁰⁰ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 20; and Cafarella, "Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria."

⁸⁰¹ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸⁰² Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 29.

⁸⁰³ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 15.

⁸⁰⁴ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸⁰⁵ Al Jazeera, "Jabhat al-Nusra claims deadly Lebanon bombing," February 1, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/02/al-nusra-front-claims-deadly-lebanon-bombing-201421221112955650.html>.

⁸⁰⁶ Al Jazeera, "Jabhat al-Nusra claims deadly Lebanon bombing,"

was competing with the Islamic State for which jihadist group represented the Sunni Muslims of the Levant.⁸⁰⁷

As for its global objectives, JN is connected to a group of Al-Qaeda core figures based in Syria since 2013 known as the “Khorasan Group,” or the “Wolves” unit.⁸⁰⁸ Led (at the time) by Kuwaiti national Muhsin al-Fadhli (d. 2015), this group of AQ military specialists relocated from the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region to Syria in order to plot external attacks.⁸⁰⁹ JN’s external planning reached fruition in July 2014. “Credible threats,” reportedly of a cooperative plot between the Khorasan Group and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, led to tighter restrictions on US-bound flights.⁸¹⁰ In response to the U.S. targeting the Khorasan Group with air strikes in 2014, al-Jolani publicly threatened the West for the first time.⁸¹¹ However, the US targeting of JN in response to such plots lessened other rebel groups’ willingness to work with JN. Al-Zawahiri’s 2015 letter recommended al-Jolani to halt planning attacks against the West.⁸¹²

JN also displayed willingness to negotiate over international interests. In August 2014, through Qatari mediation, the group released Peter Theo Curtis, an American journalist the group had held since 2012.⁸¹³ JN was also part of a coalition of rebels that took 45 Fijian UN peacekeepers hostage. Again through Qatari mediation, JN released the peacekeepers two weeks later.⁸¹⁴ Yet globally, despite JN denials,⁸¹⁵ US

⁸⁰⁷ Jennifer Cafarella, “Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength,” AEI Critical Threats Project, February 11, 2016, <http://www.aei.org/publication/jabhat-al-nusra-and-isis-sources-of-strength/>, p. 17.

⁸⁰⁸ Lister, “Al-Qa’ida Plays a Long Game in Syria.”

⁸⁰⁹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, pp. 16–17.

⁸¹⁰ Lister, “Al-Qa’ida Plays a Long Game in Syria.”

⁸¹¹ Cafarella, “Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria.”

⁸¹² Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 17; and Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 5. Al-Jawarihi’s injunction highlights the tactical and operational flexibility of the Al-Qaeda core, which appears far more willing than ISIS to recognize the importance of adapting to local conditions. In the judgment of many analysts, such flexibility also contributes to Al-Qaeda’s overall resiliency.

⁸¹³ Baz Ratner, “Syria’s Nusra Front releases U.N. peacekeepers in Golan,” Reuters, September 11, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-fiji-idUSKBN0H60C120140911>.

⁸¹⁴ Baz Ratner, “Syria’s Nusra Front releases U.N. peacekeepers in Golan.”

⁸¹⁵ Amin Nasr, “Nusra official denies group plotting foreign terror attacks,” NOW, July 21, 2016, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/567214-nusra-official-denies-group-plotting-foreign-terror-attacks>.

intelligence officials believed that JN continued to plot attacks against the United States and Europe, and that it attempted to infiltrate the refugee flow to Europe.⁸¹⁶

Funding

Prior to JN's break with the Islamic State in Iraq, half of JN's funding came directly from ISI.⁸¹⁷ After cutting ties with ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra became more dependent on funding from Al-Qaeda networks in Turkey and the Gulf States.⁸¹⁸ By one account, JFS annually receives a few million dollars or more in foreign funding;⁸¹⁹ one key fundraiser was Saudi national Abdallah Muhammad Bin-Sulayman al-Muhaysini.⁸²⁰ JN also earned significant income from ransoming foreign hostages. Reportedly, the group has received between \$4 million and \$25 million in ransom payments.⁸²¹

JN has some local funding. Especially in Syria's Idlib province, JN established its own social services.⁸²² The group's collection of taxes in exchange for such governance activities provides it with a minimal supplemental income.⁸²³

Evolution

Phase one: Founding and tensions with ISI (August 2011–January 2014)

In August 2011, ISI leader al-Baghdadi dispatched a delegation led by al-Jolani (then emir of ISI's Ninewa Province)⁸²⁴ and Iraqi national Maysar al-Juburi/Abu Mariya al-

⁸¹⁶ David Ignatius, "A new jihadist threat may be on the horizon in Syria," *The Washington Post*, July 19, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/a-new-jihadist-threat-rises-in-syria-as-the-islamic-state-recedes/2016/07/19/f9fd6ae6-4df4-11e6-a422-83ab49ed5e6a_story.html?utm_term=.ca4a639c47b0.

⁸¹⁷ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 12.

⁸¹⁸ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 31.

⁸¹⁹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*.

⁸²⁰ United States Treasury Department, "Treasury Designates Key Al-Nusra Front Leaders," November 10, 2016, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0605.aspx>.

⁸²¹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 31.

⁸²² Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, pp. 30–31.

⁸²³ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 32.

Qahtani to Syria.⁸²⁵ When JN was established, al-Jolani was its leader and al-Juburi its deputy leader and religious chief.⁸²⁶ Initially, al-Jolani and his delegation reached out to a network of AQI/ISI safe houses in Homs, northern Damascus, and Aleppo.⁸²⁷

In December 2011, a month before JN announced its presence, it carried out its first formal attack: a double suicide bombing outside a Syrian military intelligence compound in Damascus.⁸²⁸ The group had initial success as an insurgent group in Aleppo Province.⁸²⁹ High-profile attacks on regime targets became JN's signature operations and raised its profile among other rebel groups.⁸³⁰ The group was still a small, primarily cell-based organization, but it operated lethally and efficiently.⁸³¹ Initially, JN was unpopular among Syrian nationalist revolutionaries, who feared that it would pollute the Syrian civil war by replicating the bloody, sectarian agenda of ISI.⁸³²

The key to Jabhat al-Nusra's success in Syria was and remains its ability to serve as a force multiplier for other armed opposition groups.⁸³³ JN's integration into the military uprising facilitated political integration when the opposition cleared the regime from areas and took over governance there.⁸³⁴ By coordinating its military efforts with other armed groups, JN made itself necessary to the war effort. This tactical coordination undercut the possibility of popular opposition to Al-Qaeda's long-term political goals.⁸³⁵ During 2012-2013, the group's leading role in the rebellion reversed earlier concerns that its attacks would be directed against the

⁸²⁴ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 9.

⁸²⁵ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸²⁶ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 9.

⁸²⁷ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*.

⁸²⁸ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 10.

⁸²⁹ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸³⁰ Humud, *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, p. 10.

⁸³¹ Humud, *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*; and Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 11.

⁸³² Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸³³ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 11.

⁸³⁴ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸³⁵ Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, 2014, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISWBackgrounder_Jenny_JN.pdf, p. 2.

broader population.⁸³⁶ For example, in late 2012, after armed opposition groups cleared the regime out of areas of Aleppo Province, JN provided services to civilians through “relief departments.”⁸³⁷

Throughout its existence, JN has been too small a military force to defeat the Assad regime or large nonstate groups on its own.⁸³⁸ Its integration into other forces is necessary for its own military and political successes. In the military effort, JN brings its expertise, discipline, and weapons and funding supply chain.⁸³⁹ Its use of suicide bombers at the outset of military confrontations catches targets off guard and weakens their defenses, allowing for follow-on strikes.⁸⁴⁰

By 2013, JN was becoming a larger force, growing to 3,000–5,000 fighters.⁸⁴¹ The group had developed from anti-regime terrorism into a full insurgent force.⁸⁴² JN also helped control territory in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zour.⁸⁴³ However, its long-term goal of establishing an Islamic emirate in the Levant was not shared by the entire opposition.⁸⁴⁴

Phase two: Break from ISIL (January 2014 to March 2015)

In January 2014, after the split with ISIL, JN allied with other Syrian rebel groups to confront ISIL.⁸⁴⁵ The next month, AQ leader al-Zawahiri formally expelled ISIL from

⁸³⁶ Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 2.

⁸³⁷ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 11.

⁸³⁸ Harleen Gambhir, Jennifer Cafarella, and Katherine Zimmerman, *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and Al-Qaeda, Report Three: Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, American Enterprise Institute and Institute for the Study of War, 2016, <http://post.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/PLANEX%20Report%203%20FINAL.pdf>, p. 24.

⁸³⁹ Humud, *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, pp. 11–12.

⁸⁴⁰ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 3; and Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 33.

⁸⁴¹ Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 18.

⁸⁴² Lister, “Al-Qa’ida Plays a Long Game in Syria.”

⁸⁴³ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 2.

⁸⁴⁴ Cafarella, “Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria.”

⁸⁴⁵ Al-Tamimi, “Al-Qa’ida Uncoupling.”

Al-Qaeda.⁸⁴⁶ At the local level, ISIL and JN continued tactical cooperation throughout 2014.⁸⁴⁷ However, JN lost its Deir ez-Zour stronghold to ISIL after the split.⁸⁴⁸ After al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph over territory that included eastern Syria, JN focused on consolidating along Syria's northeastern border with Turkey.⁸⁴⁹ From July 2014, the group began controlling parts of Idlib Province. In October 2014, JN seized from the Free Syrian Army much of the Jabal al-Zawiya region of Idlib, on the Turkish border in northwestern Syria.⁸⁵⁰ Turkey supported rebel efforts to overthrow the Assad regime. JN took advantage of this position to move donations and manpower into Syria from Turkey.⁸⁵¹

ISIL peeled off much of JN's foreign fighter manpower when the groups split.⁸⁵² Domestically, this allowed JN to present itself as a much more "Syrian" organization, as opposed to the Islamic State's regional focus. However, al-Baghdadi's caliphate was now ascendant in the global jihad, creating some incentive for JN to compete in that sphere. In November 2014, al-Jolani for the first time highlighted his group's foreign fighting force, which included Europeans, central Asians, Moroccans, and Saudis.⁸⁵³ Yet in its effort to appear as a local force, JN was discriminating in its recruitment of foreigners into its ranks.⁸⁵⁴ JN picked only the most qualified and obedient foreigners to ensure that its fighters were an asset, not a burden, to the Syrian opposition.

Locally, JN pursued direct territorial control. In Idlib, the group's direct control gave it more freedom to act in a less compromising manner toward other rebel groups.⁸⁵⁵ JN established "judicial houses," which implemented a stricter version of Shari'a than

⁸⁴⁶ Humud, *Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa*, p. 11.

⁸⁴⁷ Cafarella, "Peace-talks between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria."

⁸⁴⁸ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 2.

⁸⁴⁹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 33.

⁸⁵⁰ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 1.

⁸⁵¹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 33.

⁸⁵² Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 13.

⁸⁵³ Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 3; and Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 18.

⁸⁵⁴ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸⁵⁵ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 2.

previous courts.⁸⁵⁶ From mid-2014, JN began fighting against U.S.-backed rebel groups in Aleppo and Idlib.⁸⁵⁷

After the split from ISIL, JN continued trying to integrate itself into the civilian population.⁸⁵⁸ JN was assisted by Ahrar al-Sham, another Al-Qaeda-linked indigenous armed group that served as a key interlocutor between JN and other rebel groups.⁸⁵⁹ This relationship strengthened JN's military capabilities, since Ahrar al-Sham has a larger fighting force.⁸⁶⁰

JN's information campaign was imperative to its ability to embed itself into opposition forces. After U.S. airstrikes against the Khorasan Group, JN framed the targeting of its external operations as a strike against the revolution.⁸⁶¹ This effort prompted public demonstrations in rebel-controlled areas, with protesters equating U.S. airstrikes with those by the Assad regime and Russia.

Phase three: Jaish al-Fateh coalition and Syrian ceasefire (March 2015-July 2016)

In March 2015, JN and Ahrar al-Sham led the formation of the Jaysh al-Fath ("Army of Conquest") coalition with five other Islamist-oriented rebel groups.⁸⁶² The move was a step back for JN: a return to its prior willingness to accommodate other rebel groups—at least those with an Islamic orientation—to allow for near-term integration into the revolutionary landscape. JN's moderation was apparent from the coalition agreement, which focused on the Syrian civil war and rejected external operations.

The coalition provided JN an official coordination platform with local Islamist forces—and through them with other nationalist rebel groups, including Western-

⁸⁵⁶ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*.

⁸⁵⁷ Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 5; and Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸⁵⁸ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 2.

⁸⁵⁹ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 26.

⁸⁶⁰ Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 24.

⁸⁶¹ Jennifer Cafarella, "Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria, ISW blog, October 1, 2014, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2014/10/local-dynamics-shift-in-response-to-us.html>.

⁸⁶² Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria"; and Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 19.

backed ones.⁸⁶³ Some saw in this effort the moderating effect Ahrar al-Sham had on JN, noting a reduction in the latter's belligerence against other rebel groups. However, the coalition agreement was confined to specific areas of Syria (mainly Idlib, Hama, and Latakia Governorates), so JN could decide where it was in the group's best interest to cooperate with the other rebel groups, and where it was not. JN tightened its control of Idlib throughout 2015, with seizures from Western-aligned rebel groups.⁸⁶⁴

This was a period of growth for JN. Whereas in 2013 it had three thousand to five thousand fighters, by the end of 2015 JN likely had more than doubled in size.⁸⁶⁵ The group recruited at least another three thousand Syrians from February to June 2016.⁸⁶⁶ The group's fighting force was consistently around 60 to 70 percent Syrian.⁸⁶⁷ That recruitment drive coincided with inconclusive negotiations to create a lasting ceasefire between the regime and the rebels. JN was excluded from the talks, and it was well-placed to take advantage when the Assad regime violated the ceasefire.

JN continued to pursue its long-term domestic goal of an Islamic state in Syria. The group worked to empower Islamic-oriented rebel groups.⁸⁶⁸ In the near term, JN deemphasized its own role in order to more broadly promote other domestic voices in support of Islamic governance.⁸⁶⁹

Locally, JN moved to consolidate its rule in Idlib.⁸⁷⁰ Regionally, the group sought to compete with the Islamic State for prominence in the Levant.⁸⁷¹ In Lebanon, JN recruited in Tripoli and the Bekaa Valley, where some Sunnis were concerned by Hizbullah's dominant position in the Lebanese state.⁸⁷²

⁸⁶³ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸⁶⁴ Cafarella, *The Threat of New Al-Qaeda Leadership*, p. 5.

⁸⁶⁵ Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 18.

⁸⁶⁶ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 6.

⁸⁶⁷ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸⁶⁸ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 40.

⁸⁶⁹ Charles Lister, "The Nusra Front is Dead and Stronger Than Ever Before," *Foreign Policy*, July 28, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/28/the-nusra-front-is-dead-and-stronger-than-ever-before/>.

⁸⁷⁰ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 34.

⁸⁷¹ Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 17.

⁸⁷² Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 18.

The Syrian ceasefire of February 2016 exposed the limits of JN's popular support. When fighting the regime, JN cooperated militarily with a broad range of rebel groups, many of which reject JN's long-term vision.⁸⁷³ They tolerated JN's outlook because they needed JN's military capabilities. When the fighting stopped, so too did mainstream Syrian support for JN.⁸⁷⁴

During this period JN was also more vocal about its Al-Qaeda affiliation and global jihadist vision. In June 2015, the group released a 43-minute video called "The Heirs of Glory," which tied the group to historical Islamic conquests in the region, as well as to Osama Bin Laden and the 9/11 attacks.⁸⁷⁵ In August, JN spokesman Abu Firas al-Suri said, "Our goals are not limited to Syria, but our current battle is."⁸⁷⁶

In 2015 and 2016, JN also asserted itself against non-Islamist rebel groups. For example, JN attacked the U.S.-trained New Syrian Force in northern Aleppo, kidnapping its leader and overrunning the group's base.⁸⁷⁷ In information operations, JN framed such efforts as part of a "counter-corruption" campaign.⁸⁷⁸ This attribution limited the negative impact on JN's relations with other rebel groups.⁸⁷⁹

JN remained too small to carry out major operations without local support from the population and other rebel groups.⁸⁸⁰ However, JN's advantage is its command and control, which allows it an operational perspective and the ability to move fighters and equipment to other fronts as necessary.⁸⁸¹ JN's effective fighting provides it a leading role in nearly half of the opposition's "joint military operations rooms" as well as in governance of territory that the militant coalitions clear.⁸⁸²

⁸⁷³ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸⁷⁴ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 19.

⁸⁷⁵ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸⁷⁶ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸⁷⁷ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸⁷⁸ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 4.

⁸⁷⁹ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 5.

⁸⁸⁰ Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*. p. 24.

⁸⁸¹ Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*. p. 20.

⁸⁸² Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*. p. 19.

Phase four: Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, a “break” from AQ core (July 2016-November 2016)

In July 2016, JN rebranded itself as Jabhat Fath al-Sham (Levant Conquest Front, or JFS). JN had spent 2015-2016 both asserting its association with Al-Qaeda’s vision and questioning whether its association with the organization hindered unity in the Islamist rebel ranks. Al-Jolani soon announced that JFS had “no affiliation to any external entity.”⁸⁸³ Along with the intention of subsuming Islamist rebel groups that had shunned JN for its Al-Qaeda ties, the move came in the wake of discussions between U.S. and Russian policymakers to jointly target the Islamic State and JN in Syria.⁸⁸⁴

At its establishment, JFS had between five thousand and ten thousand fighters.⁸⁸⁵ At the end of 2016, another estimate suggested that the group had around ten thousand fighters.⁸⁸⁶ The group continued to focus on domestic recruitment, with Syrians representing up to 70 percent of its ranks. JFS also had more direct control over most of Idlib Province and parts of Aleppo Province by mid-2016.⁸⁸⁷

A key partner for JN during this period was the more domestically entrenched Ahrar al-Sham, a force multiplier for JN. Ahrar al-Sham helped JN connect to and communicate with other rebel groups.⁸⁸⁸ Some Ahrar al-Sham leaders have links to AQ core.⁸⁸⁹ However, the group always resisted a formal merger with JN, likely because of JN’s formal affiliation to Al-Qaeda. By rebranding itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, JN hoped to unify Ahrar al-Sham and JFS.

The JFS rebranding was primarily an information operation. The “international community,” al-Jolani said, was using JN’s affiliation with Al-Qaeda as an “excuse ... to bombard and displace Muslims in the Levant.”⁸⁹⁰ At the same time, the group’s

⁸⁸³ Carla E. Humud et al., *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, Congressional Research Service, RL33487, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf>, p. 39.

⁸⁸⁴ Al-Tamimi, “Al-Qa’ida Uncoupling.”

⁸⁸⁵ “Syria War: Who are Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?” BBC, August 1, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36924000>.

⁸⁸⁶ United States Institute of Peace, “The Jihadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?”

⁸⁸⁷ “Syria War: Who are Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?” BBC, August 1, 2016.

⁸⁸⁸ Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, p. 26.

⁸⁸⁹ Cafarella, “Local Dynamics Shift in Response to U.S.-Led Airstrikes in Syria.”

⁸⁹⁰ Chulov, “Al-Nusra Front cut ties with al-Qaida and renames itself.”

exclusion from various ceasefire attempts and its continued fighting against the Syrian regime helped its recruitment.⁸⁹¹ The group balances itself against the extremism of the Islamic State. Although JFS avoids sectarian attacks on other Muslims, it has discriminated against and attempted to convert Christians and Druze.⁸⁹²

On the military level, JFS continues to cooperate with other rebel groups, some of which may be supported by U.S. programs.⁸⁹³ JFS also cooperates with other opposition groups to control territory.⁸⁹⁴ The group is well placed to take advantage of the Islamic State's territorial losses.⁸⁹⁵ However, in August 2016, it suffered its own military setback when it failed to break the Assad regime's siege of Aleppo.⁸⁹⁶ Meanwhile, continued attacks against other rebel groups finally have started to damage JFS's broader position in the opposition movement.⁸⁹⁷ However, the group reportedly gained advanced weaponry—including tanks and Chinese- and U.S.-made anti-tank missiles—from assaults against western-backed rebel groups in October and November 2016.⁸⁹⁸

Phase five: HTS coalition (December 2016-February 2017)

At the end of 2016, the military balance in Syria's civil war shifted when the Assad regime retook Aleppo. JFS and the entire Syrian opposition faced new pressures. The flight of rebels from Aleppo pushed more factions into Idlib, JFS's power base.⁸⁹⁹

⁸⁹¹ United States Institute of Peace, "The Jihadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?"

⁸⁹² United States Institute of Peace, "The Jihadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?"

⁸⁹³ Humud et al., *Armed Conflict in Syria*, p. 39.

⁸⁹⁴ United States Institute of Peace, "The Jihadi Threat 4: Whither Jabhat Fateh al-Sham?"

⁸⁹⁵ Cafarella, *Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength*, p. 7.

⁸⁹⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, "Jihadists and other rebels launch new offensive in Aleppo," FDD's Long War Journal, October 30, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/jihadists-and-other-rebels-launch-new-offensive-in-aleppo.php>.

⁸⁹⁷ Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria."

⁸⁹⁸ Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra Deepens Its Foothold in Northwestern Syria*, p. 4.

⁸⁹⁹ Alex MacDonald, "ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels," Middle East Eye, January 26, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/why-jabhat-fateh-al-sham-fighting-other-rebels-syria-1902636393>.

Also in December 2016, Ahrar al-Sham rejected long-attempted efforts to merge with JFS.⁹⁰⁰

In late January 2017, JFS merged with smaller Islamist rebel factions, which had long cooperated with JN/JFS, and rebranded again as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (The Assembly for the Liberation of the Levant, HTS).⁹⁰¹ Other groups joining HTS included Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zanki, Liwa al-Haqq, Ansar al-Din, and Jaysh al-Sunna.⁹⁰² For the first time, al-Jolani did not serve as leader. The leader of Ahrar al-Sham resigned from that group to lead HTS.⁹⁰³ The militant, known as Abu Jabir or Hashim al-Shaykh, had been part of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, according to some reports.⁹⁰⁴

Although HTS attracted some support from Ahrar al-Sham, the two groups had serious tensions. One problem was Jund al-Aqsa, another AQ-linked Islamic rebel group that merged with JFS. Jund al-Aqsa is a more hardline group, and it reportedly attacked Ahrar al-Sham positions on multiple occasions. Ahrar al-Sham retaliated against Jund al-Aqsa and JFS.⁹⁰⁵ To calm tensions with Ahrar al-Sham, JFS/HTS expelled Jund al-Aqsa from its coalition in January 2017.⁹⁰⁶ By this point, however, Ahrar al-Sham had organized a coalition of its own to fight JFS.⁹⁰⁷ Ahrar al-Sham accused JFS of being anti-revolutionary and said that JFS attacked innocents no differently than the Islamic State.⁹⁰⁸ JFS decried a “conspiracy” and claimed that Free Syrian Army-aligned rebel groups provided targeting coordinates to Syrian, Russian, and U.S. forces.⁹⁰⁹ In response, JFS overran the Free Syrian Army (FSA)-aligned Jaish al-Mujahideen and attacked Ahrar al-Sham and other rebel groups in Aleppo Province.⁹¹⁰ Each of the groups that JFS attacked were involved in the Russian- and

⁹⁰⁰ “Intensive Infighting Erupts Between Commanders of Al-Nusra Front & Ahrar Al-Sham in Syria,” South Front, December 29, 2016, <https://southfront.org/intensive-infighting-erupts-between-commanders-of-al-nusra-front-ahrar-al-sham-in-syria/>.

⁹⁰¹ Thomas Joscelyn, “Al-Qaeda and allies announce ‘new entity’ in Syria,” FDD’s Long War Journal, January 28, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/Al-Qaeda-and-allies-announce-new-entity-in-syria.php>.

⁹⁰² Joscelyn, “Al-Qaeda and allies announce ‘new entity’ in Syria.”

⁹⁰³ Joscelyn, “Al-Qaeda and allies announce ‘new entity’ in Syria.”

⁹⁰⁴ Joscelyn, “Al-Qaeda and allies announce ‘new entity’ in Syria.”

⁹⁰⁵ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

⁹⁰⁶ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

⁹⁰⁷ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

⁹⁰⁸ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

⁹⁰⁹ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

⁹¹⁰ MacDonald, “ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels.”

Turkish-supported peace conference in Kazakhstan.⁹¹¹ HTS and the Ahrar al-Sham coalition are at an impasse so long as the civil war remains unsettled. Ahrar al-Sham and the other groups may be strong enough to confront HTS directly. Yet they will still need HTS on their side if they have any hope of defeating the regime.⁹¹²

Security vulnerabilities in Syria

Table 26 below summarizes the vulnerabilities in Syria (where AQS is operating).

Table 26. Security vulnerabilities in Syria (2014)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since 2011, Syria has experienced an extremely violent and destabilizing civil war that, as of June 2017, has killed more than 400,000 Syrians, displaced more than 6 million Syrians internally, and caused more than 5 million Syrians to leave the country. • Syria's civil war involves hundreds of domestic, regional, and global combatants.
History of Violent Jihadism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From roughly 1978 to 1982, Syrian president Hafiz al-Assad, father of current Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, faced a violent, sectarian-tinged uprising from Syria's Sunni Islamist opposition, among other opposition elements. • This uprising culminated in the 1982 "Hama Massacre," in which the Assad regime killed some 20,000 to 40,000 Syrians over an approximately one month period in order to put down the uprising.
Partial/Collapse of Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since the start of the uprising the Syrian government has lost large amounts of territory to Syria's Kurds, ISIS, and Sunni opposition elements. The Syrian military is over-burdened and relies heavily on outside support, including from Russian, Iranian, and Lebanese Shiite allies. • The Syrian government controlled approximately one-third of Syrian territory, containing approximately 65% of Syrian citizens, as of January 2017, according to the Associated Foreign Press. Since the Russian intervention in fall 2015, however, the Syrian government has gained momentum against its enemies, though it is unlikely to regain full control of Syria anytime in the near future.
Government Illegitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging potential challenges in quantifying and measuring government legitimacy, numerous factors indicate that large numbers of Syrian nationals no longer recognize the Assad

⁹¹¹ MacDonald, "ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels."

⁹¹² MacDonald, "ANALYSIS: Why Fateh al-Sham is lashing out at Syrian rebels."

	<p>regime’s right to govern, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is not democratically elected; o countless Syrians have raised arms against the Assad regime; o the Assad regime has killed and/or displaced millions of Syrians; o the Assad regime no longer governs over all Syrian territory and citizens; and, o The Syrian civil war has devolved into a highly sectarian conflict that pits the regime and its Alawite base, which makes up approximately 13% of Syria’s population, against a Sunni population that makes up 70-74% of the Syrian population.
Demographic Instabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syria is a heterogeneous country. Prior to the 2011 civil war, key communities included the Alawites (12%), Kurds (8-10%), and Sunni Arabs (60%). Christians, Druze, Ismaili and others make up the remaining percentage of Syrians. • The current civil war has generally divided the country along ethnic and sectarian lines: Kurdish armed groups dominate the north and seek to exploit the instability to increase their autonomy; the Alawite regime controls key areas of the center and northwest; and, Sunni Arabs dominate the opposition, including through jihadist groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ), as well as among the moderate political and military opposition. • The Syrian regime has been accused of systematically targeting Sunnis in order to alter Syria’s demographic character.
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Syrian government has lost approximately two-thirds of Syrian territory to opposition militants.

U.S. approach to AQS

Table 27 below describes the approaches the U.S. is currently taking to countering AQS, while Table 28 described the U.S. approach in 2014.

Table 27. U.S. approach to Al-Qaeda-Syria (2017)

U.S. Approach	Details
Attack the Network- Unilateral Direct Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The United States initiated airstrikes against AQ elements in Syria on September 23, 2014, the same date that it initiated operations against ISIS in Syria. U.S. airstrikes are relatively infrequent compared to the larger U.S. effort against ISIS. • Initial airstrikes targeted AQS elements described by DOD as the Khorasan Group (KG), as opposed to the larger AQ-affiliate inside Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). KG included AQ operatives reportedly ordered to Syria by AQ leadership in Pakistan in order to organize attacks against western targets and to support JN. • In late 2016, President Obama ordered the expansion of U.S. strikes against AQ in Syria to explicitly include the JN due to its increasing

	<p>strength and the likelihood that U.S. military success against ISIS will leave a vacuum in Syria that JN could exploit.</p>
<p>Security Cooperation / Building Partner Capacity (Train and Equip)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The US strengthens the defense capabilities of regional partners Jordan and Lebanon, against various terrorist groups inside Syria, including but not limited to AQ. • DOD activities include increasing security assistance funding, improving border security, and building partner capacity, among other activities.
<p>Establish U.S. Posture in Theater to Support Persistent Operations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The US CT posture in the Middle East, primarily structured to support Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) against ISIS, indirectly supports counter AQ missions in Syria. U.S. military assets at Turkey's Incirlik air base, for example, can support airstrikes against AQ in Syria just as they can support airstrikes against ISIS targets.
<p>Messaging/ counter-messaging</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In March 2016 the United States established the Global Engagement Center (GEC) to counter the messaging and influence of international terrorist organizations. • In a March 11, 2017 statement, U.S. Special Envoy Michael Ratney described current AQS rival Ahrar al-Sham as "loyal defenders of the Syrian revolution," painting AQS as an enemy of the revolution and thereby undermining AQS's strategy of attracting allies among Syrian rebel groups.
<p>Attack the Network - Countering Foreign Fighter Flows</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US counter foreign fighter (FF) flow efforts impact AQ among other terrorist groups in Syria. Key efforts include: U.S. leadership in passing United Nations Security Council Reform (UNSCR) 2178 regarding counter FF cooperation in September 2014 and U.S. intelligence cooperation with international CT partners on FF. • The number of FF traveling to Syria has declined significantly since peaking in 2014, according to the State Department.
<p>Attack the Network - Counter Threat Finance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2012, the State Department designated JN a foreign terrorist organization, which makes it illegal for U.S. entities to conduct business with the organization. • In late 2016 and early 2017, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned six individuals associated with AQ in Syria, freezing their assets and prohibiting Americans from financial transactions with them.

Table 28. U.S. approach to Al-Qaeda-Syria (2014)

U.S. Approach	Details
<p>Unilateral Direct Action</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The United States initiated airstrikes against AQ elements in Syria (AQS) on September 23, 2014, the same date that it initiated operations against ISIS in Syria. U.S. airstrikes are relatively infrequent compared to the larger U.S. effort against ISIS. • Initial airstrikes targeted AQS elements described by DOD as the Khorasan Group (KG), as opposed to the larger AQ-affiliate inside Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). KG included AQ operatives reportedly ordered to Syria by AQ leadership in Pakistan in order to organize attacks against western targets and to support JN.

Security Cooperation /Building Partner Capacity (Train and Equip)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. strengthens the defense capabilities of regional partners Jordan and Lebanon, against various terrorist groups inside Syria, including but not limited to AQ. • DOD activities include increasing security assistance funding, improving border security, and building partner capacity, among other activities.
Establish U.S. Posture in Theater to Support Persistent Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The US CT posture in the Middle East, primarily structured to support OIR against ISIS, indirectly supports counter AQ missions in Syria. U.S. military assets at Turkey’s Incirlik air base, for example, can support airstrikes against AQ in Syria just as they can support airstrikes against ISIS targets.
Attack the Network - Countering Foreign Fighter Flows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US counter foreign fighter (FF) flow efforts impact AQ among other terrorist groups in Syria. Key efforts include: U.S. leadership in passing UNSCR 2178 regarding counter FF cooperation in September 2014 and U.S. intelligence cooperation with international CT partners on FF.
Attack the Network -Counter Threat Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2012, the State Department designated JN a foreign terrorist organization, making it illegal for U.S. entities to conduct business with the organization.

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQS?

Al-Qaeda-Syria has neither been **defeated nor dismantled**. Al-Qaeda’s primary affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), which renamed itself Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) in July 2016 and then merged with other groups in January 2017 to form Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), has emerged in 2017 as one of the most powerful fighting forces among the Syrian opposition.

U.S. airstrikes beginning in September 2014 against the Khorasan Group, an AQ element in Syria described by the Pentagon as planning external operations against the West, correlate with an early 2015 JN strategy shift to prioritize operations in Syria over such external plotting. U.S. airstrikes likely contributed to this internally-driven strategy shift and, to be sure, may have thwarted some attacks. Yet JN’s successful rise in the intervening years indicates that U.S. airstrikes **did not disrupt** AQS’s ability to plan and execute attacks within Syria, hold Syrian territory, recruit, arm and train, communicate with AQ-core, and/or execute propaganda activities.

The above outcome is a result of two key factors:

- First, the persistence of the Syrian civil war allows for the continuation and exacerbation of conditions in which terrorist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda

thrive. The international community, including the United States, has been unable to resolve the Syrian civil war and thus mitigate the vulnerabilities in Syria's security sector that these groups exploit.

- Second, the United States has largely prioritized the campaign to defeat ISIS above other missions in Syria, effectively leaving JN relatively free to gather strength.

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQS?

Jabhat al-Nusra announced its formation in January 2012, not long after the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Since that time many of the vulnerabilities in Syria's security sector that gave rise to JN have been exacerbated, including internal conflict, partial collapse of the government, government illegitimacy, and demographic instability. The worsening of these vulnerabilities indeed correlates with JN's increasing power, but JN did not cause the exacerbation of these vulnerabilities. Rather, JN is both one of many contributing factors as well because of these vulnerabilities.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

The first major shift in the U.S. approach toward AQ in Syria involved the beginning of airstrikes against AQ operatives in September 2014. These airstrikes, however, occurred relatively infrequently compared to U.S. airstrikes against ISIS and moreover targeted a particular subset of AQ entities described by the Pentagon as the Khorasan Group, an external operations element of AQ in Syria, as opposed to JN. (Note: JN insists that there was never a separate entity called the Khorasan Group.) Accordingly, the second major shift in U.S. direct unilateral action against AQ in Syria involved President Obama's fall 2016 directive to expand counter-AQ strikes to include JN targets in order to reverse JN's momentum on the Syrian battlefield.

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Appendix I: Case Study of Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)

For the purpose of this assessment, ASG is not considered an official AQ affiliate according to the definition of ‘affiliate’ applied to groups in the rest of the report. This is because despite the strong personal relationship between ASG founder Abdurajak Janjalani and Osama Bin Laden, there was no reported formal pledge of allegiance to Al-Qaeda. There is also no indication that there was an acceptance of any formal pledge of allegiance. This does not necessarily mean that the relationship between ASG and AQ was weaker than the relationship between AQ and its formal affiliates. ASG did receive funding and training from AQ-core and maintained a relationship that was in many ways more direct than other, formal, affiliates. However, ASG functioned in many ways more independently than official affiliates, and grew alongside rather than underneath AQ-core. ASG may not have developed into a formal affiliate for several reasons. First, as ASG’s development was largely concomitant with AQ-core’s rise, the relationship between ASG and AQ-core may have been one of quasi-equals as opposed to the often subordinate relationship that arises from a formal ‘affiliate’ role. Second, it is possible that ASG and AQ-core were not sufficiently strong, competent and willing to develop an affiliate relationship at the same time in the 1990s and 2000s when many of the other affiliations were formalized.

ASG is included in this assessment despite a lack of formal affiliation for three reasons. First, ASG is a significant AQ-related group that has had a large impact in a geographic region that is not otherwise represented in this assessment. Second, the relationship between ASG and AQ represents another type of interaction outside of the affiliate framework. Though this report has scoped out the majority of AQ’s associates and adherents, ASG provides an opportunity to underscore the importance of these alternative relationship structures and demonstrate how they function. Third, counter-ASG efforts by the U.S. and Philippine governments are sufficiently unique to be featured regardless of ASG’s alternative relationship to AQ in order to accurately represent the range of CT strategies carried out by the U.S. government and its partners.

Overview

Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), established in 1990/91, is a Philippine-based fundamentalist Islamic group with ties to Al-Qaeda (AQ) and other South Asian extremist groups including Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). As of 2014 part of the group has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS). The group has been beset by divisions and fractures. Two primary sects of ASG have emerged; one the Sulu/Jolo faction is presently lead by Raduallan Sahiron, while the Basilan faction is headed by Isnilon Hapilon. Today the primary disagreement between the groups relates to whether they have pledged allegiance to ISIS. ASG's primary goal is to establish an independent Islamic state in western Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.

This section highlights ASG's historical trajectory by phase. Overall, the group's actions have been inconsistent over time, shifting in accordance with ASG's relative strength, resources and the vision of its leadership. There shifts have led to an inconsistent strategic trajectory over time. While at times the group has carried out ideologically-based operations focused on the establishment of an autonomous Muslim state in the Philippines governed according to Sharia law, it has also conducted attacks with the sole purpose of banditry and criminality. Over time, however, the group has remained fundamentally radically Islamic.

ASG is largely funded through kidnapping for ransom operations and extortion. It has also received external funding through other extremist groups, such as JI, and oversea remittances.⁹¹³ ASG operates primarily in the Philippine provinces of the Sulu Archipelago, namely Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi; and on the Zamboanga Peninsula. The group also operates in Malaysia.

Evolution

Phase zero: The emergence of ASG (1970s- onward)

The Philippines has faced socioeconomic and demographic tensions centering on secessionist movements in its southern islands for decades. These movements have been led by multiple Muslim minority insurgent movements asserting themselves

⁹¹³ U.S. Department of State, "Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *Country Reports on Terrorism 2014*, 2014, accessed 6/8/2017, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239413.htm>.

against the Catholic majority.⁹¹⁴ One significant insurgency in the 1970s was led by Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a group which demanded an independent Muslim state. From 1973 to 1978, the MNLF waged a guerrilla war with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). This dispute resulted in negotiations between the Philippine government and the MNLF in 1989 that led to the establishment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). It also led to a splintering within the movement. One splinter group formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which demanded independence for Muslim populated regions. The MILF gained strength in the 1990s and collaborated with JI, an Al-Qaeda-associated terrorist group present across Southeast Asia, prompting a military offensive by then President Joseph Estrada. A second splinter group, al Harakat al Islamiyya (the Islamic Movement), later known as ASG, was formed in 1990 or 1991.

Phase one: Ideologically driven fundamentalist group with a direct connection to Al-Qaeda Core (1989 – 1998)

ASG was founded by and named after Abdurajak Janjalani, a Filipino native from Basilan, who took the nom de guerre Abu Sayyaf, “Father of Swordsmen.”⁹¹⁵ Janjalani, who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the early 1980s, encountered Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan and participated in the foundational leadership circle of AQ core.⁹¹⁶ ASG was allegedly founded at the behest of Osama Bin Laden.⁹¹⁷ Janjalani had previously participated in the MNLF, which like ASG sought to create an independent

⁹¹⁴ Linda Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy,” *PRISM* 6, no. 3 (2016), accessed 6/7/2017, http://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_6-3/Robinson.pdf?ver=2016-12-06-101054-373.

⁹¹⁵ Counter Extremism Project, “Abu Sayyaf Group,” accessed 6/8/2017, <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/abu-sayyaf-group>.

⁹¹⁶ CENTRA Technology, Inc. “Terrorist Group Profile: Abu Sayyaf Group,” Research Paper. 1 February 2007; Billye Hutchison, “Abu Sayyaf,” the Counterproliferation Papers, Future Warfare Series No. 49, USAF Counterproliferation Center, page 3; Zachary Abuza, “Balik-Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf,” September 2005, Strategic Studies Institute, page 2.; Hutchison, “Abu Sayyaf,” page 3.; Abuza, “Balik-Terrorism,” page 2.

⁹¹⁷ Abuza, “Balik-Terrorism,” page 2.

Islamic state in the Moro.⁹¹⁸ ASG was formed partially to disrupt the on-going peace talks between the MNLF and the Philippine government.⁹¹⁹

Ties to AQ during this foundational phase were strong and direct because of Janjalani's personal relationship with Bin Laden and Bin Laden's brother-in-law, Mohammed Jamal Khalifa. ASG received both funding and training from AQ core,⁹²⁰ including financial support through Khalifa's charity that operated in the southern Philippines. ASG also received bomb making training and funds from AQ bomb maker Ramzi Yousef when he came to the Philippines in 1994, using Manila as the base for the failed Bojinka plot.

ASG's direct connection to AQ diminished after the failed Bojinka plot,⁹²¹ the 1995 arrest of Ramzi Yousef in Pakistan, the barring of Mohammed Jamal Khalifa from entering the Philippines, and (later) the 9/11 attacks and subsequent CT efforts.⁹²² Internal politics also stymied ASG's growth when MNLF agreed on a political settlement with the government in 1996. Ties with other jihadi groups continued to grow, however. In the late 1990s, JI used MILF on Mindanao for training and operational planning, bringing JI in direct contact with ASG and MILF combatants.⁹²³

During this phase, ASG had limited operation capabilities, but successfully carried out terrorist activities including ambushes, bombings, kidnappings and executions. They largely targeted Filipino Christians on Basilan and the west coast of Mindanao, and focused on recruitment from other splinter groups, including the MNLF.

ASG suffered a major setback when founder Abdurajak Janjalani was killed in 1998 by the Philippine military that has launched a CT raid on Basilan Island. Though command was transferred to Janjalani's brother Khadaffy Janjalani, and Ghalib Andang, this severed an important and direct link between ASG and AQ-core.

⁹¹⁸ "Abu Sayyaf Group."

⁹¹⁹ CENTRA Technology, Inc. "Terrorist Group Profile: Abu Sayyaf Group," Research Paper. 1 February 2007.

⁹²⁰ Rommel Banlaoi, "THE ABU SAYYAF GROUP: From Mere Banditry to Genuine Terrorism," Southeast Asian Affairs 2006, pp. 249-250.

⁹²¹ Banlaoi, "THE ABU SAYYAF GROUP," page 7-8.

⁹²² Zack Fellman, "Abu Sayyaf Group," AQAM Futures Project, Case Study Number 5, CSIS, November 2011, page 3.

⁹²³ "Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations"; also Larry Nicksch, *Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation*, Congressional Research Service, 2007, accessed 6/7/2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL31265.pdf>.

Phase two: Infighting and increased criminality (1998–2002)

After Abdurajak Janjalani's death in 1998, ASG's activity declined and its remaining operations focused on criminality over ideology. Though the group still carried out terrorist acts, they were conducted for the express purpose of meeting the group's basic financial needs, as opposed to advancing a jihadist agenda. Overall the group focused on survival.

In the late 1990s, ASG splintered into two major factions, based in Basilan and Sulu.⁹²⁴ In July 1999 the factions agreed to appoint Abdurajak's brother, Khadaffy, as emir but the group's objectives and ideology were uncertain during this time⁹²⁵ as ASG began operating as a more traditionally criminal enterprise relying on raids, theft, and kidnap for ransom.⁹²⁶ ASG also increased its kidnapping operations aimed at foreigners for the purpose of extracting ransom.⁹²⁷

The relationship between AQ and ASG was slowly strengthened in 2000-2001 after 9/11 when Khaddafy Janjalani began to reorient ASG operations, priorities and ideology toward AQ operations. After 9/11, the Philippine government received increase CT support from the U.S. The Philippine government continued to negotiate with both remnant MNLF and MILF, while ASG continued to organize against the government.⁹²⁸

Phase three: Reemergence as an ideologically-driven terrorist group (2002-2006)

Shortly after 2002, Khadaffy Janjalani consolidated his power as emir and asserted control over the varying ASG factions, clarifying the group's mission as a jihadi terrorist organization rather than a criminal organization.⁹²⁹ Janjalani refocused the group's mission on large scale terrorist attacks against high visibility Western targets

⁹²⁴ Banlaoi, "THE ABU SAYYAF GROUP," page 252.

⁹²⁵ Banlaoi, "THE ABU SAYYAF GROUP," page 252.

⁹²⁶ Zachary Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines," June 15, 2008, Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*; also Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines."

⁹²⁷ Niksch, *Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation*.

⁹²⁸ "Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations."

⁹²⁹ Hutchison, "Abu Sayyaf," page 7.

like those in Manila and Davao.⁹³⁰ ASG carried out several successful and high profile attacks during this time. For example, Janjalani successfully executed the Philippine's most deadly terrorist attack on record sinking Superferry 14 in 2004 and killing hundreds, and coordinated a series of bombings across multiple cities on Valentine's Day 2005.

Janjalani also worked to establish relations with regional AQ-affiliates like JI and deepened ASG's existing ties with the MILF. Indication of the ASG/JI relationship was evident in 2003 when two senior JI leaders (Umar Patek and Dulmatin) took refuge with ASG in the Philippines and trained ASG fighters in bomb making.^{931,932} ASG began to face increased pressure from the U.S. as a result of ASG's association the AQ-core and their tactic of kidnapping US citizens for ransom, and executing victims if demands were not met.⁹³³

Phase four: Fracture & leaderless decline (2006-2014)

In 2006 the Philippine government (along with U.S. advisors) launched Operation Ultimatum, which took a heavy toll on ASG senior leadership. Khadaffy Janjalani was killed, creating a power vacuum and plunging the group into disarray.⁹³⁴

As in the period between 1998 and 2002 ASG reverted to existing as a survivalist criminal network, falling back on kidnap for ransom and small scale attacks against local police.⁹³⁵ ASG continued to splinter along clan lines.⁹³⁶ Any remaining relationship between ASG and AQ core and affiliates in the region was largely severed after Janjalani died. Since Janjalani's death, ASG has lacked an ideological leader that has been able to unify all of the group's varied factions.⁹³⁷

⁹³⁰ Hutchison, "Abu Sayyaf," page 8; also Fellman, "Abu Sayyaf Group," page 3-4.

⁹³¹ Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines."

⁹³² Fellman, "Abu Sayyaf Group," page 3-4.

⁹³³ Lisa Robinson, Patrick B. Johnston and Gillian S. Oak, "U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014," RAND, page 12.

⁹³⁴ Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines."

⁹³⁵ Fellman, "Abu Sayyaf Group," page 3-4; also Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines."

⁹³⁶ "Abu Sayyaf Group."

⁹³⁷ "Abu Sayyaf Group."

Phase five: ASG divergence and divided loyalty (2014– Present)

In 2014, the emergence of ISIS deepened the rift between ASG factions. In the summer of 2014, the leader of ASG’s Basilan-based faction, Isnilon Hapilon, pledged allegiance to ISIS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁹³⁸ The Basilan-based faction has since executed violent attacks against civilian targets, while the Jolo faction has continued to operate more like a criminal enterprise than a terrorist group. ASG continues to fight internally about the group’s relationship with ISIS and there has been no observable resolution to the disagreement. There is no longer any traceable relationship with AQ core.

The objectives of the group today are difficult to understand because ASG is compartmentalized and amorphous; internal disagreement about the group’s relationship to ISIS complicates command and control and generates uncertainty in determining ASG’s mission. However, the US Department of State considers Hapilon the present leader of ASG and treats his pledge to ISIS as representative of the group in its entirety.⁹³⁹ In 2016, Hapilon attempted to rebrand ASG as Al-Harakatul al-Islamiyyah (Islamic Movement) to further clarify the group’s commitment to building an Islamic caliphate in the region.⁹⁴⁰

Though ASG received material support from AQ in the past, in more recent years the group has financed itself through extortion, smuggling, narcotics production and trafficking, and kidnap-for-ransom operations.⁹⁴¹ Today ASG uses the threat of indiscriminate public violence as a means to extort, intimidate, and strike against the Philippine government after the fashion of ISIS. The bulk of ASG attacks in recent years have been kidnap-for-ransom of foreign tourists and attacks against the public or security forces in the Sulu archipelago and Mindanao. ASG has also released

⁹³⁸ Counter Extremism Project, “CEP Releases Report on Abu Sayyaf Group Following Attack in South Philippines,” November 8, 2016, accessed 6/8/2017, <https://www.counterextremism.com/press/cep-releases-report-abu-sayyaf-group-following-attack-south-philippines>; also Maria A. Ressa, “Senior Abu Sayyaf leader swears oath to ISIS,” Rappler, August 04, 2014, accessed 6/8/2017, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/65199-abu-sayyaf-leader-oath-isis>.

⁹³⁹ US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism: ASG*. <https://staging-pa3.state.gov/releases/43652>.

⁹⁴⁰ Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, *Pro-Isis Groups In Mindanao and their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia*, October 25, 2016, http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2016/10/IPAC_Report_33.pdf.

⁹⁴¹ CENTRA Technology, Inc. “Terrorist Group Profile: Abu Sayyaf Group,” Research Paper. 1 February 2007.

multiple video-recorded beheadings of westerners when their ransom demands are not met.⁹⁴² Presently ASG's reach is confined to the Philippines though a relationship with ISIS may change that limitation in the coming years.⁹⁴³ Abu Sayyaf continues to work with other criminal groups around the archipelago.⁹⁴⁴

A marked increase in violence against civilians and Philippine soldiers in and around the city of Marawi⁹⁴⁵ in 2016 and 2017 led President Rodrigo Duterte to place the southern island of Mindanao under military rule in May 2017.⁹⁴⁶

Security vulnerabilities in the Philippines

Table 29 below describes vulnerabilities in the Philippines, where ASG operates.

⁹⁴² Felipe Villamor and Melissa Eddy, "Video Shows Beheading of German by Abu Sayyaf in Philippines," *The New York Times*, 2/27/17, accessed 6/12/2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/27/world/asia/jurgen-kantner-hostage-abu-sayyaf.html?_r=1&mtref=undefined.

⁹⁴³ CENTRA Technology, Inc. "Terrorist Group Profile: Abu Sayyaf Group," Research Paper. 1 February 2007; In addition to ties with Daesh, ASG is affiliated with: the Philippine Misuari Renegade/Breakaway Group (MRG/MBG), a disgruntled offshoot of the MILF, the Philippine Raja Solaiman Movement (RSM), a militant group increasingly associated with terrorism which seeks broad conversion to Islam of Philippine citizens and the transition of Philippine government to traditional Islamic government", the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Communist New People's Army (NPA), and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

⁹⁴⁴ Felipe Villamor, "Clash Between Philippine Forces and Abu Sayyaf Leaves 9 Dead," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2017, accessed 6/8/2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/11/world/asia/philippines-abu-sayyaf-isis.html?mcubz=2>.

⁹⁴⁵ Floyd Whaley, "Abu Sayyaf Militants Thriving as Hostage-Takers in Philippines," *The New York Times*, April 26, 2016, accessed 6/8/2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/27/world/asia/abu-sayyaf-philippines-kidnappings.html>.

⁹⁴⁶ Sofia Lotto Persio, "ISIS-Linked Abu Sayyaf Militants Storm Cathedral after Duterte Declares Martial Law," *Newsweek*, 5/24/17, accessed 6/7/2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/duterte-faces-hostage-situation-marawi-city-isis-linked-abu-sayyaf-militants-614454>.

Table 29. Security vulnerabilities in the Philippines

Vulnerability	Details
Internal conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The southern Philippines has a long history of conflict,⁹⁴⁷ which has included Muslim insurgent groups, communist militants, clan militias and criminal gang networks.⁹⁴⁸ • Separatist movements who use terrorist tactics have included the MNLF, MILF and ASG. These groups have had direct links to other jihadi groups including JI, Al-Qaeda and ISIS. • Much of the conflict is centered in and around the islands of Mindanao, especially on Basilan and Jolo.⁹⁴⁹ • The communist insurgency is led by the Communist Party of the Philippines' (CPP) military wing known as the New People's Army (NPA). The insurgency is one of the oldest communist insurgencies in the world.
History of violent jihadism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a long history of Muslim-Christian tension in the southern end of the Philippine archipelago. • This tension manifested in Muslim separatist movements. Some of these separatist movements (MILF, ASG) declared a jihad against the Philippine government, while others (MNLF) worked within the system to reach a negotiated settlement.
Government illegitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decades of insurgency in the Philippines has created an ongoing question of legitimacy for the government.

⁹⁴⁷ Salvatore Schiavo-Campo and Mary Judd, "The Mindanao Conflict in the Philippines: Roots, Costs, and Potential Peace Dividend," *The World Bank: Social Development Papers: Conflict Prevention & Reconstruction*, no. No. 24 (2005), accessed 6/12/2017, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTCPR/214578-1111996036679/20482477/WP24_Web.pdf.

⁹⁴⁸ BBC News, "Guide to the Philippines conflict," News: Asia, October 8, 2012, accessed 6/12/2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17038024>.

⁹⁴⁹ BBC News, "Guide to the Philippines conflict," News: Asia.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President Rodrigo Duterte’s support of extra-judicial killings and imposition of martial law in some areas has simultaneously garnered him a high approval rating for those who view him as tough on drugs, crime and terrorism, and deeply concerned human rights activists and others who condemn the Philippine’s culture of impunity.⁹⁵⁰
<p>Demographic Instabilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because the Philippines is an archipelago nation made up of over 7,000 islands, it contains a large amount of cultural and social diversity. • There is widespread poverty in much of the Philippines with vast disparities in income and quality of life across regions, though it has outpaced neighboring countries in economic growth.⁹⁵¹
<p>Security Sector Ineffectiveness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Armed Forces of the Philippines has been unable to exert force over the entire archipelago. It has been called one of Asia’s weakest militaries.⁹⁵² • The security sector faces many challenges including insurgencies, natural disasters and territorial and sovereignty disputes. • Duterte is in the midst of implementing an armed forces modernization strategy.

U.S. approach to ASG

Table 30 below describes the U.S. approach to countering ASG in the Philippines.

⁹⁵⁰ Miguel Syjuco, “This Is Why Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte Will Get Away With Murder,” Time, Aug 15, 2016, accessed 6/12/2017, <http://time.com/4453587/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-dictator-impunity-marcos/>.

See also: Phelim Kine, “Killing and Lies: Philippine President Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs’ Exposed,” Human Rights Watch, March 9, 2017, accessed 6/12/2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/09/killing-and-lies-philippine-president-dutertes-war-drugs-exposed>.

⁹⁵¹ United Nations Development Programme, “About the Philippines,” UNDP, accessed 6/12/2017, <http://www.ph.undp.org/content/philippines/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

⁹⁵² Prashanth Parameswaran, “What’s Next for Philippine Military Modernization Under Duterte?,” The Diplomat, March 17, 2017, accessed 6/12/2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/whats-next-for-philippine-military-modernization-under-duterte/>.

Table 30. U.S. approach to ASG

U.S. Approach	Details
Advise, Assist, and Accompany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior to 9/11, the Philippine government invited U.S. forces to aid in addressing the growing terror and insurgent threat in the southern islands, which had included the kidnapping of U.S. citizens. DoS/DoD supported the standup of the Light Reaction Company (LRC). Additional support in the planning stages when 9/11 occurred. • After the 9/11 attacks, ASG’s connection to JI and AQ-core provided the U.S. authorization and funding for a sustained 14-year U.S. operation to counter-ASG known as Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines.⁹⁵³ • In November 2001, the U.S. and the Philippines agreed to collaborate in the War on Terror (WOT) to bolster the Philippine security forces’ ability to counter transnational terrorism. President Bush promised \$100 million in military assistance and \$4.6 billion in economic aid. Then-president Arroyo agreed to allow the U.S. military to deploy to the Philippines to advise and assist the Philippines Armed Forces.⁹⁵⁴ During this time, the Philippines and Southeast Asia were declared the “Second Front in the War on Terror” by the U.S., who also formally declared ASG to be an Al-Qaeda affiliate in the region.⁹⁵⁵ • OEF-P epitomized a partnered, light footprint approach to CT.⁹⁵⁶ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ After an initial phase in which 1,300 U.S. forces arrived in the region, U.S. forces averaged 500-600 at any one time thereafter.⁹⁵⁷

⁹⁵³ Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy.”

⁹⁵⁴ Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy.”

⁹⁵⁵ Anthony Measures, “What is Abu Sayyaf?” *Centre on Religion and Geopolitics*. May 17, 2016. Accessed July 26, 2017. <http://www.religionandgeopolitics.org/philippines/what-abu-sayyaf>.

⁹⁵⁶ Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy.”

⁹⁵⁷ Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy.”

- U.S. military operations occur in the Philippines under a whole-of-government effort coordinated by the embassy.⁹⁵⁸
- U.S. special operations forces (SOF) were the designed and executed U.S. CT efforts carried out in the southern Philippines.⁹⁵⁹
- The CT effort in the Philippines was carried out primarily by the Philippine government, with U.S. forces in a supportive role. U.S. forces and government did not act unilaterally.
 - The OEF-P campaign contained three LOEs: (1) Training, advising, and assisting Philippine security forces (PSF), including the provision of direct support and intelligence (2) Conducting civil-military operations (CMO) (3) Conducting information operations (IO)⁹⁶⁰
- In fall 2001, U.S. SOF forces conducted an assessment in the Philippines that established an evaluation of terrain and threats. Joint Task force 510 (JTF-51) deployed in February 2002 to conduct Operation Balikatan. This operation included to CMO, IO, training, advice and assistance.
- At operational level, US SOF advised and assisted AFP to improve joint processes and integrate command and control, planning and coordination, developing plans and conducting intelligence analysis.⁹⁶¹
- Examples of U.S.-assisted operations include:
 - **Operation Liberty** – US forces provided advisory, communications, medical and ISR support, exfiltrated surrendering fighters, determined shortfalls in AFP-conducted operation. Experience used served as basis of subsequent training.
 - **The Burnham Rescue**- U.S. SOF trained but could not assist units that attempted a rescue of U.S. hostages on Basilan. One hostage was rescued (injured), two others killed.
 - **Targeting Abu Sabaya** – AFP pursuit of Abu Sabaya entailed

⁹⁵⁸ Richard Swain. *Case Study: Operation Enduring Freedom Philippines*. U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Center. October 2010. Accessed July 26, 2017. <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a532988.pdf>.

⁹⁵⁹ Robinson, “The SOF Experience in the Philippines and the Implications for Future Defense Strategy.”

⁹⁶⁰ Swain, *Case Study: Operation Enduring Freedom Philippines*.

⁹⁶¹ Linda Robinson, Patrick B. Johnston, and Gillian S. Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001–2014*, RAND Corporation, 2016, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1236/RAND_RR1236.pdf.

	<p>intelligence and combat operations by land and maritime forces, supported by JTF 510 advice, imagery intelligence (IMINT), ISR assets and other assets.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Operation Ultimatum – began August 1 2006- ended Oct 2017. A series of operations that aimed to take down the ASG network on Jolo. During this time AFP demonstrated new competence in planning and conducting large-scale operations and embraced CMO as a major element of campaign. o The Abu Solaiman Operation - successful killing of ASG leader due to effective fusion of intelligence and operations⁹⁶²
Train & Equip Partners for CT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helped train, equip and improve Philippine force.⁹⁶³ US SOF provided training, advice and assistance to conventional AFP units. Later, US SOF provided training, advice and assistance to the Philippine National Police (PNP) Special Action Forces (SAF), the Light Reaction Regiment (LRR) and other SOF.⁹⁶⁴ • Training was provided to and for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ground combat • Air crews • Naval sources • Police special action forces • Philippines special operations units • Light infantry skills and self-assessment • US obligated \$10.5m (2001), \$56m (2002) in military assistance. Military assistance never obligated less than \$34m after this.⁹⁶⁵
Security Sector Reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. conducted activities in support of institutional development of the PSF including training and reform to operational planning and advice, CMO, IO, Intelligence support operations, ISR • At the institutional level, the U.S. provided development of Philippine SOF – created training cadre, schoolhouse, selection criteria, course, doctrine and non-commissioned officer (NCO) academy. Later helped with creation of CMO capability.⁹⁶⁶
Civilian Military Operations (CMO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CMO was a key component of OEF-P and was conducted alongside IO to enable combat operations
Messaging/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. IO was conducted in conjunction with Philippine forces to

⁹⁶² Linda Robinson, Patrick B. Johnston, and Gillian S. Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*, RAND Corporation, 2016, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1236/RAND_RR1236.pdf.

⁹⁶³ *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines.*

⁹⁶⁴ *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines.*

⁹⁶⁵ *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines.*

⁹⁶⁶ *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines.*

counter-messaging (countering violent extremism)	increase populations support for Philippine government and reduce safe-havens for ASG. ⁹⁶⁷
Intelligence and Information Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligence gathering and sharing was a principle activity in the U.S.-Philippine relationship
Established U.S. posture in theater to support persistent CT operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was an extended U.S. presence in the Philippines during this time in support of CT training and operations.
Support Host Nation Ability to Own the Battlespace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In October 2003, the U.S. designated the Philippines a Major Non-NATO Ally. • The U.S. intervention was designed and conducted to increase the legitimacy of the Philippine government by supporting their armed forces ability to counter the terror threat and interact positively with civilians through civil affairs and CMO.⁹⁶⁸ • All operations were conducted “by, with and through” host nation forces

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt ASG?

The U.S. played a supportive role in helping the Philippine armed forces **disrupt and dismantle** ASG from 2000-2014.⁹⁶⁹ By 2014, the Philippine armed forces successfully diminished the risk posed by ASG by targeting key leaders, weakening ASG’s network, reducing their ability to recruit from the local population, and honing their own effectiveness in operations by receiving training, funds, advice and assistance

⁹⁶⁷ U.S. *Special Operations Forces in the Philippines*.

⁹⁶⁸ Swain, *Case Study: Operation Enduring Freedom Philippines*.

⁹⁶⁹ This analysis should be viewed through the lens that the relationship between ASG and AQ was not determined to be sufficiently intertwined to merit the title of “affiliate.” As such, successful counter-AQ and counter-ASG operations may not be linked in the same way as other examples in this report.

from U.S. SOF.⁹⁷⁰ Success can be contributed to the manner by which U.S. support was provided (by, with and through), and the sustained time-span in which the support was provided (over 14 years).

From 2001-2014, U.S. SOF activities in the Philippines correlates with changes in threat level, threat conditions, a population that overwhelmingly and increasingly rejected the terrorist group and supported the government. U.S. SOF activities in the Philippines also correlate to increased Philippine capability to successfully carry out operations.

These actions led to:

- Reduction in enemy-initiated attacks
 - Attacks declined 56% between 2000-2012
- Decreased numbers of ASG militants
 - ASG-armed militants declined from 1270 to 437 (other estimates 2200 to 400)
- Polls showing reduced support for ASG and increased satisfaction with PSF⁹⁷¹

It is inconclusive as to whether these results are lasting as ASG has regained strength and influence in the southern Philippines in the years after the majority of U.S. SOF departed. ASG continues to carry out attacks on Philippine armed forces, civilians and foreigners. ASG's resurgence is also linked to an ASG-faction's affiliation to ISIS.

Though ASG was never defeated, there is limited evidence that ASG is still aligned in any meaningful way with AQ-core or affiliates. ASG as a group, however, has grown in strength after it factionalized into ISIS-aligned and non-ISIS aligned splinter groups.

A positive by-product of U.S. counter ASG activities was the increased bilateral relations and mil-to-mil engagement between the U.S. and Philippine for a sustained period of time. The relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines shifted with the election of President Rodrigo Duterte, who has voiced distrust of the U.S. presence in the Philippines. Though Duterte since ordered U.S. forces to leave the southern Philippines, this order has not been carried out. U.S. forces continue to operate in Mindanao and Duterte's directives have not been reflected in any action or requests

⁹⁷⁰ Nicksch, *Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-U.S. Anti-Terrorism Cooperation*.

⁹⁷¹ Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*.

by the Philippines military.⁹⁷² Philippine and U.S. forces continue to train together as of May 2017.⁹⁷³

Gaps remain in the Philippine armed forces capability and capacity despite years of training and assistance, and U.S. SOF did not have the remit or capacity to address underlying drivers of conflict such as crime and poverty⁹⁷⁴. Challenges during the time of U.S. SOF engagement included the 'balloon effect' where high value individuals and associated networks would move from one island to another.

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of ASG?

The vulnerabilities that exist in the Philippines pre-dated ASG.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

The overall U.S. approach in the Philippines was consistently 'by, with and through' where respecting Philippine authority to lead led to a prolonged commitment of sustained advisory role for U.S. The U.S. did not conduct any unilateral engagements.

U.S. SOF supported Philippine armed forces in undertaking a population-centric approach to CT including targeted CMO, information gathering and IO. Over time U.S. SOF focused its training and assistance on institution building (as opposed to tactical and operational training) in order to ensure embedded and lasting institutional learning. US SOF placed an emphasis on assessments and subsequent adaptations to the plans.

⁹⁷² Tara Copp, "PACOM chief sees no changes in US-Philippines military relationship," Stars and Stripes, November 15, 2016, accessed June 8, 2017, <https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/pacom-chief-sees-no-changes-in-us-philippines-military-relationship-1.439469#.WTbybevyu00>.

⁹⁷³ Staff Sgt. Christopher McCullough, "Philippine, US Troops Train Together to Provide Relief from the Sea to Remote Areas," U.S. Pacific Command, May 18, 2017, accessed June 7, 2017, <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1186580/philippine-us-troops-train-together-to-provide-relief-from-the-sea-to-remote-ar/>.

⁹⁷⁴Robinson, Johnston, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001-2014*.

Appendix J: Assessment Data

For each of the case studies of Al-Qaeda affiliates, we created a table that compares the U.S. government approach in each case to the challenges that Al-Qaeda posed and the security vulnerabilities that were present in each location. These tables enabled us to conduct a qualitative cross-comparative assessment of how aligned the U.S. approaches were to these underlying issues, as well as to identify which approaches were most and least effective. The following tables present the raw assessment data assembled by the study team. For ease of viewing the data is broken down into two tables. The first assesses the effect U.S. approaches had/have on the vulnerabilities in the affected country for each Al-Qaeda affiliate. The second table assesses the effect those same U.S. approaches had/have on each Al-Qaeda affiliate's approach.

In the tables, "direct" means the U.S. approach directly addresses the vulnerability or the Al-Qaeda approach in a positive way. "Indirect" means the U.S. approach indirectly addresses the vulnerability or the Al-Qaeda approach in a positive way. "Potentially CP" means that the U.S. approach is potentially counter-productive in attempting to address the vulnerability or Al-Qaeda approach. A grayed-out cell means the U.S. approach has no discernable effect on the vulnerability or Al-Qaeda approach. Finally, a blacked out cell means the vulnerability or Al-Qaeda approach does not apply for the specific Al-Qaeda affiliate or the country in which it operates.

Table 31. U.S. Government approaches' effects on vulnerabilities in the security sector

AQ Affiliates	U.S. Approach	Vulnerabilities in the Security Sector						
		Internal Conflict	History of Violent Jihadism	Partial/Collapse of Government	Government Illegitimacy	Demographic Instabilities	Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Neighbor in Crisis
AQAP (Yemen) 2017	Unilateral Direct Action	Potentially CP			Potentially CP			
	Advise, Assist, Accompany CT Action (primarily with third parties)	Potentially CP			Potentially CP		DIRECT	
	Train & Equip Partner for CT	Potentially CP			Potentially CP		DIRECT	
	Work with 3rd Party	Potentially CP		Potentially CP	Potentially CP		DIRECT	
	Security Sector Reform			INDIRECT	DIRECT		DIRECT	
	Civilian Military Operations	INDIRECT					INDIRECT	
	Messaging/Counter-messaging	INDIRECT	INDIRECT		INDIRECT	INDIRECT	INDIRECT	
	Intelligence and Information-Sharing						DIRECT	
AQAP (Yemen)	Unilateral Direct Action	Potentially CP			Potentially CP			
	Train & Equip Partner for CT	Potentially CP			INDIRECT		DIRECT	

AQ Affiliates	U.S. Approach	Vulnerabilities in the Security Sector						
		Internal Conflict	History of Violent Jihadism	Partial/Collapse of Government	Government Illegitimacy	Demographic Instabilities	Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Neighbor in Crisis
	Civil Military Operations	INDIRECT			INDIRECT			
AQIM (Mali) 2010-2012	Train & Equip Partner for CT	INDIRECT			INDIRECT	INDIRECT	DIRECT	
	Civil Military Operations	INDIRECT			DIRECT		INDIRECT	
	Messaging/Counter-Messaging	INDIRECT	INDIRECT		INDIRECT	INDIRECT	INDIRECT	
	Support Host Nation	INDIRECT	INDIRECT		DIRECT	INDIRECT	INDIRECT	
AQIM (Mali) 2017	Train & Equip Partner for CT	INDIRECT		INDIRECT			DIRECT	
	Partner with 3rd Party	INDIRECT		INDIRECT			DIRECT	
	Security Sector Reform	INDIRECT		DIRECT		INDIRECT	DIRECT	
	Civil Military Operations	INDIRECT		INDIRECT		INDIRECT	INDIRECT	
	Messaging/Counter-messaging	INDIRECT	INDIRECT	INDIRECT		INDIRECT		
AQIS 2017	Unilateral Direct Action (PAK, AFG)	Potentially CP	Potentially CP		Potentially CP			Potentially CP
	Advise, Assist, Accompany CT Action (in Afghanistan)	DIRECT	Potentially CP		DIRECT		INDIRECT	

AQ Affiliates	U.S. Approach	Vulnerabilities in the Security Sector						
		Internal Conflict	History of Violent Jihadism	Partial/Collapse of Government	Government Illegitimacy	Demographic Instabilities	Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Neighbor in Crisis
	Intelligence and Information-Sharing (with at least Bangladesh)						DIRECT	
	Train & Equip Partner for CT (focused on Bangladesh)				DIRECT		DIRECT	
	Established US Posture (in AFG)	Potentially CP	Potentially CP		Potentially CP			
AQI (Iraq) 2004-2006	Unilateral Direct Action	Potentially CP			Potentially CP	Potentially CP		
	Advise, Assist, Accompany CT Action	Potentially CP			Potentially CP	Potentially CP	DIRECT	
	Train & Equip Partner for CT	DIRECT			INDIRECT	Potentially CP	DIRECT	
	Security Sector Reform	Potentially CP			Potentially CP	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	
	Civil Military Operations	INDIRECT			DIRECT	Potentially CP	INDIRECT	
	Messaging/Counter-messaging	INDIRECT			INDIRECT	INDIRECT	INDIRECT	
	Established US Posture	Potentially CP			Potentially CP	Potentially CP	DIRECT	
	Support Host Nation	INDIRECT			DIRECT	INDIRECT	INDIRECT	

AQ Affiliates	U.S. Approach	Vulnerabilities in the Security Sector						
		Internal Conflict	History of Violent Jihadism	Partial/Collapse of Government	Government Illegitimacy	Demographic Instabilities	Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Neighbor in Crisis
al-Shebab (Somalia) 2017	Unilateral Direct Action	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	Potentially CP			
	Advise, Assist, Accompany CT Action	INDIRECT			Potentially CP		DIRECT	
	Train & Equip Partner for CT	INDIRECT			Potentially CP		DIRECT	
	Work with 3rd Party (AMISOM)	Potentially CP		Potentially CP	Potentially CP			
	Security Sector Reform	DIRECT		INDIRECT	DIRECT		DIRECT	
	Civilian Military Operations	DIRECT			INDIRECT	INDIRECT	INDIRECT	
	Messaging/Counter-messaging	INDIRECT	DIRECT		INDIRECT			
	Intelligence and Information-Sharing	INDIRECT			INDIRECT		DIRECT	
	Established US posture in theater to support persistent CT operations	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	Potentially CP		INDIRECT	
	Support Host Nation Ability to Own the Battlespace	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	INDIRECT	DIRECT		DIRECT	

AQ Affiliates	U.S. Approach	Vulnerabilities in the Security Sector						
		Internal Conflict	History of Violent Jihadism	Partial/Collapse of Government	Government Illegitimacy	Demographic Instabilities	Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Neighbor in Crisis
al-Shebab (Somalia) 2010-2011	Unilateral Direct Action	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	Potentially CP			
	Advise, Assist, Accompany CT Action	INDIRECT		INDIRECT	INDIRECT		DIRECT	
	Train & Equip Partner for CT	INDIRECT		INDIRECT	INDIRECT		DIRECT	
	Work with 3rd Party (AMISOM)	DIRECT	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	Potentially CP		INDIRECT	
	Security Sector Reform	DIRECT		INDIRECT	DIRECT		DIRECT	
	Civilian Military Operations	DIRECT	INDIRECT				INDIRECT	
	Messaging/Counter-messaging	INDIRECT	DIRECT		INDIRECT		INDIRECT	
	Intelligence and Information-Sharing	INDIRECT			INDIRECT		INDIRECT	
	Established US posture in theater to support persistent CT operations	DIRECT	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	Potentially CP		DIRECT	
Support Host Nation Ability to Own the Battlespace	DIRECT		INDIRECT	DIRECT		DIRECT		
Al-Qaeda Syria	Unilateral Direct Action	Potentially CP		INDIRECT		INDIRECT		
	Train & Equip Partner for CT							

AQ Affiliates	U.S. Approach	Vulnerabilities in the Security Sector						
		Internal Conflict	History of Violent Jihadism	Partial/Collapse of Government	Government Illegitimacy	Demographic Instabilities	Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Neighbor in Crisis
	Established US Posture in Theater to Support Persistent US Operations			INDIRECT		INDIRECT		
	Countering Foreign Fighter Flows	INDIRECT		INDIRECT		INDIRECT		
Al-Qaeda Syria 2017	Unilateral Direct Action	Potentially CP		INDIRECT		INDIRECT		
	Train & Equip Partner for CT							
	Messaging/Counter-messaging							
	Established US Posture in Theater to Support Persistent US Operations			INDIRECT		INDIRECT		
	Counter Threat Finance							
	Countering Foreign Fighter Flows	INDIRECT		INDIRECT		INDIRECT		
Al-Qaeda Core	Unilateral Direct Action	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	DIRECT (because we wanted the Taliban government removed)	DIRECT (because we wanted the Taliban government removed)			

AQ Affiliates	U.S. Approach	Vulnerabilities in the Security Sector						
		Internal Conflict	History of Violent Jihadism	Partial/Collapse of Government	Government Illegitimacy	Demographic Instabilities	Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Neighbor in Crisis
	Work with 3rd Party (Northern Alliance/Tribal Elements)	Potentially CP	Potentially CP	DIRECT (because we wanted the Taliban government removed)	DIRECT (because we wanted the Taliban government removed)			
	Intelligence and Information-Sharing							
	Civilian Military Operations	DIRECT		DIRECT	DIRECT	INDIRECT	DIRECT	
Al-Qaeda Core (AFG) 2009-2017	Unilateral Direct Action	Potentially CP	Potentially CP		Potentially CP		Potentially CP	
	Advise, Assist, Accompany CT Action	Potentially CP					INDIRECT	
	Train & Equip Partner for CT	Potentially CP			INDIRECT		DIRECT	
	Security Sector Reform	DIRECT	INDIRECT		DIRECT		DIRECT	
	Established US Posture	Potentially CP	Potentially CP		Potentially CP			
	Support Host Nation Ability to Own the Battlespace	DIRECT			DIRECT		DIRECT	
	Counter Threat Financing							

AQ Affiliates	U.S. Approach	Vulnerabilities in the Security Sector						
		Internal Conflict	History of Violent Jihadism	Partial/Collapse of Government	Government Illegitimacy	Demographic Instabilities	Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Neighbor in Crisis
Abu Sayyaf Group	Advise, Assist, & Accompany CT Action	INDIRECT	Potentially CP		INDIRECT		DIRECT	
	Train & Equip Partner for CT	INDIRECT	Potentially CP		INDIRECT		DIRECT	
	Security Sector Reform	DIRECT			DIRECT		DIRECT	
	Civilian Military Operations (CMO)	INDIRECT			DIRECT	DIRECT	INDIRECT	
	Messaging/counter-messaging (countering violent extremism)	INDIRECT	Potentially CP		INDIRECT			
	Intelligence and Information Sharing				INDIRECT		DIRECT	
	Established US posture in theater to support persistent CT operations	DIRECT	Potentially CP		Potentially CP		Potentially CP	
	Support Host Nation Ability to Own the Battlespace	INDIRECT			Potentially CP		DIRECT	

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