

Getting It Right

US NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY
AND AL QAEDA SINCE 2011



BY MARY HABECK



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current national security policy is failing to stop the advancement of al Qaeda and its affiliates throughout the Muslim-majority world. While there are many reasons for this failure, three key issues stand out: a poor definition of the enemy, an incorrect view of its objectives, and the adoption of a strategy that will not defeat the latest evolution of this adaptive organization. If the US understood al Qaeda as it is: the leadership and field army of an insurgency with worldwide linkages that hopes to impose its extremist version of *shari'a*, govern territory, and overthrow the leaders of every Muslim-majority country, the current national strategy for combating al Qaeda would not be confined to counterterrorism and attrition, but would instead make counterinsurgency—without large numbers of American ground forces—its main technique for confronting and defeating the organization.

The current official definition of al Qaeda is particularly troubling, since this frames the entire problem for the US government. By choosing to understand al Qaeda narrowly as the terrorist group that carried out the 9/11 attacks, the government has decided on an overly legalistic assessment of a far greater problem. It is also troubling that a very careful reading of official statements and published documents is necessary to find this definition, perhaps because if it were more widely known there would be strenuous objections to it. The Obama administration also ignores al Qaeda's own stated objectives—to impose its extremist version of *shari'a* and govern territory—to focus solely on its clear desire to attack the United States. By doing so, we are missing the explanation for the vast majority of al

Qaeda's activity around the globe, including its efforts to control territory in places like Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and Mali.

The misreading of the enemy and his objectives has led to the adoption of a strategy, centered on counterterrorism, that cannot defeat al Qaeda. The set of techniques known as counterterrorism is ultimately based on attrition—that is, killing or capturing the members of the terrorist group. Counterterrorism and attrition work best against small groups that are incapable of mass recruitment and therefore cannot replace themselves, are unable to hold territory, and lack the capacity to set up shadow governance. None of this is true of al Qaeda today. Given the resurgence of al Qaeda since 2011, one would expect a serious rethinking of US national strategy to combat the group, but so far this has not happened.

Any strategy that would seek to combat the new al Qaeda must begin with a reassessment of the enemy and its objectives and choose a set of techniques that matches this reassessment. A better definition of the enemy would take into consideration its ideology, stated objectives, and military-political strategy and would take seriously the challenge of those affiliated organizations that seek to consciously and continuously implement al Qaeda's vision in the world. The strategy that would flow from this redefinition would almost certainly include some version of counterinsurgency as well as counterterrorism, both of which would work with and through partners, rather than through American boots on the ground, to implement a coherent and global policy to defeat this growing threat.

GETTING IT RIGHT:

US NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY AND AL QAEDA SINCE 2011

The death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 was supposed to end the threat from al Qaeda, making the United States and the world safer as the group collapsed without its charismatic founder and leader. Yet a series of developments—including the spread of al Qaeda’s ideology and version of *shari’a*; the multiplication of extremist groups claiming affiliation with al Qaeda; the attack in Benghazi and bombing in Boston; the advance of al Qaeda in Syria, Libya, Mali, and Iraq; the string of jailbreaks carried out by al Qaeda related groups; and al Qaeda’s threats against US and European embassies across the broader Middle East—suggest that something has gone terribly wrong. Since the heady days immediately after bin Laden’s death, from Tunisia to Myanmar and from the Caucasus to Kenya, the ideals and goals of al Qaeda are gaining followers and committed warriors who are fighting insurgencies in battlefields both old (Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan) and new (Mali, the Sinai, Syria, and Myanmar).

Explaining the resurgence of al Qaeda has been difficult for President Barack Obama’s administration, which has steadfastly maintained since May 2011 that the group is “on the run” and near strategic defeat. In his 2014 State of the Union address, President Obama defended this position, asserting that al Qaeda’s “core leadership” was on a pathway to defeat.¹ He was even clearer in a press conference on August 9, 2013, arguing that al Qaeda’s core was “decimated,” “broken apart,” and “very weak” and that it “does not have a lot of operational capacity.”² Left unaddressed in the State of the Union as well as that press conference was a response to the spreading insurgencies, mounting terrorist activity, and surge in death and destruction across the globe for which al Qaeda has claimed responsibility.

From public statements and a close study of the growth and spread of al Qaeda, it is clear that two issues are preventing the United States from developing an effective response to the organization’s resurgence. Of first importance is the conceptualization of the enemy that dominates both within and outside government,

and second is the lack of a global strategy once the size of the problem becomes clear.

Since 9/11, both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations have struggled to define what precisely al Qaeda is. At various times it has been described as an ideology, a network, a “group of guys,” a terrorist threat, an insurgency threat, a global jihadist threat, and a set of three problems—each requiring distinct strategies. This last definition, which I will dissect in greater detail, is the one the government accepts today. An understanding of al Qaeda that is more in line with the group’s own self-definition, together with an analysis of the actions taken by al Qaeda, shows that this framing of the organization does not match reality.

Defining the enemy as it is now, rather than as it was 10 years ago, suggests that the actual problems the world faces from al Qaeda are far greater than the Obama administration has acknowledged and that they will likewise require a far more demanding strategy to address them. While it would be beyond the scope of this paper to present a fully elaborated plan to combat al Qaeda, I will conclude with a few suggestions to guide the creation and implementation of a strategy that at least matches the scale of the threat that the world must confront and defeat.

The Evolution of al Qaeda and the Current Situation

Understanding the full extent of the problem that the United States—and the world—is facing from al Qaeda requires a look at how the threat from the group has evolved since 9/11, and especially since bin Laden was killed in May 2011. Of first importance is the fact that bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri never envisaged their organization as a terrorist group but always intended to use terror for specific ends while creating the conditions necessary for a global insurgency that they hoped to control.³ Even in the 1990s, the vast majority of the group’s money, time, and membership

was spent on training fighters for the coming war with the rest of the world, while only a tiny percentage of bin Laden's efforts was dedicated to attacking the US.⁴

As difficult as it can be for Americans to acknowledge, 9/11 was not about us: it was about creating the conditions for the further evolution of al Qaeda's war with the entire world. The story of al Qaeda from 9/11 to the present has, in many ways, been one of an organization attempting to move up the Maoist spectrum of warfare from terror attacks to insurgency to regular warfare.

Here, we must stop and address a common misunderstanding of al Qaeda that has had a profound and pernicious effect on American policy: the belief that al Qaeda wants to attack only the "far enemy" (the US and Israel) and not the "near enemy" (the rulers of every Muslim-majority country in the world). This is a misreading of al Qaeda's strategy, which was, from at least 1994, predicated on attacking America as a means to the greater end of overthrowing the "apostate" leaders of the greater Middle East.⁵

Bin Laden's original argument with other jihadist groups in the 1990s was that taking on the local rulers had consistently failed because those rulers were propped up by a puppet master, the United States. Only when the "greater unbelief [*kufi*]" had been forcibly removed from "Muslim lands" would the mujahideen have a free hand to take on and defeat their sinful leaders one by one in a prolonged military struggle.⁶ The creation of his fantasy "caliphate" would then allow the eventual conquest of the entire world.

This can be clearly seen in what the group has actually done since 9/11. While terrorist attacks and plots have been the most obvious part of the equation—and certainly have attracted the most attention from American analysts—al Qaeda has been engaged in more than terrorism.⁷ As an integral part of the Taliban, the organization was involved from the beginning in the guerrilla war against the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. In Iraq, al Qaeda saw an opportunity to advance its war from terror attacks to taking territory, as a series of statements, articles, and a short book written just after the invasion show.⁸ The actions of the al Qaeda affiliate in Iraq, including the imposition of its version of *shari'a*, establishment of governing institutions, and creation of

a "state," show that this was more than just rhetoric.

The 2006 Ethiopian intervention in Somalia created another opportunity for al Qaeda, and al Shabaab exploited it to take territory and impose its concept of governance on unwilling Somalis. Every speech bin Laden and Zawahiri gave during this period addressed the mujahideen fighting in conflicts from Chechnya to North Africa to the Philippines, encouraging them to take the war to the "apostate" enemy as well as the foreign occupiers, and the appearance of foreign fighters and nationals waging guerrilla warfare together under the banner of al Qaeda became a predictable part of these so-called local wars.

By early 2011, groups claiming some sort of attachment to al Qaeda, its ideology, and its objectives were multiplying, and many of these were engaged in insurgencies and shadow governance along with carrying out terrorist attacks. The decision by the Algerian Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC, or Groupe Salafiste Pour la Prédication et le Combat) to join with al Qaeda to form al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the swearing of fealty to al Qaeda by the group that became al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (and later the Islamic State of Iraq), and the creation of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula were just the tip of a large iceberg. Many other groups—in the Caucasus, Indonesia, Nigeria, Somalia, northern Pakistan, Central Asia, and elsewhere—exhibited other characteristics: they had some sort of relationship with the organization, espoused al Qaeda's religious current (a form of jihadi salafism), attempted to impose al Qaeda's version of *shari'a*, and said that their ultimate goal was to create a caliphate.

The Arab Spring provides the context and explanation for the next evolutionary leap of the organization. From the initial uprising in Tunisia, it was clear that the Arab Spring represented both hope and danger: the hope of a positive transformation of the Middle East and the danger that the revolutions would be co-opted by al Qaeda and other extremists, taking the countries of this already-unstable region down a darker path. Public statements by Zawahiri in early 2011 show that the leaders of al Qaeda understood the opportunities the uprisings offered.⁹

As some experts had feared, the chaos that followed the Spring allowed numerous Islamist and jihadist groups to

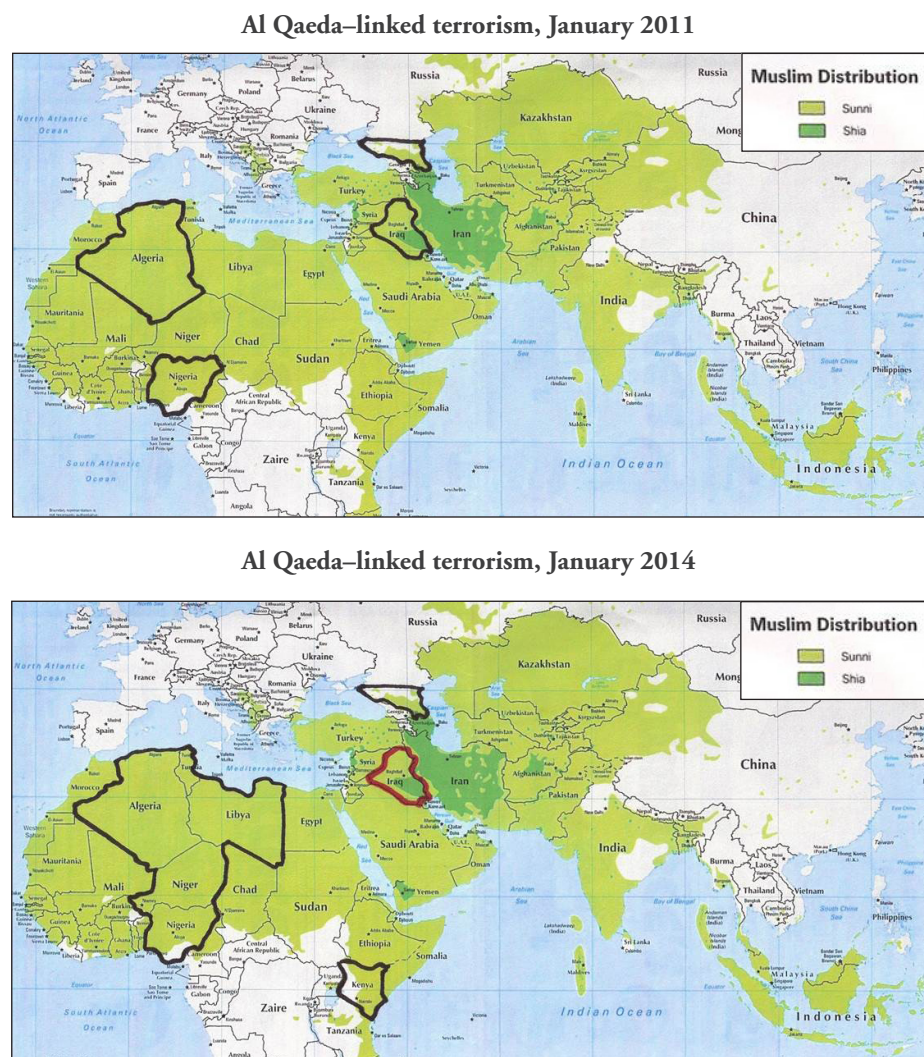
gain new followers; build better networks; and begin political, preaching (*dā'wa*), and jihadist action in fresh arenas. This foment had little to do with al Qaeda, at least at first, but the superior discipline, organization, and strategies of Zawahiri's group—as well as its sheer ruthlessness and daring—soon began to tell. By the summer of 2013, al Qaeda had co-opted local insurgencies in Mali and Syria and was well positioned to use its strengths to push the revolutions in the rest of North Africa and beyond in its direction.

A quick overview of the current situation shows a worrisome trend. Just before bin Laden's death, al Qaeda was held in check in the vast majority of the greater Middle East. Most countries faced only a minor terrorist threat from al Qaeda and affiliated groups, with perhaps a few incidents and dozens of people arrested annually.

Five countries—Iraq, Yemen, Algeria, Chechnya, and Nigeria—faced a moderate-to-severe terrorist threat, with hundreds to thousands killed each year in bombings, assassinations, and other terrorist attacks by groups linked to al Qaeda. Except for ambiguous indications in Yemen, these countries lacked the traditional signs of thriving insurgencies (control of territory, imposition of shadow governance, levying of military forces from the local population, and inability by local governments to extend their writ in affected areas). Only three nations faced open insurgencies (generally posed by multiple groups) that dominated territory and attempted to impose al Qaeda's notions of governance:

FIGURE 1

AL QAEDA–LINKED TERRORISM, JANUARY 2011 AND JANUARY 2014



Note: Black lines indicate terrorism; red lines indicate insurgency.
 Source: Map from University of Texas Libraries, modified by author.

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia. It was also unclear to observers at the time how the main insurgent groups in these arenas—the Taliban, Tehrik-e-Taliban, and al Shabaab—were connected to al Qaeda.

Today, the situation has dramatically worsened. As figure 1 shows, a number of countries that once experienced only a minor threat from al Qaeda–linked groups are now confronting a much more serious terrorism problem. In Tunisia, Libya, Niger, and Kenya, groups like al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and an affiliate of

FIGURE 2

AL QAEDA–LINKED INSURGENCIES, JANUARY 2011 AND JANUARY 2014

Al Qaeda–linked insurgencies, January 2011



Al Qaeda–linked insurgencies, January 2014



Note: Red lines indicate insurgency.

Source: Map from University of Texas Libraries, modified by author.

al Shabaab are carrying out assassinations, bombings, assaults on prisons and police, and other deadly attacks at an increasing tempo. Meanwhile, the security situations in Chechnya, Algeria, and Nigeria, despite capable counterterrorism efforts by central governments, have not improved.

Even more disturbing, the number of countries that now face an insurgency rather than a terrorism problem

has risen from three to nine, as shown in figure 2. In addition to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia, where the organizational linkages with al Qaeda are less disputed, there are now serious insurgencies in Syria, Mali, Yemen, and Iraq that have open ties with the organization and two further guerrilla wars in Myanmar and the Sinai that involve al Qaeda–linked groups.

It is also significant that several insurgencies once seen as nearly pacified—if not defeated—have reasserted themselves and are, in most cases, as potent as ever. In addition to the return of al Qaeda in Iraq, the insurgency in Afghanistan, which was partially suppressed by a poorly resourced “surge,” has swept aside most of these gains and begun to reimpose shadow governance on territory in the east and south that it held before 2010.¹⁰ The al Qaeda militants in Yemen have reappeared in areas previously freed from their influence by the central government while al Shabaab in Somalia—portrayed by many as having completely collapsed in early 2013—has retaken Somali towns as African Union Mission on Somalia

forces have withdrawn, and it is spreading its violence into Kenya.¹¹

Any objective comparison of the situation would conclude that al Qaeda has dramatically resurged in power and capabilities since 2011 and now presents an unprecedented challenge throughout the greater Middle East.

Getting It Wrong

Given this downward spiral in conditions, the most disturbing aspect of current US policy toward al Qaeda is how little it has changed over the past three years. Since the Obama administration issued its *National Strategy for Counterterrorism* in June 2011, official US government views of the enemy, policy objectives, and strategic plans have not altered, even as one country after another has been engulfed in ever-greater violence.¹² A lack of flexibility is, however, not the principal answer to what has gone wrong with US policy toward al Qaeda. A close look at the National Strategy, as well as statements by President Obama and high-ranking government officials, shows fundamental flaws are inherent in current al Qaeda policy.

What Is al Qaeda? The most significant problem with current US policy is its underlying assumptions about the enemy. Despite more than two decades of studying and analyzing al Qaeda, government policy is guided by a definition and an understanding of the organization and its objectives that are deeply flawed and prevent the US from crafting a winning strategy.

The National Strategy provides the best evidence of these problems, since it sets forth the official views on al Qaeda. The document begins with an analysis of the “threat we face,” which it calls “al Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents.” A call-out box explains that affiliates (carefully distinguished from “associated forces” in a footnote) are “groups that have aligned with al Qaeda” while adherents are “individuals who have formed collaborative relationships with, act on behalf of, or are otherwise inspired to take action in furtherance of the goals of al Qaeda.”¹³ The document also mentions “al Qaeda’s core leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan” without further explanation.¹⁴

What is missing from the National Strategy is a definition of al Qaeda itself. This is an odd lacuna and one that cannot be accidental, as multiple official pronouncements confirm. Every speech by the leading figures in the administration on al Qaeda, including those by John Brennan (director of the Central Intelligence Agency), Jeh Johnson (now the head of Homeland Security), Leon Panetta (former director of the CIA), Matthew Olsen

(director of the National Counterterrorism Center), and James Clapper (Director of National Intelligence), has failed to state clearly what the US government means by “al Qaeda.”¹⁵ Even President Obama, in his last major speech on al Qaeda at the National Defense University in May 2013, used the term “al Qaeda” repeatedly but never defined what it meant.¹⁶

There are many potential explanations for this omission, but the *least likely* is that there is no clear and accepted concept of al Qaeda within the US government. In several speeches given over the past two years, administration officials have been able to state that “al Qaeda” is nearing strategic defeat, an impossible judgment to make if the US government has no set view of al Qaeda to guide its assessment.

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From three pieces of evidence, we can divine how the administration understands the organization. First, the repeated assertions that al Qaeda is decimated and “on the run,” suggest that the current US government does not believe that “al Qaeda” includes both the leadership in Pakistan-Afghanistan and the many groups around the globe that claim a relationship with this leadership. Whatever else one might think about the insurgencies and terrorism conducted by al Qaeda-linked groups, it is unreasonable to see their growth and spread as pointing to imminent strategic defeat. Second, any definition of al Qaeda must fit with a sincere desire by the Obama administration to “return” to the rule of law and carry out the fight with al Qaeda in a “manner consistent with our laws and values” (as Johnson put it).¹⁷ Finally, the government’s understanding of al Qaeda must lend itself to using attrition as the main means to degrade and eventually destroy the group, as this is the government’s chosen strategy to take on and defeat it.

One view of al Qaeda fits these three criteria: that the group consists solely of the men who participated in the 9/11 attacks. It is telling that this is the definition

held by the September 2001 “Authorization for the Use of Military Force” (AUMF), which gave President Bush the authority to begin the war with al Qaeda in the first place and which still defines the limits of presidential authority in this fight. According to the AUMF, the president can use military force only “against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines *planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons*, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States *by such nations, organizations or persons*.”¹⁸

This legal authority, taken in its most narrow sense, prevents the president from using military action against any individuals or groups that joined al Qaeda after 9/11. For an administration committed to the rule of law and legal limitations, it also sets a boundary on the term “al Qaeda” itself.

The numerous statements by government leaders that al Qaeda is nearing strategic defeat are a direct reflection of this view of the enemy. Given the levels of violence al Qaeda has reached in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere; the numerous terrorist plots by al Qaeda that are continually disrupted throughout Europe and the greater Middle East; and the fact that al Qaeda’s leadership has been able to replace every loss the US has inflicted on it, these statements make sense only if “al Qaeda” is taken to refer solely to those men who participated in 9/11.

This original group has indeed been severely attrited in the last 12 years through the actions of the Bush and Obama administrations, as well as US partners and allies. Although their numbers have also been continually replenished and their losses replaced, if one adopts this narrow definition of the organization, then it is possible to truthfully state that “al Qaeda” is nearing defeat. But this definition does nothing to deal with the reality of al Qaeda today.

The administration has just as much difficulty defining the affiliates and their relationship to this narrowly construed “al Qaeda.” In contrast to the entire paragraph that carefully delineates adherents, the National Strategy devotes one sentence to the affiliates (“groups that have aligned with al Qaeda”), with no

explanation for what “aligned” means. Further discussion is also obscure, stating that affiliates “accept” or “aspire to advance” al Qaeda’s agenda. Even an additional footnote on affiliates defines them only as “a broader category of entities” that the US must combat without using military force (because of the AUMF).

Of the other major statements by administration officials, only Johnson’s offers any definition of different al Qaeda groups, although it is of “associated forces” and not of affiliates. Johnson’s definition also has two parts joined by “and”—any organized, armed groups that has entered the fight alongside al Qaeda *and* is a “co-belligerent with al Qaeda in hostilities against the United States or its coalition partners.” This wording is again consonant with legal rulings—which define “associated forces” but not “affiliates”—and the emphasis on willingness to attack America and its allies also sets bounds on who the US can engage in hostilities. Despite mentioning affiliates in the title of his talk, Johnson never defines the term.

What Are al Qaeda’s Objectives? On one point, however, government statements and speeches are very clear: al Qaeda is a terrorist organization whose main tactic is attacking America and killing Americans and the nation’s allies. The purpose of the attacks is to terrorize the US into leaving the world stage or to draw the US into lengthy wars of attrition. Every speech made by administration officials, including the president, emphasizes this point, and when other objectives are mentioned, they are either downplayed or denigrated. Brennan’s 2011 speech is the best expression of this attitude toward other, potentially political, objectives:

Our strategy is . . . shaped by a deeper understanding of al Qaeda’s goals, strategy, and tactics. I’m not talking about al Qaeda’s grandiose vision of global domination through a violent Islamic caliphate. That vision is absurd, and we are not going to organize our counterterrorism policies against a feckless delusion that is never going to happen. We are not going to elevate these thugs and their murderous aspirations into something larger than they are.

This understanding of al Qaeda contrasts sharply with the administration's views of the affiliates, who are said to have mostly local concerns and agendas, although some (like al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) have obviously bought into the global plans of al Qaeda (such as attacking the US). Only the National Strategy briefly mentions the fact that the affiliates further al Qaeda's regional and global agenda "by destabilizing the countries in which they train and operate." How, precisely, this would further al Qaeda's goals—as understood by the government—to terrorize the US or draw it into prolonged conflict, is not discussed.

This close reading of public statements leads to the conclusion that the Obama administration sees al Qaeda as two separate entities: a close-knit "core" focused on attacking America and consisting of those men who carried out 9/11 and a loose network of groups that are somehow affiliated with the core but pursue local interests and fight insurgencies against their local rulers. It is worth noting that left unclear in every statement and speech is the precise relationship between the two entities and the extent of coordination, command, and control between "al Qaeda" and its affiliates.

How Should the US Combat al Qaeda? If al Qaeda is a terrorist group with a set number of known members that seeks primarily to kill Americans, the proper strategy to adopt is one based on the array of techniques known as counterterrorism. Counterterrorism ends the threat from terrorist groups through attrition—killing or capturing the enemy—until the group has been so degraded that it can no longer carry out significant attacks. In general, counterterrorism depends on law enforcement agencies and methodologies as its primary means, although intelligence plays a key role and quasi-military means may have to be called on if the threat is beyond the scope of law enforcement (that is, if the terrorists are overseas or use a level of violence that law enforcement cannot match).

This is precisely the main strategy—as illustrated in public statements and actions over the past five years—that the US government is pursuing. The belief that it is possible to end the threat from al Qaeda by attriting the "core," the preference for capturing and trying al

Qaeda members as if they were criminals, and the aversion to military ways and means permeate everything the administration says and does. The adoption of counterterrorism also reinforces the pervasive language about a nearing "strategic defeat" of al Qaeda (by attriting the "core"), the decision to withdraw from Iraq, and the push to withdraw from Afghanistan, even though al Qaeda has not yet been defeated in either country. It explains the intense focus on, and unwavering support for, targeted killings—once the US military is withdrawn, this will be the only legal and, in the view of the current government, acceptable way to weaken al Qaeda.

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The administration's strategy also explains the relative disregard for events around the Muslim-majority world. Each of the major speeches and statements I have mentioned paid attention to this region, but always through the lens of counterterrorism and keeping the US safe. Here, we must again partially blame the legal effect of the AUMF, since the only reason that military force could be used against al Qaeda was in response to its participation in 9/11 and the "imminent threat of violent attack," as the Obama administration put it.¹⁹ Engaging in hostilities against other entities—like the affiliates—is not authorized. To make up for this gap, the National Strategy and almost every speech also mention the US dependence on partners to take on and defeat the affiliates across the Muslim-majority world. Since, however, these countries employ the same counterterrorism and regular warfare techniques that have so far failed to defeat al Qaeda anywhere in the world, none of the partners faced with a serious insurgency (see Somalia, Yemen, Mali) has been able to win their fights with al Qaeda.

Of course, the legal effect of the 2001 AUMF does not explain why the administration has not simply

gone to Congress to request a new AUMF to broaden the definition of al Qaeda and authorize the use of military force against the extremists threatening a good portion of the greater Middle East. Nor does it explain why the US government continues to believe that affiliates are still primarily interested in a local agenda, even as fighters from al Qaeda-linked groups show up in distant battlefields like Syria and cooperate across regions. Three convictions held by US leadership—a distaste for the use of the military, a belief that only the threat to the homeland matters, and a desire (shared by most Americans) to deescalate and bring the troops home—do.

Johnson's description of how to know it is time to end the current state of "armed conflict" shows these impulses. The speech is a staunch defense of current policy—that is, engaging in a war and utilizing military forces—but is built on an underlying desire to end military involvement and return to law enforcement means to get at the terrorists. In the administration's formulation, the tipping point will be reached after attrition has run its course and so many of the leaders and operatives of "al Qaeda" and its affiliates have been killed that the group is no longer able "to attempt or launch a strategic attack against the United States." Then, the US will be able to deescalate even further and return to the law enforcement and intelligence methods that dominated during the 1990s.²⁰ Yet even this formulation raises as many questions as it answers, since determining if a clandestine group like al Qaeda can "attempt" a strategic attack might be impossible.

What Went Wrong? Despite the US government's continued defense of its policy toward al Qaeda, the tone of public statements shows that officials realize something has gone wrong. The triumphalist speeches by Brennan in 2011 and 2012 have been replaced by the less-confident statements and press conference given by the president in the past year, as well as a recent sobering discussion by Brennan at the Council on Foreign Relations.²¹ But there has been no change in policy. If the chaotic conditions stemming from the Arab Spring and the purposeful actions of al Qaeda are primarily to blame for the spread of al Qaeda throughout the greater Middle East, some responsibility must also be attached

to the policy the administration chose and its unwillingness to change course as events have evolved.

This discussion has shown that there are, in fact, a series of serious problems within the government's strategic framework that need to be rethought. Of first importance is the definition of al Qaeda, which is based on a faulty understanding of the organization, its membership, and the relationship between the affiliates and the core. Without clarity on these, it is impossible for anyone to determine how to combat the group or when al Qaeda has been defeated.

The confusion over al Qaeda's objectives is also of serious concern. If al Qaeda's leadership is interested only in terrorism and attacking the US is its primary goal, why is it so deeply involved in insurgencies around the Muslim-majority world? And why does it spend so much time creating shadow governance and imposing its version of *shari'a* on reluctant Muslims? Finally, if al Qaeda is on the decline and US policy is succeeding, why are we losing so much ground in the Middle East to the extremists? And why are our partners in places like Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, and Libya also failing in their attempts to take on and defeat al Qaeda?

What can be stated unequivocally is that the administration's attempt to use sheer attrition to combat al Qaeda has failed: the group has, as Johnson feared in his speech, been able to recruit new fighters to the cause faster than the US can kill them off.²² So what is "plan B" to take on and defeat al Qaeda?

Getting It Right

Any attempt to find a new way to defeat al Qaeda must begin by putting the conflict into historical context to see what has failed or succeeded beyond the bounds of the current administration. A look back at the fight against al Qaeda and other extremist groups shows that the United States has followed an overall strategy of gradual escalation that makes the Obama administration's decision to deescalate all the more anomalous.

Before 1994, the US generally sought to minimize responses and avoid unnecessary loss of life from attacks by terrorist or jihadist groups, as the policies adopted after the 1982 Beirut bombing and the

1993 Mogadishu incident show. The exceptions were bombings that could be traced to a specific regime (for example, the Berlin disco bombing masterminded by Muammar Qadhafi) and an attack on the homeland (the 1993 World Trade Center bombing). The responses to these exceptions were, however, very mild. Ronald Reagan carried out a single retaliatory raid on Qadhafi, and Bill Clinton chose to use law enforcement methods to track down the perpetrators. As his administration became aware of the larger connections to al Qaeda, Clinton escalated the US response, using diplomatic and legal pressure to convince governments to give up leaders of the group.

The next stage, after the destruction of two embassies in East Africa (1998), combined this methodology with a quasi-military reaction (cruise missiles and enhanced intelligence techniques) to find and kill the perpetrators. After 9/11, the US directly inserted ground troops in limited numbers to seek and destroy al Qaeda, while working with partners around the world to round up extremists and financially choke the terrorists. The next stage added the use of significant ground forces to preempt the terrorists and create the conditions for a long-term solution to the problems of the Middle East (that is, democracy). The adoption of counterinsurgency rather than counterterrorism as the main method for combatting al Qaeda and the Taliban on the ground was a late development of this stage.

The current administration has taken a very different tack. In response to the growing power and threat of al Qaeda, it has chosen to deescalate the fight by withdrawing military forces and ending counterinsurgency attempts, instead returning to law enforcement methods, targeted killings, and enhanced intelligence techniques. This has made the US far more dependent on partners who use enemy-centric methods to provide the boots on the ground necessary to take on al Qaeda's fighters in the field. And, while these techniques have prevented any large-scale attacks on the homeland, they have not stopped al Qaeda from taking over an ever-growing expanse of territory around the world.

This short analysis shows that the US has attempted a wide variety of military, law enforcement, and intelligence techniques to stop al Qaeda. It also is a strong

argument for stopping the deescalation of the fight, since this has led directly to the resurgence of al Qaeda and the loss of ever more territory to the group. What is needed is a strategy that will put more effort into the fight, while taking into consideration the war-weariness of the American people.

To create a successful strategy for combating al Qaeda, we must have a more accurate vision of what the group is.

Defining the Enemy. To create a successful strategy for combating al Qaeda, we must have a more accurate vision of what the group is. The only way to define al Qaeda is as the group itself does: an organization committed to a specific ideology (*aqida*), jihadist methodology (*minhaj*), and version of *shari'a* created by Osama bin Laden and other leaders in 1988 and currently led by Ayman al Zawahiri. Al Qaeda is more than just the leadership around Zawahiri, however. It is also any lower commander who has sworn an oath of fealty (called *bay'a*) to this leadership, as well as all local soldiers who have sworn fealty to al Qaeda commanders. Even this definition does not get at all the potential threats to the US, since many groups have not declared a relationship with al Qaeda and yet have expressed an interest in attacking America and killing Americans.

The best way to understand al Qaeda is, therefore, as all those groups and individuals who fully accept its ideology and jihadist methodology and consciously and continuously seek to fulfill al Qaeda's main goals of overthrowing Muslim rulers around the world, imposing its extremist version of *shari'a*, setting up shadow governance, and eventually creating their caliphate. Thus, the term al Qaeda should encompass what this administration calls the "core" in Afghanistan-Pakistan (with its replacement members) as well as associated forces, affiliates, and dozens of fighting groups that have no formal affiliation to al Qaeda but are committed to its ideology, jihadist methodology, version of *shari'a*, objectives, and strategy. In some ways, one might call this the "duck" definition of al Qaeda: if it

looks like al Qaeda, talks like al Qaeda, and acts like al Qaeda, then it is al Qaeda.

This definition offers a very different view than the administration's of what is occurring in the Muslim-majority world. Rather than consisting of just a core leadership that is in decline and disarray, al Qaeda's gains in the Muslim-majority world stand out clearly, with dozens of groups following its ideology, methodology, and *shari'a* and multiple countries engulfed in insurgencies that follow al Qaeda's playbook.

Objectives. Getting the definition of al Qaeda right also helps with framing the principal objectives for a strategy. Al Qaeda and the extremist groups I have described must be decisively defeated, the territory and Muslims that they currently control must be freed from their power, and the organization's ideology and methodology so discredited that few Muslims will feel attracted to its arguments. The only workable definition of defeat is that al Qaeda is pushed back through the insurgency and terrorism spectrum until it is once again the small terrorist group that it was in 1988: incapable of holding territory or carrying out guerrilla warfare and unable to enforce its version of *shari'a* or recruit enough to replace losses. This implies defeating not just the core but also its armies in the field and making al Qaeda as a whole capable of carrying out only minor and local terrorist attacks.

In contrast to the administration's definition provided by Jeh Johnson, this view of victory has metrics attached to it that will allow us to see whether we are winning or losing. If over time al Qaeda is holding ever-greater territory and forcing more people to follow its version of *shari'a*, then we are losing, whether or not they manage to carry out an attack on the homeland.

A Plan of Action. If this argument is correct and al Qaeda is no longer just a terrorist group but also an insurgency with global connections, it follows that the right course of action to confront and defeat it is some version of counterinsurgency as well as counterterrorism. It is a false dichotomy to choose one or the other: in this fight, both will be necessary, although not in every country. The vast majority of nations are confronting a terrorism challenge and need only to engage

in counterterrorism to defeat al Qaeda. In the nine countries facing an insurgency, however, more must be done to stop and then roll back the extremists' advances.

Conceptually, a global counterinsurgency would use the same basic techniques that have been employed in local and national fights over the past century. To clear, hold, and build, while keeping in mind the primacy of a political solution, are still keys to this fight. At the same time, the usual counterinsurgency problems of space and time are more than just quantitative issues: they become qualitative challenges in a global insurgency. In addition, since counterinsurgency is never a set of rigidly defined tactics that can be mechanically transferred from one region to another without significant modification for each nation's culture and history, and for the character of the insurgency that threatens the targeted population, the need for context-dependent implementation is more urgent than ever in a global fight.

It is also obvious that the US cannot put boots on the ground in every country facing an al Qaeda insurgency. In only two wars, the continuing fight in Afghanistan and the resurging conflict in Iraq, does the US have an obligation and the legal grounding to reengage in a fully resourced counterinsurgency. In other countries, the US would need to help train and equip partners to fight a successful counterinsurgency, rather than the counterterrorism and regular fights that are now ongoing. While some might argue that a greater US presence will only inflame these conflicts and cause them to radicalize even more young men, the examples of Iraq and Syria—where despite the US having no boots on the ground, the violence has spun out of control while radicalization has proceeded apace—show that this theory is wrong.

Risks of Action and Inaction. The risks of action seem clear and overwhelming. If the US engages in an all-out war with al Qaeda and cooperating groups, it could be one of the longest and most costly endeavors—in blood and treasure—that America has ever attempted. The length of the fight, its cost, and the usual difficulties with showing clear progress will sooner or later create public and elite opposition, and politicians will be tempted to win public favor, save money, and prevent US deaths in battle by declaring victory and quitting the struggle. In particular, it seems likely that—given

our current political paralysis—the US will have difficulty getting its fiscal house in order, and leaders might believe that it cannot afford to continue the war past a certain point.

There is also no guarantee of victory even if the US dedicates itself to the fight. Insurgencies have a tendency to flare up repeatedly, even after being suppressed with all the skill at the command of the counterinsurgents. This fact might mean that the US and its partners will have to leave sizable numbers of troops on the ground throughout the world, perhaps for decades, an outcome that will have no domestic support.

The risks of inaction are even more dire. If the US decides to minimize its struggle with al Qaeda, perhaps confining policy to counterterrorism to save money and American lives, the group will take control of more territory and people and be able to create their states in areas that are already threatened. Countries that are currently facing just a terrorism threat will slip into insurgency while those facing serious insurgencies (like Syria, Somalia, and Yemen) might fall to the enemy. Even our most capable partners might find themselves overwhelmed or, at least, confronting a serious terrorism and/or insurgency threat.

As for timing: within two to three years, if the US maintains the current level of effort, it will face an

enemy that controls at least twice as much territory and population (in North Africa, Libya, the Sinai, and Syria), and with an army of regular and irregular fighters at least twice as large. Al Qaeda will reclaim Mali, Iraq, Yemen, and Somalia, and Afghanistan will once again become an al Qaeda safe haven. In another three to five years, a whole series of areas (the entire Sahel and Sahara including northern Nigeria, the Horn of Africa, Tunisia, Egypt, and eventually Pakistan) will be seriously threatened if not already overwhelmed. At some point, al Qaeda will obtain nuclear weapons, and then it will be too late to act.

Preventing this outcome will require serious and prolonged effort and is worth all of these costs and risks.

About the Author

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Notes

1. The White House, "President Barack Obama's State of the Union Address," January 28, 2014, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/28/president-barack-obamas-state-union-address.

2. "Transcript: President Obama's News Conference," NPR, August 9, 2013, www.npr.org/2013/08/09/210574114/transcript-president-obamas-news-conference.

3. As just one example of this, bin Laden reminded Mullah Omar in a letter from the 1990s that he was committed to fighting an insurgency in Tajikistan and had armed, had trained, had deployed, and was logistically resupplying forces in that country for that purpose. See Letter from Osama bin Laden to Mullah Muhammad Omar, no date, AFGP-2002-600321, www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/AFGP-2002-600321-Trans.pdf. The concept of a global jihad against all the "apostate" rulers was most clearly expressed in a sermon from 2000; see Supporters of Sharia, "Bin Laadin Speaks on Hijrah and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," *al-Jihaad Newsletter*, no. 4, June 22, 2000, www.angelfire.com/bc3/johnsonuk/eng/magazine/aj4.html#1.

4. The 9/11 Commission Report shows this. It cost bin Laden \$30 million per year to sustain al Qaeda operations before 9/11, of which \$400,000–500,000 was spent on the 9/11 attacks. See National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 2004, 169–70 and 172, www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf. Captured documents from Afghanistan also demonstrate that the most important positions in the group were dedicated to the members who ran training camps and organized regular military brigades. See "Al Qaeda: Internal Organization," no date, AFGP-2002-000080, www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/AFGP-2002-000080-Trans.pdf; and "Al Qaeda: Internal Organization," no date, AFGP-2002-000078, www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/AFGP-2002-000078-Trans.pdf [continuation of AFGP-2002-000080].

5. The shift seems to have occurred in September 1994, when bin Laden's series of letters to the Saudi ruler turned from giving advice to declaring war over the arrest of the "sincere" scholars who supported bin Laden's position. With this act, he said, "The Zionists, the Christians, and others are implementing their conspiracy against Islam and the Muslims. By going along with this plan, the Saudi regime is showing its

allegiance to the unbelievers, instead of its loyalty to the people of the faith, which is clearly a divergence from the right path." Therefore, all the Saudi leaders were infidels (and should be killed and replaced). See Committee for Advice and Reform, "Statement No. 6," September 12, 1994, AFGP-2002-003345, www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-Bin-Laden-Translation.pdf. His 1996 Declaration of Jihad then takes the logical next step: since the Saudis could do nothing but obey their masters, it only made sense to attack the "greater unbelief" (the Jews and Americans) rather than the lesser unbelief (the Saudis). After the Americans were expelled, however, it would be time for armed forces to take on the illegitimate regime and restore "the normal course." See Osama bin Muhammad bin Laden, "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," August 1996, www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military-july-dec96-fatwa_1996/.

6. See bin Laden, "Declaration of War," Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance," 735–814, <http://ia600505.us.archive.org/6/items/Dawaaah/DAWH.pdf>; and Hazim al-Madani, "This Is How We See and Want Jihad," www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=bva3ke83.

7. This is not to minimize the terrorist threat to the US and others. According to the Heritage Foundation, there have been 59 terrorist plots in the US from 2002 to 2013 that were connected to al Qaeda either operationally or through its ideology. See James Jay Carafano, Steven P. Bucci, and Jessica Zuckerman, *60 Terrorist Plots Since 9/11: Continued Lessons in Domestic Counterterrorism*, Heritage Foundation, 2013, www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/07/60-terrorist-plots-since-911-continued-lessons-in-domestic-counterterrorism. The terrorism threat in Great Britain and Europe has been even more severe, with multiple disrupted attacks that would have rivaled 9/11 in scope and casualties if they had occurred (see "Operation Crevice," the 2006 trans-Atlantic aircraft plot, and the 2010 Mumbai-style plot), as well as a few successful attacks that killed large numbers of people (the Madrid train bombings of March 2004 and the London 7-7 tube bombings).

8. See especially Osama bin Laden, "Message to Our Brothers in Iraq," February 2003, http://aburuwa.topcities.com/bin_c.htm; Abu Ayman al-Hilali, "The American Occupation and Tasks of the Stage," in *Iraq: From Occupation to Liberation. Reality of the Crisis and the Prospects for a Solution to It* (*Al-Ansar Magazine* book, no. 3), June 2003, 37–52, www.

tawhed.ws/dl?i=vg2gn0qe; and “The Iraq Jihad: Hopes and Dangers,” 2004, www.mettransparent.com/old/texts/iraq_aljihad_amal_akhtar.htm.

9. Ayman al Zawahiri, “A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt [Parts 3-12],” al-Sahab Media, 2011–2013.

10. The best source for understanding this resurgence is the *Long War Journal* at www.longwarjournal.org.

11. See, for example, “Al-Shabab Retakes Somali Town after Raskamboni Militia, KDF Pullout,” Keydmedia, November 16, 2013, www.keydmedia.net/en/news/article/al-shabab_retakes_somali_town_after_raskamboni_militia_kdf_pullout/. On claims of al Shabaab collapse, see “Al-Shabaab Defeated, Says Somali President,” Hiiraan Online, March 16, 2013, www.hiiraan.com/news4/2013/Mar/28527/al-shabaab_defeated_says_somali_president.aspx.

12. The White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, June 2011, www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf.

13. Ibid.

14. The first use of the term al Qaeda “core” seems to have been in 2005 in a monograph by Lewis A. Dunn, *Can al Qaeda Be Deterred from Using Nuclear Weapons?* (Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction Occasional Paper 3, July 2005), 6.

15. This discussion is based on the White House, “Remarks of John O. Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, on Ensuring al-Qaeda’s Demise—As Prepared for Delivery,” June 29, 2011, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/29/remarks-john-o-brennan-assistant-president-homeland-security-and-counterterrorism; John Brennan, “The Ethics and Efficacy of the President’s Counterterrorism Strategy,” (remarks, Wilson Center, Washington, DC, April 30, 2012), www.wilsoncenter.org/event/the-ethics-and-ethics-us-counterterrorism-strategy; James R. Clapper, “Unclassified Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” January 31, 2012, www.intelligence.senate.gov/120131/clapper.pdf; Jeh Johnson, “The Conflict against al Qaeda and Its Affiliates: How Will It End?” (speech, Oxford University, Oxford, UK, November 30, 2012), www.miamiherald.com/2012/12/02/3123260/the-conflict-against-al-qaeda.html; Leon Panetta, “Remarks by Secretary Panetta at King’s College London,” January 18, 2013, www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5180; and Matthew G. Olsen, “Hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs: The Homeland Threat Landscape and U.S. Response,” November 14, 2013, www.dni.gov/files/documents/2013-11-14%20SHSGAC%20HEARING%20%28M.%20OLSEN%29.pdf.

16. President Barack Obama, “The Future of Our Fight against Terrorism” (speech, National Defense University, Washington, DC, May 23, 2013), www.cfr.org/counterterrorism/president-obamas-speech-national-defense-university-future-our-fight-against-terrorism-may-2013/p30771.

17. Johnson, “The Conflict against al Qaeda and Its Affiliates: How Will It End?”

18. *Authorization for Use of Military Force* (Enrolled Bill), S.J.Res.23, 107th Cong., 1st sess. (September 14, 2001), <http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/terrorism/sjres23.enr.html>. Emphasis added.

19. Mary Grinman, “Department of Justice White Paper Reveals United States Position on Lethal Force Operations Targeting U.S. Citizens Abroad,” Jolt Digest (*Harvard Journal of Law & Technology*), February 12, 2011, <http://jolt.law.harvard.edu/digest/national-security/departments-of-justice-white-paper-reveals-united-states-position-on-lethal-force-operations-targeting-u-s-citizens-abroad>.

20. Johnson, “The Conflict against al Qaeda and Its Affiliates: How Will It End?”

21. John O. Brennan, “CIA Director Brennan Denies Hacking Allegations: A Conversation with John O. Brennan” (remarks, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC, March 11, 2014), www.cfr.org/intelligence/cia-director-brennan-denies-hacking-allegations/p32563.

22. Johnson, “The Conflict against al Qaeda and Its Affiliates: How Will It End?”