

AL QAEDA'S OPERATING ENVIRONMENTS

A NEW APPROACH TO
THE WAR ON TERROR

CHARLIE SZROM
CHRIS HARNISCH

MARCH 2011

A REPORT BY THE CRITICAL THREATS PROJECT
OF THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE



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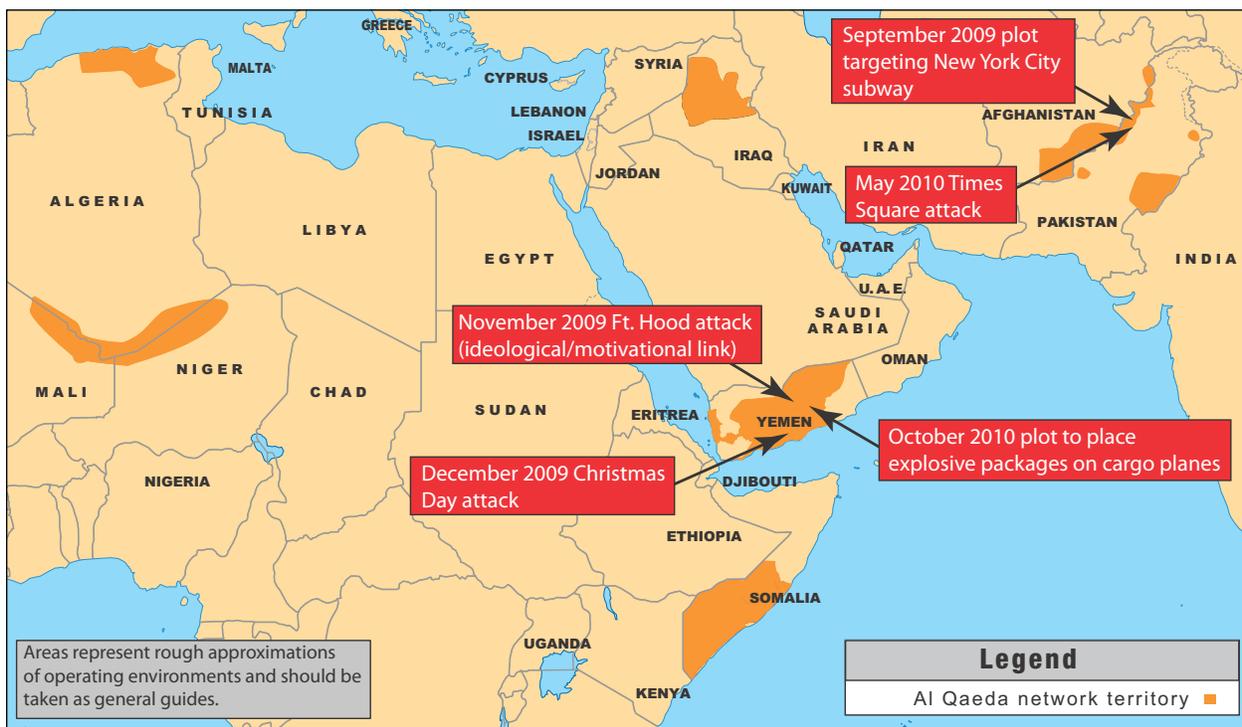
Summary and Key Findings

The environment in which an al Qaeda affiliate operates is one of the most important factors in assessing the threat it poses to US interests. Defeating the militant Islamist network led by al Qaeda requires a nuanced strategy that supports the appropriate combination and prioritization of policies and approaches for each environment in which an al Qaeda affiliate or franchise operates. The US government has not articulated such a strategy, a deficiency that acquires urgency because terrorist groups based abroad have been linked to three attacks against the American homeland in the past year. Building a strategy to oppose the al Qaeda network requires detailed understanding of its different operating environments, the ties between its various parts, and how territory affects its vitality. A comprehensive strategy should deny the al Qaeda network access to operating environments from which it can pose a major threat to the United States and the West.

Key Findings

- The US government should reassess its policies and strategy in the war on terror. Terrorist groups abroad have lent support to attempted attacks on the American homeland three times in the past year and a half. The Obama administration has not yet conducted a significant, systematic review of its approach to this threat.
- Territory matters to al Qaeda, notwithstanding the arguments of some counterterrorism experts to the contrary. Understanding the importance of territory to the al Qaeda network and the precise nature of its various operating environments could lay the foundation for a detailed strategy, help educate Americans about the war on terror, and inform a reexamination of US policy in the war on terror.
- The environment in which an al Qaeda affiliate operates determines the group's strength, capabilities, and character more than any other single factor. Denying al Qaeda and its affiliates access to environments propitious to their operations can significantly reduce the terror threat to the United States.
- The United States need not invade and occupy every al Qaeda operating zone. Instead, the only likely path to success depends on a nuanced but systematic approach to this challenge that makes appropriate use of all military, diplomatic, foreign assistance, foreign internal defense, and other tools.
- The environments in which the al Qaeda network operates can be divided into three general categories: quasi state, limited safe haven, and distressed zone. Groups operating out of Islamist quasi states tend to be the most dangerous over the long term because the security such groups enjoy facilitates efforts to protect their organizations, plan, train, and produce more effective attacks over time. Groups in any of the environments, however, are capable of launching individual successful mass-casualty attacks.
- Territory suitable for the establishment of al Qaeda sanctuaries and for the future expansion of the al Qaeda network is much more limited than generally recognized in public debates. Al Qaeda has very specific requirements for safe havens and sanctuaries, and the network already has a strong presence in most of the areas that meet those requirements. Thus, should the network be

WHERE WERE ATTACKS ON THE US HOMELAND PREPARED?



SOURCE: Compiled from news reports in Pakistan by the authors and the Critical Threats Project team.

defeated in one sanctuary, it will have difficulty moving rapidly to a new area in which it is not already established.

- The United States and its allies can defeat the al Qaeda network. Doing so will take years of work and many resources. But if policymakers and the

American public understand the central importance of territory to al Qaeda, successfully develop policies and strategies that fit each particular enemy operating environment, avoid the errors in past efforts to construct strategy, and maintain pressure over time to roll back the al Qaeda network's presence worldwide, success in this effort is attainable.

Introduction

In the nine years since September 11, 2001, the United States has fought a war against the network of militant Islamist groups led by al Qaeda, hereafter referred to as the al Qaeda network (AQN). The enemy wears no uniform and belongs to no recognized state, creating instead its own system of quasi states, emirates, and affiliates. AQN operates from locations around the world, sometimes surreptitiously and sometimes with the support or acquiescence of foreign governments. It aims to conduct terror attacks on American interests, including on US territory, to advance a militant Islamist agenda. Confusion as to the nature of the enemy and the best ways to combat the AQN has hindered the US approach to the conflict. Attempted terrorist attacks on the United States have made successfully developing a holistic, nuanced strategy to address it an urgent priority.

The US government has not articulated a strategy that coordinates its various antiterrorist policies and prioritizes which approaches—that is, which country-specific strategies and customized sets of tactics—should be used against particular al Qaeda affiliates or associates. Attempts have been made within government and the military to construct an overall strategy, but these efforts have not been successful. The strategy will require varied approaches because groups that make up the AQN differ by locale in objectives, organization, and tactics. Some groups work toward a shared goal of destabilizing the international order. Others work primarily toward local goals, but their participation in the network and the disruptive effect created by their work locally contribute to the overall goal of destabilizing international order. Operational connections between many of these groups further tie the network together.

A successful strategy for winning this war must recognize both the importance of territory to the

AQN and the connections and distinctions among different franchises and affiliates of the network. It must use an appropriate combination of policy tools to combat these franchises and affiliates. Choosing the correct mix requires an understanding of the different environments in which al Qaeda-linked groups operate. This strategy must also clearly articulate how to leverage success in one geographic zone to weaken the enemy elsewhere and how to contribute to the overall goal of defeating the entire network.

The Obama administration's 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) identifies the enemy as "al-Qa'ida and its affiliates."¹ This network consists of a core group of leaders, largely residing in Pakistan, including Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, and a modest support staff.² The core al Qaeda group, commonly known as al Qaeda Central, has officially recognized three franchises: al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) based in Yemen, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) based in West Africa, and al Qaeda in Iraq, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq. Other groups lack official franchise status but are prominent within the network. Both Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who formerly led the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and to whom bin Laden pledged fidelity, and Doku Umarov, who leads the Russia-based Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus, have received the title *emir al mumineen*, or "Commander of the Faithful," in al Qaeda communiqués. Al Qaeda Central endowed Mullah Omar and Umarov with the title—which gives the leaders a stake in the network—because of the importance al Qaeda places on the geographic spaces they contest, even though neither group is formally an al Qaeda franchise. A third part of the network consists of groups, including al Shabaab in Somalia and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in Pakistan, that maintain al Qaeda links or have

pledged fealty to al Qaeda but do not use or have not been granted the privilege to use the al Qaeda name. Some of the groups in this third tier have capabilities similar to those of al Qaeda franchises and are likely striving to receive greater attention within the AQN, a goal which may include using the al Qaeda name—an important brand that can facilitate fundraising and recruiting throughout the Muslim world.³

The United States has developed a general set of policies to combat these franchises and affiliates and a number of ad hoc strategies to address some (but not all) of the most important AQN units. While these individual policies may accomplish the short-term goal of hindering a potential attack or disrupting a group's operations, such policies are unlikely to contribute sufficiently to the overall objective of defeating the AQN in the long term without a more holistic, synthetic, and nuanced overarching strategy. Since "defeat" has become a controversial term in this struggle, for the purposes of this report, it is defined as creating conditions in which no AQN unit can operate unmolested from a swath of territory, and in which attempted attacks against US territory are extremely rare and ineffective.

The United States has fought this war primarily through counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan and through counterterrorism (direct action) operations targeting key al Qaeda leaders, operators, facilitators, and financiers. Such measures include, for example, drone strikes in Pakistan and direct action operations in Yemen and Africa. The United States has also used soft-power tactics, including public diplomacy outreach and economic assistance—for example, President Barack Obama's June 2009 Cairo speech to the Muslim world and the Kerry-Lugar-Berman aid package to Pakistan. Lastly, the United States and its allies have fought the war through law enforcement action in Europe and America and through financial interdiction and homeland security measures across several geographic areas.

Each of these tactics has merit, yet the United States does not have a coherent strategy articulating the approach that should be implemented in each

type of operating environment, the tactics appropriate for each approach, or the method by which successes in one operating environment will help defeat the enemy network in a different operating environment. The current US approach toward the AQN can be described with the phrase Andrew Krepinevich used to assess US efforts in Vietnam: "a strategy of tactics."⁴

John Brennan, assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism, said, "The United States of America is at war. We are at war against al Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates."⁵ There are a number of statements from the administration regarding the fight against al Qaeda, but none detail how this war will be won. In August, Obama declared, "We will disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda, while preventing Afghanistan from again serving as a base for terrorists."⁶ Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has stated that US policy in Afghanistan will deliver "a strategic defeat to Al-Qaeda and its extremist affiliates by rolling back the Taliban from their strongholds."⁷ And the NSS states, "To disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qa'ida and its affiliates, we are pursuing a strategy that protects our homeland, secures the world's most dangerous weapons and material, denies al-Qa'ida safe haven, and builds positive partnerships with Muslim communities around the world."⁸ The NSS also discusses the use of all measures of civilian and military power, improved technology and information sharing, enhanced homeland security measures, the importance of winning the fight in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and combating al Qaeda outside South Asia:

Wherever al-Qa'ida or its terrorist affiliates attempt to establish a safe haven—as they have in Yemen, Somalia, the Maghreb, and the Sahel—we will meet them with growing pressure. We also will strengthen our own network of partners to disable al-Qa'ida's financial, human, and planning networks; disrupt terrorist operations before they mature; and address potential safe-havens before al-Qa'ida and its terrorist affiliates can

take root. These efforts will focus on information-sharing, law enforcement cooperation, and establishing new practices to counter evolving adversaries. We will also help states avoid becoming terrorist safe havens by helping them build their capacity for responsible governance and security through development and security sector assistance.⁹

Brennan described a similar list of policy initiatives:

In Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and beyond, we are not only delivering severe blows against the leadership of al Qaeda and its affiliates, we are helping these governments build their capacity to provide for their

own security—to help them root out the al Qaeda cancer that has manifested itself within their borders and to help them prevent it from returning.¹⁰

Both the NSS and Brennan's speech cite an impressive list of commendable policy efforts. They do not explain, however, how these various efforts will be tailored, coordinated, and synchronized to achieve strategic effects, even in general terms (one would not, of course, expect the administration to publish the precise details of its strategy for fighting the terrorists). US strategy for defeating the AQN requires specifying at least which mix of policies are appropriate for the different al Qaeda groups and the environments in which they operate.

Does Territory Matter to the al Qaeda Network?

It is worth examining the extent to which the AQN benefits from safe havens, which are the areas and territory in which AQN conducts training and maintains leadership with relatively little harassment, before assessing the network's different operating environments. A substantial body of literature, including work by former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officials Paul Pillar and Marc Sageman, argues that particular safe havens are of little importance to al Qaeda and its affiliates. An analysis of this literature, however, reveals important flaws in reasoning and failures to account for some less commonly considered aspects of the AQN and how it operates.

A central argument against the value of safe havens for terrorist groups is that the successful execution of a deadly attack requires only a few dedicated operatives. Safe havens provide training space for an operation, but, advocates of this argument note, training can also occur surreptitiously without a safe haven. Such individuals often point to the fact that nineteen hijackers carried out the 9/11 attacks and that most of their training occurred in apartments in Germany, hotel rooms in Spain, and flight schools in the United States.¹¹

Though superficially persuasive, this argument is flawed. In reality, a terrorist group needs much more than a few dedicated operatives to launch a successful deadly attack. It needs leadership, planners, trainers, fundraisers, recruiters, and propagandists. While a group certainly can have many of those elements without a safe haven, the human infrastructure required to recruit, train, plan, and support a major terrorist operation must be sustained for years, even decades. Military, intelligence, and law enforcement authorities have a much greater chance of intercepting the movements or communications of a terrorist group operating in the West without a safe

haven, thereby increasing the likelihood that the group's operations will be disrupted. The argument that safe havens are not important to successful terrorist operations also takes inadequate account of Western states' significantly increased efforts to identify and target would-be attackers compared with the pre-9/11 period.

Al Qaeda could not have conducted the 9/11 attacks without the use of its territory in Afghanistan. At the time of the 9/11 attacks, al Qaeda Central included only about two hundred individuals, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.¹² Al Qaeda Central used the Taliban in Afghanistan to provide it with the operating space and personnel that supported the 9/11 trainers and militants who conducted the attack.¹³ The hijackers themselves may have completed training for their operation in parts of the Western world; individuals within Afghanistan sustained the operation through coordination, initial training, the provision of replacements, and acting as a conduit for financing and recruiting.

Al Qaeda Central's operations before and after the elimination of its safe haven in Afghanistan also demonstrate the important role territory played in enabling a group to conduct not one spectacular attack but a sustained campaign. From Afghanistan, the core group launched several mass-casualty attacks on US targets, including the East African embassy bombings, the USS *Cole* bombing, and the 9/11 hijackings. Al Qaeda franchises and affiliates have succeeded in carrying out attacks since the elimination of that safe haven, but al Qaeda Central's operations beyond the Afghanistan-Pakistan region have been limited since the removal of the Taliban government that sheltered al Qaeda Central's leadership. The group has attempted to launch attacks, including the 2009 plot to blow up New York City's subway system

directed by senior al Qaeda commander Adnan G. el Shukrijumah.¹⁴ Even such attempted attacks by al Qaeda Central, however, rely on operating space provided by the AQN's safe haven in North Waziristan, Pakistan. Yet, the reduced and more limited operating environment in North Waziristan is part of the reason the group has not been able to sustain a coordinated campaign against the West since the fall of the Taliban and the loss of safe territory across Afghanistan.

Some argue that al Qaeda does not require safe havens to operate because technology makes safe havens irrelevant: they argue that militants can be recruited, indoctrinated, and trained over the Internet.¹⁵

The Internet has indeed become one of the most valuable tools in the AQN's arsenal. Online indoctrination, or, at least, affirmation of preexisting radical beliefs, helped inspire Major Nidal Hasan to carry out an attack at the US Army's Fort Hood base, even though Hasan had never visited an al Qaeda training camp or personally met with al Qaeda leaders or planners.¹⁶ Extremist material published by the English-speaking Anwar al Awlaki, spiritual leader of AQAP, and downloaded from the Internet has been found on the computers of many would-be terrorists, including attempted Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad.¹⁷

The argument that the Internet has made safe havens irrelevant, however, has two major flaws. First, safe havens make terrorist Internet operations much more effective because individuals not under immediate threat of capture or death can devote more time to producing and disseminating propaganda, thereby increasing the quality and quantity of their products. US and allied authorities often cannot intercept communications or use them to target terrorists as easily in a quasi state as they can in areas controlled by friendly authorities. From a technological perspective, Awlaki could have produced his materials as easily in Detroit as in Yemen, yet he has chosen to make his base in the Arabian Peninsula, despite his US citizenship. Awlaki, in conjunction with fellow American militant Samir Khan, has used Yemen as a base from which to

regularly publish *Inspire*, al Qaeda's first English-language magazine.

Another weakness in the argument that the Internet has become a substitute for safe havens is that it ignores the human dimension of terrorist networks. Terrorists, like most people, particularly those engaged in dangerous undertakings, rely on tight human networks and support groups that cannot be formed or even adequately maintained over the Internet. Safe havens give recruits the chance to be part of a group of like-minded people with whom they can form emotional bonds. Safe havens also allow recruits to earn the trust and respect of radical Islamist leaders—who are not, by nature, very trusting people. After forming such bonds, potential terrorists can receive clear orders while located in safe havens.

Several recent cases suggest that terror groups themselves place great importance on these personal interactions, which solidify ties between recruits and leaders and strengthen the will of operatives, increasing the likelihood of a successful attack. The Christmas Day bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, became radicalized over the Internet. Still, he went to Yemen, where he allegedly met face-to-face with Awlaki, to receive training and orders.¹⁸ Faisal Shahzad traveled to Pakistan to earn the trust of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leaders and receive training and funding for the Times Square attack. Shahzad had personal ties to the Pakistani frontier through family that lived in Peshawar, yet he contacted an intermediary militant group, Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), to reach training camps in northwest Pakistan.¹⁹ Likewise, a recent sixteen-year-old Pakistani recruit for al Qaeda was only able to win access to an al Qaeda training camp after connecting with a Taliban recruiter. While traveling to Pakistan's northwest, he parted ways with the recruiter to join an al Qaeda camp, where he used the name of an uncle within the Taliban leadership to establish his credentials.²⁰ The case of the five young men who left northern Virginia in late 2009 to join militant groups in Pakistan also shows the importance of face-to-face interaction. Despite their enthusiasm, JeM and LeT refused to train the young men

for fear they might be spies. In a 2003 case, LeT agreed to train another group of men who had left northern Virginia for Pakistan precisely because one of the men had previously trained with LeT.²¹

The 9/11 hijackers won the trust of the AQN and key leaders such as Osama bin Laden and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) through personal bonds formed during preliminary training in camps in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.²² KSM and bin Laden vetted and selected the hijackers following meetings with them in Afghanistan. Bin Laden, for example, personally chose Khalid al Mihdhar and Nawaf al Hazmi to participate in the operation; they would later serve as the “muscle” on American Airlines Flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon.²³

The plot leaders themselves relied on direct personal interaction. Bin Laden invited KSM to join him in Kandahar, and KSM spent much of late 1998 and early 1999 in the southern Afghanistan city planning the operation.²⁴ Bin Laden closely supervised and improved the operational planning for the attack, benefiting from KSM's proximity. KSM had a number of ideas for operations, including a somewhat unrealistic proposal to convince a Saudi Air Force pilot to hijack a Saudi fighter jet and use it to attack the Israeli city of Eilat. Bin Laden supported these ideas but wanted KSM to conduct 9/11 first and guided him to focus on that attack.²⁵ Such ties could not have been forged and maintained through the Internet alone. Without them, 9/11 would not have occurred.

Some argue that al Qaeda Central does not need a safe haven because that organization is now primarily an ideological leader of the militant Islamist movement rather than an operational force.²⁶ According to this argument, individual militants or small cells can operate without direct contact from al Qaeda Central; these militants or small cells may receive inspiration from al Qaeda Central but conduct actions autonomously. Thus, al Qaeda Central may need to protect a few key leaders but does not necessarily need to maintain a safe haven.

Al Qaeda Central not only plays a key role as an ideological leader and force multiplier, but also continues to plan and facilitate operations for some

elements of the network, activities for which a safe haven is essential. Al Qaeda Central's continuing operational role is apparent from the importance the CIA and al Qaeda itself place upon al Qaeda Central's “number three,” or operational chief position. Individuals in this position have been repeatedly and successfully targeted for elimination or arrest by the CIA or other national security agencies. Al Qaeda has responded by filling the position rapidly.²⁷ It would not need to promote individuals to conduct international operations if it did not place importance on international operations. Current al Qaeda operational commander Adnan G. el Shukrijumah continues to coordinate actively with plotters seeking to attack Western targets.²⁸ Rashid Rauf and Saleh al Somali, the other two members of al Qaeda Central's external operations council, coordinated with plotters before attempting or contemplating operations targeting the New York City subway and a mall in Manchester, England.²⁹ Similarly, Omani authorities in January 2010 arrested an al Qaeda operative en route from northwest Pakistan to Yemen with information allegedly from al Qaeda Central destined for the leadership of AQAP.³⁰ Al Qaeda Central also continues to train militants in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas.

The importance of safe havens to al Qaeda groups is evident in the group's own repeated statements of its objectives. Al Qaeda has said that it seeks the establishment of Islamist states that will eventually lead to the creation of a global Islamist caliphate. The very fact that Taliban leaders under Mullah Omar still refer to themselves as members of the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” and that al Qaeda affiliates in Iraq and Russia are the “Islamic State of Iraq” and the “Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus,” respectively, shows that the AQN remains focused on maintaining quasi states and limited safe havens and regaining such operating environments once they are lost.

Literature arguing that the AQN does not need safe havens often looks at one specific element without considering the network in its entirety. Terrorist groups may be able to survive without safe havens, but safe havens significantly increase their chances of survival and enhance their operational capabilities.

Why Whack-a-Mole Is Wrong: Al Qaeda's Operating Environment Checklist

Some analysts and observers have argued that the task of denying safe havens to al Qaeda is hopeless. They assert that the terror threat has simply moved from one country to another as US or other forces have threatened the AQN. Hence the “whack-a-mole” metaphor oft applied to such an argument: like the arcade game, the argument goes, the enemy simply pops up in a new location after being hammered in an old one.³¹

In the mid-1990s, Osama bin Laden lived in and coordinated terrorist activities from Sudan. From there, he moved to Afghanistan, where he enjoyed his greatest freedom to plan and launch attacks. After the US invasion of Afghanistan, al Qaeda increased its activity in Iraq while al Qaeda Central moved its bases to Pakistan. Following US success in Iraq, the terror threat increased again in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with new threats arising in areas such as Yemen, Somalia, and West Africa. If the United States cleared al Qaeda out of these areas, would the group not simply move back to Sudan, Indonesia, Nigeria, or elsewhere?

In reality, the areas where bin Laden and al Qaeda have operated have much in common with one another and not much with the rest of the world. It is true that all areas with significant AQN presence share three traits common to many countries: underdevelopment, incompetent governance, and a citizenry disenfranchised by—or disillusioned with—the central government. Yet many areas in the Muslim world with all three traits do not have a significant al Qaeda presence. Why not?

In addition to the aforementioned socioeconomic and political characteristics, an environment conducive to al Qaeda's presence and operations must also have a history of radical Islamism that al Qaeda operatives can exploit. Not all forms of radical

Islamism are the same; some are much more vulnerable to al Qaeda's ideological approach than others.

Examples of Failed al Qaeda Expansions: Nigeria and Indonesia

The AQN has been actively trying to penetrate Nigeria and Indonesia for many years. In both countries, millions of people live in poverty. Both have areas thoroughly disconnected from and distrustful of the central government and the outside world. Much of primarily Muslim northern Nigeria views itself as a state separate from the southern half of the country, which is mostly Christian.³² Historical links tie northern Nigeria to other areas home to radical Islam, such as Sudan and even Saudi Arabia.³³

The AQN has tried to infiltrate northern Nigeria through its franchise AQIM. AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel announced his intent in February 2010 to arm Nigerian Muslims against Nigerian Christians.³⁴ Osama bin Laden listed Nigeria, along with Pakistan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco, as “regions ready for liberation” in 2003.³⁵

Of those six countries, only Nigeria has neither a robust security service nor an active al Qaeda presence. Regular violence, some of it perpetrated by a quasi-Islamist group known as Boko Haram, plagued northern Nigeria in 2009 and 2010. Security forces have had varying degrees of success in countering the violence. In some instances, unrest raged for days as authorities lacked the capacity or popular backing to intervene.³⁶

Still, northern Nigeria lacks the strain of radical Islamism found in some parts of the Middle East. The Sultan of Sokoto serves as the Islamic authority in northern Nigeria. This authority was formed in

1804 as a result of a revolt led by Usman dan Fodio, a teacher and Islamic writer. The Sokoto Caliphate dan Fodio established serves as an early example of political Islamism in power. Yet, while puritanical concerns in the early 1800s over the lack of Islamic rule in northern Nigeria may have led to the rise of the Sokoto Caliphate, its existence as an alternate Islamic authority may have blunted the entry of more recent—and more radical—iterations of Islamism into northern Nigeria. Al Qaeda and its facilitators have had difficulty convincing locals to follow their radical, Salafist interpretation of Islam because locals can look to the historical example of dan Fodio and the current remaining authority of the Sultan of Sokoto for evidence of Islamic authority. In many ways, northern Nigerians dabbled in Islamism long before al Qaeda came to be. They have resisted the revisionist worldview promoted by the AQN that downplays traditional authority structures such as the Sokoto Caliphate. The relatively moderate nature of northern Nigerian Muslims, evidenced by their half-hearted embrace of experiments to implement *sharia*, has also prevented the establishment of a strain of radical Islamism friendly to the AQN.³⁷

Similar trends helped inoculate Indonesia against a strong AQN presence. Indonesia experienced the first major violent Islamist-linked attack after 9/11 in October 2002, when the group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) detonated several bombs, killing 202 people in the deadliest attack in Indonesia's history.³⁸ Some have claimed that the tactics and bomb design employed by JI and the personal connections of some JI leaders tie the group to al Qaeda Central.³⁹

Despite the existence of JI, Indonesia is not a major al Qaeda safe haven and does not appear to be moving in that direction. Like Nigeria, Indonesia lacks a recent history of extremist Islamic tradition. Indonesia's security services have also performed relatively well in countering the terror threat. Terrorists conducted a successful attack in Bali in 2005 and Jakarta in July 2009. In the 2009 attack, a bombing of the JW Marriott and Ritz Carlton hotels killed nine people and wounded fifty. No major terror attacks have occurred since July 2009 in Indonesia. Attacks

have also become less deadly in Indonesia: only 9 people died in the July 2009 attack compared to 26 in the 2005 Bali attack and 202 in the 2002 Bali attack.⁴⁰ As with the Sultan of Sokoto in Nigeria, groups like the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, have provided alternate sources of authority for Muslims. The NU engages in charity work, and a number of its members have entered government.⁴¹ Indonesia's first president after the fall of Suharto came from a political party closely associated with the NU.⁴² Such groups combat al Qaeda and its affiliates by providing a vision for Muslim political life that does not support terrorist activity.

Requirements for an al Qaeda Network Operating Environment

The safe havens where al Qaeda and its affiliates operate in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and North and West Africa all have strong radical Islamist movements whose beliefs align well with al Qaeda's ideology—Salafists, Wahhabis, and Deobandis all have long historical presences in these areas. Decades of conflict there have severely degraded traditional social structures, government, and the ability of security forces to operate. Islamist groups have taken advantage of these factors to restructure these societies according to their worldview, thereby creating fertile ground for al Qaeda operations. In the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, for example, radical imams run Deobandi *madrassas*, educating a new generation of fighters in a skewed version of Islam.

Extremist *madrassas* operate and preach similar views in every region of the world. Although worrisome, *madrassas* and imams are much less dangerous when they are not operating among a population already inclined toward their specific views, in ungoverned and poverty-stricken areas, and in states whose security forces lack the will or ability—or both—to target those who would move from radicalism to terrorism or insurgency. We should not allow the global nature of the militant Islamist movement

or the global extent of poverty and poor governance to blind us to the fact that only certain defined and limited areas of the world bring these two dangerous factors together in a potentially lethal fashion.

Weakening the AQN in one operating environment does not mean that it will be able to simply or quickly reestablish itself in another. It has taken years for the AQN to develop networks and safe havens in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere. The attempt to rapidly import al Qaeda ideology and leaders into Iraq ultimately failed, in large part because US forces enabled Iraqis to resist and eject a group and ideology they saw as foreign. Al

Qaeda did not have enough time to develop the trust, relationships, and human networks necessary to support itself in Iraq. The AQN's attempted safe haven in Iraq proved too vulnerable and fragile for all the intensity and lethality the AQN displayed there.

As the experience in Iraq demonstrates, defeating part of the AQN in one zone weakens the terrorist enemy worldwide. At the very least, it forces al Qaeda to shift operations to less-developed areas where it is less capable and more vulnerable. In the end, a successful US global strategy against al Qaeda must constrain the group's options and, ultimately, defeat the network.

Types of al Qaeda Network Operating Environments

AQNs operate in three kinds of environments: quasi states, limited safe havens, and distressed zones. (See map on page 25.) The distinctions between environment types are not rigid; rather, these types are three points along a spectrum ranging from groups that control the territory in which they operate entirely (directly or through allies) to groups on the run.⁴³

Each kind of environment demands a unique mix of policies and tools to defeat the al Qaeda threat. Evaluating a group's operating environment gives policymakers a general guide, not a hard set of rules, for developing the set of policies that will best address a particular AQN group.

A quasi state is an area within which an AQN group or an AQN host functions as the government and faces no significant opposition. Al Shabaab in southern Somalia is the most prominent example of a group currently operating in a quasi state. Al Shabaab has set up Islamist administrations in portions of southern and central Somalia, and neither the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), the African Union (AU) Mission in Somalia, nor local Islamist groups such as Ahlu Sunna wa al Jama'a (ASWJ) pose a threat to its existence or governance.

A limited safe haven is an area in which AQN groups have sanctuary but do not control local government structures. Safe havens usually persist because of support from local sympathizers, acquiescence by the formal government, ineffective government security services, or a combination of these factors. This type of environment allows Islamist groups to train forces and shelter leadership, albeit discreetly and on a limited basis. Groups such as AQAP, AQIM, and LeT operate in this environment.

A distressed zone is a former quasi state or limited safe haven in which a terrorist group is threatened by government-sponsored military action, often

supported by the United States and other regional or Western powers. Groups in such an environment may retain some safe territory and leadership, and limited training, fundraising, and operational capabilities. Groups operating in this environment include the TTP, the Quetta Shura Taliban, and the Islamic State of Iraq. The Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus has lost the strength that its secular nationalist predecessors had in previous years, but it still has a significant safe haven in the southern reaches of the North Caucasus and maintains a steady level of attacks, especially in Dagestan. The group thus falls somewhere between the limited safe haven and distressed zone categories.

The Islamist Quasi State

AQN groups operating in quasi states pose the most dangerous threat to the United States over the long term. Quasi states offer the most advantages to AQN organizations, including safety and a greater degree of control over their surroundings. Quasi states offer more space to prepare and train for attacks than any terrorist organization could use, allowing an AQN group to operate multiple, large-scale, and complex training camps; to hold planning and logistics meetings; and to store arms—all with minimal risk of disruption. Group leaders and operatives in quasi states enjoy nearly complete freedom of movement within the territory they control. Further, the sense of security generated from operating in a quasi state provides groups with an inherent recruiting advantage: a place where a would-be terrorist can train with a low likelihood of getting killed immediately is an appealing prospect for an aspiring global militant.

Another advantage of the quasi state is that it enables the terrorist group to control who and what

enters and leaves the area. This allows terrorist groups to import foreign fighters, arms, and other resources freely and without fear of interception. Simply controlling the land borders of a quasi state provides a group with a marked advantage, and securing access to the sea, air corridors, or landing strips for aircraft significantly enhances that advantage. Furthermore, a group's control of the borders of its quasi state generates daunting challenges for Western intelligence agencies. Such conditions make it very difficult for intelligence agencies to gather information on human and arms trafficking and ascertain how and where foreign fighters and arms are entering a quasi state and reaching their destinations. Without such information, interdicting such traffic is challenging.

AQN groups operating in quasi states are also able to control—and gain possession of—many of the resources that normally flow into and through low-income states. Quasi states can tax freely on a large scale and direct or sometimes hijack financial and material assistance from international and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) designed to alleviate poverty and hunger. They can also take credit for any such assistance.⁴⁴

A quasi state also facilitates a terrorist group's efforts to maintain and build popular support, legitimacy, and compliance, all of which are vital for the survival and strength of both the group and quasi state. A terrorist group operating in a quasi state is able to control or significantly regulate the flow of information in its territory, making it more capable of influencing public opinion and perception. Groups can shut down unfavorable media outlets, dictate what the media report, execute and intimidate opposition journalists, and hold public gatherings that convey a certain message or narrative. This control of information helps generate local support for the terrorist group and attracts new recruits. It also facilitates the propagation of an international ideology and allows the group to direct popular discontent and frustration toward its chosen enemy—the United States, its allies, or the West in general. Terrorist organizations in quasi states can also provide

services such as education, infrastructure, and humanitarian assistance, on which the local population grows dependent.

Most militant Islamist groups supplement their positive efforts to gain popular support and legitimacy with coercive measures to compel the compliance of the general population. A quasi state, however, enables Islamists to use coercive measures without hindrance and often under the cloak of legitimate authority.

The support and compliance of the general population significantly diminishes the likelihood of a terrorist group relinquishing control of a quasi state without external intervention. One of the most challenging features of a quasi state is that the stronger the quasi state becomes, the easier it is for the group in control to implement policies that will generate greater popular support, legitimacy, compliance, and fear. At a certain point, of course, a quasi state may begin to suffer the same problems a formal state would—failure to provide services at desired levels, refusal to permit representative or popular participation in government, and imposition of an ideology that the local population views as extreme or foreign. The phenomenon of an Islamist quasi state collapsing or even suffering from a significant internal resistance movement has not yet been observed, but no Islamist quasi state has survived for long: the United States toppled the Taliban regime just five years after its formation, and al Shabaab has had control of southern Somalia only for a few years.

Case Study: Somalia and al Shabaab

Currently, the only AQN-affiliated group operating in a quasi state is al Shabaab in Somalia.⁴⁵ Because of the difficulty inherent in defeating a quasi state, it is important to examine the challenge the al Shabaab-run quasi state in Somalia poses. The threat posed by past AQN quasi states—Afghanistan under the Taliban, and Sudan—remains, making a full understanding of quasi states critical.⁴⁶ This section analyzes the case of al Shabaab, presenting some initial

policy considerations for countering this terrorist threat in the Horn of Africa.

Al Shabaab began operating as an independent entity in early 2007, only months after the Ethiopian military invaded Somalia to dismantle a conglomerate of regional Islamist administrations known as the Islamic Courts Unions. Al Shabaab portrayed itself as the defender of the people by fighting the Ethiopians, imposing a *sharia*-based justice system, and distributing money and food to the poor through well-choseographed town visits—all of which earned it popular support and legitimacy.⁴⁷ The group secured control of nearly all of southern and much of central Somalia within six months of the Ethiopian withdrawal in January 2009, with the exception of a few districts in Mogadishu, the capital, that are controlled by the TFG, which is backed by the United Nations (UN). Al Shabaab has set up Islamic provinces to govern territory under its control. The administrations of the Islamic provinces collect taxes, build roads, regulate NGOs and the distribution of foreign aid, and enforce a draconian interpretation of Islamic law.⁴⁸

Al Shabaab benefits from all the advantages that generally result from controlling a quasi state. It operates terrorist training camps, urban warfare training facilities, and ideological indoctrination centers.⁴⁹ It also controls key airstrips and ports—including the port of Kismayo—in southern Somalia that facilitate arms importation.⁵⁰ Allegedly, al Shabaab receives much of its arms shipments through the Kismayo port and air cargo from Eritrea.⁵¹ The challenge of unregulated arms transfers into Somalia became so daunting that the AU petitioned the UN, unsuccessfully, to implement a Somalia-wide no-fly zone and blockade of sea ports in February 2010.⁵²

Information regarding the routes taken by foreign militants seeking to join al Shabaab remains sparse, but the group's ranks include hundreds of foreigners, including more than two dozen Americans and possibly more than one hundred Europeans.⁵³ Approximately half of al Shabaab's foreign fighters come from Kenya, but many come from Tanzania, Sudan, and Uganda.⁵⁴ Al Shabaab's control of ports facilitates the

transfer of foreign fighters into the country, making it one of the most sought-after fronts for veteran militants from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.⁵⁵

Because of its firm control of southern and central Somalia, al Shabaab influences public opinion and constructs the narrative of the Somali people's struggle. The group has not only set up its own media networks, but it has also attempted to control other networks. In April 2010, al Shabaab banned radio stations from playing music, broadcasting information not in accordance with its edicts, and retransmitting BBC and Voice of America broadcasts, and it enforced these regulations with violence.⁵⁶ The group also shut down independent radio stations and threatened, kidnapped, and assassinated opposition journalists.⁵⁷ It also holds large rallies and demonstrations and forces locals to attend them and to listen to speeches by the group's leaders. These tactics help al Shabaab control the population, secure the compliance or elimination of potential dissenters, shape the public's opinion of the current conflict in Somalia, and encourage Somali rejection of non-al Shabaab actors.

Since the January 2009 withdrawal of Ethiopian troops—widely perceived as foreign occupiers—al Shabaab's popular support has diminished. Several anti-al Shabaab protests occurred in Mogadishu in 2010.⁵⁸ But the group rules by creating fear through violence, minimizing any chance of a local coup or challenge to power. Al Shabaab holds public executions of alleged spies to engender loyalty and subservience to its militants, and it forces men and boys to enlist in its ranks at gunpoint.⁵⁹ These factors further complicate any attempt to reduce al Shabaab's hold on power in southern Somalia by creating a hostile environment for any potential opposition.

Perhaps the most troubling characteristic of the al Shabaab quasi state is that there appears to be no other force in Somalia strong enough to dislodge it from power or reduce the danger it poses. The only local entities able to pose a military threat to al Shabaab's quasi state are the forces from the weak TFG, the approximately eight thousand Ugandan and Burundian troops stationed in Mogadishu under

the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) mandate, and a Sufi militia called Ahlu Sunna wa al Jama'a (ASWJ). The TFG and AMISOM forces have little capacity outside Mogadishu, while ASWJ has limited resources and military capability. The poorly trained TFG forces have proved inept at securing more than a few districts in Mogadishu, and they have struggled with soldiers defecting to al Shabaab because they did not receive monthly salaries.⁶⁰ The AMISOM soldiers form a much better-trained and better-equipped force, but the AU's mandate caps the force's size at twelve thousand troops and prevents it from going on the offensive against al Shabaab. Currently, AMISOM forces are stationed at key government posts in Mogadishu, including the presidential palace, the seaport, and the airport. It is highly unlikely that the threat al Shabaab poses to the United States and its interests will diminish under the current conditions in Somalia, despite recent modest gains in Mogadishu by AMISOM.

There is no easy solution to the challenge al Shabaab poses. Policymakers have struggled to bring stability to Somalia since the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, and the current Somali government represents the fifteenth attempt at a transitional government in nineteen years. America's current hands-off approach to Somalia, however, allows al Shabaab to expand its control and provides it with room and time to prepare for an international attack. Al Shabaab first struck outside Somalia in July 2010, killing seventy-nine people in Uganda, and it has threatened to carry out more international attacks. In a September 2010 interview with the *Washington Post*, a reported al Shabaab operative stated that al Shabaab "won't stop at [Somalia's] borders."⁶¹ The group's leaders have made several statements explicitly expressing a desire to strike the United States. The earliest such statement came in 2008: "We assure our Muslim brothers in general and the mujahideen in particular: give them the good news that we are preparing for America—Allah willing—what will make them forget the blessed attacks in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam."⁶² Dennis Blair, the former US director of national intelligence, said in 2010 that al

Shabaab "will remain focused on regional objectives in the near-term," but that the group may attempt to attack US territory in the future using westerners training in Somalia.⁶³ Fuad Mohamed Qalaf, a high-ranking al Shabaab leader, threatened the United States directly during a radio broadcast in late December 2010: "We tell the US President Barack Obama to embrace Islam before we come to his country."⁶⁴

Terrorist quasi states present the greatest long-term challenge to the United States, and thus may require the boldest policy considerations. Policy considerations should attempt to achieve three goals when addressing a terrorist quasi state. First, the policy should aim to eliminate the group's areas of operational impunity. Second, it should seek to provide security to the local population to demonstrate an alternative to violent Islamist rule and to peel potential recruits from a group's ranks. Third, it should strive to engage local actors in the establishment of a functional government to replace the terrorist organization.

The rare drone strike or Special Operations Forces raid targeting al Shabaab's leadership, while worthwhile and potentially disruptive to the group's short-term operations, will not halt its overall advance. A policy of "constructive disengagement," as some have proposed, will only exacerbate the situation in Somalia by allowing al Shabaab to gain greater control.⁶⁵ The point may arrive when the United States will have to decide whether it wants to commit troops to Somalia or live with the threat of the occasional terrorist attack originating in Somalia, but at present, the United States can take several concrete steps to attempt to undermine and challenge al Shabaab's quasi state. These rely heavily on partners already on the ground in Somalia—specifically the TFG and AMISOM—to conduct a counterinsurgency operation. There is no guarantee that AMISOM and TFG forces have the capacity to conduct a successful counterinsurgency operation, or that the complex Somali environment provides a reasonable prospect for success. There is even less evidence that the TFG would be able to govern Mogadishu in a durable way even if the whole city were secured. Still, TFG forces

have a better chance than foreign forces of earning the trust of the local population—a key element of any counterinsurgency operation—because they are ethnically Somali.

The first concrete step the United States should take is to use its seat on the UN Security Council to help change the AMISOM mandate from a peacekeeping mission to a peace-enforcing mission, which would allow troops to go on the offensive against al Shabaab. Changing the mandate will not be easy, and attempts to do so are likely to face resistance within both the AU and the UN. The AU, in fact, has rejected the proposition of asking the UN to change the mandate from peacekeeping to peace-enforcing, but one of the main reasons for that is because the AU's leadership believes the current AMISOM force does not have the resources needed for a peace-enforcing mission.⁶⁶

Second, the United States should work with AU defense ministries to determine the number of troops necessary to conduct a counterinsurgency operation and to advocate for a higher ceiling on the number of AMISOM troops allowed in Somalia. It should also offer a variety of humanitarian and defense incentives to African countries willing to commit troops to the mission. Johnnie Carson, the US assistant secretary of state for African affairs, informally stated that the United States favors more troops on the ground in Somalia, but he stopped short of specifying how many more.⁶⁷ The AMISOM force commander stated that he needs forty thousand troops for AMISOM to achieve success in its current mission, while the East African Intergovernmental Authority on Development put the number at twenty thousand—a number Uganda said it can supply.⁶⁸

The United States should assist AMISOM and the TFG to develop a plan for providing equipment, funding, logistical support, and counterinsurgency training to AMISOM and TFG forces. Currently, the United States provides training to Ugandan and Burundian troops, but it does little to support TFG troops. The former US African Command commander, General William Ward, said he would be willing to train TFG troops, but only the White House

has the authority to decide whether the United States should do so. The White House should task the US African Command with training TFG troops in counterinsurgency tactics, and it should work with Congress to authorize funding to help support TFG troops.

The initial goal of this mission would be to disrupt al Shabaab's operations by killing and arresting operatives and leaders, raiding weapons caches, and retaking territory currently under al Shabaab's control. The force would first have to secure Mogadishu, and then extend southward while ensuring that it maintains control of previously secured areas. Clearing Mogadishu of al Shabaab and establishing security there would allow the city's citizens to live without the fear of regular artillery attacks, gunfire, and brutal punishments for not adhering to Islamic law. It would also allow increased commerce and the safe distribution of foreign aid. The local population may initially be apprehensive about welcoming AMISOM troops, but if AMISOM troops succeed in securing the city, in conjunction with TFG troops, they might be able to earn the respect and cooperation of the local population. A secured capital city would also allow the TFG to provide basic services to the people—a key step for the TFG in gaining popular legitimacy—if it is able to overcome its own internal deficiencies.

The United States should actively support capacity building within the TFG and the creation of an environment that allows a successor to the TFG to emerge. Currently, corruption is rampant in the TFG, and the organization has proved incompetent, partially due to a lack of security in Mogadishu and the TFG's lack of funding. A secure capital city may improve the TFG's ability to govern to a standard acceptable to Somalis, but there is also a strong possibility that the TFG will prove hopeless. Either way, only a Somali government can replace al Shabaab's rule, and the United States and its allies must help the TFG or an alternate source of power within Somalia remedy its many flaws. The TFG was never meant to serve as a permanent solution to Somalia's problems; rather, it was supposed to be transient, to govern until the

establishment of a more effective government with a stronger foundation.

Regardless of whether the TFG remains in power or a newly elected government takes office, the United States should provide training to Somalia's legitimate government in good-governance practices, combating corruption, and institution building. Such efforts should help the government gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Somali population. Ultimately, a fully centralized government may not be feasible in Somalia. Nonetheless, establishing pockets of effective governance, security, and economic prosperity will create zones hostile to al Shabaab's influence, reducing the violent Islamist group's power and consuming its resources.

The less secure al Shabaab feels in its hold over territory, the less attention it will be able to devote to preparing attacks against the West. Thus, US policy should aim to create a secure Mogadishu that fosters economic growth and the emergence of a legitimate, post-TFG government accepted by the people of Mogadishu. The TFG-AMISOM counterinsurgency approach to Somalia will give the United States better odds of averting the need to make the difficult decision of whether to commit US resources to Somalia in the future.

The most effective and enduring way to achieve these goals is through a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign. Such an approach may cost more lives and more money than policies to combat groups in other operating environments, but the danger posed by an al Qaeda-linked group operating in a secured quasi state is much greater over the long term. The United States need not commit its own troops to combat every terrorist quasi state that emerges, and in some cases, US boots on the ground may have a counterproductive effect on the overall mission. Still, the United States must be willing to support an offensive military mission that seeks to disrupt a terrorist group's operations and provide security to the local population. Failing to adopt such an approach will allow any group operating in a quasi state to become stronger, thereby increasing the threat posed to the United States.

The Limited Safe Haven

Over the long term, a limited safe haven in a country with a sovereign government is less threatening than a full quasi state. Islamist groups in limited safe havens have less freedom to recruit, train, and plan, and they cannot access the levers of power that come with controlling a quasi state. They can still conduct training and enjoy the support of at least some local entities. This in turn makes it difficult for external forces to attack their operating environments or to target key leaders, especially if the state's policy is to ignore or protect the group. Such groups generally are able to operate at will in their local environments. Government security forces run the risk of antagonizing locals when attempting to combat the groups. These groups may also perform some of the functions of government, such as providing education or humanitarian aid to locals.

A quasi state strengthens terrorist groups by facilitating their persistence, expansion, and out-of-area operations. Limited safe havens provide less capability and reliability for Islamist groups and force them to spend more time organizing their leaders and operations than groups in quasi states.

Examples of Limited Safe Havens

LeT is one example of a group operating in a limited safe haven. LeT conducted the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India, that killed 166 and paralyzed India's financial center for three days.⁶⁹ The group enjoys a limited safe haven due to the political and financial support it receives from parts of the Pakistani security establishment and Pakistan's reluctance to take meaningful action against the group or its various front organizations.⁷⁰ LeT conducts some activities typical of terrorist groups in quasi states. Although it has not established Islamic administrations or attempted to control social life in the way al Shabaab has, the group operates educational institutions, especially in Lahore.⁷¹ LeT provided humanitarian assistance to victims of the 2010 floods in Pakistan through its front group Jamaat-ud-Dawa

(later renamed the Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation).⁷² LeT does not function as the primary governing authority in any area, but the governments in Lahore and other areas of Pakistan tolerate the group and give it room to operate. More importantly, leading elements within the Pakistani military and intelligence services protect the group from Pakistani or international operations.

This limited safe haven enables LeT to continue conducting operations targeting India and other Western interests. In doing so, it has relied on forward operatives located in India.⁷³ The group has conducted several operations in Afghanistan in recent years attacking Indian interests.⁷⁴ It has also begun to conduct operations that simultaneously target Western interests, such as the Mumbai attacks and the 2010 Pune bombing, which occurred at locations frequented by foreign visitors; it has also been targeting US forces in Afghanistan.⁷⁵ These attacks have come following public warnings from LeT that it seeks to attack the West.⁷⁶ LeT is not simply a “Kashmiri separatist” movement; it is an Islamist terrorist organization with increasingly global aims that survives because of the limited safe haven Pakistan affords to it.

AQAP is another example of a group operating in a limited safe haven. The Yemeni government does not provide the level of direct support to AQAP that the Pakistani government provides LeT, nor did the Yemeni government create AQAP in the way Pakistan's intelligence services helped form LeT. The Yemeni government has, however, failed to take action that would seriously damage AQAP. The government often arrests individuals it claims have al Qaeda ties, but there is scant evidence that such individuals play important roles in the al Qaeda organization. Yemen has a very poor track record of detaining leading al Qaeda commanders, including those responsible for the 2000 *USS Cole* attack and the 2002 *Limburg* attack. In some cases, Yemen has later released operatives or allowed them to escape from prison. Yemen has never conducted a robust, sustained campaign to round up commanders or deny territory to al Qaeda in the country's southern, central, and eastern governments. AQAP launched a

series of bold attacks on government security targets in the south throughout the second half of 2010, which sparked a limited government response, but the sincerity and durability of that response remain to be seen, particularly in light of the new challenge to President Ali Abdullah Saleh's rule seen in protests in February 2011.⁷⁷

The Yemeni government may be unwilling to conduct a full military campaign against AQAP for three reasons. First, it fears antagonizing some of the tribes that provide shelter to AQAP. AQAP has presented itself as the protector of those tribes in its rhetoric and has attempted to turn them against the government by portraying the government as a pawn of the United States and Saudi Arabia.⁷⁸ Further, AQAP operatives—including non-Yemenis—have married into various tribes, thereby solidifying relationships.⁷⁹ Tribal culture in Yemen is strong, and an attack on any tribe member can provoke a response from the entire tribe, which the Yemeni government likely fears.

A second reason the Yemeni government has stopped short of a full campaign against AQAP is because the government views other security challenges, such as the al Houthi rebellion in the north and the secessionist movement in the south, as more threatening. The government has elected to allocate its security resources to address these challenges instead. Yemen's priorities may change, however, since AQAP has made a concerted effort to attack Yemeni government targets. Similarly, the Saudi government tolerated an al Qaeda presence in its country for many years until al Qaeda began conducting attacks inside the kingdom; this provoked a Saudi crackdown on al Qaeda, which has effectively denied the group sanctuary there since 2006.⁸⁰ AQAP could find itself in a similar position if Yemen's priorities change.

A third reason the Yemeni government may be apprehensive about fighting al Qaeda is because its ties to radical Islamists run deep. Bin Laden and the Yemeni government had a *de facto* nonaggression pact as of the late 1990s, and bin Laden had been successful in winning the release of his cohorts from Yemeni custody.⁸¹ For many years, the Yemeni

government used Islamist militants who fought in the Soviet-Afghan war to suppress other domestic security threats.⁸² In this way, AQAP's tribal and historical ties with Yemen mirror LeT's political and financial ties with Pakistan.

AQAP is one of only three official al Qaeda franchises. AQIM, another franchise along with the Islamic State of Iraq, also has transnational aspirations and maintains a limited safe haven. AQIM operates primarily in four countries in West Africa and the Maghreb: Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The group maintains a safe haven east of the Algerian capital of Algiers, making its home in a mountainous area that has hosted violent Islamist groups since the early 1990s. It often conducts attacks near this safe haven and in and around the capital of Algiers. The Algerian government has managed to reduce these attacks to some degree in recent years through various tactics, including the imposition of a heavy police presence in areas often targeted by AQIM. AQIM maintains a potentially more significant limited safe haven in northeastern Mali in a mountainous area bordering Algeria and Niger surrounded by the Sahara. There, the group holds hostages and likely relies on support from local tribes.⁸³ This territory allows the group to protect its Saharan leadership, which is subordinate, at least in theory, to AQIM's overall leadership, and to project its influence throughout the Sahara. From northeastern Mali, the group can move from oasis to oasis throughout the desert, gaining revenue from smuggling, kidnappings, and conducting terrorist operations.⁸⁴

The Malian sanctuary may be a limited safe haven that the local government wishes to eliminate but is unable to due to limited resources or capacity. In June 2009, the Malian military conducted an offensive against al Qaeda elements in the northeast, but the offensive failed to eliminate the limited safe haven. A July 2010 French-Mauritanian raid in the same area similarly failed.⁸⁵ The operation took place on short notice and with limited planning; part of the mission's objective was to free French hostage Michel Germaneau.

Policy toward Limited Safe Havens

In some ways, developing an appropriate policy to counter limited safe havens is more complicated than finding approaches to counter quasi states. The introduction of foreign military forces into a limited safe haven, for instance, can exacerbate an already delicate situation given ties between the host government and the West. Such action would likely feed into al Qaeda's narrative of a US-led war against Islam and has the potential to generate greater popular local support and attract more recruits for al Qaeda, both within the targeted country and internationally.

1. Pressuring and Improving the Capacity of Host Governments. One necessary part of a successful strategy involves pressuring host governments—such as those in Yemen and Pakistan that have failed to take any significant action against major elements of the al Qaeda network—to combat terrorist groups. This pressure can take many forms, including negotiations, public and private rhetoric and dialogue, and conditions for aid receipt. This pressure will likely need to be complemented by providing military assistance to the appropriate governments and offering military and law enforcement training and equipment to those countries to bolster their capacity to take on the militant groups in their respective countries. This approach aims to eradicate the al Qaeda safe haven with local forces and minimize the US footprint.

Both the Yemeni and Pakistani governments still provide direct aid or support through inaction to militants despite US pressure. For at least one year following the 2009 Christmas Day attack, the Yemeni government did not detain any significant AQAP leaders. The Pakistani government still provides significant aid and support to some militant groups. Pressure has been placed on both governments, primarily through private, diplomatic channels. Military cooperation has also occurred with both governments, particularly with Pakistan. Yet these efforts have not been enough. US policymakers should consider whether current pressure on both governments has yielded sufficient results. Such an examination should be

followed by a decision on whether additional pressure could generate better results—or whether this policy tool will ultimately prove ineffective.

The United States has conducted several training operations with states in West Africa to build regional capacity to fight al Qaeda-linked groups and enhance cooperation with the United States in combating terror. The most recent of these, Operation Flintlock, occurred in May 2010. Recent operations' failure to dislodge AQIM from northeastern Mali and the inability of the Algerian security forces to completely eliminate the terrorist threat in the northern part of their country shows that much work remains to be done on this front.

2. Reducing Local Grievances. Reducing the grievances that drive the local population to support al Qaeda and its affiliates is another approach to defeating limited safe havens. This approach will be very difficult, and probably impossible, without the cooperation of the local government, since many of the grievances that fuel support for militant Islamist groups arise from political or economic conditions. Humanitarian assistance that improves state services to areas that are or could be home to al Qaeda-linked militants might help. This soft-power approach in Pakistan could involve, for example, filling the gap left by the failure of state agencies to respond effectively to the massive flooding in the country in the summer of 2010—except that Islamabad has historically been violently opposed to the delivery of humanitarian assistance it does not control. Reports regarding the delivery of aid in Pakistan reveal that a massive influx of cash has sometimes created more problems for countering terrorist groups or proved unusable. The Pakistani government has diverted a greater portion of aid than originally called for, much aid remains unspent, and the country's NGOs have proved too small to accept a large influx of additional US dollars.⁸⁶ In Yemen, a humanitarian aid approach could mean finding an efficient way to deal with the impending water crisis in the country while diversifying the country's economy, moving it away from reliance on its shrinking oil industry. In West Africa, a

relatively small amount of aid could increase Niger's ability to counter al Qaeda as AQIM attempts to expand into the country—one of the world's poorest—as it experiences one of the worst famines in its history.

Humanitarian aid alone is unlikely to eliminate limited safe havens. US policy should strive to generate economic opportunities that allow locals to prosper outside of aid programs and to support the establishment of government structures that empower the local population through representation. This could take the form of providing investment and loans at attractive interest rates for small and medium enterprises. Stronger local businesses would weaken the recruiting power of al Qaeda-linked groups, which often succeed in attracting young men simply because they pay the highest salaries in impoverished areas.

The business sector has a proclivity to oppose al Qaeda-linked groups because they cause instability and destruction. Economic investment that goes beyond grants can leverage that tendency. Revamped federal and local government structures, properly designed and implemented, could give locals the power some of them may have sought through involvement with al Qaeda-linked groups. Established local politicians are likely to oppose al Qaeda-linked groups, as they are among the most threatened by the AQN's expansion of power. Given the proper tools and incentives, political leaders could help rid their areas of al Qaeda-linked elements or ensure that al Qaeda-linked elements do not reemerge.

Implementing controlled democratic reform may help build the legitimacy of the host government. A representative system of government provides citizens with a voice and stake in their government and decreases the marginalization of certain segments of the population. Anticorruption efforts should be conducted in conjunction with democratic reform. Rampant corruption throughout Yemen, Pakistan, and the Maghreb and West Africa hurts the legitimacy of host governments and limits economic opportunities, thereby increasing the strength of the AQN.

Locals' grievances may not be economic or focused on the lack of real political representation in all cases.

The local government, the United States, and its partners will need to investigate the grievances of the local hosts of an al Qaeda-linked group and design specific initiatives to address those grievances to peel back al Qaeda's local support. An information-operations campaign could highlight how these grievances are being addressed to counter al Qaeda propaganda and separate the local community from the AQN. Such campaigns could highlight the AQN's damage to the citizens' region. For example, LeT has many supporters throughout Pakistan's urbanized heartland. Some of these are likely impoverished individuals. Others, however, subscribe to the LeT ideology, which promotes an aggressive, nationalist, and violent Islamist Pakistan. An information-operations campaign could seek to undermine LeT's appeal by shedding light on the harm the group has caused to prosperity and stability in Pakistan.

3. Counterterrorism Tactics. Traditional counterterrorism tactics targeting high-value individuals are a third tool used to attack groups in this operating environment. The objective of these attacks is to weaken a group and disrupt its operations by killing, detaining, or harassing high-value targets. This approach does not require the United States or the local state to commit ground forces, making it less expensive and more politically tenable. Drone strikes and clandestine direct-action operations seeking to eliminate or capture al Qaeda leaders, operatives, and facilitators are examples of counterterrorism tactics. These tactics should be used cautiously and, ideally, with the cooperation and consent of the host government. Coordination with the host government helps avoid provoking the local populace and develops human intelligence assets that are valuable in understanding and locating enemy targets.⁸⁷ This approach is limited in that it can neither defeat the terrorist group nor address the structural problems in the safe haven that allowed the group to establish itself in the first place. The disruption effect is also transitory—it persists only as long as the United States is willing and able to continue targeted strikes.

Targeted strikes have killed many al Qaeda leaders in the past few years, including Rashid Rauf and Saleh al Somali, al Qaeda commanders in Pakistan responsible for international operations such as a plot to bring down transatlantic airliners.⁸⁸ The Obama administration has made such strikes a central element of its national security policy, and use of targeted strikes has increased dramatically: 171 strikes occurred in 2009 and 2010, compared to only 43 between 2004 and the end of 2008.⁸⁹ The United States is reportedly considering the use of drone-strikes in Yemen as well.⁹⁰ Proponents of the drone-strike program often point to its high success rate in eliminating al Qaeda leadership. Many policymakers support the drone program due to its low cost, zero direct risk to the lives of US servicemen, and relatively high return on investment.

Nevertheless, the program has failed to prevent enemy groups in Pakistan from conducting international terror operations.⁹¹ Despite nearly two years of aggressive strikes, the TTP conducted two significant operations against the United States: the December 2009 bombing of the CIA base in Khost Province, Afghanistan, and the May 2010 attempted bombing of Times Square. Moreover, violence has continued apace in Pakistan, with particularly vicious bombings linked to TTP elements in the Punjab in July 2010.⁹²

The fact that strikes have been unable to halt international operations or local violence linked to terror groups reveals their limitations. Ultimately, drone strikes cannot defeat terrorist groups and cannot mitigate the failure of a government, such as Pakistan's, to uproot militant groups within its territory. The elimination of a number of al Qaeda leaders does not necessarily translate into a reduction in the number or effectiveness of terror attacks. Yet, anonymous administration officials quoted by the media have presented the number of al Qaeda leaders killed by the drone-strike program as evidence of the administration's success in the war on terror.⁹³

Targeted strikes disrupt terrorist operations by making it difficult for commanders to meet or communicate, reducing enemy morale, and eliminating years of experience from the al Qaeda organization.

An al Qaeda-linked group can still train and plan operations within limited safe havens even if some of its leaders and operatives are killed, however, because these groups often quickly fill personnel gaps with subordinates who have been groomed for precisely that purpose. Territory provides the greatest strength to a terrorist group, and territory cannot be held from the air; it can only be harassed.

Policymakers should keep this in mind as they consider a strategy for addressing limited safe havens. The drone program is a tactic; it is useful, but it is just a tactic. Limited safe havens require a robust strategy, not an individual tactic, to eliminate sanctuaries and defeat al Qaeda-linked groups. Only a strategy that includes other policy options listed in this report and that works toward the eventual dislodging of the enemy can defeat an al Qaeda-linked group in a limited safe haven.

4. Regional Cooperation. A fourth approach for dealing with groups in limited safe havens is enhancing cooperation among states with a mutual interest in the defeat of the terrorist organization. Groups that move among limited safe havens in several neighboring states or use territory in one state to launch attacks in another can exploit differences among states. States must deny the enemy success in exploiting division by coordinating policies and operations to defeat the terrorist group. Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger established a joint headquarters in southern Algeria at Tamanrasset in April 2010 to conduct operations against AQIM.⁹⁴ The French-Mauritanian raid on AQIM in July 2010 was not coordinated with Mali, however. A lack of cooperation on such operations could make some countries less willing to take on the AQN or could create gaps and seams that the AQN can exploit.⁹⁵ Interstate cooperation against al Qaeda-linked groups with limited safe havens is much more limited in South Asia, primarily because Pakistan created some of the al Qaeda-linked militant groups to fight India.

Limited safe havens present a unique challenge to policymakers. Over the long term, they are less dangerous than quasi states. Yet, the groups that inhabit

limited safe havens are just as capable as groups in quasi states of launching mass-casualty attacks in the short term. Dealing with limited safe havens requires empowering, pressuring, and cajoling the host governments in whose countries they lie. Humanitarian aid, economic investment, and government reform will help address the grievances of local populations. Information operations must push back against AQN propaganda and highlight successful efforts to reduce grievances. Counterterrorism efforts such as targeted strikes are not a substitute for empowering local security forces to reduce the territory controlled by an AQN group. Regional cooperation against groups operating from limited safe havens is also necessary. The United States has used all these tools in various combinations in Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, in Yemen. But neither the Bush administration nor the Obama administration has successfully developed a coherent strategy, despite some attempts, that prioritizes and coordinates the use of these tools to achieve strategic, rather than transitory, effects. Without such a strategy, short-term gains are likely to prove ephemeral.

The Distressed Zone

The third environment, the distressed zone, is an area that was previously a quasi state or limited safe haven, but that has since come under assault from external forces. Groups in this category have lost control of a quasi state or limited safe haven and operate in a much more restrictive environment. The threat from these groups is not necessarily reduced in the short term: they may be most dangerous as they attempt to conduct spectacular operations to prove their continued vitality. Over the long term, however, the reduced operating space for sheltering leadership and training operatives, as well as declining support from local residents and hosts, will likely reduce the number and quality of operations the groups can conduct.

To keep a group in this operating environment in a distressed state and eventually defeat it, the United States and its partners must hold territory, rebuild infrastructure, and address local grievances.⁹⁶ These

are the phases of a counterinsurgency campaign, whose first phase (clearing) captures a group's original territory. Reconstruction involves rebuilding infrastructure and maintaining security, but it goes far beyond those goals. Holding a territory requires preventing the festering of grievances that allow an insurgency to reemerge. The occupying force must repatriate families torn from their homes during the clearing phase. Governance structures must be recreated or built from scratch. Creating an authority that is responsive to and protective of the people will be a particular challenge in areas such as northwest Pakistan, where decades of an al Qaeda-linked presence have destroyed traditional tribal structures. This phase may also involve combat operations to eliminate new sanctuaries or to clear areas that were not fully cleared during the clearing phase of the counterinsurgency campaign. Critical to this phase is a long-term commitment to an area and attention to reducing the grievances that led local populations to begin to support al Qaeda-linked groups in the first place.

Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan and parts of northwest Pakistan fall into this category of operating environments. In each case, initial clearing campaigns destroyed the safe havens of enemy al Qaeda-linked groups. Periodic violence has continued to flare up in each of these cases, and the reemergence of insurgent groups remains possible. The reemergence of enemy groups has already occurred in Afghanistan and perhaps Pakistan. It is necessary, therefore, to continue to reexamine policy toward distressed zones to ensure that grievances continue to be addressed and local institutions remain viable. Commitments of resources to distressed zones must also be maintained long after major fighting has ceased.

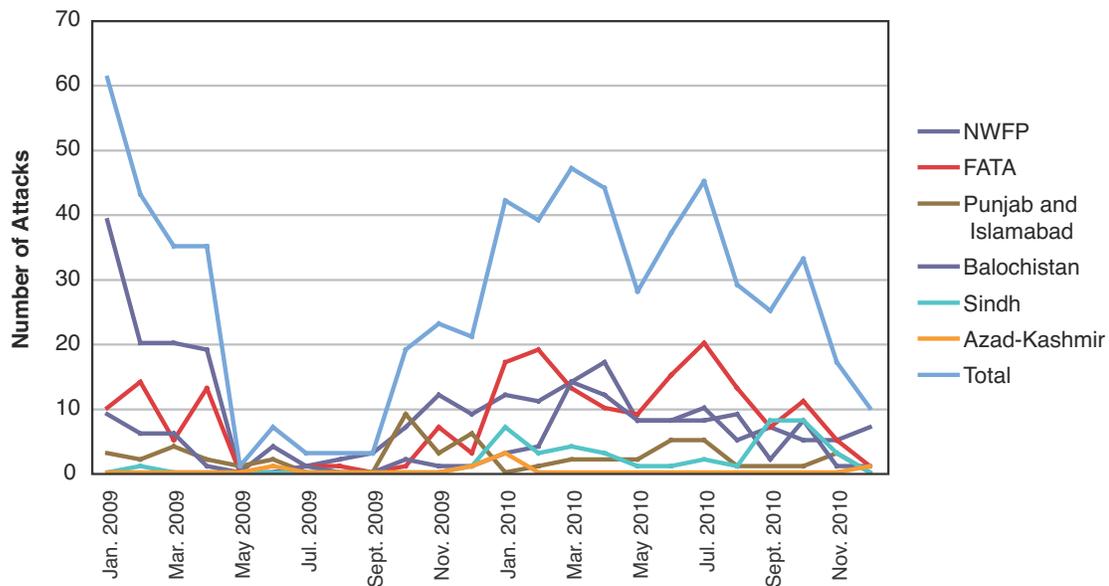
The Pakistani military's defeat of the TTP in some areas offers a lesson for dealing with other limited safe havens. The Pakistani military, prompted by a shift in popular opinion and a militant advance that brought the TTP within sixty miles of the Pakistani capital of Islamabad, decided to go to war against the TTP until the group was defeated. This campaign first succeeded in Swat in April 2009, followed by South Waziristan in October 2009. The

November 2008 operation in Bajaur that preceded the 2009 campaign was a partial success, and fighting has continued to flare up throughout 2010 in other parts of Pakistan's northwest, particularly in the sliver of territory known as Orakzai.

Immediately before the operation in South Waziristan, the TTP launched a number of operations in Pakistan's heartland, including an attack on the headquarters of the Pakistani military in Rawalpindi. The group repeated a string of attacks in December 2009 to prove its vitality. Sporadic TTP-linked attacks continued to occur throughout the first half of 2010, including an attack on the US consulate in Peshawar in March 2010 and an attack in Punjab in July 2010. But violence returned to high levels in the last six months of 2010. The TTP also managed to train and finance Times Square bomber Shahzad. Other militant groups in Pakistan, such as JeM, supported Shahzad. The anti-TTP campaign launched by the Pakistani military could not fully reduce the pace of attacks because the effort has not yet targeted militant groups aligned with the TTP. The TTP also maintains a presence in North Waziristan, where Pakistan's military has yet to intervene. Failure to completely destroy the TTP and its allied groups has allowed such groups to continue to sponsor violence in Pakistan, as the figure shows, even though major offensive operations temporarily disrupted TTP activities. Significant militant violence still plagues Pakistan.⁹⁷

Continued attacks mean the Pakistani military's campaign has not defeated or fully reduced the TTP threat because it did not target other allied militant groups such as LeT, JeM, the Haqqani network, and the Quetta Shura Taliban. Nor did the Pakistani military conduct clearing operations in all the TTP's safe havens. Perhaps only in South Waziristan, Swat, and Bajaur can the TTP's operating environment be considered a distressed zone. Gains in these areas, however, have been further imperiled by the floods in Pakistan in 2010 and the Pakistani military's delay in repatriating internally displaced people who fled South Waziristan during the fighting in October 2009. The areas in which TTP and other militant

MILITANT ATTACKS IN PAKISTAN BY REGION, JANUARY 2009–DECEMBER 2010



NOTE: NWFP refers to the Northwest Frontier Province, renamed in 2010 to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. FATA refers to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

groups operate in Pakistan should be considered a series of limited safe havens.

Al Qaeda in Iraq is a clear case of an offensive moving a group from operating in a safe haven near a quasi state to battling for its existence. Al Qaeda in Iraq once dominated parts of the country (particularly the Anbar Province and Sunni Arab areas in and around Baghdad) and nearly forced the exit of coalition forces in 2007. A cohesive counterinsurgency campaign chosen by then-president George W. Bush and executed by General David Petraeus rolled back the enemy. Al Qaeda in Iraq still conducts attacks, but it no longer presents an imminent threat to the stability and economic and political progress of the Iraqi state.⁹⁸ It has lost its original leadership, and the Iraqi people, most importantly Iraqi Sunnis, have turned squarely against the group. More than two and a half years have passed since the official end of the surge in July 2008, and al Qaeda in Iraq has failed to regain much of its previous power. Thus, the campaign is not a temporary setback for the organization.⁹⁹ While some terrorist elements are likely to remain in Iraq for a long time and sporadic attacks

will continue, the lack of any sustained terror campaign over the last year, despite months of political wrangling before a governing coalition finally formed, shows the weakened capacity of al Qaeda in Iraq. The group failed to conduct a series of major operations that might have enabled it to take advantage of an opportunity to increase its power. Al Qaeda in Iraq will not have such a window again for at least a few years. The official end of US combat operations in Iraq on August 31, 2010, led some to worry that al Qaeda in Iraq could reemerge,¹⁰⁰ but the Iraqi Security Forces' proven capacity and the vast majority of the Iraqi people's determination to move beyond conflict render such an outcome unlikely. Still, ensuring the permanent defeat of al Qaeda in Iraq requires continued US attention to the country and continued efforts by the Iraqi government, which can do the most to prevent any resurgence of the al Qaeda group.

The last major al Qaeda-linked groups operating in distressed zones are the Afghan insurgent groups, namely the Quetta Shura Taliban and Haqqani network. These groups once operated the most successful

OPERATING ENVIRONMENTS OF THE AL QAEDA NETWORK, MARCH 2010



SOURCE: Compiled from news reports in Pakistan by the authors and the Critical Threats Project team.

quasi state of the AQN under Mullah Omar. Nearly every group within the AQN has recognized Mullah Omar, the founder and leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, as *emir al mumineen*, or “Commander of the Faithful,” for his success as head of a militant Islamist Afghanistan.¹⁰¹ Eliminating that quasi state required an American military invasion. The Afghan insurgent groups are still struggling to regain their former quasi state using a limited safe haven in Pakistan. When considering how best to prevent that outcome, it is worth noting that the only strategy that has been effective in preventing the reemergence of quasi states is the one developed by General Stanley McChrystal and continuing under the command of General Petraeus: a campaign to seize territory from the enemy, a counterinsurgency effort to win over the

population and prevent the enemy from threatening stability, and a series of measures to help the Afghan government address the grievances that have been fueling the insurgency.

The defeat of the groups currently operating in distressed zones will require continued US support for ongoing counterinsurgency campaigns. The campaigns must continue to expand into the limited territory still held by such groups. Equally important, though, state security forces must maintain security in the areas previously occupied by terrorist groups. The United States should also continue to build upon the soft-power policies implemented in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to increase the chances that gains made against the militants can be sustained.

Lone Wolves and Sleeper Cells

Beyond the three categories of al Qaeda-linked groups, there are individuals and groups of individuals linked to al Qaeda who have attempted attacks against selected US and Western targets. They may derive inspiration from al Qaeda and sometimes have operational connections to larger groups. Effective homeland security measures, law enforcement efforts, and intelligence—not to mention the alert eyes of responsible citizens, such as the vendor in Times Square who noticed smoke emerging from Shahzad's car—are required in order to prevent such terrorists from carrying out attacks. Discussion of those policy

measures, which are defensive in nature, goes beyond the scope of this report. Homeland security measures are policies of last resort, designed to halt an operation midstream. Territory held by AQN groups is the source of the problem and presents the greatest threat. Eliminating al Qaeda's quasi states, erasing its limited safe havens, and keeping defeated groups in a weakened state will reduce the number of al Qaeda-linked individuals or cells who attempt attacks against US interests. Individuals and cells by themselves, without operational or strategic depth, present much less of a threat, especially over the long term.

Conclusion

The al Qaeda network has attacked US territory three times in the last year and a half: the Christmas Day attack, the Times Square attack, and the package plot of October 2010. Al Qaeda and its affiliates prepared these attacks from operating environments in two countries, and AQN territory stretches across at least two continents. Reducing the risk of further attacks on US territory will require a concerted strategy to roll back the entire AQN. Homeland security and law enforcement are critical to keeping US citizens safe, but they should be measures of last resort. US homeland security infrastructure cannot plug every security hole. Sustained strain upon the system over time and continued innovation by terrorist enemies may eventually result in a terrorist attack that succeeds in killing Americans, rather than one that results in creating fear alone (as the last three did).

Only certain types of operating environments are hospitable to al Qaeda-linked groups, and such environments are generally limited around the world. Contrary to the popular “whack-a-mole” theory, the eradication of an al Qaeda faction or safe haven does not spur the network to immediately establish an alternative safe haven, as adequate locations are difficult to find and it takes a long time to make conditions ripe for a new operating environment.

Only an offensive strategy that implements a robust combination of policy options can defeat the AQN and reduce the threat of terrorist attacks on the United States and its interests and allies over the long term. These combinations must be adjusted to suit the distinct environments in which these groups operate. Successfully developing an offensive strategy requires recognizing that the AQN maintains extensive links between groups while understanding that differences exist between these groups and their operating environments.

The sum of policies and greater understanding alone does not create a successful strategy. The strategy to achieve strategic goals requires clearing and transforming the operating environments hospitable to the AQN, one by one. Doing so will keep continual pressure on each of the current operating environments so that members of the network will not be able to flee to areas less resistant to its presence. A comprehensive strategy will also maintain a ceiling on the number of areas around the world that could serve as operating environments for the enemy network by reducing the factors that make an operating environment hospitable to al Qaeda. With this strategy and a commitment to victory, the defeat of the AQN is possible over the long term.

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44. Some Islamist groups levy taxes even in distressed zones, but to a much lesser degree and scale than in quasi states.

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