



Statement before the House Committee on Homeland Security  
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence  
on “The Persistent Threat: Al Qaeda’s Evolution and Resilience”

# **Al Qaeda’s Strengthening in the Shadows**

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Rice, and distinguished members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee on the persistent threat from al Qaeda.

US strategy is setting the stage for al Qaeda to lead the Salafi-jihadi movement again when that movement is the strongest it has ever been globally. Al Qaeda has adapted and evolved as America focused myopically on retaking two cities from the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS). Al Qaeda has become more resilient and ready to exploit our own strategic weaknesses. It seized the opportunity presented by conflicts in the Muslim world to advance its strategic objectives. It has acted deliberately below the thresholds that would set off alarms in Washington. It embedded itself in local insurgencies from Mali to Syria to Afghanistan that will serve as a source of strength for the global organization. The rise of the ISIS galvanized the Salafi-jihadi movement globally, which will continue to strengthen al Qaeda long after ISIS is gone. America's strategy to counter al Qaeda has remained relatively unchanged since 2001 even as the organization has adapted. The US does not even recognize any more the seriousness of the threat al Qaeda poses.

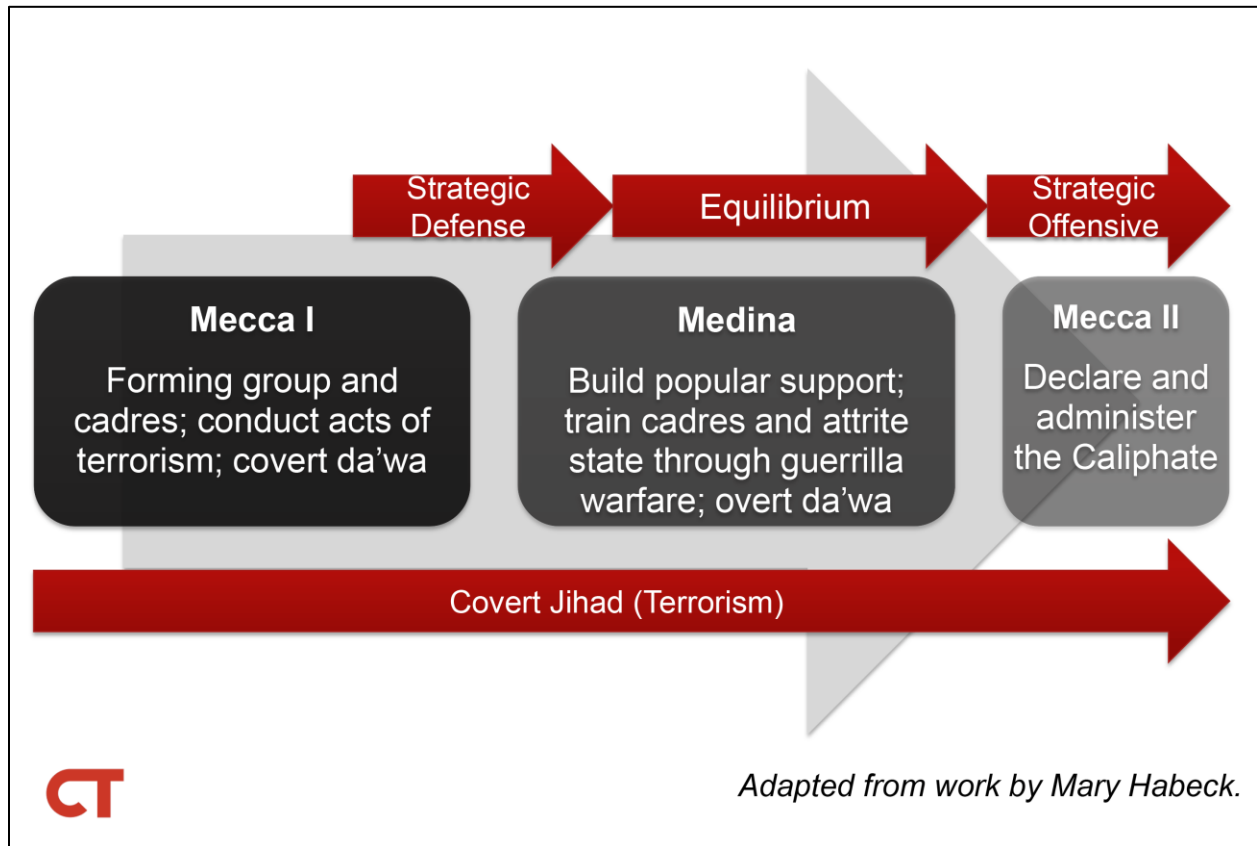
### **Al Qaeda's Role as the Vanguard Force**

Al Qaeda sees itself as the vanguard of the Salafi-jihadi movement. It does not seek to establish a state in the short term, unlike ISIS. It aims, rather, to provide strategic guidance and capabilities to the network of individuals, groups, and organizations that subscribe to the Salafi-jihadi ideology and form the true base of the movement.

Al Qaeda's objectives remain to unify the *umma*, Muslim community, in a struggle to destroy current Muslim societies and build in their stead what al Qaeda considers to be true Islamic polities and eventually, a caliphate. Al Qaeda prioritizes the Muslim world rather than attacking the West. It works hard to teach its religion to the masses, having learned through experience that too-rapid imposition of its views will alienate the population. It compares Muslims today to children, who must first learn right from wrong before they can be held accountable. Al Qaeda senior leadership directed attacks against the United States and the West to compel them to retreat from the Muslim world and end their support for state governments, which al Qaeda believed would pave the way for the success of popular revolutions in the name of Islam. Attacks against the West were always subordinate to the larger aims al Qaeda pursues in the Muslim world itself.

Salafi-jihadi ideology shapes al Qaeda's global strategy and operations in predictable ways. It holds that Islam must be revived in rigid allegory to the initial spread of the religion (See Figure 1). That allegory contains three primary phases: Mecca I, in which Mohammad began to receive the Qur'an from Allah but was threatened and persecuted in a hostile community; Medina, during which he emigrated to a more favorable location and built the base of the religion and its core followers; and Mecca II, when he returned to his original community, gained the ascendancy, and began to expand the faith broadly and rapidly. Al Qaeda assesses the Salafi-jihadi movement to be in the Medina phase of defensive jihad and gathering strength through governance and building military capabilities. (ISIS, by contrast, argues that the movement is in the Mecca II phase.) Like the Prophet Mohammed during this period, al Qaeda uses mediation and arbitration as a mechanism to generate support in local communities.

Figure 1. The Phases of the Prophet's Life and al Qaeda's Strategy



Source: Author.

Divisions weaken the *umma*, thus al Qaeda rejects state nationalism and judging the purity of Muslims, especially when facing a common enemy. Al Qaeda seeks to eradicate the nation as a primary form of identity for Muslims because al Qaeda saw nationalism as part of the failure of the mujahideen in the 1990s in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Ayman al Zawahiri stated:

The cause of Sham is the cause of the entire umma. . . .The enemy seeks to transform the Jihad in Sham from a cause for the Muslim *umma* to an exclusively nationalist Syrian cause, then turn the nationalist cause to an issue of specific regions and localities, and finally reduce this to an issue of a few cities, villages, and neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>

Al Qaeda also rejects the division that ISIS introduced to the Salafi-jihadi movement because it distracted Muslims from fighting a shared, common enemy.

Zawahiri's September 2013 guidance identified a military line of effort against the United States and others to weaken their support for Muslim governments and a political line of effort to both form and cultivate the vanguard force and mobilize the masses in the name of Islam.<sup>2</sup> Zawahiri gave explicit guidelines for operational activities and legitimate targets, which local affiliates have reinforced.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Zawahiri called for al Qaeda to support the revolutions of "the oppressed against the oppressors" regardless of whether the groups are Muslim and to teach the revolutionaries Islam. Al Qaeda affiliates all follow this guidance.

Al Qaeda has thus become less visible, less oppressive, and less violent because its leaders have changed their approach, not because the organization has become weaker. It has, on the contrary, grown much stronger and in ways more dangerous than ever before.

### **The al Qaeda Network Today**

Al Qaeda deliberately “localized” to build a durable popular base in key human terrain in the Muslim world. The conflicts that spiraled out of control after the initial popular movements during the 2011 Arab Spring did what al Qaeda had never been able to do for itself: They mobilized the Sunni populations against the state. Al Qaeda seized the opportunity and insinuated itself into the local insurgencies to hijack and redirect them toward its own purposes. It intertwined its network with the Salafi-jihadi base, which serves as a source of resilience and strength for al Qaeda. It eschewed directed attacks against Western targets, assessing correctly that the absence of such attacks would lead to the false narrative that it was weak and prevent additional military action against its groups. Al Qaeda is not in decline; it is preparing to emerge from the shadows to carry forward the Salafi-jihadi movement.

The conditions in the Muslim world empower al Qaeda, ISIS, and the Salafi-jihadi base. The collapse of five states since 2011—Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Mali—and the weakening of strong states such as Egypt made Sunni populations vulnerable. Communities mobilized in their own defense or as part of a popular insurgency. Al Qaeda and the Salafi-jihadi base support their efforts; have also filled governance gaps, exacerbated by conflict; and have expanded into Sunni communities. Rising sectarianism and the slow polarization of societies from Africa to the India subcontinent created additional opportunities for the Salafi-jihadi base to expand. Communities that had rejected Salafi-jihadi ideology for decades now tolerate its presence as part of a short-term calculus to survive.

The marbling of al Qaeda in local movements sometimes creates the appearance that local groups reject al Qaeda as they break and reform relations with it. However, the shifting and realignment within the network is largely over organizational, rather than ideological, differences. Normal personal power politics and operational-level disagreements play a role in al Qaeda’s organizational relations, too. These fractures must not be mistaken for overall weakness or disintegration. Nor should the US try to distinguish between the globally focused and locally focused groups, as the Salafi-jihadi ideology is inherently global in nature. The focus on the local objectives advances the overall global objectives of the Salafi-jihadi movement by design.

**Counterargument: Al Qaeda Is in Decline.** Serious and respectable experts argue against the view outlined above. Daniel Byman, among others, recently argued that al Qaeda’s strength has waned because of its low operational pace, limited resources and popular support, and backward slide in its own objectives.<sup>4</sup> Yet he notes that even as al Qaeda declined, the Salafi-jihadi movement that it helped mobilize is thriving. Byman based his assessment on the absence of a successful mass-casualty attack in the West in the past 10 years and the focus of the affiliates on local and regional objectives. He cited al Qaeda core’s inability to attract recruits—now drawn to ISIS—and the core’s reliance on its affiliates for resources, rather than the reverse. Byman further identified the rejection of al Qaeda by popular clerics as an indicator the group is failing. He noted, finally, that al Qaeda is in decline because the organization underestimated the effect that the US counterterrorism campaign and al Qaeda’s alienation from the people had on the organization itself.<sup>5</sup>

Many analysts have interpreted al Qaeda’s localization, its marbling in the local Salafi-jihadi base, as a strategic error that will weaken the al Qaeda organization in the long term. Charles Lister, for example,

cited al Qaeda's dissolution of its affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al Nusra, and the concessions al Qaeda leaders have made in Syria to a local support base as constraints on al Qaeda's activities and an indicator that al Qaeda will be absorbed into the local fight. Lister argued that the shifts in Syria move what was al Qaeda's affiliate further outside of the al Qaeda senior leadership's sphere, breaking up what was once a global network.<sup>6</sup> Al Qaeda's deliberate localization risks its ability to achieve its long-term objectives in this view, as al Qaeda groups compromise on ideology and strategy to court local support. Al Qaeda global will become a diluted version of itself over time.

Al Qaeda may indeed be in decline, but the evidence strongly suggests otherwise. Al Qaeda's leadership statements, its stated objectives and strategy to achieve these objectives, and its adaptations to new conditions lead to a different assessment.

**Al Qaeda Rising.** Al Qaeda benefits from the rise of ISIS and the conflicts that have swept through the Muslim world. It is positioned itself across the Muslim world to recapture the leadership of the Salafi-jihadi movement as pressure increases on ISIS. Al Qaeda's shift toward decentralized operations and the dispersal of its network built resilience within the organization and adapted to pressures from US-led counterterrorism actions.<sup>7</sup> It obfuscates its relationships with the Salafi-jihadi base to better achieve local objectives and to confound analysts and policymakers. Al Qaeda gained local popular support previously denied to it by the very population it sought to influence and now governs communities by proxy to begin to restructure society in pursuit of its long-term objectives.

ISIS has strengthened al Qaeda. It has galvanized the global Salafi-jihadi movement and drawn the West's attention. It has inspired a wave of would-be recruits to conduct fight-in-place attacks in the West, something al Qaeda was never able to do. Competition between ISIS and al Qaeda is limited to the top echelons of the movement: Groups on the ground deconflict and sometimes even cooperate. Should ISIS's global network collapse, al Qaeda will be able to capture the remnants and incorporate ISIS's capabilities into its own organization. Al Qaeda casts itself as more moderate than ISIS, gaining acceptance in populations that seek to defend themselves from ISIS. Finally, the West's prioritization of the anti-ISIS fight and the spread of civil wars and conflict in Muslim states gave al Qaeda the freedom of operation to focus on a strategic objective: the transformation of Muslim societies.

Al Qaeda's "rebranding" in the post-Arab Spring environment—the softening of its image and focus on local populations—is intended to buy support from the population. The shift signaled an inflection in al Qaeda's population-centric approach in which it began to use the Salafi-jihadi base as a means to entrench itself in local contexts. Zawahiri reinforced this approach when he took over the movement from Osama bin Laden. Zawahiri experienced failure in Egypt in the 1990s as the population rejected his Egyptian Islamic Jihad group completely. This failure shapes Zawahiri's decision-making. He is sensitive to the requirement of gaining popular acceptance and thus continuously forbids actions that could isolate al Qaeda from the people. He recently ordered groups not to attack even legitimate targets if the masses would not understand the purpose of the action.<sup>8</sup> Al Qaeda seeks to change the very fabric of Muslim society and cannot do so from a position of isolation.

Al Qaeda is aggressively working through the Salafi-jihadi base to transform Sunni communities so that they willingly accept its ideology. The spread of violence and collapse of order imperils communities. Some, such as those in Syria, are under direct threat. These communities now accept the presence of al Qaeda and the Salafi-jihadi base because their presence delivers much-needed assistance so that the community can survive. Al Qaeda insinuates itself indirectly through the partners and proxies in the Salafi-jihadi base that focus on meeting the needs of the community. Communities receive not only

basic assistance but also a sermon on Islam. The intent is to spread the Salafi-jihadi ideology alongside good works. Al Qaeda embeds itself into local insurgencies by providing much-needed capabilities, resources, or planning and then hijacks the insurgency toward its own purpose. Al Qaeda fills governance gaps in such a way as to deliver its message alongside basic services. Al Qaeda channels resources through Salafi charities and organizations and elevates local Salafis to positions of authority in communities to begin to transform the governance system into one that meets al Qaeda's requirements under *shari'a*.

The impression of al Qaeda's weakness is a deliberate pose. Senior al Qaeda leadership correctly assessed that portraying global dissolution and publicly embracing local fights would create confusion in Western minds about the threat al Qaeda poses. The group seeks to remain below the level of US and Western policy redlines to pursue its strategic objectives in the Muslim world without attracting Western responses. Al Qaeda has thus for the most part avoided attempting large-scale attacks in the US and Europe and establishing Taliban-like governments. Al Qaeda has messaged that it no longer threatens the West, that it lacked centralized leadership, and that the rise of ISIS crippled it.<sup>9</sup> Al Qaeda's prioritization of local fights also exploits the reluctance in Western governments toward intervening in local conflicts.

**Al Qaeda today.** Al Qaeda currently seeks to incite the *umma* to undertake a global *jihad* to defend Muslims. Propaganda and media material focuses on the arguments to fight Western and Russian aggression against Muslims and on the need to unify against common enemies. It tailors its message toward target audiences in Muslim lands that are threatened and in the West. Al Qaeda encourages those in Muslims lands to support the mujahideen fighting in their defense by whatever means possible. It tells Muslims in the West to mobilize and conduct small-scale attacks against Jews, Americans and NATO allies, Russians, and those denigrating Islam. The group that conducted the recent terrorist attack in St. Petersburg, Russia, claimed to have done so on al Qaeda's orders.

Al Qaeda senior leadership (AQL) no longer concentrates in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater. Neither is it any longer synonymous with what the Obama administration dubbed "al Qaeda core"—the al Qaeda node in Afghanistan-Pakistan. This shift began in the early 2010s. AQL is now dispersed throughout al Qaeda's network with strong concentrations in Syria (primarily al Qaeda's network that had been based in Iran), Yemen, and Afghanistan-Pakistan. AQL is comprised of the senior leaders of al Qaeda affiliates and veteran operatives, including those who gained their freedom from prison during the Arab Spring uprisings. The dispersion of the AQL cadre creates certain operational challenges, such as rapid coordination, but also complicates Western efforts to eliminate the group.

Affiliate leadership still coordinates for strategic messaging. The joint releases by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) are the strongest points of coordination. These groups issued a joint statement eulogizing Omar Abdul Rahman (the Blind Sheikh) one day after reports of his death surfaced and one eulogizing Abu Khayr al Masri four days after his death. They may have secure communications to coordinate these joint statements rapidly, or the groups may emplace members with one another to approve such joint statements. The echo of the same themes across affiliate leadership statements during the same period is another sign of coordination. Common talking points on ISIS and now on the global *jihad* and authorized activities are the primary examples of this coordination.

Al Qaeda could again take the helm of the Salafi-jihadi movement. The core al Qaeda leaders and groups remained part of the al Qaeda network and have rejected ISIS. The entrenchment of its affiliates into

local dynamics better positions al Qaeda to capture the remnants of ISIS as the global anti-ISIS coalition degrades it. Al Qaeda is strengthening in each of the theaters in which it is active.

**Iraq and al Sham (Syria and Lebanon).** Al Qaeda prioritizes the Syrian theater as the primary struggle against Western and Russian aggression. AQSL emphasizes the importance of the Syrian fight for all Muslims. Senior al Qaeda members operate in Syria to provide overall strategic guidance to al Qaeda's Syrian network. The US first identified these individuals as the "Khorasan group" and sought to eliminate the cell.<sup>10</sup> Al Qaeda operatives who had been in Iran began to base in Syria in 2013. Al Qaeda secured the release of at least five senior operatives in a prisoner swap with Iran for an Iranian diplomat it captured in Yemen.<sup>11</sup> These operatives then traveled to Syria, among them al Qaeda's chief of military operations, Saif al Adel, and the late deputy leader Abu Khayr al Masri.

Al Qaeda is strongest in Syria, where it has used the conditions created by the Syrian civil war and Operation Inherent Resolve against ISIS to establish deep sanctuary in the northwest and position itself to expand farther into the Syrian theater. Al Qaeda is consolidating control over Idlib province, which it likely will retain uncontested in the near term. Through Jabhat al Nusra and Salafi-jihadi organizations such as Ahrar al Sham, al Qaeda co-opted the majority of Syria's mainstream opposition into the Salafi-jihadi ranks, establishing itself as the dominant force within the northern Syria's opposition.<sup>12</sup> Al Qaeda has set conditions for the future establishment of an Islamic emirate—not necessarily under al Qaeda's name—that will secure al Qaeda's objective to build an Islamic polity in Syria. Ayman al Zawahiri explicitly referenced al Qaeda's work toward establishing an Islamic emirate in Syria in May 2016.<sup>13</sup>

The Syrian al Qaeda network is one of the best-resourced nodes in al Qaeda because of Syria's primacy in the global theaters for jihad. Syria remains a top destination for al Qaeda's foreign-fighter flow, creating a large foreign recruitment base. Al Qaeda in Syria suffered some financial hits because of its loss of control over oil fields, but these losses will not likely affect its operations.<sup>14</sup> It funnels resources from groups in its network that receive external support (especially from Qatar and Turkey), it receives donations from individuals, conducts kidnappings for ransom, and also generates resources through taxation and commercial enterprise.

Zawahiri continues to see Iraq and al Sham as a single theater for al Qaeda and desires the al Qaeda organization to reenter Iraq. He argued for the treatment of Iraq and al Sham as a single theater during the break with ISIS and continued to direct al Qaeda support to the Sunni in Iraq. Zawahiri called for Syrian mujahideen to reach out in support of the Iraqi Sunni in an August 2016 statement:

As for our brothers the heroes of Islam from the mujahideen of Sham, I urge them to help their brothers in Iraq to reorganize themselves, for their battle is one, and Sham is an extension of Iraq, and Iraq is the bedrock of Sham.<sup>15</sup>

Al Qaeda will reenter Iraq seeking to lead a Sunni insurgency as ISIS weakens.

**Afghanistan.** Al Qaeda is reconstituting in Afghanistan in concert with the Afghan Taliban, which provides sanctuary to al Qaeda. AQSL, such as Ayman al Zawahiri and Hamza bin Laden, operates from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Retaining al Qaeda's sanctuary in Afghanistan is a secondary but important effort for the global organization because the victory against the Soviets in Afghanistan remains al Qaeda's crown jewel, proving that the mujahideen can defeat a superpower. Al Qaeda never fully lost its sanctuary in Pakistan and used this base to project forward into Afghanistan again as the US drew down militarily.<sup>16</sup> By 2015, al Qaeda was running large training camps inside Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> The US began revising its assessments of al Qaeda's strength in Afghanistan based on the discovery of these

training camps.<sup>18</sup> The US killed senior al Qaeda leaders operating in Afghanistan in an October 2016 air strike, their presence a telling indicator that al Qaeda had returned to the country.<sup>19</sup>

**Yemen.** Yemen serves as a critical safe haven to support al Qaeda's global operations and a cadre of senior leaders, and as the battlefield for the religiously significant Arabian Peninsula. AQAP remains one of al Qaeda's premier nodes and is set to strengthen further in the context of Yemen's civil war. AQAP facilitates global al Qaeda operations. AQAP-trained bombmakers went to Syria and Libya in 2011 and 2012. AQAP almost certainly provided the equipment or the expertise for al Shabaab's 2016 laptop bomb.<sup>20</sup> Al Qaeda leaders in Yemen, including long-time veterans, provide strategic guidance alongside senior leaders in Afghanistan-Pakistan to the global movement.

The collapse of Yemen into civil war presented al Qaeda with a second chance to embed itself in the population.<sup>21</sup> Al Qaeda's experiment with governance in 2011 failed after the group lost the support of the population in which it was operating. It learned from its errors. It used proxy groups drawn from the local population to provide security and governance after that debacle, which ensured a local face on al Qaeda's efforts. These groups seized control of and administered Yemen's third-largest port city for a year, making nearly \$2 million per day, and the populated areas that AQAP had controlled in 2011.<sup>22</sup> An Emirati-led counterterrorism operation ended AQAP's control of terrain, but AQAP's strength comes from its relationship with the mobilized Sunni population in Yemen, not the land.<sup>23</sup>

**East Africa.** Al Qaeda affiliate al Shabaab serves as a key link between the Middle East and Africa for the al Qaeda network and is gaining ground in Somalia.<sup>24</sup> Al Shabaab still administers parts of south-central Somalia and generates funding through taxation and control over certain trade.<sup>25</sup> It has increasingly projected force back into Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, and into northern Kenya. Al Shabaab has also conducted multiple high-profile raids on military bases in Somalia that decimated military units and restocked al Shabaab's military equipment. Its attraction is not its attacks against the government or African Union peacekeeping forces, but rather its competitive shadow government that appeals to disenfranchised clans,<sup>26</sup> which is how al Shabaab expanded in Somalia originally. Al Shabaab could broaden its support base through its limited provision of humanitarian aid as famine looms in Somalia.<sup>27</sup> It seeks to influence the Kenyan electorate and stoke tensions ahead of the August 2017 elections, which may result in political unrest in the country.

**Sahel.** Al Qaeda's network in the Sahel now operates under the name Jama'a Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen (JNIM), merging various Salafi-jihadi groups that had been cooperating with al Qaeda. Al Qaeda targeted key human terrain in the Sahel in order to expand its base. Iyad ag Ghali, JNIM's leader, not only heads al Qaeda's associated group in the Sahel, but is also a key smuggler and leader within the Ifoghas Tuareg. Al Qaeda embedded first within the 2012 Tuareg insurgency in Mali and then helped stoke a Fulani insurgency in central Mali.<sup>28</sup> Its recruitment of Fulanis likely enabled al Qaeda's attacks against Western targets in Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast. Salafi-jihadi groups are reconstituting in northern Mali after the 2013 French intervention. JNIM coordinates closely with AQIM and could be subordinated to the al Qaeda affiliate. A breakaway faction pledged to ISIS in the Sahara, but its presence has not affected al Qaeda's activities. It is not clear whether al Qaeda will restore relations with Boko Haram, which has split with both factions cleaving to ISIS.

**Maghreb.** ISIS and al Qaeda compete for the loyalty of North African groups. Al Qaeda reunified in North Africa after the split with ISIS, consolidating multiple splinter groups that had left AQIM since 2011 to avoid division in its ranks. Al Qaeda aims to preserve its sanctuaries and continue to capture foreign fight flows from the region. These include positions in Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. It is not yet clear what



al Qaeda's play is with its dissolution of Ansar al Sharia in Libya, but it may be a move similar to Jabhat al Nusra's dissolution in Syria that will permit al Qaeda personnel to remain accepted by the local populations. Al Qaeda will almost certainly benefit from Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el Sisi's crackdown on political and violent Islamists in Egypt and in Libya. AQIM continues to generate resources through smuggling and kidnappings for ransom that it shares with JNIM and other members of the Salafi-jihadi base.

**Indian Subcontinent.** The al Qaeda presence in the Indian subcontinent remains weak after Ayman al Zawahiri announced the launch of a new affiliate in September 2014.<sup>29</sup> Al Qaeda divides the Pakistani theater by ethnic group. The Pashtun are part of its Khorasan theater, which includes Afghanistan and Iran, and the Punjab are under al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which works through the Indian Punjab and Bangladesh. A recent surge in propaganda from AQIS leadership may indicate an attempt to revive the group.<sup>30</sup>

### **Al Qaeda's Next Generation**

US counterterrorism actions have significantly degraded the al Qaeda leadership cadre over the years. But targeted killing has only had a short-term effect on the global organization. Al Qaeda had a much deeper bench than assumed in 2001 when the high-value targeting began and has been able to generate a next generation of leaders who are rising to the fore today. Al Qaeda's ideology and the Salafi-jihadi ideology provided the group's doctrine and strategy, which is exogenous to any single individual.

The old generation continues to provide strategic guidance to the Salafi-jihadi movement. The voices of pro-al Qaeda ideologues, in fact, have been amplified as a tool against ISIS. Abu Qatada and Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi, for example, are active on the global stage to condemn ISIS, but in the process, justify support for al Qaeda's methods (even as they portray al Qaeda as weak). Ayman al Zawahiri, whom many dismissed as irrelevant and uncharismatic, still issues guidance to his subordinates and addresses those living in Muslim lands to call them to join the jihad. Operational tensions between field commanders and the headquarters persist today, especially in Syria, as they did in the 2000s in Iraq. Zawahiri likewise might be elevating his former network from his days leading the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Less visible but still active is a cadre of senior leaders based in Syria and Afghanistan-Pakistan such as Saif al Adel and others. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, if he is still alive, is coordinating operations in the Sahel.

Attrition at the leadership level compelled al Qaeda to unmask long-standing senior operatives who could speak with legitimacy on a global platform. AQAP, which had lost its leader, deputy leader, and religious officials in a year, released a video showcasing the depth of its bench in Yemen in December 2015. Sheikh Ibrahim al Banna, who served as AQAP's security chief, appeared in the video after keeping a low profile because he was reported to have been killed in 2010. Al Banna earned a degree from al Azhar University, giving him religious credentials that add authority to his messages to all Muslim to embrace jihad. Another individual in the video was Ibrahim al Qosi, a former Guantanamo detainee released to Sudan who claimed to have been operating from Yemen since December 2014. Al Qaeda continues to leverage individuals who had returned to the battlefield from Guantanamo as a badge of honor.

A new generation of al Qaeda is rising. Osama bin Laden had been cultivating his son, Hamza, for years before his death. Al Qaeda's al Sahab media released a message from Hamza bin Laden for the first time in August 2015.<sup>31</sup> Hamza called for lone-wolf attacks in the West. His continued focus on inciting attacks by Muslims living in the West, alongside criticism of the Saudi Kingdom, seems to indicate that Hamza is

taking on his father's mantle. Al Qaeda operatives released from prison in the Arab Spring and after, such as Khaled Batarfi in Yemen, have also taken an active role at a senior level. Zawahiri, likewise, appears to be developing new leaders. Syrian al Qaeda leader Abu Muhammad al Julani<sup>32</sup> and the senior operatives now heading Hay'at Tahrir al Sham and Ahrar al Sham, may be new operational leaders whom Zawahiri could elevate if need be. It seems, for the time being, that Zawahiri is minimizing al Qaeda's visible presence in Syria. Likewise, affiliate leaders Ahmed Umar (Abu Ubaidah) of al Shabaab and Asim Umar of AQIS will serve to amplify the al Qaeda echo chamber.

### **Looking Forward: Al Qaeda's Future Threat**

The United States risks strategic surprise with al Qaeda. Nothing indicates that al Qaeda as a global organization has altered its long-term objectives nor changed its position on how to achieve these objectives. Al Qaeda's entrenchment into local conflicts is dangerous for the United States because al Qaeda seeks to alter Muslim communities and unify them under it in its violent struggle for Islam. Global trends are also moving in al Qaeda's favor such that it will likely benefit from increasing sectarianism and polarization in the Muslim world and even in the West. Al Qaeda could reassume its position as the vanguard force of a much-empowered Salafi-jihadi movement as pressure increases on ISIS.

Al Qaeda is almost certainly refining and improving its external attack capabilities to be prepared to deploy them at a future date. Ibrahim al Asiri, al Qaeda's innovative bombmaker, remains at large and has already trained others in his tradecraft. Al Qaeda's external attack capabilities are degraded because of US and partnered counterterrorism actions, but they have not been destroyed. The 2017 Worldwide Threats Assessments from Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats assesses that al Qaeda still intends to conduct attacks against the United States and the West, although the group's capability to do so from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region has been degraded.<sup>33</sup> However, al Qaeda's affiliates in Syria and Yemen "have preserved the resources, manpower, safe haven, local influence, and operational capabilities to continue to pose a threat," and al Shabaab in Somalia has the "operational capabilities to pose a real threat to the region." Al Qaeda may continue to attack Russian targets for Russia's role in Syria, may begin attacks against Emirati targets for the United Arab Emirates' role in Yemen, and may also focus on Egypt.

Synergy among global trends will increase support for the Salafi-jihadi movement overall, which al Qaeda seeks to capture. Rising sectarianism, not just between Sunni and Shi'a, but between Muslims and non-Muslims, will polarize populations. Of concern are the reflections today in places such as India, where far-right Hindu groups are attacking Muslims for eating cow. Intercommunal sectarian violence serves to bolster support for Salafi-jihadi groups. Closing political space to Islamists and persecution of Salafis in the Muslim world will also drive some of these individuals and factions toward violence to achieve their aims or defend themselves. Al Qaeda seeks to capture those disenchanted with the nonviolent route, especially in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. The anti-Muslim Brotherhood policies pushed by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el Sisi and Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed will almost certainly feed extremism rather than eliminate it.

Al Qaeda is prepared for the weakening of ISIS. It has the position inside Syria to expand into terrain liberated from ISIS, some of which al Qaeda had occupied before ISIS. Populations that had lived under ISIS will be less likely to reject al Qaeda's ideology, although both are a far cry from mainstream Islam. The mass mobilization of Muslims in the West will continue beyond the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Hamza bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders seek to recruit these mobilized individuals under al Qaeda's leadership.

Al Qaeda's evolution and adaptation to conditions ensures that it will threaten the United States long term and emerge stronger from the chaos that has enveloped the Muslim world. It is poised to take over the reins of the Salafi-jihadi movement. Yet, it is not sufficient just to defeat al Qaeda and ISIS. The Salafi-jihadi movement predates both groups and will generate another transnational organization if they are defeated. Instead, the US must move beyond focusing on the groups and instead seek to weaken and defeat the global Salafi-jihadi movement.

<sup>1</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, "AQ Leader Zawahiri Declares Syrian Jihad an Issue Concerning All Muslims, Calls to Reject Nationalist Sentiment," April 23, 2017, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/aq-leader-zawahiri-declares-syrian-jihad-an-issue-concerning-all-muslims-calls-to-reject-nationalist-sentiment.html>.

<sup>2</sup> SITE Intelligence Group, "Zawahiri Gives General Guidelines for Jihad Regarding Military, Propaganda," September 13, 2013, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/zawahiri-gives-general-guidelines-for-jihad-regarding-military-propaganda.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, for example, released a substantial document that provided a "Code of Conduct" for mujahideen in the Indian subcontinent. See SITE Intelligence Group, "AQIS Publishes Its 'Code of Conduct,' Declares U.S. Citizens and Interests in Pakistan Its 'Foremost Priority,'" June 25, 2017, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/aqis-publishes-its-code-of-conduct-declares-u-s-citizens-and-interests-in-pakistan-its-foremost-priority.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Byman, "Judging al-Qaida's Record, Part 1: Is the Organization in Decline?" Lawfare blog, June 27, 2017, <https://lawfareblog.com/judging-al-qaedas-record-part-i-organization-decline>.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Byman, "Judging al-Qaida's Record, Part II: Why has al-Qaida Declined?" Lawfare blog, June 28, 2017, <https://lawfareblog.com/judging-al-qaedas-record-part-ii-why-has-al-qaeda-declined>.

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda's Turning Against Its Syrian Affiliate," Middle East Institute, May 18, 2017, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/al-qaeda-s-turning-against-its-syrian-affiliate>

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