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### Al Qaeda's Twenty-Year Strategic Plan: The Current Phase of Global Terror

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# Al Qaeda's Twenty-Year Strategic Plan: The Current Phase of Global Terror

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*This study examines Al Qaeda's organizational dynamics, doctrinal precepts, strategic objectives, operational priorities, and tactical vectors in the context of its Twenty-Year Strategic Plan. This seven-stage Strategic Plan is addressed with a particular focus on its current phase (Stage 5), 2013–2016, involving the mobilization of Muslim forces for the "Declaration of the Caliphate." In this regard, particular attention is paid to the Al Qaeda engagement in militant jihadist campaigns across the Middle East and other Muslim domains. The study concludes with an overall assessment of global threats and ongoing risks arising from the current phase of Al Qaeda's Twenty-Year Strategic Plan.*

## Introduction

Al Qaeda, along with its affiliated networks and homegrown "inspired" cells in various jurisdictions, constitutes the foremost international terrorist threat to global security, according to official assessments.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding its apparent failure to mobilize the Muslim masses, the movement calling itself "Al Qaeda al-Jihad" (Arabic for "The Base of the Jihad," i.e., the holy struggle) has effectively appropriated to itself the vanguard role in a putative, militant global *jihad*. For its militant proponents, *jihadism* considers itself engaged in a sacred conflict of global proportions as between *Dar ul-Islam*, the abode of the Muslim faithful, sanctified with divine sanction, and the *Dar ul-Harb*, the domain of world's infidels, characterized by corrupt governance, idolatrous beliefs, and degenerate practices.<sup>2</sup> As will be explained below, in addressing the Strategic Doctrine of Global Jihad, Al Qaeda and its ideologues have defined terrorism to be both a legitimate defensive tactic for the protection of *Dar ul-Islam* against infidel threats, and a divinely sanctioned offensive strategy for the pursuit and conquest of *Dar ul-Harb*. Terror is deemed a weapon in the Al Qaeda *jihad* against perceived enemies of Islam, preparatory to the ultimate re-institution of a global Caliphate.

The study that follows will address the doctrine of *jihad* (struggle) driving Al Qaeda actions, its twenty-year Strategic Plan to establish a global Caliphate, the operational dynamics of the "terrorism cycle" through which this goal is being pursued, concluding with assessment of the contemporary threats and risks associated Al Qaeda-inspired global *jihadist* terrorism.

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## Al Qaeda—Four Waves of Terror

From its beginnings in the late 1980s, as an Arab element in the Afghan *mujaheddin* (religious warriors) resistance against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, until today, Al Qaeda has demonstrated a remarkable agility and adaptability over the course of its *jihadist* campaign against perceived “enemies of Islam.”<sup>3</sup> Over the past four decades the organization known as Al Qaeda (Arabic for “The Base”) has evolved through four “waves,” or phases of militant struggle against designated targets at each stage, commencing with the original (a) “Arab-Afghan” *mujaheddin*, followed by (b) the Resistance from Exile, which in turn engendered (c) so-called Homegrown terrorism, which has now re-grouped and rebuilt itself into the contemporary (d) *Al Qaeda al-Jihad*, (“The Base for Jihad”), sometimes referred to as *Al Qaeda al-Oum* (“The Mother Base”), as a worldwide, distributed “system of systems” for global *jihad* overseen from the remote northwestern frontier areas of Pakistan.<sup>4</sup>

### Arab Afghans

The Afghan-Arab element which joined in support of the *mujahiden* resistance to the Soviet presence and domination of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 came from across the Arab and Muslim world. Three countries—Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Algeria—reportedly supplied the overwhelming majority of recruits. Al Qaeda emerged around 1988, having evolved out of the *Maktab al-Khidamat* (Services Office), a Muslim organization founded in 1980 to raise funds and recruit foreign—especially Arab—*mujahiden* for the struggle. It was founded by Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, a Palestinian Islamic scholar and member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Its religious outlook reflected a Salafist perspective of Islam. Its political ideology, rooted in the doctrines of Muslim Brotherhood stalwarts like Hassan al-Bannah and Syed Qutb, was fixated on galvanizing a militant *jihad* against perceived enemies of Islam, both “Near” (in the Arab world) and “Far” (the West).

Following their victory in Afghanistan and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, the Arab-Afghan leadership of Al Qaeda found itself divided as to future geostrategic priorities or axes of advance. Certain elements in the leadership aimed to carry forward with the struggle against Soviet/Russian rule over historically Muslim societies in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Others sought to reorient their struggle towards overthrowing secular (“apostate”) regimes within the Arab world itself. Some also called for a far-reaching *jihad* against enemies of Islam in the *Dar ul-Harb*, commencing in the Balkans and in Kashmir.<sup>5</sup> Following the murder of Abdullah Azzam in 1989, Osama bin Laden emerged as the leader of the Al Qaeda faction committed to the *jihadist* struggle against enemies of Islam across the world.

The Soviet withdrawal and subsequent collapse of the (Marxist) Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1992) prompted Arab-Afghan *mujahedeen* followers of Ibn Khattab, a close associate of the Al Qaeda leadership and Osama bin Laden, to lead an extension of their *jihad* to neighboring Tajikistan in 1993, and then to Chechnya in the spring of 1995.<sup>6</sup> His objective was explicitly to expel the Russians from all Muslim territories in the Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>7</sup> Already at that time, Arab-Afghan training facilities were also providing training to Algerians and other North Africans for terrorist operations in Britain, France, and Germany.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile Osama bin Laden himself had returned to Saudi Arabia to exercise leadership of his movement from this heartland of Salafist Islam. Subsequently, his fervent opposition to the presence of American and other foreign armed forces in Saudi Arabia at the invitation of the government and in response to the Iraqi invasion of neighboring Kuwait, led to his departure to Sudan. Between 1992 and 1996 the Al Qaeda element in

Sudan proceeded to create an operational headquarters with international branch offices along with training camps for *mujahideen*, and initiated terror attacks targeting Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the United States. As well, Al Qaeda provided backing for Egyptian Islamic Jihad attacks on Egypt, including the attempted assassination of President Mubarak. These militant activities served as a sort of precursor to the notion of Resistance from Exile. However, by May 1996, diplomatic pressure on the Sudanese impelled them to expel Osama bin Laden and his associates, who in turn sought refuge back in Afghanistan, now controlled by the Taliban.

The Afghanistan sanctuary allowed the Arab-Afghan militants the latitude and legitimacy to sustain an Al Qaeda *jihad* against perceived enemies, Near and Far. In August 1996, Osama bin Laden issued a formal *fatwa* calling for a *jihad* against the United States, Arab apostate regimes, and their allies, with the aim of liberating the Muslim world from any and all infidel presence.<sup>9</sup> Toward this end, Al Qaeda training camps were established in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistani border regions for the training and indoctrination of militant *jihadists* recruited from around the world so as to develop their organizational and operational capabilities. In February, 1998, Al Qaeda and allied *jihadist* groups proclaimed the creation of the "World Islamic Front for Combat Against the Jews and Crusaders," declaring:

[T]he ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque (in Makka) from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim. This is in accordance with the words of Almighty Allah, "and fight the pagans all together as they fight you all together," and "fight them until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah."<sup>10</sup>

Through an active recruitment, training, and indoctrination effort Al Qaeda was able to build an expansive network of operatives and supporters across the world. From its base in Afghanistan Al Qaeda used its network of operatives to initiate a *jihadist* terror campaign against designated targets in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Africa, Western Europe, and the United States.

### ***Resistance from Exile***

*Jihadist* efforts during the 1990s to seize power in Middle Eastern countries by force, as in Egypt and Syria, or even by elections, as in Algeria, provoked repressive reactions on the part of incumbent authorities.<sup>11</sup> Replicating the experience of the Prophet of Islam, many Islamist leaders chose to remove themselves from these so-called apostate (*takfiri*) jurisdictions and go into exile (*hijra*) to Europe or North America where they would be free to re-group, mobilize, and prepare a resistance that could ultimately enable a return to their erstwhile homelands. They were joined in exile by Arab-Afghan veterans who were unable or unwilling to return to their countries of origin.<sup>12</sup>

From their sanctuary in democratic, Western jurisdictions, Islamist activists in exile were free to pronounce in favor of regime change and the installation of Islamic theocracy across the Middle East and North Africa. Some of the more radical diaspora preachers and activists went further to incite and promote violent terror campaigns against "apostate" political systems in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and

Yemen.<sup>13</sup> Al Qaeda and its local networks provided the organizational and operational links between the Islamist diaspora and the *jihadi* cadres in the home countries under attack.

### **Homegrown Terrorism**

Whereas the Islamist exiles may not have intended, at least not initially, to foment unrest in their countries of sanctuary, in so far as their primary goal related to Islamic governance back home, their preaching and activism inevitably inculcated a radical and extremist outlook in among local diaspora Muslim communities and especially among their youth.<sup>14</sup> Local branches of radical Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir (“Party of Liberation”) managed to embed themselves in diaspora communities in various countries across Europe, Australasia, and North America.<sup>15</sup> Prompted by radical elements in the local religious, communal and/or educational leadership, and inspired by Al Qaeda propaganda (see below), a sub-culture of radicalization took root in these diaspora communities and served to mobilize homegrown recruits and support for the militant *jihadi* agenda.<sup>16</sup>

Notwithstanding its notionally “homegrown” character, the accumulated evidence from actual plots and attacks on local targets points to the systematic involvement of Al Qaeda core elements in the indoctrination, recruitment, training, and planning of terrorist assaults in-country in recent years.<sup>17</sup> Data on major Islamist terrorist plots in Britain reveal ideological and operational links between homegrown elements and Al Qaeda in Pakistan.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, with Canadian homegrown cells, the group that composed the so-called Toronto-18 was shown to have had international connections to Al Qaeda operatives in Britain and Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> U.S. authorities have reported similar findings as regards homegrown *jihadists* arrested for plotting terrorist acts targeting the American homeland.<sup>20</sup>

As will be addressed in greater detail below, the Internet has come to play a major role in Al Qaeda’s ongoing efforts to mobilize and promote locally homegrown *jihadi* operations against European and North American targets.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the spring 2013 issue of Al Qaeda’s Web-based, English-language magazine *Inspire* advocated “individual jihad” so as to galvanize even lone militants to attack “important targets” as part of its terror campaign against the West.<sup>22</sup>

### **Al Qaeda al Jihad**

The escalating Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan has been accompanied by a re-grouping and re-building of Al Qaeda’s core organizational hub, “al-Qaeda al-Jihad,” in the remote region of Waziristan along the Pakistan border with Afghanistan. Today, Al Qaeda has effectively transformed itself into a loosely structured decentralized “system, not organization,” a veritable “system of systems” spanning the Middle East and North Africa, East and West Africa, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, with tentacles reaching out to Europe and North America.<sup>23</sup> Since 2003 Al Qaeda absorbed or merged with 10 new and extant terrorist groups and thus intensified its presence in some 19 countries.<sup>24</sup> In the words of a high ranking British intelligence official, “Al-Qaeda has split like a piece of mercury into different groups in different countries.”<sup>25</sup>

This devolution of militant *jihadi* capabilities reflected a precept put forward by the preeminent strategic theorist Mustafa Sethmariam Nasar (nom de guerre: Abu Mus’ab al-Suri) calling for the mobilization of locally grounded, global *jihad* insurrections in every targeted country.<sup>26</sup> Within this globally distributed *jihadi* “system of systems” certain operational functions, such as armed struggle or terror strikes or recruitment, fund-raising,

logistics, reconnaissance, and devolved upon regional affiliates, front organizations, local auxiliaries, or cells (“families”), so as not to compromise the whole through inadvertent self-exposure. Meanwhile the core element, Al Qaeda al Jihad, would deliver theological inspiration, strategic guidance, tactical doctrine, and operational coordination for the “system of systems” as a whole.<sup>27</sup> That said, an unprecedented internal dispute between the Al Qaeda core leadership and a regional affiliate was first reported in June 2013, over the Iraqi affiliate’s action to merge its Syrian counterpart, the al-Nusra Front, into a so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in defiance of explicit orders from the core Al Qaeda leadership under Ayman al-Zawahiri himself to keep the two movements separate.<sup>28</sup>

The evolving decentralization and localization of Al Qaeda network activities was accompanied by an emergent trend toward indigenous regional *jihadist* insurgencies in parts of the Middle East and Muslim Africa, most notably in Iraq, Syria, the Maghreb, Somalia, Nigeria and Yemen, along with ongoing “homegrown” terrorism in the European, North American, and Australasian diaspora. Yet, despite these seemingly disparate and dispersed operational campaigns, indications are that the Al Qaeda core element, Al Qaeda al Jihad, remains systematically engaged by way of exercising transcendent leadership.<sup>29</sup> Homegrown cells and regional affiliates of the “system of systems” still look to their core Al Qaeda al Jihad for overall theological inspiration and strategic guidance, along with tactical support, training, and resourcing. The overall aim is to pursue the Al Qaeda Twenty-Year Strategic Plan to a definitive victory, culminating in the establishment of a global Caliphate by the year 2020.<sup>30</sup>

### The Strategic Doctrine of Global Jihad

*Jihad* is a religious obligation in Islam. What is described as the “Greater *Jihad*” pertains to a personal effort to better one’s own religious compliance. The “Lesser *Jihad*” represents a communal and individual obligation to defend and protect Islam, Muslims, and their geographic domains against hostile forces. However, the prominent Islamist scholar, Abdullah Yusuf Azzam (1941–1989), a founder of Al Qaeda and promoter of the Arab-Afghan *mujahideen* against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, insisted that the notion of a “Greater” or spiritual *jihad* had no theological basis in Islamic jurisprudence:

The saying, “We have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad (jihad of the soul)” which people quote on the basis that it is a hadith [Prophetic sayings], is in fact a false, fabricated hadith which has no basis. It is only a saying of Ibrahim Ibn Abi‘Abalah, one of the Successors, and it contradicts textual evidence and reality.<sup>31</sup>

The commitment to *jihad* is made explicit in Quranic accounts of military expeditions and combat in defense of the faith and the faithful. That remit for *jihad* invokes both defensive and offensive warfare at the tactical as well as strategic levels. According to Mawlana Maududi, a foremost twentieth-century Islamist thinker and founder of the Jamaat e-Islami Islamist revivalist party, “Islamic jihad is both offensive and defensive at one and the same time.”<sup>32</sup> At a tactical level, *jihad* mobilizes the defenders of Muslim interests. A proclamation of *jihad* gives a mandate to embark on proactive, offensive operations aimed at spreading the Islamic faith.

The authority to proclaim *jihad*, in Islamic law, was traditionally vested in the Muslim governments of the day. It was a governance prerogative. However, Al Qaeda founder

Abdullah Azzam considered contemporary Muslim governments and societies to be tainted by apostasy, so they could not be expected to fulfill the religious obligations for *jihad*. Al Qaeda and its radical Islamist fellow-travelers therefore took it on themselves to transform *jihad* from a governmental or collective prerogative to an individual or peer group prerogative, thereby appropriating the right to declare war in the name of Islam.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Al Qaeda and its affiliated Islamist groups consider themselves to be waging a *jihad* against their perceived enemies of Islam, Near and Far.

Islamic law encompasses prescriptions pertaining to just war and the lawful conduct of warfare. Thus it is required that due warning be given of the intention to wage war. Al Qaeda, for its part, has observed this principle by duly warning of its intentions to attack particular countries and targets. Terrorists even seek and obtain religious sanction (*fatwas*) for acknowledged scholars for their operations. Yet, whereas Islamic law prohibits the killing of clergy, the elderly, women, and children, Al Qaeda and its affiliated networks have insisted that Islamic laws of war tolerate the killing of noncombatants, including women and children in certain circumstances:

Many Muslims know about the hadith in which the Prophet ordered his companions not to kill any women or children . . . but very few know that there are exceptions to this case. In summary, Muslims do not have to stop and attack on mushrikeen (polytheists) if nonfighting women and children are present. But Muslims should avoid the killing of children and nonfighting women, and should not aim at them. . . . Islam does not urge its followers to kill anyone amongst the kufar (non-believers) except the fighters, and those who supply mushrikeen and other enemies of Islam with money or advice, because the Quranic verse says: "And fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you."<sup>34</sup>

The killing of civilians, women, and children, even of the Muslim faith, has come to be treated by Al Qaeda as a kind of collateral consequence of their *jihad*. The incidental killing of Muslims is given religious justification in asserting that Allah will recognize His own as martyrs.<sup>35</sup> Al Qaeda and fellow militant *jihadists* now routinely refers to suicide bombings as "martyrdom" operations.

Be that as it may, Al Qaeda has come under heightened criticism from prominent Islamic scholars and clerics in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere over the considerable loss of Muslim lives in its terror operations. Responding to those critiques, Al Qaeda put forward a more populist set of mission priorities calculated to appeal to a broad spectrum of Muslim opinion worldwide: (a) a joint struggle with other Muslim fighters against U.S.-led foreign interventions in Muslim lands, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and now Mali; (b) striking at Jewish targets and mounting attacks inside Israel; (c) defending Muslim interests in Europe; and (d) resistance against repressive regimes in the Arab world.<sup>36</sup>

Al Qaeda's future vision and strategy for global *jihad* were set out by the present leader of Al Qaeda, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, in his book *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* first serialized in the authoritative Saudi-owned international Arab newspaper *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* already in 2002–03.<sup>37</sup> This operational manifesto emphasized a perceived titanic mega-struggle between "forces of the disbelievers" led by the United States and lusting after for energy resources in Muslim domains, and an Islamist vanguard spearheaded by the *jihadist* movement, on the other. Dr. al-Zawahiri emphasized that the Arab-Afghan founders of Al Qaeda represented the standard bearers of the global *jihad*, and that their presence in remote conflict zones like Afghanistan during the 1990s had inspired and promoted a worldwide Islamist mobilization against enemies near and far. He analyzed in

**Table 1**  
Al Qaeda twenty-year strategic plan

Stage	Strategic objective	Timeline	Tactical aim
1	“Awakening”	Sept 11	Provoke U.S. attack on Muslims, galvanize <i>Jihadism</i>
2	“Opening the Eyes”	2002–2006	Force West on defensive
3	“Arising and Standing Up”	2007–2010	Assaults on Turkey and Israel
4	“Downfall of Apostate Muslim regimes”	2010–2013	Saudi Arabia, Jordan, oil-producing countries
5	“Declaration of Caliphate”	2013–2016	Mobilization of Muslim forces
6	“Total Confrontation”	2016–2020	Total war on “non-believers”
7	“Definitive Victory”	2020	Establishment of global Caliphate

detail the strategic ramifications of this ongoing conflict, predicting a tidal wave of historic significance that would overcome “infidelity and infidels.”

Giving operational expression to this doctrinal standpoint, after succeeding Osama bin Laden as leader of Al Qaeda al-Jihad, and then witnessing the Arab Spring political transformation in the Middle East and North Africa, Dr. al-Zawahiri proceeded to issue a call for Arab peoples to mount a jihadist revolution to bring about their fulsome emancipation and transition to Islamic rule.<sup>38</sup>

### Al Qaeda Twenty-Year Strategic Plan

Available evidence suggests that Al Qaeda is pursuing a twenty-year, seven stage, grand strategy for a militant *jihadist* campaign aimed at achieving a “definitive victory” over perceived enemies of Islam and culminating in the establishment of a global Caliphate by the year 2020.<sup>39</sup> Expressing itself in the poetic style favored in literary Arabic, Al Qaeda’s “Twenty-Year Strategic Plan” commenced in 2001 with an “Awakening” on 11 September 2001: the attacks on the United States. After this “Awakening,” the next stages invoked an “Opening (the) Eyes” (2002–2006) followed by “Arising and Standing Up” (2007–2010) which in turn would bring about—poetically and operationally—the “Downfall of Apostate Muslim Regimes” by the target year 2013. These regime changes would set the stage for the next phase, “Declaration of the Caliphate” involving the mobilization of Muslim forces (2013–2016) leading to a “Total Confrontation” with the non-Muslim world (2016–2020). According to this Strategic Plan, a “Definitive Victory” would be achieved by the year 2020, culminating in the establishment a global Caliphate. Each successive stage of the Strategic Plan identifies particular objectives and tactical pursuits within the indicated time-frame. These strategic objectives, tactical aims, and timelines are set out in Table 1.

In retrospect, the “Awakening”—the attacks of 11 September 2001—did foment a polarization of the Muslim world as between a neo-Western establishment and “believers,” as was intended ostensibly by Al Qaeda strategists. The American and international responses to the attacks, as expressed in their *soi-disant* “Global War on Terror” came to be widely (mis-)perceived across the Muslim world to denote a “crusader” assault on Islam itself. Escalating terrorism and related insurgencies at Stage 2 of the Strategic Plan did force the West very much onto the defensive by way of “Opening (their) Eyes” to the threat of

militant *jihadism*. Stage 3, “Arising and Standing Up” (2007–2010) involved terrorist strikes on Turkey, a secular democracy governing a predominantly Muslim community that had actually elected an Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002, but was nevertheless targeted for attacks and subversion.<sup>40</sup> Israel was likewise targeted by Al Qaeda itself as well as by Palestinian *jihadist* counterparts, notably Hamas and Islamic Jihad.<sup>41</sup>

Stage 4 of the Al Qaeda Strategic Plan, extending over the years 2010–2013, aimed at the bringing about “The Downfall of Apostate Muslim Regimes.” For Al Qaeda, “apostasy” could encompass any system of governance in predominantly Muslim communities that did not strictly conform to an ultra-puritanical application of Islamic law and practices. Regimes deemed “apostate” by Al Qaeda include democratic political systems (e.g., Turkey), secular nationalists (e.g., Algeria, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Pakistan), single-party/military dictatorships (e.g., Libya, Syria, Uzbekistan, Yemen) traditionalist monarchies (e.g., Morocco, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates), as well as Shi’ite rulers (e.g., Iraq, Iran, Syria).<sup>42</sup> Already in the run-up to 2013 Al Qaeda had demonstrated a remarkable agility in promoting insurrections and terror campaigns across the Muslim world, from the Sahel and northern Nigeria and Somalia to the Arabian Peninsula and Levant; and from Pakistan, Southern Asia, and Central Asia (including Xinjiang, China) to Southeast Asia; all aimed at transforming their respective societies from “apostate” and “infidel” control to governance by strictly Islamist principles.<sup>43</sup>

In pursuit of their strategic objectives Al Qaeda’s leadership was usually prepared to capitalize on convergent political developments anywhere in the Muslim world, building on synergies with prospective allies. This synergetic approach has become readily apparent during the current Stage of the Strategic Plan pursuant the “Declaration of the Caliphate” through the mobilization of Muslim forces. Certainly the Al Qaeda response to the so-called Arab Spring epitomized this approach.<sup>44</sup> The popular revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, and the incipient unrest occurring in other jurisdictions, was seen by Al Qaeda al-Jihad as a populist drive to replace corrupt, unrepresentative apostate regimes with benign Islamic rule. Although Al Qaeda did not ignite these revolutions, it has since claimed that its operations globally and in the Middle East “broke the barrier of fear for the Arab peoples, so they revolted and ousted the agents of the Americans one after the other, and the Americans couldn’t help them.”<sup>45</sup>

The Al Qaeda campaign against “apostate” Muslim regimes extended beyond just Arab Spring countries. Thus, in March, 2012, its leader, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, issued a video urging the people of Pakistan to revolt against their elected (“bribe-taking”) government for allegedly betraying their interests to the United States.<sup>46</sup> Apart from operations initiated by Al Qaeda itself, locally run regional affiliates and related groups became directly engaged in fomenting *jihad* in various Muslim domains, mobilizing indigenous forces under the inspiration, guidance, and often coordination on the part of Al Qaeda al-Jihad. These affiliated *jihadist* movements included:

- Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, targeting Yemen and Saudi Arabia in particular<sup>47</sup>;
- Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, attacking the Shi’ite dominated government and community of Iraq and fighting the Alawite regime in Syria, while also engaging in operations against neighboring (Sunni) Jordan<sup>48</sup>;
- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, operating against Uzbekistan and also engaged in Tajikistan, Russia, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang) as well as in Afghanistan and Pakistan in support of Taliban allies<sup>49</sup>;
- Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, targeting Algeria, Mali, Morocco, and lately Libya<sup>50</sup>;

- Al Shabaab, operating in Somalia and also in neighboring East African jurisdictions<sup>51</sup>;
- Taliban and Haqqani networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan<sup>52</sup>;
- Jemaah Islamiyah, operating in Indonesia and also Malaysia and Singapore;
- East Turkistan Islamic Movement and Turkistan Islamic Party waging a militant campaign for Uighur independence from China<sup>53</sup>;
- Jund al-Khilafah, struggling for an Islamic Kazakhstan, while also operating in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Caucuses and even as far afield as Western Europe<sup>54</sup>;
- Boko Haram, waging a terror campaign in the Muslim majority states of northern Nigeria.

As populist rebellions and insurgencies wracked Muslim domains, the leader of Al Qaeda, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri reiterated the call for Muslim peoples to unite “with the aim of establishing Allah’s Shariah (Islamic law) as the ruling system.”<sup>55</sup> From an Al Qaeda perspective, Muslim revolutionary attainments remain incomplete without the replacement of secular governance by the righteous rule of Islamic law. Accordingly, Al Qaeda has become explicitly engaged in promoting the transformation of Arab Spring revolutions in Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere into full-fledged Islamist systems of government. As regards Egypt in particular, Al Qaeda’s leadership under Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri (himself of Egyptian origin and formerly an activist in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad) had urged Egyptian revolutionaries to confront their “real enemy from among the Crusaders, the Jews and their agents inside” so as to fulfill “the goals of the revolution and on top of them, implementing sharia-based governance and carrying out their role in building and fixing what was done by the sinful hands that ruled Egypt for the past 60 years.”<sup>56</sup> This drive for rule by Islamic law was entirely consistent with the objective put forward at Stage 5 of Al Qaeda’s Strategic Plan: to mobilize Muslim forces for the Declaration of the Caliphate.

Al Qaeda’s stance has not been merely passive and declaratory. When the Egyptian army intervened in July 2013, to overthrow that country’s Muslim Brotherhood administration under President Mohammed Mursi, Al Qaeda–linked *jihadi* elements reacted with attacks on governmental and military installations in the sensitive and vulnerable Sinai peninsula.<sup>57</sup> As civil disorder and violence escalated, the Muslim Brotherhood itself called for an “Islamic uprising” against the interim governing authority.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile in Syria, Al Qaeda had formed the al-Nusra Front to contest the leadership of the insurrection against the Alawite regime, with the aim of converting the rebellion into a proper *jihadi*.<sup>59</sup> For el-Nusra, the stated goal is the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate encompassing the entire Levant.<sup>60</sup> Actual fighting has occurred between Al Qaeda–linked *jihadi*s and other rebel groups over control of liberated zones.<sup>61</sup> As for Iraq, Al Qaeda forces in that country have been waging a decade-long terror campaign against the established government and Shi’ite population, all in the name of the “Islamic State of Iraq (and the Levant).” In keeping with its Strategic Plan, the Al Qaeda leadership now appears to be giving operational priority to rousing Muslim forces for the creation of a “jihadi Islamic state,” first and foremost through the militant *jihadi* insurgencies in Iraq and Syria.<sup>62</sup> Considering Al Qaeda’s strategic objective at this stage to restore the Caliphate, it is indeed noteworthy that Damascus and Baghdad were the original historical seats of Caliphate.

Al Qaeda operations against designated targets at each stage of its Strategic Plan tended to be ongoing, transcending the notional time-lines. Certainly Al Qaeda terror attacks (actualized or thwarted) on European and North American targets persisted beyond just Stage 2, “Opening the Eyes” (2003–2006), such that the threat persists up to the present. Al Qaeda and its affiliated networks and homegrown cells continued to operate against their

designated targets, even as Al Qaeda's strategic objectives and tactical priorities shifted at each successive stage of its Strategic Plan.

Until now Al Qaeda has not considered itself a lone Islamist warrior group. Rather, it functioned as a network leader, providing inspiration and serving as instigator and facilitator for an incipient pan-Islamic *jihad* involving far-flung affiliates and willful partners engaged in a collaborative struggle to defeat apostasy and assert the power of Islamic rule.<sup>63</sup> However, as Al Qaeda al Jihad embarks on the 5th stage of its Strategic Plan involving Declaration of the Caliphate, it remains to be seen whether its core leadership will be prepared to continue collaborating with erstwhile partners should this imply some degree of toleration for ideological dissidence and jurisprudential pluralism. Otherwise, Al Qaeda might plausibly invoke an Islamist form of revolutionary exclusivism,<sup>64</sup> with militant jihadism imparting a totalitarian propensity onto its power to rule through a soon-to-be restored (2013–2016) Caliphate.

As hitherto noted, Al Qaeda ideology and its *jihadist* doctrine claim religious authorization for political violence, including acts of terror, “martyrdom” operations and insurgent warfare. Al Qaeda terrorism is intended deliberately to inflict mass casualties and shock targeted communities, the terrifying effects being compounded by the consequential destruction of critical national infrastructure and large-scale socioeconomic disruption. Terrorism, for Al Qaeda and its affiliates, is consistent with a holy struggle to defeat so-called “apostates” in Dar ul-Islam and conquer the infidel Dar ul-Harb, all in order to (re-)create a divinely sanctioned global Caliphate.

### The Terrorism Cycle

International terrorism is predicated on a complex array of activities that facilitate the intended purpose to attack designated targets. The key enabling activities for international terrorist operations can be set out as a “Terrorism Cycle” involving the following operational functions<sup>65</sup>:

- Strategic planning
- Recruitment of activists and operatives
- Training
- Terrorist fund-raising and financial transfers
- Logistics, procurement of matériel
- Intelligence, Counterintelligence, and Protective Security
- Communications
- Propaganda, agitation and indoctrination
- Sleeper cells, safe houses
- Tactical preparation
- Reconnaissance on targets
- Assaults on targets

Detailed information about Al Qaeda motivations, intentions, and operational prescriptions are publicly available from its instructional manual, *Military Studies in the Jihad Against the Tyrants*, also known as the *Encyclopaedia of the Afghani Jihad*,<sup>66</sup> as a primary source, and from other authoritative sources.

#### *Strategic Planning*

Al Qaeda has demonstrated a capacity for skillful, centrally directed, high-level strategizing directed at the pursuit of its long-term *jihadist* goals. Whereas many of its operational

command and control functions have devolved on regional affiliates, decentralized networks, and local cells, strategic direction remains uniquely a prerogative of the top-echelon core leadership.<sup>67</sup> Although available information is sparse, the Al Qaeda strategic planning function seems to involve a three tier process: the proclamation of *jihadist* operational doctrine, target selection, and preparation of tactical plans of attack. Doctrine is clearly the prerogative of legacy leaders, primary among them Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, heir to Osama bin Laden. This leadership provides the movement with theological dispensation, political justification, and guidance as to the intended course of *jihadist* struggle. As overall leader, Dr. al-Zawahiri is known to have issued direct orders to affiliated groups to mount terror attacks, as exemplified in August 2013 by the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) plot to attack U.S. and Western interests in Yemen and elsewhere.<sup>68</sup> These planned attacks, it was subsequently disclosed, were to be of a magnitude intended "to change the face of history."<sup>69</sup>

The *jihadist* doctrine promulgated by the leadership provides an operational framework for Al Qaeda tacticians across its various regional networks and sub-networks to identify specific targets and mission objectives. In mid-2013 the emir of AQAP was appointed also to the position of "general manager" of the core leadership, symbolizing the close interconnection between Al Qaeda al-Jihad and its global affiliates.<sup>70</sup> An "External Operations Council" has been put in place so as to exercise delegated authority over targeting and recruitment on behalf of the core Al Qaeda.<sup>71</sup> Under this arrangement, actual operational planning will often take place in different countries and locales so as to lessen the risk of premature detection. Target selection usually emphasizes their symbolic value coupled with the potential for causing heavy material damage and inflicting mass casualties. Detailed tactical plans of attack are drawn up in order to prepare the strike team and to ensure that each operative is fully apprised of the target and objective.<sup>72</sup> The record indicates that all operational planning under these auspices can be and often is a protracted process, taking months and sometimes years of preparatory work prior to an assault. And yet, Al Qaeda has repeatedly demonstrated an astounding ability to achieve operational surprise in attacks on targets.

*Recruitment of Activists and Operatives.* Terrorist networks depend for their continuity and effectiveness on the continual recruitment of both activists and operatives.<sup>73</sup> Activists are recruited to perform the various auxiliary functions necessary for the continued viability of the terror organization, such as fund-raising, logistics, and communications. Operatives are recruited, trained, and deployed to actually undertake terror attacks, including suicide bombings ("martyrdom operations"). A Danish Ministry of Justice report on *Recruitment of Islamicist Terrorists in Europe* noted that "Recruitment is the bridge between a personal belief and violent activism."<sup>74</sup>

Since terrorist organizations operate illicitly they cannot recruit openly and publicly. Available evidence indicates that *jihadist* recruitment in the Muslim diaspora is often driven by a "bottom-up" self-enlistment syndrome on the part of eager prospective *mujahideen*. Local cells are typically formed around friendship or kinship ties, typically prompted by local religious preachers or teachers, and radicalized further by Internet propaganda.<sup>75</sup> In Muslim countries the radicalization of prospective recruits seems to reflect a process of social alienation captured and transformed into a religious counterculture, stimulated and sometimes driven by emissaries linked to Al Qaeda.<sup>76</sup> Actual insurgents, for their part, tended to be mobilized from among disaffected social groups and tribal communities, aroused by radical preachers or instructors in *madrassas* (religious schools).<sup>77</sup> A Europol report on the *EU Terrorism Situation and Trends* noted the key role played by Islamist activists in the recruitment of *jihadist* militants in diaspora communities.<sup>78</sup> Recent experience indicates how the Internet has become an

important means of fostering radicalization among Muslim youth and recruiting prospective operatives for training and deployment with Al Qaeda in Pakistan, Yemen, and now Syria.<sup>79</sup>

Along with these local recruitment initiatives there is evidence that Al Qaeda and its affiliates assign so-called gatekeepers, or handlers, to exercise oversight and even verification of recruitment and recruits, and to enforce discipline and militate against penetration by the authorities.<sup>80</sup> Talent spotters are dispatched to appropriate venues, whether university clubs, community groups, or religious circles, to identify likely candidates with special skills or aptitudes.<sup>81</sup> Efforts are also being made to recruit sympathizers, or moles, in sensitive security agencies, government departments, industrial facilities, and university faculties. Security authorities have claimed that Al Qaeda and its affiliates are deliberately trying to recruit youths of Australian, European, and North American background to their ranks.<sup>82</sup> These so-called clean skin recruits are considered better able to pass undetected through surveillance and border controls. They also provide better camouflage for clandestine operations against target countries in the West.

*Training.* Al Qaeda training prepares recruits to become terrorist activists and operatives.<sup>83</sup> The skills and competencies sought by militant *jihadi* organizations like Al Qaeda span a wide spectrum of learning, from flying aircraft to computer technology, to biological and chemical sciences, to finance; from the preparation of explosives and explosive devices to reconnaissance, sabotage, assassination, and urban insurgency to actual combat. Whereas some preliminary training and indoctrination can take place over the Internet, the main emphasis is still placed on real-life training delivered by experienced veterans and activists in proper training camps.<sup>84</sup> During the period of Taliban rule over Afghanistan some 70,000 *jihadi* recruits reportedly traveled to that country from around the world for military training in camps run by Al Qaeda.<sup>85</sup> Since then, militant *jihadists* have sought alternative venues for training wherever in congenial locations.<sup>86</sup> Latterly, selected recruits from Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Australia, and North America are being dispatched to Pakistan and Yemen for advanced-level operational training in Al Qaeda camps, then returning home to share their expertise with newly recruited locals.<sup>87</sup> Others found their way to training camps with *jihadi* insurgents in Somalia and the Maghreb, more recently in Syria. For a time they were even in training camps set up in remote locations in Britain, Canada, Europe, and the United States, and urban training facilities in safe houses in British and European cities.<sup>88</sup>

The Al Qaeda training regimen places strong emphasis on *jihadi* indoctrination, coupled with instruction in mission-specific skills relating to weaponry, explosives, and tactics.<sup>89</sup>

*Terrorism Fund-Raising and Financial Transfers.* Al Qaeda, its affiliates, and related *jihadi* terror groups engage in systematic fund-raising and money-laundering to finance their widespread system of networks and cells, and their various activities.<sup>90</sup> *Jihadi* organizations typically raise funds by soliciting private donations, by diverting revenues from quasi-legitimate Muslim charities, religious institutions, or sympathetic ethno-cultural organizations.<sup>91</sup> According to the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment report on *Jihad in Europe*, mosques in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere were “hijacked” by radical elements to be used for fund-raising, recruitment, incitement, and propaganda, and even for preparing terrorist assaults.<sup>92</sup>

Militant *jihadi* groups are also known to raise funds while promoting their cause through the sale of inspirational tracts, advocacy literature, audio cassettes, videos and CDs, and other iconic paraphernalia.<sup>93</sup> Al Qaeda, among others, have also set up charitable

fronts, such as the Benevolence International Foundation, to raise and transfer money for their purposes.

Terrorist organizations typically engage in criminal activities so as to augment their financial resourcing. Among the criminal activities attributed to international *jihadist* terrorist groups are the sale of fraudulent passports and identity documents, people smuggling, credit card fraud, drug trafficking, trade in contraband, and automobile theft and re-export.<sup>94</sup>

Since terrorism financing is outlawed in many jurisdictions, terror organizations have become adept at money laundering. Transfers of funds to support terrorist activities may be channeled surreptitiously through financial institutions or through informal money exchangers or *hawalas*,<sup>95</sup> or through trade-based transactions in high-value merchandise like gemstones or—in the Middle East—honey.<sup>96</sup> While substantial transfers may be remitted through such formal or informal transfer mechanisms, terrorist organizations often task reliable, trustworthy couriers with transporting large sums of cash or other high-value, compressed forms of wealth, like diamonds, narcotics, or other contraband.<sup>97</sup> These couriers usually carry falsified identity documents and passports, to transport currency or other financial assets surreptitiously to where the organizations seek their deposit or deployment.

*Logistics, Procurement of Matériel.* Terrorist organizations depend on the procurement and delivery of matériel, such as weaponry, explosives, specialized equipment, identity documents, and other supplies required for their operations. The importance of logistical support for terrorism operations is highlighted in the 2009 Europol report on the EU *Terrorism Situation and Trends*.<sup>98</sup> An intercepted Al Qaeda communication cited by the Italian Divisioni Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali (DIGOS—Division for General Investigations and Special Operations) highlighted the role of logistics in terrorist operations: “. . . if the brothers want to hide, we hide them, if the brothers want documents, we take care of these documents, if the brothers want to move, we move them . . . if they need a weapon, you give them a weapon . . .”<sup>99</sup>

Sometimes the matériel can be surreptitiously acquired whole, as when ground- to-air missiles were obtained for attacks on civil aviation. Otherwise, terror groups have tended to procure the raw materials—the better to disguise their intentions—with which to fabricate by themselves the wanted items. Organizations like Al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood likewise expend considerable effort at procuring passports and entry permits, genuine, forged or otherwise tampered with, along with other fraudulent identity documents.<sup>100</sup>

An especially worrisome aspect of terrorist logistics is the concern that Al Qaeda or other militants may acquire chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) attack capabilities.<sup>101</sup> Al Qaeda stalwart Sulaiman Abu Gaith insisted and forewarned that “it is our right to fight [the Americans] with chemical and biological weapons.”<sup>102</sup> In June 2013, Iraqi authorities dismantled an Al Qaeda cell caught preparing chemical weapons for poison gas attacks in the Middle East, Europe, and North America.<sup>103</sup> Concern has been expressed that *jihadist* organizations might try to enroll qualified operatives in universities and research institutes in order to avail themselves of training and laboratory work in sensitive, dual-use subjects like nuclear science or computer technology, which could have terrorist applications.<sup>104</sup>

*Intelligence, Counterintelligence, and Protective Security.* Al Qaeda, its affiliates, and homegrown cells place considerable emphasis on the collection of intelligence, the prevention of infiltration of their movement by the authorities, and the protective security of their operations.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, intelligence collection, counterintelligence, and protective security have become hallmarks of Al Qaeda tradecraft, inculcating its networking systems

and infusing all their activities. The leaders of Al Qaeda honed their mastery of intelligence and counterintelligence tradecraft over decades of *jihadist* struggle against the Soviet KGB in Afghanistan, the intelligence agencies (*mukhbarat*) of various Arab regimes across the Middle East, and currently against the security services of Western democracies. The lessons learned were summarized by the preeminent Al Qaeda specialist on intelligence matters, Muhammad Khalil el-Hakayma, in his manual, *The Myths of Delusion. Exposing the American Intelligence*.<sup>106</sup> Key intelligence requirements identified in the Al Qaeda operational manual, *Military Studies in the Jihad Against the Tyrants*, included:

- Gathering information about the enemy, the land, the installations, and the neighbors;
- Kidnapping enemy personnel, documents, secrets, and arms;
- Creating a cell structure for the organization, to protect internal security;<sup>107</sup>
- Communications security, including encryption, voice disguise, and deception;<sup>108</sup>
- Codes, ciphers, and secret writing;<sup>109</sup>
- Countersurveillance techniques;<sup>110</sup>
- Strategic intelligence about enemy's intentions, tactics, deployments, and vulnerabilities, derived from open sources, espionage, surveillance, and recruitment of agents and moles in government and security agencies;<sup>111</sup>
- Counterinterrogation techniques, based on reports from operatives who had undergone questioning by law enforcement or security agencies.<sup>112</sup>

According to its Head of Foreign Operations, Al Qaeda has made a particular effort lately to collect intelligence on "the various security systems employed by airports (including) X-Ray scanners, full body scanners, sniffing dogs and other aspects of security."<sup>113</sup>

*Communications.* Terrorist networks, affiliates, cells, and their auxiliaries and front organizations rely on communications to deliver operational instructions, to facilitate coordination and information sharing among individual components of the far-flung apparatus; and to disseminate strategic and tactical information about targets, objectives, and goals. Al Qaeda places the highest priority on secure communications, and its operational guidelines insist that communicating should be concise, secret, and pertinent.<sup>114</sup>

Whereas operatives may use telecommunications, e-mail, and secure Internet websites<sup>115</sup> and postal services with due caution, Al Qaeda guidelines stipulate that their most sensitive messaging should be entrusted to dedicated couriers for face-to-face communications across the reaches of the networks.<sup>116</sup> Often these couriered messages are committed solely to memory in order to minimize risks of interception. Couriers, selected for their reliability, trustworthiness, and dedication to the cause, are enjoined to travel surreptitiously for the delivery of communications at clandestine meetings usually brokered by resident contact agents trained in countersurveillance tradecraft.

*Propaganda, Agitation, and Indoctrination.* *Jihadist* propaganda, agitation, and incitement are aimed at mobilizing broad-based backing and commitment from among Muslim communities and at attracting prospective recruits to the militant movement.<sup>117</sup> The Al Qaeda operational manual *Military Studies in the Jihad Against the Tyrants* prescribes as one of its primary missions: "Spreading rumors and writing statements that instigate people against the enemy."<sup>118</sup> Radical preachers are enjoined to indoctrinate the faithful and reportedly propagated a militant *jihadism*, while providing theological justification for terrorism and martyrdom operations.<sup>119</sup>

In communities across the Muslim diaspora extremist elements have managed to subvert their religious and ethno-cultural institutions, turning them into bastions for the militant *jihadist* cause.<sup>120</sup> In Canada, for example, the security intelligence service reported that proponents of Islamist terrorism had created front organizations for advocacy purposes, and had also manipulated local communal groups into supporting the *jihadist* agenda.<sup>121</sup> Moderates found themselves effectively marginalized and coerced into compliance.

Certain international organizations like the Muslim World League have taken it upon themselves to sponsor traveling circuits of visiting clerics and itinerant activist-agitators who pass through diaspora communities to incite the faithful and galvanize enthusiasm for radical Islamism. Social–anthropological studies of Islamist radicalization in the Netherlands point to the slippery slope from extreme proselytizing (*dawa*) to *jihad*.<sup>122</sup>

*Jihadists* and other Islamist extremists make extensive use of the Internet and social media for the dissemination of propaganda, as well as for the recruitment and training of operatives.<sup>123</sup> The Internet and social media, for their part, offer radical preachers, strategists, and enthusiasts especially advantageous capabilities for reaching out and influencing, inciting, and motivating *jihadist* activism at a global level.<sup>124</sup> The notorious extremist preacher, the late Anwar al-Awlaki, openly encouraged his audience to become “Internet mujahideen” by setting up websites dedicated to militant *jihadism*, what he termed “WWW Jihad.”<sup>125</sup> As Sheikh al-Awlaki himself subsequently declared, this Internet-based was instrumental to arousing a “Western Jihad,” thereby instigating a homegrown terror “from within” Europe and North America.<sup>126</sup> Although Sheikh al-Awlaki was killed by an American drone strike in Yemen in September 2011, his Internet legacy still serves to radicalizes and galvanize a “Western Jihad.”

Jihadist websites have come to play a prominent role in propagandizing on behalf of militant Islam, agitating prospective adherents, and inciting terrorist actions. Thus, a Canadian criminal trial relating to the Global Islamic Media Front found that this website expounded provocations characteristic of militant *jihadism* that were tantamount to a terrorist threat:

- Publicizing and expounding upon the speeches of Al Qaeda leaders
- Inciting people to carry out violent *jihad*
- Urging people to support *jihadist* groups like Al Qaeda and its affiliates and al-Shabaab in Somalia
- Disseminating Al Qaeda textual propaganda and videos
- Glorifying *jihadist* “martyrs”
- Providing advice on computer security, and instructions about hacking into computer networks
- Engaging in psychological warfare by threatening targeted societies and communities
- Delivering military training to carry out violent *jihad*, including tactics for urban and gang warfare, concealing explosives, executing ambushes, arrests, and explosions
- Webcasting news reports from *jihadist* battlefronts
- Publishing online magazines like *Sawt al-Jihad* (Voice of Jihad)
- Translating its propaganda material into various languages to reach out to a wide audience, especially in the West

According to the Court, in so far as such messaging serves to incite followers to undertake militant *jihadist* missions, or transmit the demands of terrorist groups, or otherwise threaten

governments or intimidate the public, *jihadist* websites like the Global Islamic Media Front contribute directly or indirectly to actual terrorist activities.<sup>127</sup>

*Sleeper Cells, Safe Houses.* International terror networks require an infrastructure of safe houses and sleeper cells in order to accommodate and service current operational requirements and to sustain a covert capacity for future missions. Al Qaeda's manual, *Military Studies in the Jihad Against the Tyrants*, set down specific instructions regarding the selection, location, and attributes of safe houses, and related security precautions.<sup>128</sup> International terror organizations routinely maintain chains of safe houses in various cities and countries across the world. Sometimes the safe houses may be kept dormant, or are used by unassociated third-parties, until required for operational purposes.

Sleeper cells denote terrorist operatives who are kept inactive, sometimes for extensive periods of time, even years, while remaining in readiness for reactivation for future missions. Al Qaeda sleeper agents are routinely instructed to possess multiple sets of (fraudulent) identity documents and passports, and professional credentials, as part of their tradecraft.<sup>129</sup> Al Qaeda sleeper agents are carefully instructed to blend into their host communities. They are expected to maintain a dormant, clandestine presence at the targeted site, while sometimes providing periodic intelligence support and feedback (carefully, by secure communications) to Al Qaeda commanders. The remit for *taqiyya* permitted sleeper agents deployed in Western communities to conduct themselves like locals, even to the extent of drinking alcohol, gambling, going to nightclubs, marrying out, dressing in the Western style, and socializing with women, while eschewing overt identification with the Muslim community so as to avoid suspicion or detection.<sup>130</sup>

Al Qaeda sleeper agents and cells have been discovered operating in Britain, Canada, Europe, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and elsewhere.<sup>131</sup>

*Tactical Preparation.* Preparations for terror attacks tend to be the lengthiest, most protracted phase of the Terrorist Cycle. Careful, detailed preparations are crucial for operational success (from the perpetrator's perspective).<sup>132</sup> Having identified a target, Al Qaeda tactical planners will proceed to produce a detailed operational plan of attack on which the strike team can train.<sup>133</sup> This preparatory planning phase serves to ensure that each member is fully prepared and apprised of the objective. Planning meetings between commanders and operatives will usually be staged at different times in various locations, even in different countries, in order to elude surveillance and detection.

Since 2008 Al Qaeda has suffered a significant attrition of its top-echelon operatives and leaders as a result of U.S. drone attacks on their redoubt in North-Western regions of Pakistan and also Yemen.<sup>134</sup> Tactical planning for complex operations abroad was severely disrupted. Nonetheless, major terror attacks have been planned and mounted against targets in Pakistan, Britain, Europe, the Middle East, and North America, although it may have been more difficult for Al Qaeda to fill its leadership gaps with senior, experienced, and skilled operatives.

*Reconnaissance on Targets.* Al Qaeda and other militant *jihadist* organizations routinely undertake a thorough and continuous reconnaissance on their intended targets. Reconnaissance missions usually operate with the support of local cells, and aim to pinpoint target vulnerabilities, identify tactical approaches and escape routes, and guide tactical commanders and operatives in preparation for the assault.<sup>135</sup> Successive reconnaissance teams may be brought to bear, applying specialized skills and methods, even accessing architectural drawings and infrastructure maps. Another form of reconnaissance, the

infiltration agent or mole, may be utilized to obtain insider information from within targeted, sensitive facilities.<sup>136</sup> Although mounting such extensive reconnaissance does involve risks of discovery, the attention to detail is expected to enhance the likelihood of a successful attack, with maximum harm to the target.

*Assaults on Targets.* Terrorism strikes with stealth, surprise, and ruthless ferocity. The aim is to cause maximum casualties, physical damage, socioeconomic disruption, and political shock.<sup>137</sup> According to an analysis based on the most comprehensive unclassified terrorism database, between 1998 (following Osama bin Laden's proclaimed *jihad* against the United States and the West, 1996) and 2008, Al Qaeda and its affiliates mounted eighty-four terrorist attacks around the world, including sixteen mass-casualty assaults, resulting in some 4,299 deaths and 6,300 people injured.<sup>138</sup> Since then, the frequency of high-fatality terror attacks perpetrated by militant *jihadist* groups worldwide has continued to increase up to 2012, the most recent year for which data is available.<sup>139</sup> Attacks, actual or planned but disrupted, attributed to Al Qaeda, its affiliates, or homegrown cells have been mounted against targets in Australia, Central Asia, China, Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, North America, Russia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The first half of 2013 alone—while this study was being prepared—witnessed Al Qaeda initiated or inspired terror attacks (or interrupted plots) targeting Algeria, Canada, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Mali, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and Yemen. In August 2013, an intercepted Al Qaeda communication reportedly disclosed a plan of attack that would “change the face of history,” prompting an international terror alert.<sup>140</sup>

A wide repertoire of tactics may be used in mounting attacks on targets, from armed attacks using bombs, firearms, or missiles, to suicide bombings, ambushes, hostage taking, assassinations, and vehicle-borne explosives in cars, trucks, planes, ships, trains, and so on.<sup>141</sup> Suicide bombers and car/truck bombing have become the *jihadist* terror tactics of choice.<sup>142</sup> Prominent targets for Al Qaeda terror attacks have included civil aviation, airports, hotels and tourism amenities, entertainment facilities and night-clubs, urban transit systems, commercial landmarks, open-air markets, government premises, energy infrastructure, and religious institutions associated with Judaism and Shi'ite Islam, in particular.<sup>143</sup> In one of its most audacious acts, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula plotted an attack on two major Yemeni oil and gas installations while simultaneously seizing the port city of Mukalla, an attempt foiled by Yemen authorities in August 2013.<sup>144</sup> For its part, the Al Qaeda affiliate operating in Syria, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, threatened a “volcano of revenge” in retaliation against the regime's chemical weaponry attack on civilians, specifically targeting the security services, training facilities, and infrastructure.<sup>145</sup> Al Qaeda has also engaged in targeted assassinations as a terror tactic, including a high-profile attempt in August 2009 on the life of Saudi Arabia's Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the then deputy interior minister.<sup>146</sup>

While still continuing to mount discrete terror attacks on individual targets, Al Qaeda has now also begun promoting larger-scale insurgency campaigns through its regional affiliates, most notably in Iraq, Syria, Mali, Somalia, and southern Yemen. By dint of these insurgencies Al Qaeda affiliates have seized territories and gained control of their populations, subjecting them to Islamic rule. In doing so, Al Qaeda and its regional affiliates are thereby giving operational expression to the goals and objectives enunciated at the current stages of its Strategic Plan.

### Ongoing Threats and Risks

Al Qaeda is today a more diverse and complex threat than ever before. Its core element, Al Qaeda al-Jihad, is itself only one part of an expansive constellation of affiliated and allied

*jihadist* groups, although playing a preeminent part in the dynamic of contemporary militant *jihadism*.<sup>147</sup> Al Qaeda leverages this militant *jihadist* dynamic to exploit new targeting opportunities within a rapidly evolving operational environment.<sup>148</sup> Its demonstrated agility, inventiveness, and adaptability in dealing with the changing security environment have been keys to Al Qaeda's resilience.

The Al Qaeda threat is taken most seriously by governments of targeted countries.<sup>149</sup> The British government's updated counterterrorism strategy announced in March 2009, known as "Contest-2," emphasizes an integrated, whole-of-government response to terrorist threats, most notably from Al Qaeda, through its so-called Four Ps approach: *Pursuing* terrorists so as to forestall attacks, *Preventing* the spread of extremist ideologies and militancy, *Protecting* vulnerable assets, and *Preparing* for damage mitigation in the event of an attack.<sup>150</sup> The latest Europol *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* for 2013 underscores the point that Al Qaeda terrorism remains "a key issue for the security of the EU Member States and their interests abroad."<sup>151</sup> Likewise, the latest Worldwide Threat Assessment by the American Intelligence Community reiterated Al Qaeda's continued commitment to its *jihadist* goals as an ongoing threat to the United States.<sup>152</sup> Nevertheless, intelligence assessments have postulated that Al Qaeda capabilities have been "degraded" to the point where they are "probably unable to carry out complex, large-scale attacks in the West."<sup>153</sup> Similarly, the U.S. State Department's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012*, the most recent iteration, claimed that Al Qaeda's core element "has been significantly degraded as a result of ongoing worldwide efforts against the organization," but still "(its regional) affiliates are increasingly setting their own goals and specifying their own targets."<sup>154</sup>

That said, what has been observed may be not so much a weakening of Al Qaeda capabilities over all, but rather a shifting of its operational priorities in accordance with the Strategic Plan. From around 2010 the thrust of Al Qaeda's *jihadist* campaign was to be redirected toward bringing down "Apostate" Muslim regimes, to be followed by the "Mobilization of Muslim Forces" for an eventual "Total Confrontation" with "infidel" domains by the end of the decade.<sup>155</sup> A continual flow of videos and audio speeches by the Al Qaeda leadership, most prominently by its leader Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, have delivered explicit warnings of Al Qaeda intentions to attack targeted countries in the Muslim World and beyond.<sup>156</sup> In June, 2013, the Al Qaeda leader again called on *jihadist* fighters in Syria to wage a relentless struggle "until the establishment in the Levant of an Islamic state that will restore the Caliphate."<sup>157</sup>

These shifts in Al Qaeda strategic pursuits and operational priorities in line with its Strategic Plan may have misled some to perceive a diminished risk to their own jurisdictions, which had been roundly targeted hitherto, even though elsewhere the threats were now heightening. However, as was noted in Canada's current Counter-Terrorism Strategy:

Al Qaida, led by Ayman al Zawahiri . . . remains at the forefront of Sunni Islamist extremism and continues to serve as an ideology and inspiration for potential terrorists worldwide. Although al Qaida capacities have been constrained in recent years by global counter-terrorism efforts, other Sunni Islamist groups affiliated with al Qaida—either through formal allegiances or by looking to al Qaida as an example—have evolved and pose a substantial threat to Canada and the international community.<sup>158</sup>

Addressing this very quandary early on, the former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation for the U.K. Parliament, Lord Carlile of Berriew, offered a word of caution in his 2008 Report on the enforcement of British anti-terrorism legislation:

Complacency founded upon the recent absence of fatal terrorist attacks would be misplaced and unwise. Several terrorist conspiracies have been disrupted. The police and other control authorities have made numerous arrests. . . . There is undoubtedly an improving level of disruption and penetration of terrorism plots by the police and other control authorities.<sup>159</sup>

According to the latest annual (2013) assessment of risks of international terrorism and political violence as mapped by AON Risk Solutions, the Middle East and North and West Africa stand out as regions of the highest—and increasing—risk.<sup>160</sup> Terrorism is seen as posing the greatest threat to these countries, with Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen figuring among the most severely affected. The continued threat of a terrorist attack or political violence worldwide persists and is not expected to dissipate anytime soon.

To be sure, Al Qaeda continues to target Western societies directly for ongoing attacks, as per the “Jihad Alone” operations propounded by its *Inspire* e-magazine,<sup>161</sup> even as the main thrust of struggle shifts to the Mobilization of Muslim Forces for the Declaration of the Caliphate. Warning has been given, in conformity with the Islamic laws of war. This should be taken as an expression of intent, giving credibility to the implicit threat and attesting to the relentless risk of *jihadi* terror. For as is written in Al Qaeda’s training manual, *Military Studies in the Jihad Against the Tyrants*<sup>162</sup>:

The confrontation that Islam calls for with these godless and apostate regimes, does not know Socratic debates, Platonic ideals nor Aristotelian diplomacy. But it knows the dialogue of bullets, the ideals of assassination, bombing, and destruction, and the diplomacy of the cannon and machine-gun.

## Notes

1. The threat posed by Al Qaeda, its affiliates, and homegrown fellow-travelers is attested to in recent reports by the security authorities of various countries: Government of Canada, *Building Resilience Against Terrorism: Canada's Counter-Terrorism Strategy* (Ottawa, 2012), p. 7; United Kingdom *Strategy for Countering International Terrorism*, Cmd. 7547 (London, 2009), pp. 31–32; The Netherlands Office of the National Coordinator for Counter-terrorism (NCTb), *Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands*, DTN nr 16 (March 2009), pp. 2–3; Government of Denmark, *A Common and Safe Future. Action Plan to Prevent Extremist Views and Radicalisation Among Young People* (Copenhagen, 2009), pp. 9–10; James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 11 April 2013, p. 4. See also the speech by the U.K. ambassador to the United Nations Philip Parham, “Terrorism Continues to Pose a Grave Threat to International Peace and Security,” GOV.UK, 10 May 2013. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/terrorism-continues-to-pose-a-grave-threat-to-international-peace-and-security> (accessed 12 July 2013).

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