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On: 17 October 2013, At: 23:29

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Studies in Conflict & Terrorism

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uter20>

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Accepted author version posted online: 14 Jun 2013. Published online: 17 Jul 2013.

To cite this article: Bruce Hoffman (2013) Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 36:8, 635-653, DOI: [10.1080/1057610X.2013.802973](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.802973)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.802973>

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Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future

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This article considers the current state of the Al Qaeda terrorist movement and its likely future trajectory. It considers the principle assumptions both today and in the past about Al Qaeda and how they affect our understanding of the movement and the threat that it poses; Al Qaeda's current capacity for violence; and its ability to plan strategically and implement terrorist operations. The article further identifies nine key change drivers that will likely determine Al Qaeda's fate in the years to come before concluding that, even while the core Al Qaeda group may be in decline, Al Qaeda-ism, the movement's ideology, continues to resonate and attract new adherents. In sum, it argues that Al Qaeda remains an appealing brand most recently and most especially to extremist groups in North and West Africa and the Levant.

Assumptions

“*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*”—the more it changes, the more it's the same thing—goes Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr's famous nineteenth-century epigram. The same may be said of current analyses of what is variously called the Core Al Qaeda or the Al Qaeda Core, Al Qaeda Central, or the Al Qaeda Senior Leadership (AQSL). For example, in a speech delivered in April 2012 at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, John O. Brennan, then Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism and Assistant to the President, declared, “For the first time since this fight began, we can look ahead and envision a world in which the al Qaeda core is simply no longer relevant.”¹ A couple of months later, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta affirmed, “We've not only impacted on their leadership, we've impacted on their capability to provide any kind of command and control in terms of operations”²—building on his previous assertion from summer 2011 when, shortly after he assumed office, Panetta had proclaimed, “We're in reach of strategically defeating al Qaeda.”³ The former Defense Secretary's latter statement clearly echoed that of President Barack Obama himself who, on the first anniversary of bin Laden's killing, proclaimed, “The goal that I set—to defeat al Qaeda and deny it a chance to rebuild—is now within our reach.”⁴

The evidence supporting these claims is, admittedly, compelling. Osama bin Laden, the co-founder and leader of Al Qaeda, is dead. Key lieutenants such as Ilyas Kashmiri, described by a U.S. State Department analysis of terrorism trends as “one of the most capable terrorist operatives in South Asia,” was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan

Received 29 January 2013; accepted 31 March 2013.

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the following month,⁵ as was the movement's reported number two leader, Atiyah abd al-Rahman, in August 2011, and his successor, Abu Yahya al Libi, in June 2012.⁶ The fourfold increase in targeted assassinations undertaken by the Obama administration⁷ has thus far killed at least 34 key al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan,⁸ as well as some 235 fighters,⁹ thus setting the core organization, in the words of a recent U.S. State Department analysis, "on a path of decline that will be difficult to reverse."¹⁰ This general assessment also reflects the views of many prominent American pundits, academicians, and analysts.¹¹

The fundamental argument presented in this article, however, advocates a more cautious, even agnostic, approach. Although one cannot deny the vast inroads made against Core Al Qaeda in recent years as a result of the developments described above, this article nonetheless argues that the long-established nucleus of the Al Qaeda organization has proven itself to be as resilient as it is formidable. For more than a decade, it has withstood arguably the greatest international onslaught directed against a terrorist organization in history. Further, it has consistently shown itself capable of adapting and adjusting to even the most consequential countermeasures directed against it, having, despite all odds, survived for nearly a quarter century.

In this respect, the "Arab Spring," and especially the ongoing unrest and protracted civil war in Syria, have endowed the Al Qaeda brand and, by extension, the core organization, with new relevance and status that, depending on the future course of events in both that country and the surrounding region, could potentially resuscitate Core Al Qaeda's admittedly waning fortunes. The fact that the Al Qaeda Core seems to enjoy an unmolested existence from authorities in Pakistan, coupled with the forthcoming withdrawal of U.S. forces and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops from Afghanistan by 2014, further suggests that Core Al Qaeda may well regain the breathing space and cross-border physical sanctuary needed to ensure its continued existence for at least the next five years.

Throughout its history, the oxygen that Al Qaeda depends on has ineluctably been its possession of, or access to, physical sanctuary and safe haven. In the turbulent wake of the "Arab Spring" and the political upheavals and instability that have followed, Al Qaeda convincingly has the potential to transform toeholds established in the Levant and perhaps in the Sinai and in both North and West Africa into footholds—thus complementing its existing outposts in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

It must also be noted that the Al Qaeda Core has stubbornly survived despite predictions or conventional wisdom to the contrary. Hence, at the risk of stating the obvious, Al Qaeda's obituary has been written many times before, only to have been proven to be presumptuously premature wishful thinking. "al-Qa'ida's Top Primed To Collapse, US Says," trumpeted a *Washington Post* headline two weeks after Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind behind the 11 September 2001 attacks and then the movement's "number three," was arrested in March 2003. "I believe the tide has turned in terms of al-Qa'ida," Congressman Porter J. Goss, then chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Intelligence Committee and himself a former CIA case officer who became its director a year later, was quoted in that same article. "We've got them nailed," an unidentified intelligence expert also boasted that same month, before more expansively declaring that "we're close to dismantling them."¹²

Identically upbeat assessments were voiced following the nearly bloodless capture of Baghdad in April 2003 and the failure of Al Qaeda to make good on threats of renewed attacks in retaliation for the U.S.-led invasion.¹³ Citing Bush administration sources, an article in the *Washington Times* on 24 April 2003, for instance, reported the prevailing view in official Washington that Al Qaeda's "failure to carry out a successful strike during

the U.S.-led military campaign to topple Saddam Hussein has raised questions about their ability to carry out major new attacks.”¹⁴ Then, in rapid succession came the March 2004 commuter train bombings in Madrid; the suicide attacks against London transportation targets the following year; and, among the most serious of the various post-9/11 Al Qaeda Central-commanded plots, the planned in-flight suicide bombings of seven American and Canadian passenger aircraft in August 2006.¹⁵

The airlines plot is especially instructive in this context. Rather than selecting the softer, more accessible targets like subway and commuter trains, hotels and tourist destinations, which conventional wisdom at the time held was all an arguably seriously degraded Al Qaeda was capable of, the intended attack was directed against perhaps the most hardened target set in the post-11 September 2001 environment: commercial aviation. This development thus called into question some of the most fundamental assumptions about Core Al Qaeda's capabilities and intentions and—not least—our ability to deter it. In this latter respect, Al Qaeda's leadership apparently was completely unfazed by the succession of intelligence successes that led first to the arrest of the plot's initial commander, Abu Faraj al-Libi, in May 2005, and then to the death of his successor, Hamza Rabia, in a U.S. drone strike just five months later. Such was the movement's determination to attack despite its allegedly catastrophic condition that, these presumably fatal setbacks (e.g., one leader in custody and another dead) notwithstanding, it reached into its supposedly exhausted bench of core fighters and appointed the late Abu Ubaydah al-Masri to press ahead with the operation.

Not two years later, though, similar assertions of Al Qaeda Central's demise were being voiced. Juan Zarate, the Bush administration's Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism and one of the most perceptive and knowledgeable observers of the entire Al Qaeda phenomenon, offered an unusually nuanced and balanced assessment of the movement and the core leadership in a speech presented in April 2008. Carefully calibrating recent progress in the war on terrorism against remaining challenges, Zarate nonetheless drew attention to a “number of important developments that signal that al Qaeda and the movement it represents are under greater stress and finding more opposition to its program, in particular by Muslims affected directly by al Qaeda's tactics.”¹⁶ Zarate's remarks were amplified two weeks later by an anonymous senior American counterterrorism official quoted in an interview with London's *Daily Telegraph*: “[T]he end of the global threat al Qaeda poses,” he stated, “is now as visible as it is foreseeable.”¹⁷ Then, there was the statement by Ryan Crocker, the then U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, who told reporters on a visit to the Shi'a holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in May 2008, “You are not going to hear me say that al Qaeda is defeated, but they've never been closer to defeat than they are now.”¹⁸ And, finally, under a front-page headline in the *Washington Post*, “US Cites Big Gains Against al Qaeda,” then CIA Director Michael Hayden ticked off a list of indicators that, he argued, portended Al Qaeda's imminent demise: “Near strategic defeat of al Qaeda in Iraq. Near strategic defeat for al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. Significant setbacks for al Qaeda globally . . . as a lot of the Islamic world pushes back on their form of Islam.”¹⁹

At the time, these views fit neatly with the prevailing consensus among government officials, academicians, and pundits alike that Al Qaeda had ceased to exist as an organizational entity and had become nothing more than a hollow shell—an ideology without an organization to advance it—and a leaderless entity of disparate individuals unconnected to any central authority. Bin Laden was said to be completely estranged from the movement he created, living in a remote cave, isolated from his fighters, sympathizers, and supporters, and unable to exercise any meaningful role in the movement's operations and future trajectory. The threat, it was argued, had therefore become primarily “bottom up” and not “top

down”—to the extent that terrorist organizations themselves and the command and control functions that they had traditionally exercised were said to no longer matter. Instead, it was argued, the threat now came from self-radicalized, self-selected “lone wolves” and “bunches of guys” and not from actual, existing identifiable terrorist organizations.²⁰

Then, the plot to stage simultaneous suicide attacks on the New York City subway system, to coincide with the eighth anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks, came to light the following year. The ringleader, an Afghan-born Green Card holder who lived in Queens named Najibullah Zazi, testified that both he and two fellow conspirators had been trained at an Al Qaeda camp in Pakistan. Three senior Core Al Qaeda commanders—the late Rashid Rauf and Saleh al-Somali, who were respectively killed in U.S. drone strikes in 2008 and 2009, together with Adnan al-Shukrijumah, who is still at large—had overseen and directed the plot, which was also linked to two other ambitious sets of attacks planned for April 2009 in Manchester, England, and July 2010 in Scandinavia.²¹

May 2010 brought additional refutation of the “bottom up” argument when a naturalized U.S. citizen of Pakistani birth named Faisal Shahzad nearly succeeded in staging a massive car bombing in the heart of New York City’s Times Square. Shahzad had been recruited by a close Core Al Qaeda ally, the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP or “Pakistani Taliban”), which had also trained him in bombmaking at a camp in North Waziristan before sending him back to the United States on this mission.²²

In sum, the same arguments made about the irrelevance or impending demise of Core Al Qaeda today have all been heard before—and have consistently proven mistaken. Given that virtually every major terrorist attack or plot against either the United States or the United Kingdom (and indeed other European countries) during the period between 2002 and 2009²³ was known either to have emanated from Core Al Qaeda or from allies and associates acting on its behalf—when Core Al Qaeda had supposedly ceased to exist—such assessments sound a cautionary note with regard to the similarly optimistic claims made in many contemporary analyses of the Al Qaeda Core’s longevity and supposed irrelevance.

Capacity

The prevailing consensus that the Al Qaeda Core is poised on the brink of collapse seemed to acquire greater weight in May 2012 when the U.S. Military Academy’s Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) published 17 documents seized at bin Laden’s Abbottabad, Pakistan villa during the previous year’s raid.²⁴ “Osama bin Laden’s last words show dark days for al Qaeda” was typical of the news coverage afforded the documents’ release.²⁵ Indeed, the CTC’s conclusion based on this thimbleful of documents, from which the media largely drew for its reporting, was unequivocal:

The relationship between what has been labelled “al Qaeda Central” (AQC) under the leadership of Bin Laden is not in sync on the operational level with its so-called “affiliates.” Bin Laden enjoyed little control over either groups affiliated with al Qaeda in name (e.g., AQAP or AQI/ISI) or so-called “fellow travelers” such as the TTP.²⁶

In the rush to draw inferences from this minuscule sample of the thousands of documents removed from bin Laden’s lair by the U.S. Navy SEALs who killed the Al Qaeda leader, there was no mention of the starkly different interpretation of the materials that was offered by Obama administration officials shortly after the raid. For example, an

anonymous senior U.S. official quoted in *ProPublica* depicted bin Laden as a hands-on “micro-manager.” “The cumbersome process he had to follow for security reasons,” the official had explained, “did not prevent him from playing a role. . . . He was down in the weeds as far as best operatives, best targets, best timing.”²⁷

Intelligence analysts then dissecting bin Laden’s diary had reportedly concluded that the movement’s preeminent figure had also been involved in “every recent major al Qaeda threat.”²⁸ These included plots directed against the United States, where bin Laden urged his followers to recruit non-Muslims and minorities—especially African Americans and Latinos—for attacks that would target smaller cities in addition to New York City and Los Angeles. Striking on significant dates such as 4 July and the 10th anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks, and hitting targets such as trains and passenger aircraft, were among his exhortations both to Core Al Qaeda planners, as well as to operatives in the group’s affiliated movements in Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia, among other places, according to the information released in May 2011.²⁹ According to an account published in the *Washington Post* that same month, bin Laden “functioned like a crime boss pulling strings from a prison cell, sending regular messages to his most trusted lieutenants and strategic advice to far-flung franchises, including al Qaeda’s affiliate in Yemen.”³⁰

No explanation, however, was given a year later when the CTC’s release of the Abbotabad materials to square these discrepancies. Perhaps doing so risked calling attention to the fact that a close reading of the 17 documents reveals that they are far more ambiguous than portrayed in both the CTC report and accompanying U.S. government statements. For instance, it is significant that, notwithstanding the severe limitations imposed on the Al Qaeda Core by U.S. intelligence and military operations, especially since the escalation of the drone program’s campaign in 2009, the movement has still been able to expand appreciably beyond its South Asia base. The documents indisputably depict an Al Qaeda that, in 2011, had an active presence in more places than it did on 11 September 2001.³¹ Moreover, in the two years since the raid, the movement has been able to expand still further: deeper into West Africa (beyond Nigeria to Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) and to the Levant (Syria), as well.

That bin Laden may have been “out of sync” or had fraught relations with the variety of far-flung Al Qaeda affiliate organizations is therefore not entirely surprising. This was the tradeoff he accepted after 2002 to ensure the movement’s survival and longevity by devolving power to the local franchises. Nonetheless, bin Laden remained both determined and able to communicate his wishes to Al Qaeda’s growing stable of associates. Getting them to listen was of course a problem familiar to any manager coping with rapid expansion. Admittedly, this led to uneven relations with some of Al Qaeda’s affiliates and associates because of the cumbersome and elongated communications loop. And, at times they spurned his advice and entreaties.³² But it should be remembered that Al Qaeda itself established none of these franchises. All had already existed before choosing to align themselves with Al Qaeda; hence, as independent entities, it is unreasonable to assume that they would necessarily fall into lock step with all of bin Laden’s wishes or dictates.³³

Nonetheless, the picture that emerges from the seized Arabic-language documents is of a leader involved in both Al Qaeda’s day-to-day operations and long-term strategy.³⁴ Ever the policy wonk, opining on topics as diverse as the “Arab Spring” and the declining U.S. economy, bin Laden also retained his penchant for attempting to micromanage—however unresponsive his franchises and affiliates may or may not have been. In actual fact, the documents portray the affiliates as responsive to bin Laden on the most important, pressing issues regarding either personnel or strategy. The extent of his influence is perhaps best illustrated by bin Laden’s ability to block both the promotion of the late Anwar al-Awlaqi

within Al Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate, AQAP (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula),³⁵ and the formalization of relations between the movement's Somali arm, al Shabaab, with Core Al Qaeda.³⁶

From bin Laden documents leaked to the British press but curiously missing from the West Point CTC's trove,³⁷ we also know that, as far back as 2003, bin Laden had taken an interest in expanding Al Qaeda's operations to West Africa, and in fact was in direct contact with leaders of Nigeria's Boko Haram group.³⁸ We also know that both he and his successor and co-founder of Al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, maintained close relations with both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. Indeed, both men reportedly regularly conferred with Mullah Omar and discussed the opportunities that the eventual U.S. and ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan would present to their respective organizations.³⁹

Much has already been made in previous document leaks of bin Laden's musings about the need to rebrand Al Qaeda in light of its waning influence and tarnished image in the Muslim world as a result of its affiliates killing more of their co-religionists than their declared enemies. But a careful reading of the declassified documents presents a more nuanced understanding of bin Laden's preoccupation with this issue. His concerns in fact centered on his belief that the Western media and Al Qaeda's enemies were misportraying the movement by focusing only on its violent side and ignoring its political goals and aspirations. Bin Laden thus sought a new name for the movement that would more accurately reflect its ideological pretensions and self-appointed role as defender of Muslims everywhere.⁴⁰ This calculated assessment of Al Qaeda's outreach shortcomings is thus very different from the desperate handwringing described in news accounts of the documents.

Perhaps the most remarkable communication, however, is one dated 27 August 2010. In it, bin Laden expresses his concerns for the safety of his fighters and followers in Pakistan: not because they might be arrested or detained by the authorities, but because of the torrential rains and flooding then afflicting that country.⁴¹ The Al Qaeda leader, accordingly, was more fearful that his men might be affected by the weather than by any effort of the Pakistani government to apprehend them. This assertion alone speaks volumes about how amenable he and his minions found their refuge in Pakistan—a comfort level that is unlikely to have changed in the two years since bin Laden was killed.

Moreover, there is little in the documents that suggests that it was terribly difficult for Al Qaeda fighters to travel from Iran to Pakistan—or, for that matter, between Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁴² And there is no indication that, once in Pakistan, they had any trouble traversing Baluchistan en route to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas or North-West Frontier Province, two of the movement's favorite haunts. Given the continuing antipathy between Pakistan and the United States and the absence of any indication of a change in this laissez-faire policy of the Pakistani government toward Al Qaeda since bin Laden's death, there is no reason to believe that the core's freedom of movement has been inhibited in any meaningful way.

Finally, despite Core Al Qaeda's alleged abject decrepitude and the suppositions about bin Laden somehow being "out of touch" (as well as "out of sync"), he nonetheless laid out a compelling strategy for Al Qaeda's survival that the broad movement appears to be pursuing today. Continuing to attack the United States was only one step in his strategic plan, which focused on:

- Attriting and enervating America so that a weakened United States would be forced out of Muslim lands and therefore have neither the will nor the capability to intervene;

- Taking over and controlling territory, creating the physical sanctuaries and safe havens that are Al Qaeda's lifeblood; and
- Declaring "emirates" in these liberated lands that would be safe from U.S. and Western intervention because of their collective enfeeblement.⁴³

Although it may be tempting to dismiss bin Laden's grand plans and ambitious strategy for the movement, as Mary Habeck cogently notes, "No al Qaeda affiliate or partner (including the Taliban, al Qaeda in Iraq, or the Shabaab) has been deposed from power by an uprising of the local population alone. They have needed outside intervention in order to expel the insurgents, even when the people have hated al Qaeda's often brutal rule."⁴⁴

Two salient conclusions thus emerge from this overview of the Al Qaeda Core in light of the released Abbottabad documents. First, one can draw valid inferences from the documents that are at odds with the conventional wisdom or at least the manner in which other analyses have interpreted the documents. Second, if this contrarian view is plausible (which this author certainly believes it to be), the Al Qaeda Core's demise is neither ordained nor imminent—at least based on the publicly released evidence. Rather, one can make a reasonable argument that Core Al Qaeda has:

- a well-established sanctuary in Pakistan that it functions in without great hindrance and that is poised to expand across the border into Afghanistan as the U.S. military and ISAF continue to withdraw from that country, until the complete drawdown set for 2014;
- a deeper bench than has often been posited (or at least has been shown to be deeper at various critical junctures in the past when the Core Al Qaeda's demise had been proclaimed);⁴⁵
- a defined and articulated strategy for the future that it is presumably still pursuing;
- a highly capable leader in al-Zawahiri who, over the past year—despite predictions to the contrary—has been able not only to keep the movement alive, but also to expand its brand and forge new alliances (particularly in West African countries); and
- a well-honed, long-established dexterity that enables it to be as opportunistic as it has been instrumental, that is capable of identifying and exploiting whatever new opportunities for expansion and consolidation may present themselves.

All this suggests that the Al Qaeda Core is extremely likely to exist in 2017 much as it existed—despite predictions and assessments to the contrary—five years ago in 2007. Admittedly, it is impossible to know what shape, strength, and dimensions the Core will possess five years hence. That, as the next section of this article argues, will depend on the outcome of current events principally in Syria and Iraq, but also in the North African and other Middle Eastern countries profoundly affected by the "Arab Spring."

Change Drivers

As the preceding discussion argues, while bin Laden's death inflicted a crushing blow on Al Qaeda, it is still not clear that it has necessarily been a lethal one. He left behind a resilient movement that, although seriously weakened, has nonetheless been expanding and consolidating its control in new and far-flung locales. Bin Laden also created a core organization that, despite a decade of withering onslaught and attrition, continues to demonstrate its ability to:

- preserve a still compelling brand;
- replenish its ranks (including those of its key leaders);
- project a message that still finds an audience and adherents in disparate parts of the globe, however modest that audience may perhaps be; and,
- pursue a strategy that continues to inform both the movement's and the core's operations and activities, and that today is effectively championed by al-Zawahiri.

In this respect, since 2002, Al Qaeda has embraced a grand plan for itself that was defined as much by al-Zawahiri as bin Laden. It is a plan that deliberately (and successfully) transformed it into a de-centralized, networked, transnational movement rather than the single monolithic entity Al Qaeda formerly was.⁴⁶ In the midst of the group's expulsion from, and defeat in, Afghanistan almost 12 years ago, al-Zawahiri charted a way forward for the movement—at a moment, it is worth recalling, when everyone else believed it was on the brink of annihilation. His treatise, published in the London-based Arabic language newspaper *al Sharq al Aswat* in December 2001, and titled *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, explained how “small groups could frighten the Americans” and their allies. It equally presciently described how “[t]he jihad movement must patiently build its structure until it is well established. It must pool enough resources and supporters and devise enough plans to fight the battle at the time and arena that it chooses.”⁴⁷ And, it was al-Zawahiri, after all, who over 20 years ago articulated Al Qaeda's enduring strategy in terms of “far” and “near” enemies. The United States, of course, was the “far enemy,” whose defeat, he maintained, was a prerequisite to the elimination of the “near enemy”—the corrupt, reprobate and authoritarian anti-Islamic regimes in the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and South East Asia that could not otherwise remain in power without American support. In light of the “Arab Spring,” that strategy has now assumed almost a hybrid character,⁴⁸ whereby the movement by necessity has focused almost entirely on the “near enemy” and local struggles, while still remaining characteristically poised to take advantage of any opportunity to attack the “far enemy” that may present itself. This dual embrace of “near” and “far” enemy priorities was perhaps best demonstrated by the most recent “underwear bomber” plot involving an agent of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or MI6) who was able to infiltrate into the highest command structure of AQAP, which again leapt at the opportunity to strike at a “far enemy” commercial airline target despite the group's preoccupation with fighting the Yemeni government—the “near enemy.”⁴⁹

By the same token, it is often heard that, much like bin Laden's killing, the “Arab Spring” has sounded Al Qaeda's death knell.⁵⁰ However, while the mostly nonviolent, mass protests of the “Arab Spring” were successful in overturning hated despots and thus appeared to discredit Al Qaeda's longstanding message that only violence and *jihad* could achieve the same ends, in the 18 months since these dramatic developments commenced, evidence has repeatedly come to light of Al Qaeda's ability to take advantage of the instability and upheaval in these same countries to re-assert its relevance and attempt to revive its waning fortunes.⁵¹

Moreover, while the “Arab Spring” has transformed governance across North Africa and the Middle East, it has had little effect on the periphery of that geographic expanse. The continued antipathy in Pakistan toward the United States, coupled with the increasing activity of militant groups there—most of whom are already closely affiliated with Core al Qaeda—has, for instance, largely undermined the progress achieved in recent years against terrorism in South Asia. Further, the effects of the “Arab Spring” in Yemen, for instance, have clearly benefitted AQAP at the expense of the chronically weak central government in that country. AQAP in fact has been able to expand its reach considerably, seizing

and controlling more territory, gaining new adherents and supporters, and continuing to innovate tactically as it labors to extend its attack capabilities beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Although al Shabaab has been weakened in Somalia as a result of its expulsion from the capital, Mogadishu, over a year ago and the deaths of two key Core Al Qaeda leaders who had both embedded in the group and had enhanced appreciably its terrorist capabilities,⁵² al Shabaab nonetheless still maintains a stranglehold over the southern part of the country, where a terrible drought and famine threaten the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

Meanwhile, the instability and disorder generated by the “Arab Spring” have created new opportunities for Al Qaeda and its allies in the region to regroup and reorganize. Indeed, the number of failed or failing states or ungoverned spaces now variously found in the Sahel, in the Sinai, in parts of Syria and elsewhere has in fact increased in the aftermath of the changes witnessed across North Africa and the Middle East since 2011.

In no place is this clearer or more consequential than in Syria. The priority that Core Al Qaeda has attached to Syria may be seen in the special messages conveyed in February and June 2012, respectively, by al-Zawahiri and the late Abu Yahya al-Libi in support of the uprising against the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad and calling on Muslims in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon to do everything within their power to assist in the overthrow of Syria’s hated minority Alawite rulers.⁵³

According to U.S. intelligence analysts who regularly monitor the most relevant and important password-protected/access-controlled *jihadi* websites, the leading thread for months in the top three sites—al Shumukh al Islam, al Fida’ and Ansar al Mujahideen—has been Syria.⁵⁴ Typical of these was the 14 February 2012 message posted on al Fida’ that described Syria as presenting an ideal opportunity for *mujahideen* (“holy warriors”) who missed the Afghan and Iraqi *jihads*. “Since the launch of the Syrian revolution and since the barbaric Nusayri [Alawite] regime began killing our people there,” it stated:

[T]he mujahideen, and praise and gratitude belong to Allah, took the initiative to help those weak ones in the East and West of the earth. We ask Allah to grant them success in liberating the Muslims in Syria from the disbelieving regime. There must be weapons to stop the harm of these aggressors. The Ummah will not get out of humiliation and weakness except through Jihad.⁵⁵

Another message, presumably from a front-line fighter who had answered that call, described how “[t]hese attacks in Syria remind me of my time in Iraq.”⁵⁶ And, in March, a new e-journal, *Balagh* (“Message”), appeared from a group calling itself the “Levant News Battalion,” and contained religious exhortations to overthrow al-Assad and his Alawite cronies. It was posted on the al Shumukh al Islam online forum.⁵⁷ Pleas for financial aid to support the mujahideen fighting in Syria have also regularly appeared on this same site.⁵⁸

Al Qaeda’s interest in Syria is neither recent nor ephemeral. As the Council of Foreign Relations’ Ed Husain pointed out in his seminal article on the subject, “The territory in the Middle East that al Qaeda covets most is of course Saudi Arabia, but Syria is next on the list.” Indeed, Syria is not known by the name Syria to al Qaeda and its minions but rather as al Bilaad al Shaam⁵⁹—“The Land of the Levantine People”—treasured Muslim territory that was once administered by the Turkish Ottoman Empire as a single, unitary entity encompassing present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine. Bin Laden often referred to the events following World War I that resulted in the dismemberment of Turkey’s empire and the end of both Islamic rule of Muslims and the demise of the Caliphate. His famous statement on 7 October 2001 in response to the commencement of U.S. military operations to liberate Afghanistan referred specifically to the 1920 Treaty of

Sèvres, which detached these Arab provinces from the Muslim rule.⁶⁰ And, in one of Al Qaeda's major addresses before the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, he cited the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement—the secret understanding reached between France and Britain that divided the Levant and surrounding countries into French and British spheres of influence. Under this arrangement, France received Syria and Lebanon, while Britain got Palestine and Jordan, as well as Iraq.⁶¹

Syria has thus long been an Al Qaeda *idée fixe*. According to Husain, that country has even more of the characteristics of the same type of perfect *jihadi* storm that Afghanistan possessed three decades ago: widespread support among the Arab world, the provision of financial assistance from wealthy Gulf supporters, a popular cause that readily attracts foreign volunteers, and a contiguous border facilitating the movements of these fighters into and out of the declared battle space. Syria, though, has several additionally compelling factors that have figured prominently in the attention Core Al Qaeda has focused on it:

- First, it is sacred land referred to in early Muslim scripture and history, complete with enormously evocative “end times,” prophetic overtones.
- Second, in the geographical scheme of traditional Ottoman rule, it contains the al Haram al Sharif—the “Holy Precinct” of Jerusalem, where the Dome of the Rock (from which the Prophet is reputed to have ascended to Heaven) and the al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest shrine, are located.
- Third, the enemy—the above-quoted al Fida' message states—are the Nusayri: the hated Shi'a apostate Alawite minority sect whom the revered thirteenth-century Islamic theologian Ibn Taymiyah (author of the key *jihadi* text, *The Religious and Moral Doctrine of Jihad*)⁶² called on Sunnis to do battle with. “For Sunni jihadist fighters,” Husain explains, “the conflict in Syria is religiously underwritten by their most important teacher.”
- Fourth, unlike Afghanistan, which was part of the Ummah but distant from Arab lands, Syria offers Al Qaeda a base in the Arab heartland. As Husain notes, “This makes them relevant again to daily politics of the Middle East.”⁶³

Indeed, Core Al Qaeda's attraction to Syria is nothing less than irresistible. After Al Qaeda missed the opportunities to intervene or assert itself in the seismic events that initiated the “Arab Spring” in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011 and saw itself relegated to only a supporting role in Libya, al-Zawahiri doubtless regards the Syrian civil war as a key opportunity with which to burnish Al Qaeda's credentials and demonstrate its relevance. Even more so, Syria's geographic proximity to both neighboring Jordan and Israel realizes a Core Al Qaeda dream: bringing it to the borders of precisely the pro-Western, insufficiently Islamic Arab monarchy that the organization has long despised in Jordan and to the very gates of its most detested foe, Israel.⁶⁴

Syria is also a particularly agreeable environment for Al Qaeda. During the 2003–2009 Sunni insurgency in Iraq, it was a key base for training foreign fighters and supporting them logistically. It was also the main conduit for these fighters entering and exiting Iraq—many of whom were Syrian *jihadis* themselves. Shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, founder and leader of the Ja'mat Tawdid wu Jihad (“Monotheism and Holy War Group”), which later formally allied itself with Al Qaeda and adopted the Al Qaeda appellation, established operations in Syria that contributed enormously thereafter to the escalation of violence in Iraq.⁶⁵

The *jihadi* foreign fighter contingent currently in Syria is believed to be small, amounting only to an estimated 1,200–1,500 combatants, and thus constituting only a small portion

of the forces arrayed against the Assad regime.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, its influence is palpable through Syrian rebel organizations such as the Jabhat al Nusra li-Ahli al Shaam (“Front for the Victory of the Levantine People,” also referred to as the Jabhat al Nusra, “al Nusra Front to Protect the Levant” or simply as al Nusra).⁶⁷ According to the Quilliam Foundation’s Noman Bentoman, a former *jihadi* himself who was a founding member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Front (LIFG), an Al Qaeda affiliate, al Nusra “is largely influenced by al Qaeda’s rigid jihadi ideology” and, while its main enemy is the Syrian government and armed forces, it has been rhetorically hostile to the United States, in addition to promulgating harshly sectarian views that are focused mostly on Syria’s ruling Alawite minority.⁶⁸ Al Nusra’s emerging role as the spearhead of the most bloody and spectacular opposition attacks is demonstrated by the nearly tenfold escalation of its operations between March and June 2012.⁶⁹

It is in Syria, accordingly, that Core Al Qaeda’s future—its relevance and perhaps even its longevity—turns. In this respect, its spear carrier there has been Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).⁷⁰ The movement’s Iraqi branch arguably demonstrates the limitations of decapitation as a counterterrorism strategy, given that its first three commanders—al-Zarqawi, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, and Abu Abdullah al-Rashid al-Baghdadi—have all been killed (al-Zarqawi in 2006 and his two successors both in 2010). Yet, the group is perhaps more threatening and consequential today than at any time since the height of the insurgency in that country between 2003 and 2008.

The December 2011 withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces from Iraq breathed new life into AQI.⁷¹ Although violence overall had declined in Iraq that year, the group was nonetheless responsible for some of the bloodiest and most spectacular attacks against Shi’a pilgrims and neighborhoods, as well as against a variety of government targets—ranging from police recruits to senior officials. Fourteen AQI attacks alone claimed the lives of nearly 600 people and caused injuries to some 1,500 others.⁷² This pattern continued during 2012⁷³: typical of these activities were the coordinated attacks on Shi’a in the midst of a religious holiday in June that killed at least 66 people;⁷⁴ the coordinated car bombs, checkpoint ambushes, shootings of policemen in their homes and assaults on military bases that convulsed the country on a single day in July and left 100 people dead;⁷⁵ and the twin car bombings in Baghdad at the end of the month that killed 19 people.⁷⁶

At the start of the Ramadan holiday in July 2012, AQI’s leader, Abu Bakir al-Baghdadi, drew deliberate parallels between the group’s war on Iraq’s Shi’a majority-led government and the Sunni uprising against the Assad regime in neighboring Syria. Praising the Syrian *jihadis*, he declared:

You have taught the world lessons in courage, jihad, and patience, and you have taught the Ummah and proven to it with absolute proof and argument that injustice is only lifted with power and strength, and that weakness is only erased by giving souls and bloodshed, and spreading body parts and skulls of the martyrs and those wounded on the path.⁷⁷

Indeed, fomenting sectarian divisions and enmity has been a mainstay of both the AQI organization in Iraq and its counterparts in Syria.⁷⁸ In Iraq, for instance, attacks on Shi’a account for 86 percent of all major AQI attacks, according to research conducted by the Henry Jackson Society’s Robin Simcox.⁷⁹ It is a trend that is also reflected in Al Qaeda messaging and outreach. Al-Zawahiri’s address to the “Lions of the Levant” in February 2012, for instance, deliberately incited sectarian tensions in Syria, striking clear

anti-Alawite, anti-Hezbollah, and anti-Iranian themes.⁸⁰ And AQI propaganda has long prominently propagated anti-Shi'a sentiments, setting the violence it has inflicted on that community and the Iraqi government within the context of the eternal holy struggle against Shi'a and Iranian domination of Sunnis. As one analysis of the growing incidence of Al Qaeda sectarian messaging concluded that:

al Qaeda has a clear motive to use sectarianism to amplify its influence and that the information environment since the Arab Spring provides a vastly increased number of opportunities to do so. The roiling political changes in the region seem to have put sectarianism near the center of public discourse, perhaps because the sense of instability or threat moves people to reaffirm their closest identities to regain balance. Alternately, people may feel freer to express longstanding grievances in the absence of a controlling regime. In any case, al Qaeda is facing an atmosphere permeated by sectarian issues, and only has to decide where and how to exploit them.⁸¹

Conclusion

The challenge of looking five years into Al Qaeda's future is evidenced simply by looking to the situation a little over five years ago. In 2007, despite the death of al-Zarqawi, Iraq was still enmeshed in the violent throes of an insurgency that had yet to be brought to heel by the "surge" of American combat forces and adoption of the new counterinsurgency strategy directed by General David Petraeus. In South Asia, U.S. relations with Pakistan were certainly far more positive than they are today, and Afghanistan was not beset to the same extent it is today by the insurgent violence that now potentially threatens to re-submerge the country once the United States and ISAF draw-down is completed in 2014. The conventional wisdom was that Core Al Qaeda had already ceased to exist as an operational entity and that the main threat came not from established terrorist organizations with an identifiable leadership and chain of command, but mainly from "lone wolves" and unaffiliated, untrained "bunches of guys."

Despite the difficulty of predicting where Al Qaeda and AQI will be next year, much less in 2018, given the changes of the past 12 months alone, several conclusions based on the preceding discussion may be posited that will likely affect Core Al Qaeda's longevity and relevance:

- *First, Al Qaeda is still strongest at the geographical periphery of the dramatic events of the past 18 months.* Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, as noted above, still remain key Al Qaeda operational environments and sanctuaries and, in Yemen's case, rather than depriving Al Qaeda of political space, the "Arab Spring" has created new opportunities in that country both for AQAP's expansion and consolidation of its recent gains. Core Al Qaeda demonstrably benefits from, and feeds off, these developments—thus ensuring its longevity, at least for the foreseeable future.
- *Second, the conflict in Syria—and the attendant opportunities it presents to Al Qaeda at a critical time in its history—has potentially breathed new life into the Al Qaeda brand,* exactly as Iraq did in 2003 and, by extension, the core organization, with new relevance and status that, depending on the future course of events in both that country and the surrounding region, could potentially resuscitate Core Al Qaeda's waning fortunes, much as occurred nine years ago.

- *Third, Al Qaeda's core demographic has always been disenfranchised, disillusioned, and marginalized youth.* There is no evidence that the potential pool of young "hot heads" to which the core's message has always been directed will necessarily dissipate or constrict in light of the "Arab Spring." Moreover, it may likely grow in the future as impatience over the slow pace of democratization and economic reform takes hold and many who took to the streets find themselves excluded from or deprived of the political and economic benefits that the upheavals in their countries promised. The losers and disenchanted of the "Arab Spring" may thus provide a new reservoir of recruits for Al Qaeda in the near future—especially in those countries across North Africa and the Middle East with proportionally high populations below the age of 20.
- *Fourth, Core Al Qaeda's embrace of a patently sectarian strategy may perhaps backfire in the long term, but for the moment has proven effective in rallying fighters and support (financial and otherwise) both to Syria and Iraq.* Its extension to Lebanon and elsewhere with similar minority populations is not improbable given the recent upsurge in *jihadi* messaging and propaganda deliberately inciting violence and manipulating the sectarian issue to Core Al Qaeda's advantage.
- *Fifth, the instability and disorders generated by the upheaval caused by the "Arab Spring" may also affect the intelligence and security services of those countries most caught up in these developments.* They will likely remain less focused on Al Qaeda and other transnational threats and more concerned with internal problems. Indeed, in those countries with active Islamist political parties, there may be a reluctance to engage the more extreme and violent, although ideologically like-minded, elements at the fringe of these movements.
- *Sixth, the continued fragmentation of the jihadi movement as a result of bin Laden's killing and Core Al Qaeda's weakening may paradoxically present new and daunting challenges to both regional and Western intelligence and security services.* The continual emergence of new, smaller, more dispersed terrorist entities with a more fluid membership that easily gravitates between and among groups that have little or no established *modus operandi* will raise difficulties in terms of identifying, tracking, anticipating, and predicting threats. The authorities in Northern Ireland, for instance, encountered precisely this problem in the aftermath of the 1998 "Good Friday" accords, when the threat from a single, monolithic entity, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), devolved into the atomized threats presented by the smaller, less structured, more amorphous dissident Republican groups.⁸²
- *Seventh, the progeny of seminal jihadi leaders either killed or imprisoned over the past decade as a result of the war on terrorism may emerge as heirs to the movement bequeathed to them by their elders.* For instance, until his death in 2009, Saad bin Laden, Osama's eldest son, was being groomed to succeed his father.⁸³ The prospect of additional sons, nephews, cousins, and more distant relations forming a new generation of fighters and filling leadership roles in Core Al Qaeda is unnerving: not least because successive generations of the same terrorist organizations have shown themselves to be more lethally violent than their predecessors.
- *Eighth, there is the problem of the "old made new": former leaders or senior level fighters who emerge from prison or exile to assume key positions of command of new or existing terrorist organizations, including Core Al Qaeda, and thus revitalize and reinvigorate flagging or dormant terrorist groups.* This same development of course led to the formation of the AQAP in early 2009. Egyptian President Morsi's pardon of 16 leading *jihadi* prisoners from the al Gama'a Islamiyya and al Jihad's groups⁸⁴

and the amnesties granted to hundreds of others have the potential to infuse existing organizations with greater militancy and violence. In addition, at least a dozen or more key Core Al Qaeda personnel are still sheltering in Iran, including Saif al-Adl. If allowed their freedom, they could easily strengthen the existing central leadership.

- *Finally, the continued absence of a successful, major terrorist attack in North America since 2001 may induce a period of quiet and calm that lulls us into a state of false complacency, lowering our guard and, in turn, provoking Core Al Qaeda or one of its allies to chance a dramatically spectacular attack.*

None of the above is pre-ordained, much less certain. It is equally likely that Core Al Qaeda will continue to degenerate and eventually devolve into nothing more than a postmodern movement, with a set of loose ideas and ideologies. It would continue to pose a terrorist threat, but a far weaker, more sporadic and perhaps less consequential one. The future of the Al Qaeda Core depends not only on whether they can find a new cause—such as Syria today, like Iraq in 2003—but also, fundamentally, whether they can learn from past experiences and avoid the mistakes that previously undermined their struggle through self-inflicted wounds. One of course obviously—and indeed fervently—hopes that Al Qaeda will not prove capable of overcoming this particular pathology and will therefore continue to replicate the critical mistakes that have repeatedly undermined it in the past.

Notes

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