

# HOW AL-QAEDA SURVIVED DRONES, UPRISINGS, AND THE ISLAMIC STATE



THE NATURE OF THE CURRENT THREAT

Aaron Y. Zelin, Editor

“Al-Qaeda and its affiliate organizations never stopped being a primary terrorism concern for me, for the U.S. intelligence community, and for the broader counterterrorism community. Not a day has gone by in my entire tenure at NCTC where our emphasis on al-Qaeda has been anything less than a top priority. That’s the beauty of working on terrorism issues. You get the privilege of having multiple top priorities.”

—Nicholas Rasmussen

*Director, National Counterterrorism Center,  
comments at The Washington Institute  
March 1, 2017*

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Aaron Y. Zelin  
EDITOR



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Aaron Y. Zelin  
*June 2017*

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## About the Workshop

*We adapt to the practical reality wherever it is. As long as we are complying with the orders of sharia and refraining from its prohibitions...we invite our mujahid nation to make the jihad against the modern-day false idol America and its allies their first priority as much as they can afford [to do]. [Such an effort would] take into account the circumstances of each jihadist arena and what achieves its interests.*

—Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Brief Messages to a Victorious Nation, Part 5*

ON MARCH 1, 2017, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy convened a workshop on the current status of al-Qaeda, the third in a line of workshops organized by the Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence over the past couple of years. The prior two covered approaches to countering the Islamic State, the first focusing on five particular lines of effort, the second dealing with IS provinces outside Syria and Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

Since June 2014, al-Qaeda has fallen somewhat from the attention of governmental and outside expert analysis, which instead has focused on IS (aka ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh). No one has truly forgotten about al-Qaeda, but the conventional wisdom following the May 2011 death of Osama bin Laden has been that the group is on the ropes, its core weakened. This perception, however, is based largely on a pre-Arab-uprising view of the organization and network. Against the backdrop of the relatively new Trump administration, the time is now ripe to examine the status of al-Qaeda as an organization, a network, and an idea.

This one-day Institute workshop, which included scholars and practitioners focused on al-Qaeda and its branches, operated according to the Chatham House Rule. The event was organized thematically around four topics: (1) al-Qaeda's strength from an international and domestic perspective; (2) al-Qaeda's strongest branch in Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham); (3) al-Qaeda's major branches outside Syria (AQAP, AQIM, al-Shabab, and AQIS); and (4) al-Qaeda's financial structure. This provided a rich portrait of al-Qaeda's current stature and the nature of the threat it poses in the broader Middle East as well as in Western countries, including the United States.

In addition to panel discussions on these topics, the workshop featured opening and closing remarks by senior U.S. administration officials from the National Counterterrorism Center and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The introduction, which offers background content and a summary of each workshop's conclusion, is followed by in-depth statements-for-the-record (or, in one instance, an edited transcript). Because some presenters participated with the understanding that their statements would not be published, certain topics addressed in the introduction are not included in the compilation.

## NOTES

1. "Taking the Fight to ISIL: Operationalizing CT Lines of Effort against the Islamic State Group," symposium (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2, 2015), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/taking-the-fight-to-isil-operationalizing-ct-lines-of-effort-against-the-is>; and Katherine Bauer, ed., *Beyond Syria and Iraq: Examining Islamic State Provinces*, Policy Focus 149 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2016), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-syria-and-iraq-examining-islamic-state-provinces>.

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## Contributors

*Positions listed were those held at the time of the workshop.*

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Christopher Anzalone is a PhD candidate in Islamic studies at McGill University and a research fellow with the International Security Program at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

### ■ KATHERINE BAUER

The Blumenstein-Katz Family Fellow at The Washington Institute, Katherine Bauer is a former Treasury official who served as the department's financial attaché in Jerusalem and the Gulf. She also served as the senior policy advisor for Iran in the Office of Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes.

### ■ DAVEED GARTENSTEIN-ROSS

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies whose work focuses on understanding how violent nonstate actors (VNSAs) are transforming the world and how states are, in turn, trying to adapt to this challenge. He has specialized in jihadist movements, having undertaken detailed research into al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, Boko Haram, and IS's Wilayat Sinai. He is also the CEO of Valens Global, a consulting firm focused on the challenges posed by VNSAs, as well as a fellow with Google's Jigsaw, an associate fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, and an adjunct assistant professor in Georgetown University's Security Studies Program.

Widely published, he is also a member of the editorial board of the leading peer-reviewed journal *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.

#### ■ SAMUEL HELLER

Samuel Heller is a Beirut-based freelance writer, analyst, and fellow at the Century Foundation who has written extensively on the Syrian war for outlets including *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, *War on the Rocks*, *Foreign Policy*, *World Politics Review*, the *Daily Beast*, and *VICE News*.

#### ■ BRUCE HOFFMAN

Bruce Hoffman, a tenured professor at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service, serves as director of security studies and has studied terrorism and insurgency for more than four decades. He is also a visiting professor of terrorism studies at St. Andrews University, Scotland, and previously held the Corporate Chair in Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency at the RAND Corporation. Hoffman was appointed by the U.S. Congress as a commissioner on the 9/11 Review Commission and has been the scholar-in-residence for counterterrorism at the CIA; an advisor on counterterrorism with the Coalition Provisional Authority, Baghdad; and an advisor on counterinsurgency, Multinational Force–Iraq headquarters. Hoffman's books include *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat* (2014); *Anonymous Soldiers* (2015); and *Inside Terrorism* (2017). The second of these volumes was awarded the 2015 gold medal in The Washington Institute Book Prize.

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Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program

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#### ■ CHARLES LISTER

Charles Lister is a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, where he focuses primarily on the Syrian conflict and related issues of terrorism and insurgency. Since September 2016, Lister has managed MEI's Countering Terrorism project. He is a past visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center and served as lead coordinator for nearly three years of intensive face-to-face engagement with the leaderships of Syrian armed opposition groups, on behalf of the multinationally backed Syria Track II Dialogue Initiative. Lister is also former head of MENA at IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center. His latest book, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, was published by Oxford University Press.

#### ■ NICHOLAS RASMUSSEN

Nicholas Rasmussen was sworn in as director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) on December 18, 2014, upon his confirmation by the U.S. Senate, having previously served as NCTC's deputy director. Prior to this, Rasmussen served with the National Security Council (NSC) staff as special assistant to the president and senior director for counterterrorism, where he was responsible for providing staff support to the president, the national security advisor, and the Homeland Security advisor on counterterrorism policy and strategy. Rasmussen was first with the NCTC from 2004 to 2007 in senior policy and planning positions, and on the NSC staff as director for regional affairs in the Office of Combating Terrorism from 2001 to 2004.

#### ■ DON RASSLER

Don Ressler is an assistant professor in the Department of Social Sciences and the director of strategic initiatives at the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. His research is focused on ter-

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#### ■ HANS-JAKOB SCHINDLER

Hans-Jacob Schindler, an expert with wide international experience, joined the UN's al-Qaida/Taliban Sanctions Monitoring Team in early 2013. He previously worked as an associated partner for West Sands and an associated consultant for Stirling Assynt in Britain as well as an advisor to several companies in Europe. He has also served as program director for London's Institute for Strategic Dialogue, leading the foreign policy program area; first secretary, political affairs, and liaison to the security forces at the German embassy in Tehran; and as head of Germany's team investigating al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia. His career has included development of homeland security measures as well as risk mitigation, specifically toward insider threats.

#### ■ AARON Y. ZELIN

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute, where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadist groups in North Africa and Syria. He is also a PhD candidate (ABD) at King's College London, where his dissertation covers the history of the Tunisian jihadist movement. Zelin is the founder of the widely acclaimed and cited website Jihadology.net and its podcast *JihadPod*. He is also the author of several studies, most recently the January 2016 Washington Institute study *The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology*.

#### ■ KATHERINE ZIMMERMAN

Katherine Zimmerman is a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and the research manager for AEI's Critical Threats Project. As senior analyst on al-Qaeda, she studies how the terrorist network operates globally, including AQ affiliates in the Gulf of Aden region and in western and northern Africa. She specializes in al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the group's Yemen-based faction, and in al-Shabab, its Somali affiliate.

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## Key al-Qaeda-Related Events, 2009–17

- ▶ **JANUARY 23, 2009:** al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) formed
- ▶ **DECEMBER 25, 2009:** AQAP “underwear plot” attempted on flight to Detroit
- ▶ **JULY 11, 2010:** Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahedin (al-Shabab) conducts Kampala, Uganda, bombings during World Cup
- ▶ **OCTOBER 29, 2010:** AQAP “cargo planes plot” intercepted in United Arab Emirates
- ▶ **MARCH 2011–JUNE 2012:** AQAP controls parts of Abyan and Shabwa (Yemen)
- ▶ **APRIL 2011:** Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), a Tunisia-based al-Qaeda front, created
- ▶ **MAY 1, 2011:** Osama bin Laden killed in U.S. Navy SEAL raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan
- ▶ **SEPTEMBER 30, 2011:** AQAP ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki killed in Yemen drone strike
- ▶ **DECEMBER 2011–FEBRUARY 2012:** Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL), al-Qaeda front group in Benghazi and Darnah, Libya, created
- ▶ **JANUARY 23, 2012:** Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) announces establishment in Syria
- ▶ **FEBRUARY 2012:** Somalia’s al-Shabab publicly joins al-Qaeda

- ▶ **APRIL 2012–JANUARY 2013:** al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and local allies control cities in northern Mali
- ▶ **DECEMBER 2012:** Tunisia-based AQIM front group, Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi, established
- ▶ **JANUARY 16, 2013:** AQIM’s Mokhtar Belmokhtar leads In Amenas, Algeria, attack and hostage crisis
- ▶ **APRIL 2013:** JN splits with Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)
- ▶ **MAY 23, 2013:** AQIM attacks military barracks in Agadez, Niger, and uranium mine in Arlit, Niger
- ▶ **SEPTEMBER 14, 2013:** Ayman al-Zawahiri releases al-Qaeda’s “General Guidelines for the Work of a Jihadi”
- ▶ **SEPTEMBER 21, 2013:** al-Shabab conducts Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya
- ▶ **FEBRUARY 2014:** al-Qaeda’s General Command disassociates itself from ISIS
- ▶ **JUNE 2014:** ASL in Benghazi merges with other local Libyan Islamist insurgent factions to create Majlis Shura Thuwar Benghazi (Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council)
- ▶ **SEPTEMBER 1, 2014:** Somalia-based al-Shabab leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane, killed in a drone strike
- ▶ **SEPTEMBER 3, 2014:** al-Qaeda announces creation of a new branch in South Asia called al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)
- ▶ **DECEMBER 2014:** ASL in Darnah merges with other local Libyan Islamist insurgent factions to create Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin Darnah (Mujahedin Shura Council of Darnah and Its Suburbs)
- ▶ **JANUARY 7, 2015:** *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris conducted by AQAP-trained individuals
- ▶ **APRIL 2015–APRIL 2016:** AQAP controls al-Mukalla, Yemen
- ▶ **APRIL 2, 2015:** al-Shabab attacks Garissa University College in Kenya
- ▶ **JUNE 12, 2015:** AQAP leader, Nasser al-Wahishi, killed in drone strike in Yemen

- ▶ **NOVEMBER 20, 2015:** AQIM attacks Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali
- ▶ **JANUARY 15, 2016:** AQIM attacks Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
- ▶ **FEBRUARY 2, 2016:** al-Shabab blows hole in Daallo Airlines Flight 159, en route from Mogadishu to Djibouti
- ▶ **MARCH 13, 2016:** AQIM attacks tourists in Grand-Bassam, Cote d'Ivoire
- ▶ **JULY 29, 2016:** JN announces name change to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), merging with other smaller Syria-based, al-Qaeda-aligned jihadist factions; claims to no longer have external ties to al-Qaeda
- ▶ **JANUARY 28, 2017:** JFS merges with other Syrian Islamist factions to create Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
- ▶ **MARCH 2, 2017:** AQIM in Mali merges with other Mali-based, AQIM-aligned jihadist factions to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin

## Introduction

■ AARON Y. ZELIN

OVER THE PAST eight years, al-Qaeda's fortunes have ebbed and flowed. Drones, uprisings, and a challenge from the Islamic State have forced the core al-Qaeda organization, which was historically based in the Afghanistan/Pakistan (AfPak) region, and its various branches to adapt. A deep look into such adaptations formed the premise for The Washington Institute's March 1, 2017, workshop on the group and its network, as did an interest in assessing what the future might hold. Workshop participants included standout scholars, practitioners, and government officials from the United States and abroad. The contributions of select participants introduced in the following paragraphs will be elaborated in the individual statements-for-the-record. In separating this study into four sections, this monograph provides case studies demonstrating how each part of al-Qaeda's network has evolved and survived the various challenges it has faced roughly since the Obama administration took office.

### THE EVOLUTION OF AL-QAEDA

When President Barack Obama was inaugurated in January 2009, he wanted to shift the focus of U.S. counterterrorism efforts from foreign wars to al-Qaeda. Instead of getting bogged down fighting in Iraq, a war Obama had opposed, the United States needed to reengage in destroying al-Qaeda's senior leadership, which was responsible for the 9/11 attacks and was still actively plotting attacks. This is why the main feature of the Obama administration's counterterrorism fight was to "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future."<sup>1</sup>

In the following years, in contrast to the Bush administration's early efforts at nation building, the Obama administration sought to tread lightly in the campaign against al-Qaeda. The president's preferred tools were drone strikes and special operations. At first, such activities were focused mainly on the AfPak theater, but later they were expanded to other arenas such as Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and Syria. This approach yielded success in the killing and capture of many al-Qaeda leaders,<sup>2</sup> most notably the May 2011 raid on Osama bin Laden's safe house in Abbottabad, Pakistan. At the time, Obama argued that "the death of bin Laden marks the most significant achievement to date in our nation's effort to defeat al-Qaeda."<sup>3</sup> Yet around the same time, jihadist groups began taking advantage of the recent uprisings in various Arab countries, from Tunisia to Libya to Egypt to Yemen to Syria.

At the beginning of the Arab uprisings, many within government and the analytical community viewed the monumental events unfolding across the region as discrediting al-Qaeda and its ideology, showing that dictators could be overthrown without the use of violence. Moreover, the fact that al-Qaeda and its branches were not involved in the protests evidently signaled the group's irrelevance. Indeed, al-Qaeda was not involved in the protests, which did demonstrate in certain cases (Tunisia and Egypt) that dictators could be overthrown peacefully. Here, however, it is important to remember that al-Qaeda was never a broad-based movement. Furthermore, while al-Qaeda operatives may have been surprised by the events, they saw fresh opportunities for recruitment and fighting in the emerging openness in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt and, separately, in war zones such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, where they sought to establish safe havens. In the year following the uprisings, al-Qaeda, its branches, and official media releases by al-Qaeda-aligned ideologues provided guidance for new and established groups on how to deal with the region's changed situation.<sup>4</sup>

This altered landscape offered further opportunities still. In places such as Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia, al-Qaeda—along with its branches and front groups—acted to refine its methodology based on past failed jihad attempts in Algeria, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia, but especially in Iraq, rooted in the excesses of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Such reforms centered largely on greater outreach to local communities, working with and through local insurgencies, as well as promoting a religious program through *dawa* (proselytizing) activities. Prior to the uprisings, many of these ideas were discussed in official media releases, but on a comparatively theoretical level.

That said, in the year or two before the uprisings, al-Qaeda was attempting to carry out the *dawa* outreach online through its media campaigns.<sup>5</sup> After 2011, for the first time, al-Qaeda was implementing this program on the ground.

The Obama administration was slow to recognize al-Qaeda's adaptive exploitation of the new regional reality. Continuing to view the group through a post-9/11 lens instead of a post-Arab-uprising one, the administration also bought into the false narrative that the uprisings and overthrow of some leaders had completely discredited al-Qaeda. For instance, Obama's Homeland Security advisor at the time, John Brennan, expressed the belief that "the al-Qaeda narrative is becoming increasingly bankrupt; there is a new wave sweeping through the Middle East right now that puts a premium on individual rights and freedom and dignity; and so al-Qaeda, bin Laden—old news. Now is the time to move forward."<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the uprisings were quite timely for al-Qaeda, sweeping away, as they did, old regimes that had long served as U.S. counterterrorism counterparts. Additionally, fluid public spaces and new safe havens allowed al-Qaeda to operate more openly, recharge its network, and gain new recruits and leaders. Al-Qaeda front groups were created in Tunisia (Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia [AST] and Katibat Uqba bin Nafi), Libya (Ansar al-Sharia in Libya [ASL]), Egypt (Ansar al-Sharia in Egypt), and Syria (Jabhat al-Nusra [JN]). Amid such developments, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) exploited the chaos in Yemen and held a swath of territory from mid-2011 to mid-2012. The core group's other main branch, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), benefited from the weapons bazaar that flourished in Libya after the fall of Muammar Qadhafi. An insurgency was thus reignited in northern Mali, which led to AQIM controlling territory from spring 2012 into January 2013. Most critically, the burgeoning civil war in Syria provided a magnet for foreign-fighters, allowing al-Qaeda to recruit new individuals to its network from various parts of the world. It also allowed al-Qaeda to dispatch key leaders who had survived the U.S. drone campaign to a new safe haven, while illustrating the shifting al-Qaeda center of gravity from South Asia to the Levant.

Despite this regional shift, the Obama administration remained focused on AfPak as the site of so-called core al-Qaeda operations. Between bin Laden's death and the end of Obama's tenure in early 2017, the president and his team invoked the al-Qaeda chief's death and the devastation of its top leadership in every major speech on national security.<sup>7</sup> This focus on

al-Qaeda in AfPak also blinded Obama to the rise of the Islamic State. He even referred to IS as the “jayvee team” as it took more and more territory in Iraq in spring 2014.<sup>8</sup>

The Islamic State’s resurgence equally blindsided al-Qaeda, however, providing a major strategic and existential challenge to the network and its future. Right away, most foreign fighters who had joined al-Qaeda’s Syria branch, JN, defected to the Islamic State. Furthermore, IS began a campaign seeking *baya* (a pledge of allegiance) to the new self-declared “caliph,” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, aimed at demonstrating IS’s growing strength, appeal, and support across the global jihadist scene. The campaign also intended explicitly to poach individuals, groups, and networks from al-Qaeda. In late June 2014, the Islamic State, buoyed by battlefield triumphs, announced the reestablishment of the historic Islamic Caliphate, wherein its leaders would institute God’s law on Earth. This successful message drew ever-growing influxes of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria, appearing to strain al-Qaeda’s efforts to take further advantage of the changed post-Arab-uprisings environment.

Around the time IS was reintroducing itself to the jihadist world in April 2013, when it overtly entered Syria, a number of other exogenous factors led to a setback for al-Qaeda—namely, a narrowing space for open operations in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. In July 2013, Gen. Abdul Fattah al-Sisi seized control of Egypt in a coup d’etat; in August 2013, the Tunisian state designated AST as a terrorist organization; and in May 2014, Gen. Khalifa Haftar began a military campaign against ASL and other Islamist factions in eastern Libya. Likewise, outside the Arab world, France began its Operation Serval in January 2013 to retake northern Mali from AQIM and its alliance of more-localized jihadist groups.

Yet despite these events, al-Qaeda held together. None of its official branches—AQAP, AQIM, JN, or al-Shabab—or leaders broke their *baya* to al-Qaeda’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Furthermore, al-Qaeda saw an opportunity to operate with greater impunity amid the rise of IS, with its control of large swaths of territory threatening key regional American allies and its external operations campaign raising alarm in Western Europe, the Arab world, and Southeast Asia. Whereas previously the global counterterrorism architecture had directed its heat narrowly at al-Qaeda, now the focus was on IS. In using this cover to plan for the future, al-Qaeda sought to reinforce its relationships with local populations and make itself indispensable to local insurgencies by planting ever deeper roots, thereby becoming inter-

twined with these milieus. And indeed, al-Qaeda branches have, in the past few years, become more tightly integrated with local insurgents and actors. Related front-groups and mergers have included the following:

- Yemen: Ansar al-Sharia and Abna' Hadramawt/Abyan, both AQAP fronts
- Syria: Jabhat al-Nusra with smaller jihadist factions to become Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and later with local Syrian Islamist factions to become Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)
- Libya: ASL's Benghazi and Darnah branches with local Libyan Islamist factions to become Majlis Shura Thuwar Benghazi and Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin Darnah, respectively
- Mali (most recently): AQIM's Mali branch with local Malian jihadist actors to create Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimimin

Moreover, in September 2014, as al-Qaeda moved a number of its assets from the AfPak region to the Levant, it formalized the creation of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), with the goal of coopting local militant networks in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Pakistan.

Since 2015, as the Islamic State began losing territory and legitimacy under pressure from the global anti-IS coalition, al-Qaeda and its branches remained intact and in some cases were expanding. Al-Qaeda was thus positioned to potentially reclaim the banner of global jihadism. In May 2017, Dan Coats, the U.S. director of national intelligence, told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that “al-Qa’ida and its affiliates remain a significant CT threat overseas as they remain focused on exploiting local and regional conflicts.”<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, 2017 is an important year for al-Qaeda and its trajectory. Some analysts argue that al-Qaeda will rise again, soon eclipsing IS and possibly reabsorbing its defectors.

## CONCLUSIONS FROM THE WORKSHOP

The workshop generated a number of conclusions, both on how al-Qaeda survived the past eight years and on the group's plans to consolidate its position in Muslim communities where it is most active.

While the Obama administration undoubtedly killed many al-Qaeda leaders in the AfPak region as well as in Yemen, Somalia, and Syria, the network is not on the run and is very active in numerous locales, most specifically Syria, Yemen, Mali, Somalia, Libya, as well as AfPak. As a consequence

of the drone campaign, especially in AfPak, al-Qaeda's center of gravity has shifted to Syria. Moreover, the al-Qaeda branches AQAP and AQIM have deepened their mutual relationship in the areas of media operations, logistics, facilitation, and funding.

Due to the changing environment in the Arab world in particular, in which public squares and new safe havens have been opened up, al-Qaeda—rooted in its strategy of working with local populations—is seeking to win hearts and minds and to become more of a mass movement than a vanguard organization. Unlike the Islamic State, which sought to create and administer its “caliphate” right away, al-Qaeda leaders believe they must first lay the groundwork through education and outreach before officially instituting certain aspects of Islamic law, thereby backing their actions with clear reasoning. As a result, al-Qaeda right now espouses limited governance goals.

Linked to this approach, and because of its focus on local insurgencies, al-Qaeda has downplayed external operations against Western nations. Yet if an opportunity arises, al-Qaeda and its branches will seize it. Therefore, aviation security remains very sensitive, especially in light of attacks in the Sinai Peninsula and Mogadishu. Moreover, even if al-Qaeda and its branches have not prioritized direct involvement in external attacks, the group remains interested in inspiring strikes in the West. As recently as early May 2017, al-Qaeda's Hamza bin Osama bin Laden and AQAP's Qassim al-Raimi released videos urging such attacks.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Qaeda's emphasis on localized jihad missions, however, is not free of possible downsides. Questions remain, for example, on whether the merger of al-Qaeda groups in Syria and Libya with local Islamist factions will invigorate these insurgencies' jihadist credentials or soften the groups—in particular, HTS and ASL—to the point of rendering them incompatible with al-Qaeda's fundamental beliefs and methodology. This represents a kind of inverse case as compared to the al-Qaeda relationship with IS, which developed from 2006 until the break in 2013–14. Connected to this dynamic, figures including the foremost scholar within the jihadi movement, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, and former top JN sharia official Sami al-Uraydi have criticized JN for diluting its ideology and breaking from al-Qaeda.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, some analysts of the jihadist world would claim this all to be disinformation and a way for al-Qaeda to mask its true influence and further subvert local insurgencies.

Another corollary to al-Qaeda's push to embed itself within local insurgencies involves the view by some Gulf actors, such as Qatar, that HTS is

a “moderate extremist” group in comparison to IS—a view that could lead to HTS’s normalization given the current desperation of anti-Assad fighters for support. Actors such as HTS might also become more tolerable for Gulf states when viewed as a “tamed al-Qaeda” enlisted in the broader struggle with Shia Iran. Such a perspective has also allowed the Saudis to overlook the alliance between local Yemeni forces they are backing in the fight to eject the Houthis and AQAP, as attested by AQAP’s leader.<sup>12</sup> Such claims raise questions about the extent to which the Saudis are naive or look the other way when their proxies fight alongside with AQAP.

Finally, al-Qaeda financiers continue to exploit the region’s humanitarian crises to raise and move funds. Such fund-raising includes the abuse of charities, harking back to an al-Qaeda tactic commonly used before 9/11. Furthermore, beyond al-Qaeda’s classic approach of relying on foreign donors, especially individuals from the Gulf states, the group now also draws on local sources of revenue, ranging from kidnappings for ransom to local taxation through limited governance schemes.

This is not al-Qaeda circa 2001, let alone 2009. Only a clear-eyed view of what al-Qaeda is today will allow governments, practitioners, and analysts to develop policies that help marginalize the group. Fantasies and other misperceptions about its current state will never lead to sound policy. Furthermore, one must remember that al-Qaeda is nimble, always learning and adjusting in its quest for survival and expansion.

## CONTENTS OF THIS VOLUME

The first section, written by Bruce Hoffman, explores al-Qaeda in an overall sense and how it relates to the Islamic State on the broader global stage. The second section presents a “deep dive” on al-Qaeda in Syria, with contributions from Charles Lister and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, who approach the creation of HTS from different angles. Lister takes a more localized view, contextualizing it within the Syrian insurgency, while Gartenstein-Ross examines the branch in light of al-Qaeda’s strategic outlook. Additionally, Samuel Heller gives insights into the governance capabilities of HTS’s predecessor groups, JN and JFS, and what these capabilities might portend for HTS. The third section examines al-Qaeda’s branches outside Syria. In particular, Katherine Zimmerman looks at the evolution of AQAP, Andrew Lebovich probes the changes within AQIM, Christopher Anzalone tracks the ups and downs of al-Shabab, and Don Rassler identifies key strengths and weaknesses of AQIS. The fourth and last section explores al-Qaeda’s current finances.

Hans-Jakob Schindler explains the United Nations' understanding of and approach to dealing with al-Qaeda's financial capabilities and streams, while Katherine Bauer and Matthew Levitt examine the similarities and differences in how al-Qaeda finances itself compared to its pre- and post-9/11 situation.

## NOTES

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## The Evolving Terrorist Threat and CT Options for the Trump Administration

■ BRUCE HOFFMAN

PREPARED STATEMENT

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WHILE THE ISLAMIC STATE poses the most serious, imminent terrorist threat today, al-Qaeda has been quietly rebuilding and marshaling its resources to reinvigorate the war against the United States declared twenty years ago by its founder and leader, Osama bin Laden.<sup>1</sup> The result is that both groups have enmeshed the United States and the West in a debilitating war of attrition, with all its deleterious consequences. IS has built an external operations capability that will likely survive its loss of territory in Libya, Iraq, and Syria. Meanwhile, the threat from al-Qaeda persists and may become more serious as the group attempts to capitalize on IS's falling star, alongside the enhancement of its own terrorist strike capabilities. In order to better understand the background and dynamics of these developments, this presentation will discuss five key potentialities arising from these current threats:

1. The resilience of IS's external operations arm in a post-caliphate environment
2. The likely enduring threat posed by the tens of thousands of foreign fighters who have answered both IS's and al-Qaeda's respective calls to battle
3. The prospect of al-Qaeda absorbing—whether amenably or forcibly—IS's surviving cadre
4. The possibility of terrorist development and use of weapons of mass destruction reappearing as a salient threat consideration
5. What the new administration should do

## RESILIENCE OF ISLAMIC STATE'S EXTERNAL OPERATIONS ARM, POST-CALIPHATE

The Islamic State, alas, is here to stay—at least for the foreseeable future. Some two years before the 2015 Paris attacks, IS had built an external operations network in Europe that mostly escaped notice. Known as the Amn al-Kharji, or simply as “Emni” or “Amni” (the respective Turkish and Arabic renderings of the word *amniyat*, or security service), this unit appears to function independently of the group’s waning military and territorial fortunes. For instance, U.S. intelligence and defense officials quoted by Rukmini Callimachi in her revealing August 2016 *New York Times* article believe that IS has already sent “hundreds of operatives” into the European Union, with “hundreds more” having been dispatched to Turkey as well.<sup>2</sup> If accurate, this investment of operational personnel ensures that IS will retain an effective international terrorist strike capability in Europe irrespective of its battlefield reverses in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, IS’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has already instructed potential foreign fighters who cannot travel to the caliphate to instead immigrate to other *wilayats* (where IS branches are located).<sup>3</sup> This suggests that these other branches could develop their own external operations capabilities independent of the parent organization and present significant future threat(s)—much as al-Qaeda’s franchises have done over the past decade in Yemen, North Africa, and South Asia, among other places.

## THE THREAT POSED BY ISLAMIC STATE AND AL-QAEDA FOREIGN FIGHTERS

In addition to the presumed sleeper cells that IS has seeded throughout Europe, there is the further problem of at least some of the estimated 7,000 European foreign fighters returning home.<sup>4</sup> They are only a fraction of the nearly 40,000 persons<sup>5</sup> from more than a hundred countries throughout the world<sup>6</sup> who have trained in Syria and Iraq. What this means is that in little more than four years IS’s international cadre has surpassed even the most liberal estimates of the number of foreign fighters believed by the U.S. intelligence community to have journeyed to Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s in order to join al-Qaeda.<sup>7</sup> In other words, far more foreign nationals have been trained by IS in Syria and Iraq during the past couple of years than were trained by al-Qaeda in the dozen or so years leading up to the September 11, 2001, attacks.<sup>8</sup> This recreates the same constellation of organizational capabilities and trained operatives that made al-Qaeda so dangerous sixteen years ago.

And, unlike the comparatively narrow geographical demographics of prior al-Qaeda recruits, IS's foreign-fighter cadre includes hitherto-unrepresented nationalities, such as hundreds of Latin Americans along with citizens from Mali, Benin, and Bangladesh, among other atypical jihadist recruiting grounds.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the danger from so-called lone wolf attacks also remains. The late IS commander Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's famous September 2014 summons to battle has thus far proven far more compelling than al-Qaeda's longstanding efforts similarly to animate, motivate, and inspire individuals to engage in violence in support of its aims.

## THE PROSPECT OF AL-QAEDA ABSORBING IS'S SURVIVING CADRE

While the Islamic State has dominated the headlines and preoccupied the U.S. government's attention for the past four years, al-Qaeda has been quietly rebuilding and marshaling its resources for the continuation of its twenty-year-long struggle against the United States. Indeed, its presence in Syria should be regarded as just as dangerous and even more pernicious than that of IS. Evidence of the high priority that the al-Qaeda senior leadership (AQSL) attaches to Syria may be seen in the special messages conveyed in February and June 2012, respectively, by al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri and the late Abu Yahya al-Libi in support of the uprising against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad—calling upon Muslims in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon to do everything within their power to assist in the overthrow of the apostate Alawites.

The fact that Jabhat al-Nusra or Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, regardless of what it calls itself, is even more capable than IS and a more dangerous long-term threat seems almost immaterial to many across the region who not only actively support and assist it, but actively seek to partner with what they perversely regard as a more moderate and reasonable rival to IS.

This development may be seen as fitting neatly into Zawahiri's broader strategy of letting IS take all the heat and absorb all the blows from the coalition arrayed against it while al-Qaeda quietly rebuilds its military strength and basks in its paradoxical new cachet as "moderate extremists" in contrast to the unconstrained IS.

Anyone inclined to fall for this ruse would do well to heed the admonition of Theo Padnos (Peter Theo Curtis), the American journalist who spent two years in Syria as a hostage of Jabhat al-Nusra. Padnos relates how "the Nusra Front higher-ups were inviting Westerners to the jihad in Syria not

so much because they needed more foot soldiers—they didn't—but because they want to teach the Westerners to take the struggle into every neighborhood and subway back home."<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the importance of Syria to al-Qaeda's plans may be seen in the number of AQSL personages who have relocated there. Mushin al-Fadhli, a bin Laden intimate, had, until his death from a U.S. airstrike in 2015, commanded the Khorasan Group—al-Qaeda's elite, forward-based operational arm in Syria. Haydar Kirkan, a Turkish national and longstanding senior al-Qaeda commander, had been sent back to his homeland in 2010—presumably by bin Laden himself. Kirkan's orders were to build an infrastructure in the region to facilitate the movement of key al-Qaeda personnel hiding in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas in order to escape the escalation of drone strikes ordered by President Barack Obama. Kirkan was recently killed as a result of a U.S. bombing raid in Idlib, Syria.

And, in late 2015, Zawahiri dispatched Saif al-Adel, al-Qaeda's most experienced and battle-hardened senior commander, to Syria in order to oversee the group's interests there. With this senior command structure in place, al-Qaeda is thus well positioned to exploit IS's weakening military position and territorial losses and once again regain its preeminent position at the vanguard of the Salafi-jihadist movement. IS in any event can no longer compete with al-Qaeda in terms of influence, reach, manpower, and cohesion. In only one domain is the Islamic State currently stronger than its rival: the ability to mount spectacular terrorist strikes in Europe—and this is only because al-Qaeda has decided for the time being to restrain its involvement in this type of operation.

Looking to the immediate future, IS's continuing setbacks and serial weakening arguably create the conditions whereby some reconciliation with al-Qaeda might yet be effected. Efforts to reunite have in fact been continuous from both sides virtually from the time of IS's expulsion from the al-Qaeda fold in 2014. Regardless of how it might occur, any kind of reconciliation between IS and al-Qaeda or reamalgamation or cooperation between the two groups would profoundly change the current conflict and result in a significantly escalated threat of foreign-fighter terrorist operations in the West.

## POTENTIAL THREAT OF TERRORIST DEVELOPMENT AND WMD

A quarter of a century ago, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher described publicity as the oxygen upon which terrorism depended. Today, however, it is access to sanctuary and safe haven that sustains and nourishes

terrorism. A depressing pattern has established itself whereby we continue to kill terrorist leaders while the organizations they lead nonetheless continue to seize more territory. Indeed, according to the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), a year before the United States launched the current campaign to defeat the Islamic State, the group had a presence in only seven countries around the world. By 2015, the same year that the Obama administration's latest counterterrorism strategy had been enunciated, that number had nearly doubled. And, as recently as August 2016, the NCTC reported that IS was "fully operational" in eighteen countries.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, al-Qaeda is also present in more countries today (nearly two dozen, by my count) than it was in 2001—and in three times as many as when the Obama administration took office in 2009. Today, foreign volunteers are fighting in Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, and Mali as well as in Syria and Iraq, among other places.

Sanctuary also permits more scope for terrorist research and development efforts to produce various weapons of destruction (WMD; or more accurately, CBRN: chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons). In the case of al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan before the September 11 attacks, these fears were more than amply justified. The group's interest in acquiring a nuclear weapon had reportedly commenced as far back as 1992—a mere four years after its creation. Indeed, bin Laden's continued interest in nuclear weaponry was also on display at the time of the September 11 attacks. Two Pakistani nuclear scientists, identified as Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood and Abdul Majeed, spent three days that August at a secret al-Qaeda facility outside Kabul. Although their discussions with bin Laden, Zawahiri, and other senior al-Qaeda commanders also focused on the development and employment of chemical and biological weapons, Mahmood—the former director for nuclear power at Pakistan's Atomic Energy Commission—claimed that bin Laden's foremost interest was in developing a nuclear weapon. Nor is there any reason to suspect that al-Qaeda's general fascination with either nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction or mass disruption has ever completely abated or disappeared.

Al-Qaeda's research and development on biological warfare agents, for instance, was not only actively pursued but also far more advanced as compared to its nuclear ambitions. These efforts appear to have begun in earnest with a memo written by Zawahiri on April 15, 1999, to Muhammad Atef, then deputy commander of al-Qaeda's military committee. Citing articles from leading scholarly publications such as *Science*, the *Journal of Immunol-*

ogy, and the *New England Journal of Medicine*, as well as information gleaned from authoritative books such as *Tomorrow's Weapons* (1964), *Peace or Pestilence* (1949), and *Chemical Warfare* (1924), Zawahiri outlined in detail his thoughts on the priority that needed to be given to developing a biological weapons capability. At least two separate teams of al-Qaeda operatives were subsequently tasked to undertake parallel R&D efforts to produce anthrax, ricin, and chemical warfare agents at the movement's facilities in Kandahar and Derunta, Afghanistan. Biowarfare experts believe that on the eve of the September 11 attacks, al-Qaeda was at least two to three years away from producing a sufficient quantity of anthrax to use as a weapon.

More recently, credible intelligence surfaced in 2010 that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—widely considered the movement's most dangerous and capable affiliate—was deeply involved in the development of ricin, a bioweapon made from castor beans that the FBI has termed the third most toxic substance known to mankind—behind only plutonium and botulism. Then, in May 2013, Turkish authorities seized two kilos of sarin nerve gas—the same weapon used in the 1995 attack on the Tokyo subway system—and arrested twelve men linked to al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. Days later, another set of sarin-related arrests was made in Iraq of terrorists belonging to IS's immediate predecessor, who were reportedly respectively overseeing the production of sarin and mustard blistering agents in at least two different locations. IS, of course, has also repeatedly employed chemical weapons, including against civilians, in Syria. It is doubtful whether the group would feel constrained from deploying these weapons elsewhere.

## WHAT THE NEW ADMINISTRATION SHOULD DO

In sum, the Trump administration is facing perhaps the most parlous international security environment since the period immediately following the September 11 attacks—with serious threats now emanating from not one but two terrorist movements and a previous counterterrorism strategy and approach that has failed. Indeed, the three pillars upon which that strategy was based—leadership attrition, training of local forces, and countering violent extremism—have failed to deliver a crushing blow to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.<sup>12</sup>

The U.S.-led war on terrorism has now lasted longer than our participation in both world wars. It has surpassed even our active military involvement in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s. Like the Vietcong guerrillas

and People's Army of Vietnam main force units, our Salafi-jihadist enemies have locked us into an enervating war of attrition—the preferred strategy of terrorists and guerrillas from time immemorial. They hope to undermine national political will, corrode internal popular support, and demoralize us and our regional partners through a prolonged, generally intensifying, and increasingly diffuse campaign of terrorism and violence.

In his last publicly released videotaped statement, bin Laden revealed precisely this strategy on the eve of the 2004 U.S. presidential election. “So we are continuing this policy in bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy,” he declared.

God willing, and nothing is too great for God...This is in addition to our having experience in using guerrilla warfare and the war of attrition to fight tyrannical superpowers, as we, alongside the *mujahidin*, bled Russia for 10 years, until it went bankrupt and was forced to withdraw in defeat.<sup>13</sup>

Decisively breaking this stasis and emerging from this war of attrition must therefore be among the Trump administration's highest priorities. Simply killing a small number of leaders in terrorist groups, whose ranks in any event are continually replenished, will not end the threats posed by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda nor dislodge them from their bases of operation in the Levant and Iraq, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and South Asia. The slow and fractured process of training indigenous government security forces in those regions will not do so either. The inadequacy of these training activities and efforts to build partner capacity is evidenced by the mostly unimpeded escalation of terrorist activities in all those places. Whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Somalia, or especially Yemen, our efforts to build partner capacity have all foundered. In each, Islamist terrorist numbers grew faster than we were able to train indigenous security forces effectively; terrorist control over territory and the creation of new sanctuaries and safe havens expanded while governmental sovereignty contracted; and the terrorists' operational effectiveness appreciably outpaced that of their government opponents. While some recent progress has been made in Mali, Nigeria, Syria, and Iraq, it is not clear whether the past problems that undermined the performance of indigenous militaries have been adequately addressed and reversed. Accordingly, the Trump administration should conduct a complete reevaluation and systemic overhaul of our training and resourcing of foreign partners if we are to prevent the further spread of IS and al-Qaeda branches and counter their entrenchment across the multiple regions in which they have already embedded themselves.

While continued and increased U.S. combat air support is also required—especially in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and to back French forces in Mali—that alone is not the answer. American and allied airstrikes in coordination with local ground forces have not brought any of these counterterrorism campaigns to rapid conclusion. Therefore, in tandem with both the continued use of airpower and deployment of supporting U.S. Special Operations Forces personnel, division-size conventional U.S. military forces might be usefully deployed on a strict ninety-day rotation into violence-plagued rural areas and urban trouble spots. They have the necessary combat experience and skill sets to sequentially eliminate terrorist strength in each of these areas and thereby enable indigenous security forces to follow in their wake to stabilize and police newly liberated places. By providing more effective governance and core services—with sustained U.S. and European support—host nations could thus better prevent the recurrence of terrorism and return of terrorist forces.

## CONCLUSION

The current threat environment posed by the emergence and spread of the Islamic State and the stubborn resilience and long-game approach of al-Qaeda necessitate a new strategy and new organizational and institutional behaviors. The nontraditional challenges to U.S. national security and foreign policy imperatives posed by elusive and deadly irregular adversaries emphasize the need to anchor changes that will more effectively close the gap between detecting irregular adversarial activity and rapidly defeating it. The effectiveness of this strategy will be based on our capacity to think like a networked enemy, in anticipation of how this enemy may act in a variety of situations, aided by different resources. This goal requires that the U.S. national security structure organize itself for maximum efficiency, information sharing, and quick and effective functioning under new operational definitions.

## NOTES

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## Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: To Unite or To Divide the Ranks?

■ CHARLES LISTER

PREPARED STATEMENT

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SINCE 2011, al-Qaeda has methodically expanded and consolidated its increasingly prominent role in the Syrian conflict. This has owed in large part to a consistent willingness to adapt to changing circumstances and an acutely complex operating environment. After an initial six-month period of publicly acknowledged unilateral urban-bombing operations (December 2011–May 2012) that strongly indicated its roots in the notoriously aggressive Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) made a marked adjustment toward a strategy of intensive investment in alliance building and collaboration with Syria’s emerging opposition movements.

This strategy of “controlled pragmatism” came to embody JN’s modus operandi in Syria, in which an overtly globalist Salafi-jihadist movement sought to present itself to an explicitly local audience as exactly what its name suggested: a support front. Much of the ISI and al-Qaeda’s most extreme norms were temporarily sidelined in favor of constructing a reputation as a reliable and invaluable military ally to Syria’s revolutionaries. In building these relationships of interdependence, JN sought to systematically socialize civilian and military opposition bodies into first accepting and eventually supporting an ever greater al-Qaeda presence within their midst. Simultaneously, the group sought to subtly infiltrate the consciousness of Syria’s revolution and its most influential armed factions, thereby creating an existentially important protective blanket of front groups and allies upon which it would rely when exposed to internal or external threats.<sup>1</sup>

For a considerable period (mid-2012 to late 2015), JN remained within the first of a three-phase grand strategy, in which its existence in Syria was framed as an elite-led vanguard that sought to guide Syria’s revolutionary

movement in a “righteous” direction.<sup>2</sup> The group’s full name indicated from the outset that its roots lay in the “fields of jihad” (*fi sahat al-jihad*), meaning that its leadership exemplified jihadist veteran status, with experience fighting in jihad campaigns across the world. Indeed, the group’s seven founding members had combined fighting experience in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria itself.<sup>3</sup> This elite-led phase was therefore one in which JN would direct, teach, and preside over an Islamization of what had been intended to be a profoundly nationalistic revolution.

The second phase of JN’s operations in Syria began in early 2016, when an internal assessment by the group’s shura council leadership concluded that the time had come to exploit the success of its socialization and infiltration strategy and to pivot toward becoming a mass movement.<sup>4</sup> This meant that the group would shift from encouraging military cooperation to organizational unity, or a uniting of the ranks, as JN’s leadership had frequently indicated. Five years of horribly brutal conflict, the West’s insufficient support or protection to “moderates,” and a determined Russian intervention in late 2015 had strengthened the Islamists within Syria’s opposition and played directly into the conspiratorial narrative consistently pushed by JN.<sup>5</sup> Only by pulling other influential Islamist opposition groups under its umbrella could the jihadist group seek to one day achieve its ultimate objective, its third and final phase: the establishment of one or more Islamic emirates in Syria.

## JFS REBRANDING: JULANI’S GAMBLE

The internal JN assessment in late 2015 to shift overtly toward achieving a mass movement status saw its first test in early 2016, when a secretive consultation process was initiated with influential clerics and Islamist opposition group leaders aimed at ascertaining the interest level in a future emirate declaration in Syria.<sup>6</sup> Some of those involved were from the group’s most hardline circles, including a number of figures personally dispatched to Syria by al-Qaeda’s central leadership. Others were not members of JN at all, but were veteran jihadists tied to al-Qaeda whose residency in Turkey permitted them to exert their own influence on the process. Some, like Rifai Ahmed Taha, took it upon themselves not only to consult on the emirate issue but to mediate between JN and its Syrian Salafi military ally Ahrar al-Sham, in the hope that the two would consider a future merger.<sup>7</sup> Taha was killed in a U.S. drone strike in April 2016, although the strike’s target was more likely the leading al-Qaeda figure Ahmad Salama Mabruk, who was killed months later when his car was struck.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps unexpectedly, the emirate consultations were met with near-unanimous rejection. Although JN's military contribution to the armed struggle against the Assad regime was clearly valued—the group recruited three thousand Syrians from Aleppo and Idlib alone between February and June 2016<sup>9</sup>—this had clearly not yet translated into sociopolitical influence. For the Syrians consulted on the emirate project, the primary concern remained JN's allegiance to al-Qaeda. For many Syrians throughout the opposition, that al-Qaeda affiliation was a concern not just for ideological reasons; it was also tied to fears that non-Syrian interests would one day impede an expressly Syrian revolutionary movement.

The lesson from this experience was clear: JN's controlled pragmatism and socialization strategy had not yet secured the group's long-term objectives. Driven by this realization, senior JN members known at the time as the "doves" began discussing among themselves the urgent need for the group to publicly disassociate itself from al-Qaeda. Figures such as Abu Mariya al-Qahtani had been raising this issue since 2013, but now they saw an urgent need to act. Joined by Saleh al-Hamawi—one of JN's seven founding members, expelled from the group in July 2015 for his "dovish" views—and a cohort of independent Turkey-backed clerics, these figures undertook a concerted lobbying effort to garner support within JN for some level of break from al-Qaeda. Ultimately, this initiative gained the support of at least one-third of JN's force in northern Syria and it was agreed that the shura council would be given an ultimatum: break ties or face a major splinter. The prospective splinter group already had an agreed name: the Syrian Islamic Movement.<sup>10</sup>

Faced with this ultimatum and the prospect of debilitating internal strife, JN leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani presented the issue to a hurriedly convened meeting of the shura council in mid-July 2016. The issue was debated fiercely and major disagreements arose. "It was not easy," one figure told this author at the time, "several leaders were strongly against the proposal and some even stormed out of the meetings." Among the early opponents were the group's de facto deputy leader Sami al-Uraydi; its emir of Latakia and an original founding member, Iyad Nazmi Salih Khalil (Abu Julaybib); military leader Abu Hamam al-Suri; and senior al-Qaeda figure Saif al-Adel.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these internal differences, the decision was made to rebrand by way of severing ties to al-Qaeda outside Syria. On July 28, 2016, Julani appeared on video revealing his face for the first time and announced that he had dissolved all "external" ties and established Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS)

as a movement that would “serve the people of al-Sham.” Al-Qaeda’s deputy leader Abu al-Khayr al-Masri was in Syria at the time and had blessed the rebranding, based on Julani’s promise that it was *the* move necessary to guarantee a uniting of the ranks.<sup>12</sup> Just as the rebranding claimed to have cut ties outside Syria—with ties to al-Qaeda in Syria remaining intact—the audience was exclusively Syrian. According to three independent Syrian clerics involved in lobbying for the move, the hope had been that cutting loyalty ties to al-Qaeda outside Syria would increase Syrian ability to constrain JN’s most extremist tendencies and prevent extra-Syrian influences from muddying an explicitly Syrian revolution.<sup>13</sup>

JN’s intensified focus on uniting the ranks in Syria has brought with it significant risk and challenged the group’s structural integrity. Portions of the group’s most hardline leadership have pushed back against what they perceive as an overemphasis on concessions to Syrian revolutionaries in exchange for their loyalty, while ignoring the danger of a sustained erosion of the group’s ideological purity. Almost half of JN’s shura council refused to take on leadership positions in JFS upon its formation,<sup>14</sup> and Abu Julaybib and several other leaders have since publicly defected from the group, citing the unacceptability of its “disengagement” from al-Qaeda.<sup>15</sup>

One consequence of this strategic disagreement was the strengthening of al-Qaeda’s intensely secretive core leadership presence in northwestern Syria. Although it had existed since at least mid-2013, the arrival in mid-2015 of al-Qaeda deputy leader Abu Khayr al-Masri and several other top-level figures—including Saif al-Adel, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, and Khaled al-Aruri—signaled a clear pivot by the group’s central leadership to prioritize Syria as a strategic safe haven. When the likes of Abu Julaybib and others refused to join JFS, their activities were folded back under Abu Khayr’s core al-Qaeda umbrella, which was based in Idlib. Ultimately, this is what Ayman al-Zawahiri had always dreamed of—the creation of what he had earlier termed “safe bases,” from which external attacks on the West could one day be most effectively launched, thanks in part to the preparatory work undertaken by a more locally focused affiliate.

Faced with an internal challenge and clear evidence that uniting the ranks necessitated more trust-building with Syria’s opposition, Julani’s decision to rebrand as JFS and to assure his followers that doing so would facilitate a successful mass merger was a bold gamble. This gamble did not appear to pay off, however. Throughout the second half of 2016, three separate unity processes were initiated by Julani and all three comprehensively failed. For a time, at

least, this undermined Julani's leadership and created tensions between Julani loyalists and al-Qaeda's central leadership inside Syria and abroad.

## HTS: A PREEMPTIVE EXPANSION

More recently, JFS found itself additionally challenged by intensified diplomatic attempts to deescalate the conflict in Syria; to isolate JFS from the Syrian opposition; and to shape a more meaningful political process that leveraged the important inclusion of armed opposition groups. For JFS and JN before it, sustaining broad spectrum opposition dependence upon, and thus acceptance of, their role in Syria was expressly linked to the preeminent military contribution that the group could bring to the battlefield. With conflict deescalating and politics growing more central, JFS found itself gradually ceding its hard-fought-for advantage and leverage over broader opposition dynamics.

In mid-2016, Turkey had likewise evolved in its stance toward the conflict, pulling back from its previously unrestrained investment in mainstream opposition groups fighting the Assad regime. The Turkish policy priority thus switched from confronting Assad to combating both the Islamic State and the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG). While distancing itself from the United States, Turkey sought closer ties with Russia, one consequence of which was a new and acute Turkish effort to undermine and isolate JFS in northern Syria. As early as August 2016, opposition groups including Ahrar al-Sham were in active discussions with Turkish intelligence officers about the feasibility of decoupling from JFS and what they would need in order to do so.<sup>16</sup> Another consequence of Turkey's shift was the opposition's defeat in Aleppo city in December 2016, which Ankara had tacitly allowed in exchange for permission to intervene in August 2016 against the YPG and IS in Aleppo's northern countryside. Although JFS had maintained only a minimal presence in the city when it fell (approximately three hundred fighters), its loss provided further space to focus on countering al-Qaeda-linked activities in northwestern Syria.

That a broad spread of opposition groups then agreed to travel to the Kazakh capital, Astana, in late January 2017—or to support those who did—to negotiate a long-term ceasefire as a preparatory step for peace talks underlined the extent to which dynamics were changing. Politics was fast overwhelming military matters and by engaging in this shift, JFS's longtime military allies were becoming not only less controllable but also potential future threats. Compounding this situation, U.S. drones had dramatically intensified their targeting of JFS in Idlib and western Aleppo since Septem-

ber 2016, conducting at least thirteen strikes by mid-January and killing at least 110 fighters, including major leadership figures such as Ahmad Salama Mabruk, Haydar Kirkan, Abu Omar al-Turkistani, Abu Khattab al-Qahtani, Yunus Shuaib, Abu Ikrimah al-Tunsi, Abu Ibrahim al-Tunisi, and Abu Ali al-Tunisi.<sup>17</sup> Kirkan in particular was assessed to be highly dangerous, given his involvement in active foreign attack plotting.<sup>18</sup>

By early 2017, therefore, JFS faced seemingly existential challenges to its long-term project in Syria. In particular, the failed third attempt at negotiating a large merger of opposition groups in December 2016 had ended especially acrimoniously between JFS and Ahrar al-Sham, with senior members of JFS engaging in an aggressive online campaign aimed at maligning Ahrar al-Sham as a puppet of foreign powers too consumed with self-interest to consider unity. Perceiving increasing threats, JFS then acted preemptively in January 2017 to neutralize or deter what it perceived to be a threat to its enterprise in Syria.

Beginning on January 19, JFS and components of the jihadi group Jund al-Aqsa launched attacks and raids on Ahrar al-Sham positions across Idlib province, prompting unprecedented tensions between the two groups. Following rumors that midlevel Ahrar al-Sham commanders had provided intelligence for recent U.S. drone strikes,<sup>19</sup> JFS sought to cut off Ahrar al-Sham's access to the Turkish border crossing at Bab al-Hawa. At the crossing, openly pro-al-Qaeda Ahrar al-Sham commander Abu Khuzaymah al-Falastini defected to JFS, taking with him the fighters under his command. Tit-for-tat clashes continued for five days until January 24, when JFS launched simultaneous, coordinated assaults on facilities and headquarters belonging to Ahrar al-Sham allies Suqur al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam and several Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups, including Jaish al-Mujahedin, al-Jabha al-Shamiya, and Fastaqim Kama Umirt. Twenty-four hours earlier, JFS had surrounded all targets, placing them under siege.

Ahrar al-Sham quickly signaled the potential for JFS's attacks to spark all-out interfactional conflict. In a series of statements, Ahrar al-Sham accused JFS of conducting "an attack on the revolution" and warned that unless it stopped its aggression, JFS would face "a declaration of war." The Turkey-based Syrian Islamic Council—a highly influential body linked closely to the Muslim Brotherhood and led by prominent cleric Sheikh Usama Rifai—issued a fatwa on January 24 declaring JFS to be *khawarij* and ordering all Syrians nationwide to fight the group. A day later, twenty-three of the opposition's most prominent nonjihadist clerics issued a public call for all

northern Syria's key armed groups to merge with Ahrar al-Sham to protect against aggressions; later that same day, Suqur al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, Jaish al-Mujahedin, the Fastaqim Kama Umirt Gathering, and al-Jabhat al-Shamiya announced they had done so.<sup>20</sup> Overnight, Ahrar al-Sham had gained approximately 8,000 additional fighters to supplement its already large membership of 12,000.

With the core of northern Syria's opposition choosing to join Ahrar al-Sham for protection, JFS's claim two days earlier that it had been acting to preempt a conspiracy against it appeared to have backfired. However, after exerting substantial behind-the-scenes pressure with fighting active across Idlib, JFS coaxed the defection of as many as a thousand Ahrar al-Sham members into its ranks.<sup>21</sup> This included much of Ahrar al-Sham's minority extremist wing, which had been pushing back against Turkey's overbearing influence on the group since at least early 2014. Figures such as Hashem al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber), Abu Saleh Tahhan, Abu Muhammad al-Sadeq, and Abu Fateh al-Furghali, who had long advocated a merger with JFS, rapidly changed sides and joined JFS along with a number of formerly independent religious figures, such as Abd Allah bin Muhammad al-Muhaysini, Abdul Razzaq al-Mahdi, and Abu Taher al-Hamawi. Shortly thereafter, JFS announced on January 28 that it had also acquired pledges of allegiance from four armed groups—Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaish al-Sunna, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din—and had renamed itself Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In a move likely aimed at showing that HTS was not the result of an aggressive takeover, Julani agreed to cede leadership of the movement to Hashem al-Sheikh.

## AN UNCERTAIN OUTLOOK

By late February 2017, the infighting that had plagued northwestern Syria earlier in the year had subsided. Although Ahrar al-Sham had held back from engaging in a broader, more sustained conflict, for much of Syria's opposition a line did appear to have been crossed. Many Syrians across the opposition spectrum quickly took to using the Arabic acronym *Hetesh* for HTS, which markedly resembled Syrians' adoption of the derogatory *Daesh* for the Islamic State in early 2014. More often than not, Syria's most prominent opposition activists were now disrespecting and criticizing HTS instead of celebrating its military accomplishments as they may have done before. No all-out war had been declared on JFS and HTS as with IS in early 2014, but Julani's preemptive aggression had not gone unnoticed this time. Whereas

Jabhat al-Nusra's early attacks on the already unpopular Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and Harakat Hazm in 2014–15 went largely unquestioned by other opposition groups, JFS's attacks in 2017 on popular and locally rooted groups may have revealed what some had long feared but rarely voiced: that a self-interested al-Qaeda affiliate had been allowed to develop in their midst.<sup>22</sup>

JFS's attacks in Idlib and Aleppo had likewise drawn the attention of Turkey, which in February 2017 placed Ahrar al-Sham and other opposition groups under heavy pressure to further unify their ranks to prevent an HTS takeover. Toward mid-February, Turkey also began demanding that opposition groups in Idlib start redeploying heavy weapons to northern Aleppo via Turkish territory in order to reinforce the Turkey-backed Euphrates Shield operation there against both the YPG and IS. Both Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam agreed to do so, but their convoys were aggressively stopped and turned around by HTS militants stationed near the Bab al-Hawa crossing. HTS also took to issuing veiled private threats to Idlib's remaining FSA groups, including the Free Idlib Army, which Ahrar al-Sham sought to protect from attack on February 25.<sup>23</sup>

Amid this tense environment in Idlib and continued international political initiatives—including a second meeting in Astana in mid-February and peace talks in Geneva in late February—HTS made a concerted attempt to convince opposition groups to reinstate hostilities against the Assad regime. Only by securing such a resumption of fighting could HTS hope to overcome the reputational damage done to its brand in the preceding weeks. However, as of late February, these attempts had been unsuccessful. Moreover, internal HTS attempts to structurally merge the four groups it had absorbed on January 28 and efforts to establish a unified HTS political bureau had also failed. Relatedly, HTS was struggling to win the trust and support of key jihadist figures, both inside and outside Syria. Having refused to take a leadership role in JFS, Sami al-Uraydi publicly defected from HTS in early February, while leading al-Qaeda ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who had given his permission for the JFS rebranding, condemned the formation of HTS and angrily accused Julani of having broken his assurance that some ties would be retained with al-Qaeda. “On the contrary,” he contended, “they pushed things until they truly broke the tie.”<sup>24</sup>

Having preemptively acted to deter any possible challenge to its primacy in northwestern Syria, HTS has now solidified its strong position in Idlib, at least for the moment. As has been the case many times before, the jihadist group has remained one or more steps ahead of its Syrian and

international adversaries. Indeed, Syria's opposition is unlikely to willingly enter into a full-scale conflict with HTS unless it is provided with a genuinely attractive and credible reason for doing so, as well as the necessary protection. All armed groups in Syria have consistently operated based on the principle of self-preservation, and while HTS continues to represent an invaluable force multiplier for Syria's opposition and the political process simultaneously remains weak and unlikely to succeed, HTS will continue to strengthen its hand in northwestern Syria. Ultimately, countering HTS is about countering extremist narratives, and achieving success in this specific case is *all about* alternatives. One must outcompete HTS and its al-Qaeda-like objectives.

Nevertheless, for HTS to accomplish its third phase, which entails establishing an Islamic emirate in at least part of Syria, the group will have to deal with many competitors and adversaries. Considering its evolving posture toward the broader conflict, Turkey appears to be the greatest possible threat to HTS in the short to medium term. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that Turkey could one day launch a limited intervention in northern Idlib, likely around Atima, in order to establish a buffer zone of sorts, in which HTS would be excluded and in which a viable al-Qaeda-free safe zone protected from regime attack would become a reality. This would closely resemble the strategy underlying the Euphrates Shield intervention in northern Aleppo, where Turkey is now attempting to create an alternative opposition zone free of extremists and safe enough for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Since late 2016, international pressure and the targeting of core al-Qaeda in northwestern Syria has also exacerbated the pressure felt within HTS itself. The killing of al-Qaeda's global deputy leader Abu Khayr al-Masri in a drone strike in late February 2017 was an extremely consequential loss to the network in Syria. While proving his presence in the country, the attack also revealed that even the most senior al-Qaeda operatives were vulnerable to intelligence leaks and targeting from the air. Given previous accusations of opposition group culpability in sharing targeting information, and al-Qaeda and HTS paranoia about the intentions of opposition groups in their midst, the killing of figures like Abu Khayr may spark further infighting.

Until or unless such a scenario develops, HTS will focus on exploiting its military stature in order to reestablish its relationships of interdependence with the broader Syrian opposition. When faced with the opportunity, HTS will likely also continue to weaken and neutralize vulnerable moderate oppo-

sition groups, while pushing hard for mergers with those closer to its ideological outlook. The position of Ahrar al-Sham in this dynamic will be crucial. With its most hardline wing now inside HTS, Ahrar al-Sham's capacity to make unified decisions is strengthened, as is Turkey's influence over the group. However, should Turkish actions continue to constrain the opposition's ability to confront the Assad regime, HTS will be presented with an opportunity to more effectively encourage a last-gasp merger based on the principle of unity of effort.

Within or without such scenarios, northwestern Syria looks to remain a complex and highly unstable environment in 2017. This will challenge HTS's ability to achieve its long-term objectives but also provide it with opportunities to retain its military relevance.

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## A Strategic History of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Formation

■ DAVEED GARTENSTEIN-ROSS

PREPARED STATEMENT

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ON JANUARY 28, 2017, the formation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS; “Liberation of al-Sham Commission”) was announced, marking one of the most significant developments related to al-Qaeda’s Syria campaign. Many factors contributed to the creation of HTS. One, which has been skillfully elucidated by Charles Lister, is endogenous to al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS). Specifically, JFS leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani faced pressures within his own organization that moved him to see HTS as strategically necessary.<sup>1</sup> A second set of factors is exogenous to JFS, including in particular the relationship of various rebel groups to one another. As Aymenn al-Tamimi has shown, the failed attempt by some factions in the militant group Ahrar al-Sham to pressure its leadership to merge with JFS, as well as subsequent intrarebel conflict, ultimately led five militant factions (or at least parts of them), which had been clashing with JFS, to *join* Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>2</sup> This expansion of Ahrar al-Sham provided the impetus for JFS to accelerate its efforts to swell its ranks through HTS’s creation.

In addition to the endogenous and exogenous factors behind the establishment of HTS, there is a strategic dimension. The history of this strategy can be traced back through al-Qaeda’s decision to keep its relationship with Jabhat al-Nusra clandestine when al-Qaeda first entered the fray in Syria; Julani’s emirate plan from July 2014; the success of the Jaish al-Fatah coalition; and JN’s rebranding as JFS, including its announced dissociation from al-Qaeda. In further unifying the Syrian militant ranks through HTS, al-Qaeda can generate a number of discernible strategic advantages relating to the group’s designs on Syria from the outset.

This strategic history is the focus of this paper, which begins with a dis-

cussion of how policymakers and practitioners should understand the relationship between jihadist strategic calculations and major decisions made by jihadist organizations. The paper then turns to a strategic history of al-Qaeda in Syria, culminating in HTS's formation.

## JIHADIST STRATEGY AND LEAN STARTUP PRINCIPLES

An intense debate is under way within counterterrorism circles about how important the al-Qaeda senior leadership (AQSL) is to the global organization. This paper will make the case that AQSL is indeed relatively important.

One of the objections frequently raised to such a position is that the successes enjoyed by al-Qaeda's various global affiliates cannot be credited to some overarching master plan by AQSL, but rather to the reactions of these groups to changing events on the ground. This position, however, has long struck those ascribing high influence to AQSL (including this author) as a strawman argument, given that obviously every decision made by al-Shabab or al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in their respective theaters cannot be traced back to Ayman al-Zawahiri's bidding. The position also has another explanation, though, rooted in differing conceptions of the term "strategy."

As Stephen Cummings and David Wilson have noted, in the twentieth-century West, an image of strategy emerged that assumes that real organizations "are, for all people and all times, triangular hierarchies; that strategy is enacted by 'the men at the top,' and that it is about long-term planning, directing, organizing and controlling."<sup>3</sup> Al-Qaeda does not perfectly fit this model, particularly when one compares the directives of AQSL to the policies adopted by regional affiliate organizations. For that reason, some observers conclude either that AQSL plays only a marginal role in the global organization or that the group's strategy cannot appreciably move events on the ground.

But Western conceptions of strategy are becoming less linear. In the business sphere, the "lean startup" movement, popularized by Eric Ries, rejects old ways of conducting market research and producing business plans. In addressing why so many startups fail, Ries writes:

The first problem is the allure of a good plan, a solid strategy, and thorough market research. In earlier eras, these things were indicators of likely success. The overwhelming temptation is to apply them to startups too, but this doesn't work, because startups operate with too much uncertainty. Startups do not yet know who their customer is or what their product should be. As the world becomes more uncertain, it gets harder and harder to predict the future. The old management methods are not up to the task. Planning and

forecasting are only accurate when based on a long, stable operating history and relatively static environment. Startups have neither.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than possessing a linear conception of strategy structured around long-term business plans, lean startups base their business model around a few differentiating principles:

- **ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS MANAGEMENT.** “A startup is an institution, not just a product, and so it requires a new kind of management geared to its context of extreme uncertainty.”
- **VALIDATED LEARNING.** Entrepreneurs learn how to build a sustainable business “by running frequent experiments that allow entrepreneurs to test each element of their vision.”
- **BUILD-MEASURE-LEARN.** Startups’ fundamental model is turning ideas into products, then measuring customers’ response before deciding whether to preserve efforts or pivot them.
- **INNOVATION ACCOUNTING.** A new kind of accounting is required for startups that can better measure progress, given the uniqueness of their business model.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the emergence of the lean startup model, management is becoming less linear. The Scrum management technique, and the school of Agile project management of which it is a part, represents a rejection of more linear techniques for managing software development projects. As Jeff Sutherland notes in *Scrum: The Art of Doing Twice the Work in Half the Time*, the old Waterfall management method was one in which “a project was completed in distinct stages and moved step by step toward ultimate release to consumers or software users.”<sup>6</sup>

An analogy can be drawn between violent nonstate actors (VNSAs) and startup businesses, wherein VNSAs are described as the startups of the political-organizing space, as this author’s previous work has explored.<sup>7</sup> VNSAs’ strategy, and al-Qaeda’s in particular, very much mirrors that of startup firms. Like startups, al-Qaeda exists in too chaotic a space to be able to fully dictate events on the ground. It operates very much like a lean startup, with AQSL setting strategic and organizational principles, but the affiliate organizations constantly pivoting in response to relevant developments.

Strategy is many things. It can occur in a bottom-up or top-down fashion;

and both high levels of an organization and lower ones (in al-Qaeda's case, AQL and regional leadership, respectively) can be relevant to strategy at the same time. As Cummings and Wilson write, "Different images of strategy, like different maps attempting to picture a complex world, project different relationships between objects and structures. Recognizing this immediately calls into question the notion that there should be one best image."<sup>8</sup>

The strategic arguments offered here are not inconsistent with the endogenous factors articulated by Lister or the exogenous factors discussed by Tamimi. Together, these various frameworks can help explain how al-Qaeda and its various affiliates operate.

## AL-QAEDA'S STRATEGIC DIRECTION AND THE CREATION OF HTS

When al-Qaeda first moved into the Syria theater, its affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra disguised its role in the broader al-Qaeda organization, a move designed to allow it to operate as part of a broader rebel coalition. It was the Islamic State that ultimately forced JN to show its hand, when Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi publicly claimed that JN was subservient to him. In response, JN emir Abu Muhammad al-Julani acknowledged his group's affiliation with al-Qaeda, and appealed to al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri to resolve his dispute with Baghdadi. It was al-Qaeda's desire to keep secret its affiliation with JN that caused Zawahiri, when he finally weighed in, to side with Julani while at the same time reprimanding him. In a letter dated May 23, 2013, Zawahiri chastised Julani for "showing his links to al-Qaeda without having our permission or advice, even without notifying us."<sup>9</sup>

A significant step in the evolution toward HTS was Julani's emirate plan. Revealed through leaked audio in July 2014, the emirate plan called for announcement of an emirate in the Levant and implementation of sharia in areas it controlled.<sup>10</sup> To successfully create an emirate, JN would have to unify all the disparate al-Qaeda efforts in Syria, fend off the challenge of IS, and make sure it wasn't arming people whom the group would later need to kill.

It took months to get these efforts under way. During this period, JN took advantage of the widely held perception that it was a spent force, and thus largely not the focus of U.S. targeting. The only time the United States hit JN targets during this period was when it was striking at al-Qaeda's external operations arm in Syria, known as the Khorasan Group, which was then embedded with JN and other rebel groups.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense said at the

time that the Khorasan Group was plotting to attack American and Western interests. This narrow calculation of targeting the Khorasan Group while leaving JN largely unchecked presented a broader strategic dilemma: if al-Qaeda had a strong base in Syria, a greater threat of external operations against the West would exist systemically even if a blow were dealt to Khorasan.

Following the establishment of the emirate plan, JN assembled the Jaish al-Fatah coalition in March 2015. As the *New York Times* noted, Jaish al-Fatah was “a loose alliance” rather than a “unified army”; that is, “its member groups share resources and coordinate their efforts in battle, but they remain independent, and there is no overall military commander.”<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, Jaish al-Fatah was predominantly composed of Islamist factions, including both JN and the group that would be the most prominent Sunni rebel alternative to HTS, Ahrar al-Sham.

Jaish al-Fatah was in part a response to exogenous factors, and not just prompted by al-Qaeda’s strategy. From April to July 2014, the Islamic State had gobbled up Deir al-Zour, taking the governorate from the hands of al-Qaeda and other rebel groups. Part of JN’s problem was the poor strategic choices made by Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, who was then its commander for Deir al-Zour province. Qahtani seriously overextended his forces, including moving them into the al-Qaim area without having the logistics in place to support fighters there. His men got cut off and defeated.

This defeat made clear that JN needed a new military approach. Jaish al-Fatah began with a bang, capturing the provincial capital of Idlib the same month that it was announced. Proving an unprecedented success for JN, the coalition carved out a safe haven about the size of a small New England state.

Another key step toward the formation of HTS, but one with other endogenous and exogenous causes, was JN’s dissociation from al-Qaeda as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. This occurred on July 28, 2016, when Abu Muhammad al-Julani announced two organizational changes.<sup>13</sup> The first was that Jabhat al-Nusra was no more: Julani’s organization would henceforth be known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. Second, Julani said that the renamed organization would have “no affiliation to any external entity.”

Western intelligence agencies weren’t fooled by these announced changes, but that doesn’t mean they served no purpose in Syria, or within the region more broadly. Insight into what al-Qaeda intended from JN’s dissociation can be gleaned from an August 9, 2016, article by Osama bin Saleh (likely a pseudonym) published in *al-Masra*, a weekly newsletter of AQAP that is a key source for understanding al-Qaeda’s thinking.<sup>14</sup>

In a section of his letter titled “Not Standing Out,” Saleh reiterates that al-Qaeda never wanted a formal entity in Syria. He includes a May 2014 passage from Zawahiri reprimanding Julani for announcing al-Qaeda’s presence in Syria without authorization. Bin Saleh also points to an August 2010 letter, previously released by the U.S. government, from Osama bin Laden to Ahmed Abdi Godane, emir of the Somali jihadist group al-Shabab. Bin Laden told Godane that Shabab’s “unity” with al-Qaeda “should be carried out...through unannounced secret messaging,” Godane and his men could spread the news of al-Shabab’s unification with al-Qaeda “among the people of Somalia” but should not make “any official declaration” of allegiance. As the letter to Godane made clear, al-Shabab was already part of al-Qaeda at the time, but bin Laden believed ambiguity offered a strategic advantage. “If the matter becomes declared and out in the open, it would have the enemies escalate their anger and mobilize against you,” bin Laden wrote. Although conceding that “enemies will find out inevitably” about al-Shabab’s allegiance to al-Qaeda, bin Laden argued that “an official declaration remains to be the master of all proof.”

Bin Saleh underlines the point: “Notice that the leadership of the organization [al-Qaeda] was not passionate about declaring their relationship with other factions, in order to avoid confrontation with the enemies and...denying them excuses.”

JN’s rebranding as JFS should be viewed in this light. The group’s announced dissociation from al-Qaeda, though rather obviously a subterfuge, at least created ambiguity. It was designed to deny the group’s enemies excuses to join its ranks. And in doing so, the announced dissociation likely reassured other rebel groups that moving closer to al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch would not paint a target on them.

JFS was a precursor step to the formation of HTS.

## CONCLUSION

HTS was initially formed by five rebel factions: JFS, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Liwa al-Haqq, Liwa Ansar al-Din, and Jaish al-Sunna. It is unlike Jaish al-Fatah in the sense that the factions that make up HTS no longer retain a nominal separate identity. Instead, the organizations that joined HTS officially dissolved, becoming part of a new entity. It is possible that the new, merged entity will not last—that the factions that have nominally become one will later pull apart. But what is certain is that HTS now has tens of thousands of fighters: *Asbarq al-Awsat*’s estimate on January 30, 2017, was 31,000.<sup>15</sup>

With HTS's advent, it and Ahrar al-Sham comprise the two major Sunni rebel formations in Syria other than the Islamic State—and Ahrar al-Sham has lost a number of fighters to HTS through defection.

The emergence of HTS yields a number of advantages for al-Qaeda and significant problems for the United States. Al-Qaeda now has a broader coalition, with tens of thousands of fighters who are being exposed to its ideology and outlook. It is now all the more difficult for the United States to fight al-Qaeda in Syria without being seen as fighting against the Syrian revolution writ large.

For his part, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has the war he wanted all along, while the United States faces the situation it wished to avoid. If Assad falls, the Sunni groups vying to fill the vacuum will be al-Qaeda versus the Muslim Brotherhood, neither of which would build the kind of society the United States would like to promote, and neither of which is likely to promote policies that would advance U.S. interests.

## NOTES

1. See in particular Charles Lister's written submission to this conference. This author's major caveat related to Lister's insights is that militant groups that operate clandestinely tend to ensure that even extremely well-informed outsiders have only partial insight into such internal machinations.
2. Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Wider Tensions in the Syrian Insurgency," *CTC Sentinel*, February 22, 2017, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-formation-of-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-and-wider-tensions-in-the-syrian-insurgency>.
3. Stephen Cummings and David Wilson, "Images of Strategy," in *Images of Strategy*, ed. Stephen Cummings and David Wilson (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), p. 1.
4. Eric Ries, *The Lean Startup: How Today's Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses* (New York: Crown Business, 2011), p. 9.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
6. Jeff Sutherland, *Scrum: The Art of Doing Twice the Work in Half the Time*, Kindle ed. (New York: Crown Business, 2014), loc. 68.
7. See, in particular, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "The Lean Terrorist Cell: How Startup Companies and Violent Non-State Actors Are Changing the Old World Order," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2016).
8. Cummings and Wilson, "Images of Strategy," p. 4.

9. Zawahiri's letter can be found at <http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/710588/translation-of-ayman-al-zawahiris-letter.pdf>.
10. Thomas Joscelyn, "Leaked Audio Features Al Nusra Front Emir Discussing Creation of an Islamic Emirate," *Long War Journal*, July 12, 2014, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/leaked\\_audio\\_of\\_al.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/leaked_audio_of_al.php).
11. See Jim Miklaszewski and Cassandra Vinograd, "U.S. Bombs ISIS Sites in Syria and Targets Khorasan Group," NBC News, September 23, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/u-s-bombs-isis-sites-syria-targets-khorasan-group-n209421>.
12. Ben Hubbard, "A Look at the Army of Conquest, a Prominent Rebel Alliance in Syria," *New York Times*, October 1, 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/02/world/middleeast/syria-russia-airstrikes-rebels-army-conquest-jaish-al-fatah.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/02/world/middleeast/syria-russia-airstrikes-rebels-army-conquest-jaish-al-fatah.html?_r=0).
13. See Marina Koren, "The Jihadist Split in Syria," *Atlantic*, July 28, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/07/nusra-qaeda-split/493445/>.
14. Osama bin Saleh, "A Letter regarding Jabhat al-Nusra Dissociating from al-Qaeda" (in Arabic), *al-Masra*, August 8, 2016, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/al-masracc84-newspaper-18.pdf>.
15. Nazeer Rida, "Syria: Surfacing of 'Hai' at Tahrir al-Sham' Threatens Truce," *Asharq al-Awsat*, January 30, 2017, <https://english.aawsat.com/nazeer-rida/news-middle-east/syria-surfacing-haiat-tahrir-al-sham-threatens-truce>.

## The Governance Strategy of Jabhat al-Nusra and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham

■ SAMUEL HELLER

EDITED TRANSCRIPT

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THERE IS STILL a lack of clarity on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the extent to which its components will be integrated, so I will specifically concentrate on Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) for this discussion.

Over the course of the Syrian conflict, JFS's role in governance has largely varied by time and place. Traditionally, the group has prioritized courts and the judiciary, but it has also periodically dipped into municipal administration, services, and even provision of humanitarian relief when the opportunity or the resources have been available.

In terms of JFS's structure, one must keep in mind that the group has very little visibility, and it is virtually impossible to project upon it a comprehensive, clear structure. I have been told that within the organization, there exist alternative avenues outside the official chain of command to achieve influence and ascertain control since a lot of value is placed on familial and interpersonal relationships.

Initially, JFS invested in more joint structures such as the multifunctional judicial administrative sharia commissions in Aleppo and Deir al-Zour. Since 2014, however, the group has taken a more unilateral approach—it withdrew from the sharia commission and established its own set of hardline Islamic courts, which implemented uncodified Islamic law throughout the north-west and came complete with their own Islamic beliefs enforcement units. The group also broke from the service component of the Aleppo sharia commission to create the Public Services Administration, which provided several services to Aleppo and its surroundings, including playing a critical role in the maintenance of electrical and water infrastructure.

The main exception to JFS's recent unilateral approach has been the joint administration the group established with its partners in the Jaish al-Fatah coalition after Jaish al-Fatah in 2015 expelled the Syrian regime almost entirely out of Idlib province, including from its provincial capital. Nevertheless, this structure's geographical scope has been limited to Idlib city, Ariha, and one other town, and has not been seen as especially successful or functional.

Around the same time as the creation of this joint administration, JFS (known at the time as Jabhat al-Nusra, or JN) was expanding the Public Services Administration from Aleppo into some rural areas, which were being served by a mix of civil and local councils, charities, and other bodies. The Public Services Administration thus took control of key nodes of the electoral grid in northwestern Syria, including the electrical lines from Hama to Aleppo. In some areas of particularly strong JN influence and control, the group also seems to have tried to displace civilian local councils with *baladiyat*, or municipalities, that would answer to the Public Services Administration. In addition to these formal structures, JN exerted influence informally by intervening with the work of local councils through stalking their membership, sympathizers, or family members—though it was not the only group to engage in such behavior.

As of early 2017, it appears Jaish al-Fatah has surrendered control of the administration of Idlib city to a civilian local council in order to gain access to more resource-intensive foreign support and service projects. The establishment of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) brings with it the interesting possibility of synergies with Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, a rogue Aleppo faction that has a reputation for particularly efficient, albeit authoritarian, management of civilian life.

As far as HTS's independent structures, it seems the *dar al-qada* [court] remains active and authoritative throughout the northwest, as do the Islamic police. I have been told the Public Services Administration continues as normal, although its social media feeds have been frozen for security concerns.

It is important to note that in no area, even those seen as HTS strongholds, has the group been able to run things alone. The group is not like the Islamic State in that it has neither attempted to set up nor been capable of setting up an all-encompassing totalitarian order, and so the governance burden has been shared in the areas under its control. Where HTS has intervened, its efforts have been mostly complementary or parallel to other opposition civilian structures, and the result has frequently been an imperfect

division of labor wherein HTS assumes control of courts and law enforcement and mostly leaves local councils, political civil society organizations, and charitable organizations to serve civilians to keep these areas livable. In some instances, this structure has caused overlaps in terms of specific services, as seen with the Public Services Administration and the Aleppo City Council, before the fall of rebel-held east Aleppo.

Even in areas such as the western Idlib countryside where HTS has taken a more hands-on, unilateral role and sidelined some of these other opposition structures, civilians are still largely sustained by foreign relief efforts. In fact, HTS was actually obliged to partially back off its attempts to impose municipalities on towns in the western Aleppo countryside because relief organizations refused to work with municipalities that belonged to the Public Services Administration. These organizations asserted that they would only work with civilian local councils, since they were the accepted local partner and implementer.

The existence of this foreign support serves as an example of how HTS has existed in symbiosis with the broader opposition. I am reluctant to call the relationship parasitic because it has not been purely one-sided or extractive, but, in general, the group feeds on its revolutionary surroundings and indirectly benefits from foreign support to the opposition, whether civilian or military. This support keeps areas under HTS's influence and control livable, which has allowed the group to experiment with governance and to establish an emirate of sorts in practice even if not in name.

Especially in times when the political process has overshadowed military struggles, the rift has appeared to widen between HTS and other jihadists as well as between HTS and the mainstream insurgency. In discussing the broader opposition, it is thus important to distinguish control by geographic region. For example, HTS is almost exclusively discussed in the context of Idlib and its surroundings. In general, HTS's dependence on this small geographic region primarily means that the group's future will be determined by Idlib and the ability, or inability, of the regime to gain more territory within the province.

Within this region, excluding something extraordinary such as a Turkish invasion, there does not appear any plausible way to unseat the newly created HTS from within the opposition, which is in part what makes the group so dangerous for Syrian civilians. The way that HTS is dominating and consuming the rest of the opposition in the northwest is worrisome because if the group is seen as the only form of opposition governance there, civilian

relief and stabilization assistance could be endangered. Furthermore, I do not think HTS has the resources or the capacity to sustain the rebel-held northwest, centered on Idlib, unilaterally, either militarily or in governance or humanitarian terms. If the northwest starts collapsing, either on the frontlines or in the functioning of its governance structures, the civilian communities will likely be the ones to suffer. The Idlib province is largely doomed if this trend continues, and the international community should take a serious look into transferring civilians from Idlib into Turkey.

## AQAP Post–Arab Spring and the Islamic State

■ KATHERINE ZIMMERMAN

PREPARED STATEMENT

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**A**L-QAEDA IS STRENGTHENING in the shadows of Yemen’s civil war. Two years of turmoil created conditions that have enabled al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to build and expand a popular support base that will persist beyond the current conflict. AQAP’s absence from the headlines is deliberate, not a sign that the group is weak. Instead, AQAP is more deeply embedded with the local population and will require more than a counterterrorism strategy to defeat.

The post–Arab Spring crackdown on AQAP and the Islamic State’s arrival in Yemen in late 2014 seemed to challenge AQAP’s position. An increase in counterterrorism operations after the Arab Spring weakened AQAP only temporarily. The victories Yemeni president Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi’s military achieved against AQAP in 2012 were hollow, permitting AQAP to regain its position as Hadi’s attention drifted elsewhere. AQAP could not stop the Islamic State from gaining ground in Yemen, but the Islamic State’s clumsy efforts to impose its ideology on a Yemeni base not ready to accept it undercut the group’s popularity. AQAP’s means and methods of operating in Yemen, as well as its reputation, enabled it to survive challenges from both the Yemeni state and the Islamic State and to emerge stronger for them.

The current war is reinforcing AQAP’s strength. The collapse of the Yemeni state focused international actors on restoring order and the internationally recognized Hadi government. The outbreak of war paralyzed Yemeni military operations against AQAP, and what remains of the military is fractured. The rise of the Zaidi Shiite Houthi movement and the entanglement of Yemen’s internal power struggle with the transnational Iran-Saudi conflict drove sectarianism in Yemen that adds resonance

to AQAP's propaganda. And the mobilization of various factions of the Yemeni population provided AQAP with the opportunity to establish itself within the Sunni insurgencies.

The al-Qaeda network globally benefits from AQAP's strength. A critical node for al-Qaeda, AQAP coordinates and supports other such nodes and operates in both the global and local context.<sup>1</sup> AQAP has also been the most active and effective al-Qaeda node in targeting U.S. interests in the past. It retains its external attack capabilities. The question is not whether AQAP will attack the United States again but when.

## RESURGENCE AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

AQAP is conducting an insurgency, but the strategy to counter it has sought only to defeat AQAP militarily. The United States conducts direct-action operations, primarily drone strikes, to degrade the group's leadership and disrupt its activities. These strikes have had limited and temporary effects on the group. The Yemeni military led a ground offensive against AQAP in 2012, but Yemen's post-Arab Spring government did not even begin to address the widespread popular grievances that continue to drive instability in Yemen.

Starting in spring 2011, AQAP overreached as it expanded to occupy the space left vacant by the collapsing Yemeni state during the Arab Spring. AQAP leaders, particularly the late Nasser al-Wahishi, saw the breakdown of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh's state as the opportunity AQAP had been waiting for to build an Islamic emirate in Yemen.<sup>2</sup> AQAP fielded and controlled an insurgent force, Ansar al-Sharia, whose members were not sworn to AQAP, allowing AQAP to fill out the force's ranks rapidly and to work with individuals who might not otherwise have fought alongside al-Qaeda.<sup>3</sup> Ansar al-Sharia controlled most of Abyan and Shabwa governorates in southern Yemen for over a year.

Yemen's President Hadi, who was elected in a February 2012 referendum, conducted a successful military campaign to roll back AQAP's gains. The success of that operation resulted in part from the mistaken decision by AQAP to establish itself as a more formal government. But Hadi's gains were themselves ephemeral. The Yemeni military partnered with local tribes to clear Abyan and Shabwa governorates in southern Yemen during one month in early summer 2012, pushing Ansar al-Sharia from population centers<sup>4</sup>; it did not fully drive Ansar al-Sharia from the area, however, nor did it leave a holding force that would prevent Ansar al-Sharia from returning—which it did within a few months.

By the end of 2013, AQAP had resumed the pattern and level of activities it had been conducting before the Arab Spring. The group appeared to have learned a lesson. It did not try to hold and govern territory for the time being and instead focused on degrading the capabilities of and support for the Yemeni state.<sup>5</sup> It assassinated many political security and intelligence officers. It launched a campaign of spectacular mass-casualty attacks against Yemeni military headquarters that it claimed were support cells for the U.S. drone campaign.<sup>6</sup> It used squad-size tactical teams to carry out the attacks, coupled with a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) to breach hardened perimeters—not the signature of a weakened group.

Instability grew in Yemen in 2014. The political transition process, which had resolved the immediate unrest of the Arab Spring, was supposed to provide a forum to air and address longstanding grievances against the central government. The process ended unsatisfactorily in early 2014, though, leaving opposition groups feeling that the aims of the revolution had not been met. Living conditions for most Yemenis had deteriorated rather than improved, moreover. Hadi's government, which had a popular mandate in 2012, faced direct opposition from the Houthi movement and the Southern Movement (al-Hirak), an umbrella group for southern activist groups. The Houthis took advantage of Hadi's waning public support, abandoned the political process, and started to shape the situation on the ground to their advantage.<sup>7</sup>

The simmering unrest let AQAP rebuild itself, especially as it became increasingly apparent in early 2015 that the country was headed toward civil war. AQAP reequipped itself through a series of raids between January and March 2015 that yielded weapons from brigade headquarters in southern and eastern Yemen.<sup>8</sup> The group had retained the support it had cultivated beginning in 2011, partly by showing restraint in its attacks in Yemen—civilian casualties were minimized. When AQAP erred, as it did in a December 2013 attack on a military hospital, its leaders quickly apologized and condemned a “rogue” group for the outrage.<sup>9</sup> They were equally quick to capitalize on U.S. mistakes such as a December 2013 airstrike on a wedding party.<sup>10</sup> The Yemeni population's acceptance of AQAP put the group in a strong position as the state collapsed into war.

## APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED

AQAP is an adaptive and learning organization. It recognized its mistakes from 2011–12 and has not repeated them. Many of these mistakes centered on how AQAP governed and operated in populated terrain rather than how

it fought: First, the group openly admitted its relationship with Ansar al-Sharia early on, removing doubt that the two organizations were affiliated. Second, Ansar al-Sharia declared an emirate, a declaration that caught America's attention and also burdened the group with all the responsibilities that come with being the "state." Third, Ansar al-Sharia moved rapidly to enforce its interpretation of sharia, and its brutal justice alienated the population. These mistakes stripped AQAP and Ansar al-Sharia of local support during the military operations against them in 2012.

The group changed how it operated in 2015 based on these lessons. It retains the Ansar al-Sharia insurgent force as a forward-deployed fighting wing, but developed local groups to support its governance efforts. It seized Yemen's third-largest port city, al-Mukalla, in eastern Hadramawt governorate in April 2015, but operated under the name of a local proxy force, the "Sons of Hadramawt." The telltale black flag of al-Qaeda did not rise above the city.<sup>11</sup> The Sons of Hadramawt also remained separate from the governing bodies in the city. The group negotiated the rise to power of a Salafi-dominated local council, the Hadhrami Domestic Council (HDC), which assumed governing responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> The HDC did not assume all responsibilities at once, moreover—it slowly phased its takeover of the city's municipal functions, which distributed the governance burden over time. AQAP kept a lower profile in al-Mukalla to maintain a level of uncertainty about its relationship with the city's authorities. This approach worked despite the presence of senior AQAP leaders in the city.

AQAP also took a much gentler approach to transforming the governance system in al-Mukalla. A February 2012 crucifixion horrified the population in Abyan governorate and catalyzed local resistance to the group.<sup>13</sup> AQAP did not repeat this mistake, only beginning to enforce its interpretation of sharia in summer 2015, and then just for low-level offenses.<sup>14</sup> It held off applying the full breadth of corporal punishments until it was confident in its control. AQAP oversaw the stoning to death of a woman in January 2016, but prevented media from publicizing the event and kept it from the public eye.<sup>15</sup> The model proved durable, and AQAP controlled the city—and the revenue from the city—for a year.

An April 2016 Emirati-backed offensive against AQAP rolled back the group's territorial gains, but did not roll back gains in its relationship with the population. The context for the Emirati offensive was that AQAP had been reconstructing the quasi-state it controlled in 2011–12 in Yemen without identifying it as such.<sup>16</sup> Yemeni military forces, with UAE support, retook

al-Mukalla on April 24, 2016, and then chased AQAP from the towns it had recently seized.<sup>17</sup> The Emiratis followed with population-centric rebuilding efforts, inside al-Mukalla in particular, to repair the damage that mortar fire and rockets had done to the city when their partnered forces ousted AQAP. Many al-Mukalla residents nevertheless reported quotidian life improvements under AQAP—it was under AQAP’s rule that the sewer system was finally fixed.<sup>18</sup>

AQAP, which is remaining active in the areas cleared by the Emirati-backed forces in spring 2016, is following the same pattern observed in 2012: targeting the leadership of the groups that contested its control in the space as well as checkpoints, a sign of authority in Yemen.<sup>19</sup> Reports suggest that AQAP members are known to the population and are operating, but do not govern lest they draw attention to themselves. A more troubling development is the loosening of AQAP’s restrictions on permissible killings. AQAP had forbidden its members to kill Yemeni soldiers—primarily conscripts—held as hostages up through fall 2016 until after the captured soldiers were given a chance to repent. Now, captured soldiers—primarily volunteers—can be killed immediately. The loss of al-Mukalla and other terrain weakened AQAP, but did not strike at the group’s strength—its relationship with local populations.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the Emirati counterterrorism offensive targeted AQAP’s visible presence on the ground but did not eliminate or sufficiently disrupt AQAP safe havens or support zones.

## WINNING BEHIND THE WAR

Al-Qaeda grafts onto popular insurgencies and seeks to shape and direct them. AQAP employed this method to some effect previously, but the population was not mobilized enough to grant AQAP sufficient strength from this approach. The Yemeni civil war fundamentally changed the battlespace. Yemenis, particularly those in predominantly Sunni or mixed Sunni-Shiite areas,<sup>21</sup> are actively fighting in defense of their local and political interests—not for sectarian reasons, despite the sectarian cast of the war. Many fight to oppose the forces loyal to the Houthis and former president Saleh, both of whom they despise. There are now multiple active Sunni insurgencies in Yemen. AQAP, which also opposes the Houthi-Saleh faction, has stepped in to support these insurgencies and, in some cases, has embedded itself so thoroughly within the local forces that they deny al-Qaeda’s presence.<sup>22</sup>

AQAP’s strength in Yemen comes not from its territorial control, size, or ability to conduct mass-casualty attacks but rather from the popular sup-

port it nurtures.<sup>23</sup> AQAP's support does not rest on a popular acceptance of its ideology; it results from AQAP's efforts to make common cause with people already fighting against the Houthi-Saleh faction or through transactional relationships using established illicit networks, such as those that run through Marib and al-Jawf, to facilitate operations. The mobilization of a Sunni base in Yemen through the civil war increased the opportunities AQAP had to create this support. The group seeks to work first along pragmatic lines of effort and then to transform the society into a "just" Muslim society over time. It closely parallels the approach al-Qaeda has taken in Syria with considerable success.

AQAP is actively cultivating a support base in central Yemen outside Saudi, Emirati, and Hadi government areas of influence. The war primed the conditions for AQAP in al-Bayda governorate, where the group had already extended its tentacles during the Arab Spring. In January 2012, an AQAP commander and member of a prominent local family led a company-size force and seized control of Radah, in al-Bayda governorate.<sup>24</sup> Tribal mediation eventually removed the group from the area, but AQAP crept back in. Low-level clashes between local tribes and members of Saleh's network occurred throughout 2014, and AQAP began to support some of the local tribes. The outbreak of war accelerated this development, and AQAP poured resources into al-Bayda, including weapons, money, and personnel, to support the fight. The Emiratis' counterterrorism efforts do not extend to this critical piece of terrain. The questions today of whether a local AQAP leader is actually "AQAP" or just a tribal leader signifies that AQAP is winning on the ground.<sup>25</sup>

Yemen's civil war not only spun up various local insurgencies but also introduced a level of sectarianism previously unknown to Yemenis. AQAP had certainly singled out the Zaidi Shiite Houthis previously as "apostates" and directed targeted attacks against the Houthi leadership.<sup>26</sup> Yet beyond these attacks, sectarianism was limited. The indicators of a more sectarian environment in Yemen began to appear in 2013, however. A localized conflict between a Salafi school in Dammaj, Sadah governorate, and Houthis attracted Salafi fighters from across Yemen to defend the school.<sup>27</sup> These fighters returned home when the conflict ended, but sectarian rhetoric crept into political discourse in Sana, Yemen's capital. The current framing of the war—Iran-backed Houthis (wherein Zaidis are labeled Houthi supporters) vs. Saudi-backed Salafists (wherein all Sunnis support Salafi-jihadist ideology)—will help AQAP expand in Yemen. Al-Qaeda has promoted the idea

globally that it alone is the defender of the Sunnis, who are under attack as Sunni states stand by.

AQAP's dominance of the Yemen theater constrained the Islamic State's ability to expand in the country, though it did not prevent IS from gaining some ground. Early supporters of the Islamic State came from within AQAP's network in Yemen, probably drawn to IS's success in Iraq and its progress in creating an Islamic caliphate, to which all Salafi-jihadist groups ultimately aspire.<sup>28</sup> The Islamic State's methods—bombing mosques and hitting soft targets—were shocking to Yemenis, however, and the group's unwillingness to contextualize its operations and work within local structures alienated many. IS has not vanished from the scene in Yemen, but it will have a hard time supplanting or even seriously challenging AQAP's preeminence there.<sup>29</sup>

The end is not in sight for the Yemeni civil war. Even a national-level settlement is unlikely to resolve the local conflicts in which AQAP has embedded itself. The Emiratis have conducted counterterrorism operations, but they cannot invest further and have not broken AQAP's relationship with a core support base. AQAP will strengthen so long as the war continues to perpetuate the conditions that enable it to expand.

## THE ENDURING AQAP THREAT

American counterterrorism actions have degraded AQAP's senior leadership cadre, focusing especially on those who played on a global scale, but they have not eliminated AQAP's threat to U.S. interests. The focus of the United States and the West on defeating the Islamic State has worked to al-Qaeda's advantage. Al-Qaeda's senior leadership is sensitive to U.S. and Western policy decisions and most probably calculated that to conduct a planned and directed mass-casualty attack in the West would be to draw return fire against al-Qaeda instead of against the Islamic State. Ibrahim al-Asiri, AQAP's notorious bomb maker, remains at large and has almost certainly trained the next generation of explosives experts—but his capabilities to design weapons to hit targets in the West have remained largely unused.

AQAP also supports other al-Qaeda nodes and is thus a threat not only in Yemen but globally, as a key part of the al-Qaeda network. In February and March 2016, respectively, al-Shabab's use of explosive devices disguised as laptops in two attempts against airplanes points to the transfer of technology from Yemen to Somalia.<sup>30</sup> AQAP sent early support to Syria, notably in technology transfers of explosives materials and designs.<sup>31</sup> Finally, AQAP and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have historically coordinated in ways

ranging from a 2010 directive to cooperate on planning an attack in Europe to the sharing of leadership advice for successful insurgency strategies.<sup>32</sup> This horizontal connectivity within the al-Qaeda network adds strength and resilience to al-Qaeda globally.

Al-Qaeda leaders in Yemen, who are messaging to a global audience, serve a similar role to that historically held by al-Qaeda core senior leadership in Pakistan. In an October 2016 audio speech, AQAP official Khalid Batarfi, for example, discussed the wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as “Crusader-Safavid”<sup>33</sup> plots against the Sunnis. AQAP media products differentiate between Yemeni and Muslim audiences in general.<sup>34</sup> The group’s global product lines—its English-language *Inspire* magazine, “*Inspire Guide*” series, al-Malahem Media Foundation videos, and Arabic-language al-Masra newspaper—provide directives and religious justifications for violent jihad to a global audience.<sup>35</sup> The days of Osama bin Laden monopolizing the global guidance for al-Qaeda’s jihad are long gone. AQAP leaders are a central part of al-Qaeda’s senior leadership.

AQAP’s local focus today does not by any means remove its threat to the United States. Al-Qaeda’s vision is to transform local societies into Islamic polities, and each local success—from Syria to Mali to Somalia to Yemen—is a building block toward achieving al-Qaeda’s global objective. It prioritizes the local fights today as the futures of Sunni-majority countries are being decided, but still sees the United States and the West as an enemy. AQAP’s localization and embedding within the Yemeni population make it an even greater threat than it had been in the past.

AQAP is not a terrorist organization. It is an insurgency, and part of a global insurgency. Insurgencies gain strength and succeed by harnessing the support of populations alienated from their governments. AQAP has learned from previous mistakes exactly how to do that. The nature of and focus on the Yemeni civil war create nearly limitless opportunities to apply those lessons. The West must stop deluding itself about this threat. AQAP will never stop seeking to attack and destroy the West. Neither has it been lying low. It has, rather, been working to build depth, strength, and resilience so that it will present a much greater challenge to its enemies when—not if—it chooses to begin attacking them again.

## NOTES

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## AQIM's Formalized Flexibility

■ ANDREW LEBOVICH

PREPARED STATEMENT

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SINCE THE ARAB UPRISINGS in 2011, jihadist groups in the Sahara and Sahel have grown dramatically in their presence and strength, driven in large part by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the constellation of groups swirling around it. Despite facing major challenges from groups affiliated with the Islamic State in Tunisia and Libya, lesser offshoots in Algeria, and a more recent challenge in the Sahara, AQIM has remained durable and resilient through its deep anchorage in local politics, economies, and social systems, as well as a flexible approach to group membership and territoriality. In March 2017, this adaptability took the form of a merger by AQIM-linked Sahelian jihadist groups under the banner *Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM; “Group of the Supporters of Islam and the Muslims”), led by Iyad Ag Ghali, the head of *Ansar al-Din* in Mali.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will discuss the evolution and longer-term dynamics underlying militancy in the Sahara and Sahel since the Arab Spring, and will close by examining the creation of JNIM and the status of the al-Qaeda–Islamic State rivalry in the region.

### ADAPTING TO CHANGING REALITIES

Although analysts speculated that the Arab Spring protests that broke out across North Africa would benefit AQIM, the organization itself was somewhat slow to respond. However, by the spring and summer of 2011, the group more fully embraced the association, producing videos even then that emphasized the need for armed struggle over engagement in political processes. While such a step is itself unsurprising and hardly novel for a jihadist

group, which by definition has chosen violence as the path to change, AQIM in the wake of the Arab Spring explicitly embraced national heroes as historical antecedents, especially the Libyan anticolonialist Omar al-Mukhtar.<sup>2</sup>

One important shift in AQIM's behavior after this point was a deepening commitment to not just operating in places like Tunisia and Libya—in addition to its continued presence in Mali in particular, where it took over the rebellion and governance—but to working with and through local forces and militias to advance its agenda. Although AQIM has not shied away from large-scale attacks such as that on the Bardo Museum in Tunisia, its operations through local affiliates have in general been based on steadily progressing attacks and a slowly spreading presence, whether in Jebel Chaambi in Tunisia, in Darnah and Ajdabiya in northern Libya, in parts of southern Libya, or in Mali, where AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel called for a slow implementation of sharia in mid-2012, when AQIM found itself largely in control of northern Mali.<sup>3</sup>

Although originally an outgrowth of the Algerian jihad and civil war of the 1990s, AQIM has been significantly more effective since the Arab Spring in separating the North African jihad into a federation and attracting North African jihadists as well as those from farther afield, all while also reinforcing its local presence. This was particularly clear with the creation in December 2011 of the Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO, in French) and the response to the Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali in 2012.<sup>4</sup> And it was the case even though MUJAO sprang from real tension between the then largely Algerian leadership and Saharan Arabs joined by other populations seeking a greater role in the group.

Amid regional political turmoil, the creation of MUJAO signaled continuity as well as a new beginning. AQIM's predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), emerged from the violence and internecine mayhem of the Algerian civil war, reflecting both the fragmentary nature of the Algerian jihad and the adaptability of its fighters. Despite the tensions and animosities between the different factions, AQIM, MUJAO, and AQIM's largely Tuareg partner Ansar al-Din managed to cooperate in the administration of northern Mali during 2012, until the French intervention in January 2013, a feat accomplished in part through groups operating in different areas depending on their strengths and local connections. Thus, Ansar al-Din was largely responsible for Kidal—the home region and power center for Ag Ghali as well as his key lieutenants—while in Timbuktu governance was handled by Ansar al-Din, with AQIM fighters ever present,<sup>5</sup> and much of Gao was run by

MUJAO.<sup>6</sup> Even the deep schism between AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar and AQIM's leadership, which led to Belmokhtar's departure in late 2012 and his creation of al-Muwaqun Bi-Dima and later al-Murabitun, did not prevent later reconciliation and cooperation as circumstances changed, with al-Murabitun rejoining AQIM in late 2015 amid still-unconfirmed reports of Belmokhtar's death in military operations in Libya.<sup>7</sup>

## CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

A few key points are relevant for understanding current manifestations of jihadism in the Sahara and the Sahel. The first to be discussed here is the ability of AQIM in particular to develop deep local ties while maintaining its outward linkages to the global jihad. Even before the creation of MUJAO, AQIM had spent years recruiting in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and as far afield as Nigeria, and its durability stems in part from these "local" ties,<sup>8</sup> which grew even as anti-AQIM operations continued to erode the group's previous bastion in northern Algeria.<sup>9</sup>

Such links consisted of local liaisons combined with far-flung personal relationships between militants, meaning that AQIM commanders in particular could and still can draw on widespread ties for material as well as moral support. AQIM always maintained a somewhat loose structure in the region, giving wide autonomy to local commanders while also working with some criminal actors—e.g., in kidnapping and ransoming hostages—who later became more closely tied to AQIM's military operations.<sup>10</sup> AQIM likewise has worked with local affiliates as part of its strategy for achieving and maintaining control in northern Mali, first through Ansar al-Din, and then, post-2015, through formations in central Mali under Amadou Koufa, groups that have been variously referred to as Katibat Macina, Ansar al-Din Macina, and the Macina Liberation Front (MLF).<sup>11</sup>

In some cases, the apparently fragmentary nature of operations has led to confusion and multiple claims, such as when both the MLF and al-Murabitun took responsibility for the August 2015 attack on a hotel favored by UN contractors in Mopti, showing the linkages between the groups.<sup>12</sup> In others, as with the Boko Haram splinter Ansaru, these connections were hinted at for years before being made more explicit, through the movement of such groups under the AQIM umbrella.<sup>13</sup> Similar dynamics apply with groups connected to AQIM in Libya or the Tunisian Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi, although the connections between the latter and AQIM are close and have been widely reported.<sup>14</sup>

But in each of these cases, operational flexibility allowed different affiliates or entities otherwise linked to AQIM to expand in diverse political and social environments, permitting them to take advantage of recruitment opportunities in these communities and tailor their approach accordingly. It has also left space for reconciliation between militants. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, for instance, was reportedly involved in repeated attempts to reconcile with IS-linked and other jihadist groups in Libya in order to confront common threats to their survival, meetings that nearly cost Belmokhtar his life in Ajdabiya in June 2015 and may have finally done so in a French airstrike in November 2016.<sup>15</sup>

Another longstanding trend has been the variation between small- and large-scale operations against military as well as government targets. Although constrained by Algeria's significant military presence in the country's north, AQIM still managed to carry out several major suicide attacks on government buildings and military assets in Algiers, Dellys, Cherchell, and Tizi Ouzou before reverting to IED and other strikes on military and police targets outside the country's major cities.<sup>16</sup> According to reports from Algerian security services, however, the group has continued to plot attacks in cities like Algiers—the heavy visible security presence in northern cities, including Algiers and Constantine, attests to these active concerns.<sup>17</sup>

This variation in tactics and scope of attacks has been a regular feature of militancy in the Sahel, again responding to shifting political and security contexts. For instance, Belmokhtar was responsible for the first large-scale attack in the region, which occurred in Lemgheity, Mauritania, in 2005, even as his fighters and others were involved in kidnapping for ransom and smaller attacks. (The kidnapping industry in the region, for its part, did not take more concrete form until after 2007.) In 2012, MUJAO claimed responsibility for suicide attacks against Algerian security forces in Ouargla and Tamanrasset, and in January 2013 Belmokhtar's fighters attacked the In Amenas gas plant in Algeria following the French intervention in Mali, involving a mix of local and international fighters and planning and operations across a wide geographical range.<sup>18</sup>

Belmokhtar's fighters also staged major attacks in May 2013 at the French uranium facility at Arlit and the key military base in Agadez, both in northern Niger, and al-Murabitun struck popular hotels in Bamako (Mali) in November 2015, Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) in January 2016, and Grand-Bassam (Côte d'Ivoire) in March 2016—although this last attack was claimed under the AQIM banner, following on al-Murabitun's reabsorption into AQIM.

Yet al-Murabitun alone has also claimed smaller attacks in Algeria and Mali, not just against international targets such as French and UN forces but also against Malian troops. And the devastating attack on January 18, 2017, against the base in Gao (Mali), set up to coordinate local security patrols, exhibits the same pattern whereby operations target fighters from different Malian armed groups as well as the larger, internationally sponsored peace accords.<sup>19</sup>

For other components of the AQIM network in the Sahel, the pattern has been similar. Before the announcement of JNIM, AQIM had largely concentrated its activities around Timbuktu and the Niger buckle (the section of the river stretching from Timbuktu to Gao), engaging in a mixture of attacks on Malian forces and communal meetings, combined with repeated pressure on and killings of suspected informants and alleged thieves.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Ansar al-Din and the constellation of militant groups in central Mali engaged in its own varied activities, including IED and more-complex attacks on Malian and international targets, the assassination of local officials accused of collaborating with these same forces, and limited governance activities that allegedly included the protection of ethnic Peul (Fula) communities from attack and the lifting of taxes in areas still ostensibly under Malian state control.<sup>21</sup> Although this amalgamation of small-scale, large-scale, and local governance-related activities is by no means unique to AQIM-linked groups, the résumé of these groups is noteworthy—especially given the direct governance experience of the 2012 occupation of northern Mali—as is their commitment to at least providing a veneer of governance. Further, their diverse efforts are important in understanding not just AQIM and AQIM-related groups but also the difficulties that IS in particular has had in implanting itself in the Sahel.

## AL-QAEDA AND THE ISLAMIC STATE IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

Given the growth of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq as well as Libya, coupled with the May 2015 declaration of an IS affiliate by former MUJAO commander Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in a message threatening Morocco and Western Sahara,<sup>22</sup> media sources have speculated widely on the potential for growth in the region.<sup>23</sup> In particular, Sahrawi's group has claimed responsibility for a series of attacks along Mali's borders with Burkina Faso and inside Mali against security services, and IS took responsibility for an assault on the high-security prison at Koutoukalé, Niger, in October 2016,<sup>24</sup> stirring concerns among local analysts, civil society representatives, and government officials.<sup>25</sup>

In northern Algeria, meanwhile, IS affiliates have been limited in their efforts to engage in sustained activity, despite the killing by Jund al-Khilafah, a forerunner of IS's Wilayat al-Jazair, of French tourist Hervé Gourdel in May 2014 and several attacks by the former AQIM unit Saraya al-Ghuraba<sup>26</sup> against military and police targets in the area around Constantine, culminating in a foiled plot on a police station in the city itself, reportedly using a suicide belt or similar explosive.<sup>27</sup> Algerian authorities quickly struck back, allegedly killing Saraya al-Ghuraba's head, whom the government also claimed was responsible for killing an Algerian police officer in Constantine in October 2016.<sup>28</sup>

The creation in March 2017 of JNIM may have been in part a reaction to the growth of IS in the region, a recognition of the need to recalibrate forces and reaffirm the continued association of Koufa as well as Ag Ghali with AQIM amid reports of tensions and defections.<sup>29</sup> AQIM was certainly aware of the potential problems posed by IS's expansion in their terrain of operations, and Algerian media carried reports soon after Sahrawi's announcement of violent clashes between fighters loyal to him and those loyal to Belmokhtar.<sup>30</sup> Still, AQIM has kept its options open with regard to IS, judging Sahrawi's IS pledge to be illegitimate but still maintaining the possibility that IS fighters could return to the fold.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, despite the ostensible rivalry between the two jihadist trends, the actions of IS affiliates in Algeria and the Sahel—excluding the Nigerian Boko Haram, which merits an entirely separate discussion—have on the whole hewn closely to AQIM's actions, particularly in terms of targeting. Whether in the area around Constantine or the Liptako-Gourma zone straddling Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, claimed IS affiliates have largely struck security and government forces, deploying highly similar tactics to those honed under AQIM—and indeed reflecting the leadership of such groups by defectors from AQIM or AQIM-linked movements. Still, these similarities in tactics and AQIM's years of experience either directly governing or engaging in forms of governance may reduce the appeal of IS, versus in other regions. And if the IS presence does expand, it will likely be because of the connections and influences held by individual commanders such as Sahrawi, rather than an ideological appeal specific to the organization. Here, the local context is crucial and must be privileged, which is unfortunately often not the case when discussing jihadist groups and counterterrorism cases.

Observers should also not automatically view every action of al-Qaeda-linked groups in North Africa or the Sahara and Sahel as being necessarily

linked to the Islamic State.<sup>32</sup> For instance, the jihadist reorganization in the Sahel was spurred in part by the increasing pace of attacks against UN, Malian, and French forces over the last two years in particular, and a need to better coordinate militant activity as it expands. This may be especially true given the firmer stance taken lately by these groups against the Malian peace process itself, which grew out of the 2012 rebellion and French intervention, a stance exemplified by the suicide bombing in the Gao camp in January 2017.

JNIM, in its own way, also represents a continuation of AQIM's willingness to accommodate different tendencies and leadership forms through a kind of federalism and to operate in multiple registers at once. In choosing Iyad Ag Ghali as its leader and including at least three actors from Mali, that country remains the focal point for action; at the same time, the presence of senior AQIM leader Yahya Abu al-Hammam and Ag Ghali's affirmation of JNIM's loyalty to AQIM and al-Qaeda as well as the Taliban uphold its internationalist orientation. The inclusion of the AQIM *qadi* (judge) Abdul Rahman al-Sanhaji, a rising media presence in the group,<sup>33</sup> references not only the longstanding use of the region's ancient Islamic history as a reference point, but also specifically points to the group's role in administering and representing its interpretation of sharia.<sup>34</sup>

Regardless, AQIM and related groups have survived in hostile environments because of their flexibility, wide-ranging activities, and local rootedness, built up and expanded over nearly two decades of work. To understand these groups, U.S. officials and analysts must also understand these different contexts, how they interact and overlap, and how they continue to shape an ever-evolving jihadist milieu in North Africa, the Sahara, and the Sahel.

## NOTES

1. See, e.g., Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Qaeda Groups Reorganize in West Africa," *Long War Journal*, March 13, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/analysis-al-qaeda-groups-reorganize-in-west-africa.php>.
2. AQIM had previously used and continues to heavily use historical figures in its own self-descriptions, but the group has tended to tap older figures from the history of Islamic conquest in North Africa, and has always notably excluded some figures known as much for their Sufism as for their involvement in jihad, particularly the Algerian emir Abdelkader. For some discussion of Omar al-Mukhtar and Sufi reappropriation in general, see Abdulbasit Kassim and Jacob Zenn, "Justifying War: The Salafi-Jihadi Appropriation of Sufi Jihad in the Sahel-Sahara," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, March 1, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/research/13480-justifying-war-the-salafi-jihadi-appropriation-of-sufi-jihad-in-the-sahel-sahara>.

3. On this strategy, see Rukmini Callimachi, "In Timbuktu, al-Qaeda Left Behind a Manifesto," Associated Press, February 4, 2013, available at <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/world/2013/02/15/timbuktu-qaeda-left-behind-manifesto/Z3LaPkhWY5dJRgsRo373yK/story.html>.
4. On the creation of MUJAO, see Mohammed Mahmoud Abu al-Ma'ali, "Al-Qaeda and Its Allies in the Sahel and the Sahara," Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, May 1, 2012, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/mritems/Documents/2012/4/30/2012430145241774734Al%20Qaeda%20and%20its%20allies%20in%20the%20Sahel%20and%20the%20Sahara.pdf>.
5. Ansar al-Din was formed with significant support from Tuareg from Kidal, including Katibat al-Ansar, headed by Ag Ghali's cousin Hamada Ag Hama (Abdelkrim al-Targui). See, e.g., Benjamin Roger, "Visuel interactif: le nouvel organigramme d'Aqmi," *Jeune Afrique*, October 25, 2013, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/167651/politique/visuel-interactif-le-nouvel-organigramme-d-aqmi/>.
6. On governance and the local and foreign balance in Gao, see Andrew Lebovich, "Trying to Understand MUJWA," *al-Wasat*, August 22, 2012, <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/08/22/trying-to-understand-mujwa/>; also see Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, "State, Secession, and Jihad: The Micropolitical Economy of Conflict in Northern Mali," *African Security* 8, no. 4 (December 2015): 249–71.
7. On the lengthy process of dividing and reuniting Sahelian jihadist factions, see Marc Mémier, *AQMI et al-Mourabitoun: le djihad sahélien réunifié?* (Paris: Ifri, 2017), <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/notes-de-lifri/notes-de-lifri/aqmi-al-mourabitoun-djihad-sahelien-reunifie>.
8. See, e.g., Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Could al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/al\\_qaeda\\_sahel.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/al_qaeda_sahel.pdf); also see Morten Boas, "Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali," *CTC Sentinel*, April 24, 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/guns-money-and-prayers-aqims-blueprint-for-securing-control-of-northern-mali>.
9. Mélanie Materese, "L'Algérie contient l'EI mais voit AQMI se redéployer," *Middle East Eye*, May 6, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/reportages/l-alg-rie-contient-l-ei-mais-voit-aqmi-se-red-ployer-1698405965>.
10. One example of this is the allegedly close involvement of at least two sons of Tilemsi (Gao) Arab power broker Baba Ould Sheikh in AQIM activities, including in the high-profile attacks conducted in Ouagadougou in January 2016 and Cote d'Ivoire in March 2016. Gao-based researcher, interviews by author, Niamey, Niger, January 2017; "Burkina: le chef des opérations de l'attentat de Ouagadougou a été identifié par les autorités," *Jeune Afrique*, March 24, 2017, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/421195/politique/burkina-chef-operations-de-lattentat-de-ouagadougou-a-ete-identifie-autorites/>.
11. Koufa, known originally as a firebrand preacher, helped lead the January 2013 jihad-

- ist push toward southern Mali that triggered the French intervention. See Joshua Hammer, “When the Jihad Came to Mali,” *New York Review of Books*, March 21, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/03/21/when-jihad-came-mali/>.
12. See Mémier, “AQMI et al-Mourabitoun,” <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/notes-de-lifri/notes-de-lifri/aqmi-al-mourabitoun-djihad-sahelien-reunifie>.
  13. On Ansaru, see Ryan Cummings, “Al-Qaeda’s Nigerian Chapter,” Center on Religion and Geopolitics, March 29, 2017, <http://www.religionandgeopolitics.org/boko-haram/al-qaeda-s-nigerian-chapter>.
  14. On Libya and Tunisia, see Geoff Porter, “Terrorism in North Africa: An Examination of the Threat,” testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, March 29, 2017, <http://docs.house.gov/Committee/Calendar/ByEvent.aspx?EventID=105759>.
  15. Belmokhtar’s death was widely reported at the time of the Ajdabiya airstrike, though never confirmed. The renewed reports of his death in 2016 can be taken, if nothing else, as tacit confirmation from Western governments that the 2015 airstrike did not succeed in finding its target. Nonetheless, Belmokhtar’s disappearance since 2016 lends itself to multiple possible interpretations, even as confirmation remains elusive. French defense official, communications with author, December 2016; “Exclusif: Belmokhtar, grièvement blessé mais toujours en vie,” Middle East Eye, December 13, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/reportages/belmokhtar-grievement-bless-mais-toujours-en-vie-1484159733>.
  16. See Andrew Lebovich, “AQIM Returns in Force in Northern Algeria,” *CTC Sentinel*, September 26, 2011, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/aqim-returns-in-force-in-northern-algeria>; “Un attentat suicide fait 29 blessés en Kabylie,” *Libération*, August 14, 2011, [http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/08/14/algerie-un-attentat-suicide-fait-29-blesses-en-kabylie\\_754874](http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/08/14/algerie-un-attentat-suicide-fait-29-blesses-en-kabylie_754874); “Abdelkabar, le fils d’Ali Belhadj, a été tué,” *Le Matin d’Algérie*, July 27, 2011, <http://www.lematindz.net/news/4909-abdelkabar-le-fils-dali-belhadj-a-ete-tue.html>.
  17. In Algiers and Constantine, for instance, the author has observed how police and checkpoint gendarmerie routinely stop vehicles deemed suspect, especially on peripheral roads and main arteries leading into these cities.
  18. Aziz M., “Nouvelles revelations sur l’attentat de Tigentourine,” *El Watan*, January 10, 2014, [http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/eco/hydroc/tigentourine\\_nouvelles\\_revelations.htm](http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/eco/hydroc/tigentourine_nouvelles_revelations.htm); “The In Amenas Attack: Report of the Investigation into the Terrorist Attack on In Amenas,” *Statoil*, February 2013, <https://www.statoil.com/en/news/archive/2013/09/12/downloads/In%20Amenas%20report.pdf>; also see Hannah Armstrong, “The In Amenas Attack in the Context of Southern Algeria’s Growing Social Unrest,” *CTC Sentinel*, February 24, 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-in-amenas-attack-in-the-context-of-southern-algerias-growing-social-unrest>.
  19. Baba Ahmed, “Mali: le bilan de l’attentat contre le camp militaire de Gao revu à la baisse,” *Jeune Afrique*, February 24, 2017, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/406796/politique/mali-bilan-de-lattentat-contre-camp-militaire-de-gao-revu-a-baisse/>.

20. The latter have been the subject of recent AQIM videos, meant to show not just the group's threats against alleged criminals but also its willingness to pardon those who repent.
21. "Mali-Macina: des affrontements entre moudjahidines à milices Dozo," *al-Akhbar* (Mauritania), March 27, 2017, <http://www.fr.alakhbar.info/12437-0-Mali--Macina-des-affrontements-entre-moudjahidines-a-milices-Dozo-Zallaqa.html>. On governance and the security situation in central Mali more generally, see Boukary Sangaré, *Le Centre du Mali: epicentre du djihadisme?* (Brussels: Groupe de Recherche sur la Paix et la Sécurité, 2016), <http://www.grip.org/fr/node/2008>; Adam Thiam, *Centre du Mali: Enjeux et Dangers d'une Crise Négligée* (Centre pour le Dialogue Humanitaire, 2017), <https://www.hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Centre-du-Mali-Enjeux-et-dangers-dune-crise-n%C3%A9glig%C3%A9e.pdf>; Yvan Guichaoua and Dougoukolo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, "Djihad, révolte et auto-défense au centre du Mali," *La Conversation* (France), October 12, 2016, [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/10/14/djihad-revolte-et-auto-defense-au-centre-du-mali\\_5013649\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/10/14/djihad-revolte-et-auto-defense-au-centre-du-mali_5013649_3212.html); International Crisis Group, *Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?* Africa Report 238, (Brussels: ICG, 2016), <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/central-mali-an-uprising-in-the-making.pdf>; Corinne Dufka, "Mali: Islamist Group Abuses, Banditry Surge," Human Rights Watch, January 18, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/18/mali-islamist-group-abuses-banditry-surge>.
22. Porter, "Terrorism in North Africa," <http://docs.house.gov/Committee/Calendar/ByEvent.aspx?EventID=105759>.
23. Local and Western security experts based in the Sahel speak similarly of this growth potential, although almost always without hard evidence or in-depth analysis of al-Qaeda-Islamic State competition in the region. See, e.g., Conor Gaffey, "ISIS Expands into the Sahel, Africa's Migration Hub," *Newsweek*, November 24, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/isis-expands-its-brand-sahel-africas-migration-hub-524447>, as well as Jean-Philippe Rémy, "Comment l'Etat Islamique est parti à l'assaut de l'Afrique," *Le Monde*, January 22, 2016, [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/01/22/comment-l-etat-islamique-est-parti-a-l-assaut-de-l-afrique\\_4852085\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/01/22/comment-l-etat-islamique-est-parti-a-l-assaut-de-l-afrique_4852085_3212.html); for a counter to this argument, see Stig Jarle Hansen, "The Islamic State Is Losing in Africa," *Foreign Policy*, December 13, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/13/the-islamic-state-is-losing-in-africa/>.
24. Mathieu Olivier, "Niger: cinq soldats tués dans une attaque à Bani Bangou, dans la région de Tillabéri," *Jeune Afrique*, November 8, 2016, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/372360/politique/niger-cinq-soldats-tues-attaque-a-bani-bangou-region-de-tillaberi/>.
25. This is especially true in Niger, which saw significant recruitment of ethnic Peul people in particular to MUJAO during the occupation of northern Mali. Niger government and Peul civil society representatives, interviews by author, Niamey, Niger, January 2017.

26. Sarayat al-Ghuraba announced its defection in July 2015, the third group at the time to split from AQIM in favor of IS.
27. “Algérie: l’EI revendique la tentative d’attentat-suicide à Constantine,” *Le Monde*, February 27, 2017, [http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/02/27/tentative-d-attentat-suicide-a-constantine\\_5085940\\_3210.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/02/27/tentative-d-attentat-suicide-a-constantine_5085940_3210.html); Zineb Hamdi, “Tentative d’attentat suicide à Constantine: trois policiers blessés, le kamikaze tué,” *Tout sur l’Algérie*, February 26, 2017, available at <http://fiblydai.dz/actualite/C3%A9/l-info/item/693924-tentative-d%E2%80%99attentat-suicide-%C3%A0-constantine-trois-policiers-bless%C3%A9s-le-kamikaze-tu%C3%A9>.
28. Zineb Hamdi, “Le chef de Daech Algérie tué par l’armée à Constantine,” *Tout sur l’Algérie*, March 25, 2017, available at <http://www.actualite-algerie.com/2017/03/25/le-chef-de-daech-algerie-tue-par-larmee-a-constantine/>.
29. These allegations were rampant in the Malian press before the announcement of JNIM, particularly with the growth of a new jihadist group in northern Burkina Faso, reportedly led by a Peul commander arrested in Mali in 2013 and released from prison two years later. Also see Héni Nsaibia, “Jihadist Groups in the Sahel Region Formalize Merger,” *Jihadology*, March 27, 2017, <http://jihadology.net/2017/03/27/guest-post-jihadist-groups-in-the-sahel-region-formalize-merger/>.
30. Aziz M., “Mali: L’émir d’al-Mourabitoune gravement blessé dans des affrontements,” *El Watan*, June 17, 2015, available at <http://news.abamako.com/h/92504.html>.
31. In an interview with the Mauritanian newspaper *al-Akhhbar*, AQIM Sahara commander Yahya Abu al-Hammam described Sahrawi and his associates as having erred but said they were still in contact with him. “Abu al-Hamam fi owal muqabilah lihi ba’ad al-tadkhul al-faransi bi mali,” *al-Akhhbar*, January 10, 2016. For a further discussion, see Andrew Lebovich, “The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region,” *CTC Sentinel*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-hotel-attacks-and-militant-realignment-in-the-sahara-sahel-region>.
32. *Ibid.*
33. See Nsaibia, “Jihadist Groups in the Sahel,” <http://jihadology.net/2017/03/27/guest-post-jihadist-groups-in-the-sahel-region-formalize-merger/>.
34. Sanhaji refers to the Sanhaja Berber tribal confederation, which provided the military force behind the creation of the Almoravid Empire in the eleventh century.

## Al-Shabab in Somalia: The Resilience of Al-Qaeda's East African Affiliate

■ CHRISTOPHER ANZALONE

PREPARED STATEMENT

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**A**L-SHABAB, after dominating most of southern and central Somalia between 2008 and the spring of 2011, today faces a number of major challenges to its continued longevity: a federal government that is more capable than it was a few years ago during the insurgents' heyday, stronger and more-established regional administrations such as that in Jubaland state in the south, diminished revenues from taxation on trade routes and hubs in urban and economic centers such as Baidoa and Kismayo, and a slowdown in the number of foreign fighters traveling to join insurgent ranks. Territorially, al-Shabab was forced to withdraw from most of its urban holdings, beginning in August 2011 with the capital, Mogadishu, and continuing in 2012 with Baidoa and Kismayo, and then in 2014 with the port town of Barawa, the group's last major stronghold on the country's coast. Internal factionalism and infighting and leadership losses since 2012 have also taken a toll on the group, threatening to compound its territorial, battlefield, and economic losses.

Despite these setbacks, al-Shabab remains remarkably resilient and continues to prove adept at waging a deadly campaign of asymmetric warfare, exercise governing control over the significant amounts of territory it still controls, and quickly take advantage of the missteps of its chief enemies, the Somali Federal Government (SFG) and African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) forces. Much of the group's core senior leadership and provincial-level administrations and military forces also remain loyal, weathering the wave of infighting and defections that began in 2012–13 and continued in late 2015 into 2016 with the emergence of pro-Islamic State elements across the country. One of the keys to al-Shabab's resilience is the ability of its

leaders to address rising challenges while taking advantage of opportune situations on the ground, countering claims by the Islamic State and its regional sympathizers and supporters in East Africa that the group has “abandoned jihad” and needs to be replaced. Al-Shabab has thereby remained the jihadist standard-bearer in the region despite the allure and aggressive expansionism of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s organization.

## SETBACKS

In February 2011, AMISOM and SFG forces along with allied clan-based militias began a series of offensives against al-Shabab, pushing its personnel first out of the center of Mogadishu, nearly all of which had been controlled by the insurgents since 2009, except for a small AMISOM- and SFG-held enclave. In August 2011, al-Shabab decided to strategically withdraw from the capital rather than wage a costly frontline defense, learning from the grievous losses suffered during its 2010 “Ramadan offensive” against AMISOM and SFG forces there. Through the remainder of 2011 and into 2012, al-Shabab was also forced to withdraw from territory in the Galguduud, Hiran, Bay, Bakool, Lower Shebelle, and Juba regions. The entrance of Kenyan forces in southern and western Somalia in October 2011 and the reentrance of Ethiopian troops in western Somalia the next month resulted in further territorial losses for the insurgents.

Shifting back to guerrilla warfare against a better-equipped and numerically larger alliance of enemies, al-Shabab remained active around the outskirts of the capital into spring 2012, excelling in planting improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and ambushing AMISOM and SFG forces. One of the group’s most successful ambushes occurred in Daynile in late October on the northern outskirts of Mogadishu, when al-Shabab fighters killed between seventy and one hundred Burundian AMISOM soldiers.<sup>1</sup> This attack foreshadowed the insurgent group’s later deadly coordinated assaults on Kenyan military bases in El Adde in January 2016, in the Gedo region of Somalia, and Kulbiyow in January 2017, in the Lower Juba region.

Al-Shabab, in addition to facing battlefield pressures, was beset with infighting throughout much of 2012 and 2013. These internal divisions emerged publicly in March 2012 when Omar Hammami, perhaps the group’s most famous foreign fighter, posted a short video on YouTube in which he stated that he had defected from al-Shabab because of differences over “sharia and strategy” and now feared for his life. Hammami, along with a handful of other dissident foreign fighters, waged an online campaign

against al-Shabab's emir, Ahmed Godane, and his loyalists, harnessing social media platforms like Twitter to call into question the religious legitimacy of their actions and style of rule. Hammami accused Godane of suppressing "true jihad" in Somalia, mismanaging insurgent finances, and persecuting those within the group who disagreed with his decisionmaking. Godane was also accused by Hammami and his supporters of spreading "extremism" among al-Shabab's ranks and of being the Somali version of Djamel Zitouni, the leader of Algeria's Armed Islamic Group (GIA) during the 1990s Algerian civil war, reviled by many Sunni jihadists for targeting other Algerian Islamists and rebels and engaging in a campaign of mass *takfir* (excommunication) against any Muslim who disagreed with him.

Using Hammami and his fellow dissident foreign fighters as a tool, other senior al-Shabab leaders who were unhappy with Godane's leadership and specifically his increasing centralization of power also began to speak out publicly against the emir. Founding leader Ibrahim al-Afghani penned an open letter to Ayman al-Zawahiri calling for Godane's replacement as emir, which was published on transnational jihadist websites in mid-April 2013. A fatwa condemning Godane's targeting of Hammami and other Muslims was also published that month, signed by a number of senior al-Shabab leaders, including Afghani, Mukhtar Robow, *Muallim* (religious leader) Burhan Sheikh Hashi, and Hassan Dahir Aweis.

These internal disputes came to a head in June 2013, when Godane loyalists clashed with followers of Robow and Aweis and Afghani and Hashi were arrested and killed by al-Shabab's Amniyat security apparatus. Hammami, hiding in the Bay and Bakool regions, managed to elude the Amniyat until mid-September of that year, when he too was found and killed. Despite the heavy public relations damage to al-Shabab in jihadist circles, the group, and specifically Godane and his loyalists, survived relatively unscathed. Criticisms of some of his decisions notwithstanding, Godane retained the loyalties of all the group's regional governors and military commanders. Robow and Aweis were forced to leave the group, the former to safety among his Rahanweyn clansmen in Bay and Bakool and the latter through surrender to the SFG.

Less than one year after triumphing over his internal critics, Godane was killed in a U.S. airstrike near Barawa in Lower Shebelle. He had led al-Shabab as its emir since the group emerged fully independent from the Union of Islamic Courts in 2007, at times acting behind the scenes through deputies such as Aden Hashi Farah Ayro. Godane's successor, Ahmed Omar, known as Abu Ubaida, previously served as an insurgent regional governor and was

reportedly closely involved with the Amniyat's quashing of dissidents and defectors in 2013. He has thus far proven to be a capable leader and has continued to oversee with ruthless efficiency the suppression of defectors, this time to the Islamic State, while also waging an ongoing insurgency against the Somali government, regional administrations in the country, AMISOM, and their Somali allies.

## RESILIENCE AND OPPORTUNITIES

Al-Shabab remains capable of planning and executing coordinated mass-casualty attacks across the country, including in supposedly "secure" zones in cities such as Mogadishu and Kismayo. Using teams of suicide bombers and "*inghimasi*" (Ar: infiltrator) gunmen, al-Shabab carried out a large number of major coordinated attacks in 2016. The most frequent targets were hotels or restaurants frequented by SFG, AMISOM, and international officials as well as government buildings such as the SFG's Criminal Investigative Police division headquarters (July 31) and a local government building in Galkayo in the Mudug region (August 21). The insurgents also smuggled explosives onto a Daallo Airlines flight leaving Mogadishu in February 2016 and into Beledweyne's airport the next month, circumventing several layers of security. Despite advances in the training, organizing, and equipping of the SFG's police forces and army, including Turkish aid for airport security, significant problems remain, such as a lack of steady pay and the continued reliance on clan militias within the Somali National Army.

On January 15, 2016, al-Shabab launched a coordinated assault on the Kenyan military base at El Adde in the Gedo region of western Somalia, successfully overrunning the base and killing as many as 140–150 Kenyan soldiers and capturing and wounding others. Opening early in the morning with a suicide vehicle-borne IED attack on the base's front gate, the attack culminated with a mass infantry assault by an insurgent special forces unit, the Brigade of the Martyr Saleh Nabhani.<sup>2</sup> This same unit carried out a second successful attack in nearly identical fashion a year later, in late January 2017, striking the Kenyan military base at Kulbiyow in the Lower Juba region of southern Somalia. Al-Shabab named these two attacks after revered jihadist leader-ideologues, the former after the late al-Qaeda central ideologue Abu Yahya al-Libi (killed 2012), the latter after the recently slain al-Shabab commander Mohamed Mohamud Ali (aka Mohamed Mohamud Duno or Dulyadayn, killed June 2016).

The Kenyan government's reactions to the losses of the El Adde and Kul-biyow bases, which was to hide the number of casualties its forces had suffered and to even initially deny that the bases had been captured, enabled al-Shabab to develop powerful media operations narratives around its enemies' obfuscation and lack of believability. Publishing scores of high-definition photographs of the attacks and capture of the bases and, for El Adde, extensive video footage, al-Shabab effectively called into question the truthfulness of the Kenyan government's narrative and seized control of the news media environment. It had done so similarly during the September 2013 Westgate Mall siege in Nairobi, when it answered the Kenyan government's confused and conflicting press statements with a steady stream of live tweets and other "reporting" from inside the mall and from the group's leadership, filling the narrative gap left by the international and local news media. Portraying itself as a king of "jihadist/insurgent journalism," al-Shabab continues to utilize its significant media operations capabilities to present its own narrative, however slanted, for various events, a narrative that is in many ways more cohesive and sustained than that presented by many of its foes.

On this front, al-Shabab operates several types of media operations aimed at different audiences. Internationally, the group's al-Kataib Media Foundation produces high-quality films and other pieces in several languages, including English, Arabic, Swahili, French, and Somali. Regionally, al-Shabab's Kenyan affiliates and allies in groups such as the Muslim Youth Center (MYC)/al-Hijra and al-Muhajiroun in East Africa produce a number of print publications in Swahili and English, including the magazines *Gaidi Mtaani* and *Amka* and the newsletter *al-Ghuraba*. These materials are augmented by Swahili-language productions from al-Kataib, mainly from the Kenyan preacher and MYC/al-Hijra founder Ahmad Iman Ali, who serves as the main leader-ideologue for al-Shabab's foreign-fighter contingent.<sup>3</sup> The volume of Swahili-language media productions from al-Shabab, most of them from al-Kataib, has increased noticeably since January 2012, when Iman Ali was named the group's Kenyan commander, although Swahili speakers have been featured in insurgent media since at least 2008. Al-Shabab has skillfully exploited grievances, real and perceived, among many Kenyan Muslim youth regarding what they see as Kenyan government and societal persecution and neglect. Among the most powerful and successful narratives the insurgent group has used is widespread anger at the brazen killings of multiple controversial but popular Kenyan Muslim preachers beginning in 2012, including Aboud Rogo Mohammed, Ibrahim "Rogo" Omar, Samir Khan Nusaybah,

and Abubakar Makaburi (real name: Abubakar Shariff Ahmed), in attacks that human rights organizations have accused Kenya's antiterrorism police units of carrying out.

Domestically, al-Shabab maintains a prolific media presence through semiofficial (essentially connected) media outlets such as Radio al-Andalus and Radio al-Furqan, pro-insurgent news media such as SomaliMeMo and Calamada, and connections to other Somali noninsurgent news media groups. In addition to running its own media outlets and cooperating closely with pro-insurgent venues, al-Shabab regularly interacts with domestic, regional, and international news organizations, including Somali news and radio channels and international satellite networks such as Al Jazeera and BBC. Al-Shabab uses its domestic media presence adeptly, such as in March 2016 following a major U.S. airstrike on one of its training camps in the Hiran region, which Pentagon sources claimed killed upward of 150 militants, including then provincial governor Mohamed Mire. Several days later, Mire appeared in public and spoke to Somali news and radio organizations, showing that he was still alive and also denying claims that another insurgent official, Yusuf Ali Ugas, had been killed.

The insurgents, though no longer in control of urban and economic hubs such as Kismayo, Baidoa, and Mogadishu, continue to operate in and around them as well as in the surrounding countryside. Outside Kismayo, for example, al-Shabab checkpoint personnel impose taxes on merchant trucks and regulate travel on the main road between the port city and the town of Jilib, which remains under insurgent control. The group also has achieved propaganda victories by reentering, even if briefly, villages and towns vacated by AMISOM, including the port town of Merca and other parts of the Lower Shebelle region south of Mogadishu in spring 2016.

In late October into November 2016, as Ethiopian forces pulled out from key bases in western Somalia to address mounting domestic protests in Ethiopia's Oromia region, al-Shabab quickly retook a number of villages and towns in the Hiran, Galguduud, Middle Shebelle, Bay, and Gedo regions. As in areas of Lower Shebelle retaken by its fighters earlier in the year, al-Shabab reestablished not only military control but also social programs, such as vaccination clinics for livestock and people alike, and ideological and religious education in the form of courses at insurgent-run schools and institutes.

Insurgent administrators, long adept at managing the group's relations with local clans, still maintain working, if temporary, agreements and relationships with local clans and subclans in areas under their control. In

addition to mediating clan disputes and working with local clan elders to adjudicate issues of contention,<sup>4</sup> such as the safety of defectors from Somali government security forces, al-Shabab runs special sharia institutes for members, especially youth, from specific local clans or subclans. Thus far, the group has been careful in its relations with the country's powerful clan groups and, despite its puritanism, has generally avoided open conflict with them. In short, the insurgent group at times tempers its ideological impulses in the interest of self-preservation and achieving longer-term goals. Recently, however, al-Shabab has faced some clan backlash owing to certain economic policies—namely, its collection of taxes and *zakat* donations from Abgaal and Gugundhabe clan militias in spring 2016 in the Middle Shebelle and Hiran regions.

## CHALLENGES FROM THE ISLAMIC STATE

Pro-Islamic State elements in Somalia first emerged in force in October 2015, when prominent al-Shabab preacher and leader Abdulqadir Mumin pledged allegiance (*baya*) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi along with an unspecified number of his fighters in the semiautonomous Puntland region in northern Somalia. His group, estimated to number between one and three hundred fighters, remains the largest pro-IS group in East Africa and Somalia and operates in Puntland in and around the Golis Mountains and Galgala Hills. In October 2016, Mumin's group temporarily captured the port town of Qandala, once a pirate stronghold, but was forced to withdraw in December in the face of a superior coalition of Puntland government and allied militia forces. The group continues to carry out hit-and-run attacks and kidnappings and murders of Puntland government security forces and members, including in Puntland's main city of Boosaasa.

The Islamic State began a sustained media campaign in May 2015, continuing through the winter of 2015–16, that aimed first to convince al-Shabab's leaders to defect from al-Qaeda and, when that did not succeed, homed in on individual members. By January 2016, when it was clear that the group's calls were meeting with only limited success in Somalia and East Africa, IS members began to warn al-Shabab's "deviant" leadership of the divinely ordained consequences that awaited them on the Day of Judgment for suppressing and even killing pro-IS defectors from within their ranks.

Mumin's group successfully established a foothold in the name of IS in large part because of its geographic area of operations. Indeed, al-Shabab's presence in Puntland has never been strong and, though the group has some

operatives there who carry out sporadic assassinations and other attacks, it lost the bulk of its Puntland forces when Mumin defected. The preacher had been dispatched by al-Shabab in 2012 and 2013 to oversee the group's operations in the region. Attempts by al-Shabab to land forces on the Puntland coast, in part to quash Mumin's group, were defeated in March 2016 when combined forces from Puntland and the Galmudug region, aided by allied clan militias, crushed several hundred insurgents and captured as many as a hundred others by month's end in a series of battles. Mumin, a native of Puntland, also draws support from strategic alliances with members of his clan, the Majerteen Ali Saleban, and other militia forces such as that of Abdisamad Mohamed Galan.

Though a majority of Somalia's pro-IS fighters are based in Puntland, many of the attacks IS claims through its media networks, chiefly the Amaq News Agency, take place in and around Mogadishu, with a handful of claimed attacks in Puntland or other parts of the country. Nearly all the attacks, with the exception of the seizure of Qandala, are guerrilla-type actions such as the throwing of grenades, strikes on checkpoints, planting of IEDs, and drive-by shootings and assassinations of Somali government police, soldiers, and government officials.

Al-Shabab leaders rely on the Amniyat to track down and either arrest or kill pro-IS defectors and dissidents within the group's ranks, and they have successfully thus far suppressed the spread of IS in Somalia and East Africa. Signs suggest, however, that IS may be making inroads into segments of al-Shabab's target audiences, including among disaffected Kenyan Muslim and Somali youth as well as disgruntled locals angry at al-Shabab's heavy taxation practices. Such stirrings have not yet translated into an exodus from al-Shabab to pro-IS elements in the region. Al-Shabab's well-established recruiting and support networks, the cohesion and continuity of its senior and administrative leadership, and larger numbers and streams of revenue make it difficult, and probably impossible, for IS to supplant the group as the dominant jihadist actor in the domestic and regional arenas.

## AL-SHABAB IN 2017

Al-Shabab's leadership shows no signs of moderating or joining the Somali national political process. The group's emir, Ahmed "Abu Ubaida" Omar, reiterated al-Shabab's renunciation of the democratic system and involvement of foreign organizations such as NATO, the European Union, and the UN in Somalia during summer of 2016. Following the election of the SFG's

new president, Mohamed Abdullahi “Farmajo” Mohamed, in managed elections in February 2017, the group’s governor of Galguduud, Hassan Yaqub, and spokesman Ali Mohammed Rage both reiterated their group’s denial of the SFG’s legitimacy and accused Farmajo of being an “American and Western Crusader puppet” and a representative of foreign interests in Somalia. As of late February, the group was still conducting attacks on AMISOM, the SFG, and allied forces throughout the country from Puntland in the north to the Lower Juba region in the south, including inside Mogadishu. It also, as suggested earlier, continued to largely successfully repress pro-IS elements in southern and central Somalia.

Though it has limited available manpower, al-Shabab continues to prove skillful at strategically shifting its forces to different locales as needed while also retaining capabilities within supposedly secure areas in cities and towns. As its ability to tax the illegal charcoal trade diminished in late 2014 into 2015, when it lost control of Barawa, the group transitioned to building up other revenue sources such as through the taxation of agricultural products including sugar and livestock. Its media operations capabilities also remain intact, though the creation of time-intensive productions such as high-definition films has slowed (but not stopped) since 2013; this is not the case with its domestic media, which releases new material daily. Insurgent administrators and leaders exploit mistakes by the Somali government, presenting themselves as capable mediators of disputes between various groups, such as feuding clans, in contrast to the internationally backed government. Much of the insurgents’ success and continued fortunes continues to rely as much on the missteps of its enemies as on its own decisionmaking.

The SFG’s inability to project authority and governance over territory outside Mogadishu and its reliance on AMISOM military forces, along with government mismanagement, corruption, and factionalism, remain significant hindrances to the defeat of al-Shabab. The AMISOM coalition itself has been beset with internal problems, such as the failure to provide regular pay to soldiers and domestic unrest dogging several troop-providing countries, including Burundi and Ethiopia,<sup>5</sup> highlighting the need for the SFG to build up its own domestic security capabilities.

The expansion of U.S. military involvement in Somalia, though it may help roll back al-Shabab territorially to a degree, will not in and of itself address the larger sociopolitical issues that fuel al-Shabab and pro-IS groups in the country and East Africa. The U.S. government, EU, UN, and other international actors must also encourage and assist the Somali government

and the administrations of regional states in the country and in Kenya to address issues of political corruption, economic inequality, communal relations, and youth engagement. Improvements in these areas will do much to hinder the efforts of al-Shabab and other jihadist groups to manipulate these issues to increase their recruitment and support networks. As long as such challenges remain largely unsolved, al-Shabab will always have a pool of potential recruits from which to draw.

## NOTES

1. AMISOM initially admitted to losing only ten soldiers in the battle, while al-Shabab spokesmen Ali Rage and Abdul al-Aziz Abu Musab claimed that around a hundred soldiers were killed. Local residents reported seeing seventy to eighty corpses clad in Burundian AMISOM uniforms at a public event organized by al-Shabab to display the dead along with captured weapons and equipment.
2. The brigade is named after al-Qaeda East African operative Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhani (frequently mistransliterated from Arabic as “Nabhan”), who helped establish al-Shabab training camps in 2007 and 2008 before he was killed in a U.S. military strike in September 2009.
3. Claims emerged in September 2016 that Ahmad Iman Ali had defected to the Islamic State and pledged allegiance (*baya*) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, but these claims remain unconfirmed and seem to be based on a letter left by three women who attempted an attack on a Mombasa police station that month. A letter was found signed by the three with their *noms de guerre*—Umm Maysara, Umm Mabad, and Umm Saad—and was the basis for the claims about Iman Ali’s defection.
4. Hamza Mohamed, “Somalia: Elders Negotiate with al-Shabab over Soldiers,” Al Jazeera, November 24, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/11/somalia-elders-negotiate-al-shabab-soldiers-161116061954168.html/>.
5. Joshua Meservey and Kelsey Lilley, “Is the Coalition Fighting al-Shabaab Falling Apart?” *War on the Rocks*, October 26, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/is-the-coalition-fighting-al-shabaab-falling-apart/>.

## Al-Qaeda in South Asia: A Brief Assessment

■ DON RASSLER

PREPARED STATEMENT

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**A**LTHOUGH AL-QAEDA has often been viewed as primarily an Arab organization, the group's DNA is intricately tied to South Asia. Al-Qaeda was founded in Pakistan in 1988 and has since maintained a presence in various pockets across the region. Over the last twenty-eight years, the group has also sought to embed itself in and influence the direction of Afghanistan and Pakistan's jihadist milieu. The creation in September 2014 of al-Qaeda's South Asia branch—al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)<sup>1</sup>—largely formalized an institutional relationship and local capacity-building activity in which core al-Qaeda had been involved for more than a decade. Thus, while AQIS as an affiliate is still relatively new, a proper assessment of al-Qaeda in South Asia should be predicated on an analysis of both core al-Qaeda and AQIS.

The following pages entail a brief assessment of how core al-Qaeda and AQIS have fared in the region over the last five years. All in all, a look at al-Qaeda's activity and influence in South Asia over that period tells a mixed story, given that the group has demonstrated both strength and weakness in a number of areas.

### AREAS OF STRENGTH

On the positive side for al-Qaeda, three points stand out. First, al-Qaeda has been resilient and persistent. The group has dealt with the loss of key leaders, including Osama bin Laden, Atiyah Abd al Rahman, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Mustafa Abu Yazid, and Farouq al-Qahtani, as well as several AQIS personalities. An important reflection of its resilience involves the group's

confidence to expand to “new” areas in recent years. This includes the ability of AQIS/core al-Qaeda to set up camps in multiple Afghan provinces, especially those outside southeastern and northeastern Afghanistan, where the group has long been active.<sup>2</sup> Most noteworthy in this regard is the discovery in 2015 of a massive AQIS camp in the Shorabak district of Kandahar that spanned thirty square miles and where “AQIS and Taliban were working together.”<sup>3</sup> At the time, the camp was described as “probably the largest [al-Qaeda] camp” discovered in the country, even after fifteen years of conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Al-Qaeda’s ability to maintain a presence across the border in Pakistan and to conduct attacks in or operate from Karachi, North and South Waziristan, Khyber, and Dera Ismail Khan—even if only in small pockets—speaks to its durability as well.<sup>5</sup> A review of Pakistani media reports compiled by the author indicates that from September 2014 (when AQIS was created) to March 2017, Pakistani security forces were involved in at least twenty-three separate operations that resulted in the detention or death of al-Qaeda members in Karachi. While this shows al-Qaeda’s persistent presence in Karachi, AQIS’s initiation of a campaign of violence in Bangladesh represents a broadening of the group’s operational footprint.

Second, al-Qaeda in the region has been able to institutionalize or expand existing relationships, and set up new ones, with a number of local militant outfits through AQIS.<sup>6</sup> This has allowed the group to diversify its target sets and accomplish more. Rhetorically, al-Qaeda core is still focused on the United States as its number-one targeting priority, but AQIS’s actions and a video released by the group in March 2016 demonstrate how AQIS’s efforts have expanded over the past several years.<sup>7</sup> According to the video, AQIS has five main targeting priorities: (1) the United States; (2) military, intelligence, and security agencies in Pakistan; (3) the Pakistani government; (4) “thugs” who extort Muslim businesses and kill Sunni religious scholars; and (5) atheists, blasphemers, and nonbelievers who actively oppose Islam.<sup>8</sup> The goal of these various efforts is to complicate local security environments and to shape the landscape in ways that are beneficial to al-Qaeda’s long-term agenda.

The challenge for the United States and local governments in the region is that AQIS is not just stating these priorities as talking points, it is acting to operationalize and synchronize them as part of a multifront campaign targeting various enemies across South Asia.<sup>9</sup> This points to an organization that, despite counterterrorism pressure from the United States and—to a mixed extent—local governments, remains committed and capable enough

to foment instability against varied targets in multiple countries.<sup>10</sup> The strong corresponding suggestion is that AQIS as an organization is currently less concerned about pure survival and “playing defense” and more focused on actually trying to figure out how it can maintain an offensive posture.

The expansion of al-Qaeda’s local activity has been most apparent through AQIS’s targeting of prominent activists, intellectuals, and writers in Bangladesh.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, between 2013 and May 2016 AQIS has claimed credit for thirteen separate attacks in that country, resulting in the death of eleven individuals who defended secular ideas and institutions or were involved in a range of progressive causes.<sup>12</sup> Each of these attacks was carried out as a targeted assassination using machetes or knives.<sup>13</sup> While AQIS’s choice of weapon limited the number of casualties, the group’s attacks in the country have helped AQIS and its local affiliates gain publicity and position themselves as defenders of those who oppose, and want to violently contest, secular and liberal ideas.

The development of AQIS’s ties with various local militant partners has also bolstered its role as a consultant<sup>14</sup> and local conflict shaper, and it has arguably deepened al-Qaeda’s reach and influence into mainland Pakistan. Al-Qaeda’s continued ability to maintain close ties to the Afghan Taliban, despite the deaths of Mullah Omar and Mullah Akhtar Mansour,<sup>15</sup> and to incorporate members or former members of Harakat ul-Mujahedin (HuM) and Harakat ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI)<sup>16</sup>—groups with historical ties to the Pakistani state—are concerning in this regard, as is al-Qaeda’s ability to radicalize and operationalize members of Pakistan’s military.<sup>17</sup> For the United States, none of these trends is positive.

Third, although not strategic in nature, al-Qaeda’s regional operations in Pakistan and Bangladesh have provided some noteworthy gains. These gains are typified by al-Qaeda’s killing in Bangladesh of an American citizen, a U.S. embassy employee, and several prominent bloggers, and the group’s ties to attacks and plots against Pakistani military facilities that both preceded and postdated the creation of AQIS.<sup>18</sup>

## AREAS OF WEAKNESS

As many commentators have noted, over the past five years, al-Qaeda in the region has been much less successful in conducting strategic attacks and external operations, especially those that target the United States and the West. Al-Qaeda core has also proven itself less adept at motivating inspired individuals online to conduct attacks in their home countries. Yet, as al-

Qaeda's failed European plots tied to Younis al-Mauritani and the work of Farouq al-Qahtani demonstrate, this isn't for lack of trying.<sup>19</sup>

A variety of data points also demonstrate how al-Qaeda's ability to centrally coordinate the activity of its affiliates has been challenged over the last five years. The movement of key al-Qaeda personnel from the Afghanistan/Pakistan (AfPak) region and Iran to the Levant points to a shift in the group's physical center of gravity and where—strategically—it views its future. These dynamics suggest that even though South and Central Asia will always remain a key focus of activity and operations—and even though the group will almost certainly aim to wage its campaign from a number of locales, including AfPak—the future strategic direction of core al-Qaeda will likely align more closely with dynamics in the Levant.

Al-Qaeda is also facing stiff competition from the Islamic State and IS-inspired actors in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Relatedly, it appears that al-Qaeda's attempts to position itself as a more moderate and principled actor,<sup>20</sup> at least when compared to IS or elements of the Pakistani Taliban—and to publicly distance itself from sectarian attacks or attacks targeting public spaces—has only, at least for some potential recruits, reinforced the view of al-Qaeda as a conservative has-been that is insufficiently aggressive. The Islamic State's operational track record, including its ability to conduct more attacks with greater lethality over a shorter period of time, represents an important counterpoint.

Elsewhere, al-Qaeda's efforts to reorient the jihad in the disputed Kashmir region and to bolster its operations in India have not yet produced tangible operational results. Again, this is not necessarily for lack of trying. Since at least 2007, al-Qaeda has worked to delegitimize Pakistan's role in the Kashmir conflict through a targeted Urdu-language messaging campaign.<sup>21</sup> Al-Qaeda's primary argument in that regard has been that the Pakistani state, due to its relationship with and support for the United States, especially in the areas of security and counterterrorism, is an apostate un-Islamic government. Framing Pakistan's status in this way has helped al-Qaeda claim that Pakistan, and its militant proxies focused on Kashmir, is fighting not a legitimate jihad but a corrupt one. The problem for al-Qaeda is that the group's limited results in Kashmir have meant little operational traction. More efficacious for AQIS in the jihad has been its ideological influence on Pakistani militant groups, such as HuJI and Jaish-e-Mohammad, that have historically operated in Kashmir. This demonstrates the mid- to long-range threat posed by AQIS, one that must be monitored, through its efforts to shift both the

ideological terms of the jihad and the source of the conflict's legitimacy, as viewed by key militants. This is the case despite its inability to have a significant operational impact on the Kashmir jihad.

Al-Qaeda's efforts to mobilize Indian Muslims to conduct attacks in their own country have also not been successful to date.<sup>22</sup> Ever since Lashkar-e-Taiba's (LeT's) November 2008 attack in Mumbai, al-Qaeda has been more vocal in its hostility toward India and its desire to recruit and establish a network there. The appointment of Asim Umar, who is from India, as AQIS's leader was also an important signal by the group in this regard. In late 2015 and early 2016, Indian authorities arrested and indicted five AQIS operatives in different parts of India:<sup>23</sup> Muhammad Asif, a founding member of AQIS who reportedly served as the group's chief in India; Abdul Rehman, a cleric who was a key recruiter for the group; Zafar Masood; Syed Ansar Shah; and Abdul Sami. Twelve other individuals with ties to AQIS were charged in absentia. Out of the seventeen AQIS-linked individuals indicted, six had links to the Sambhal district of Uttar Pradesh, indicating that the area has served as a hub of AQIS activity in India.<sup>24</sup>

The primary mission of AQIS's cell in India was to radicalize and recruit Indian Muslims, and to send those recruits to Pakistan for training. While some media accounts suggested that AQIS's operatives in India were "in touch with at least 100 youth"<sup>25</sup> and that they "might have recruited at least 20 [Indians],"<sup>26</sup> other reports indicated that the group was only successful in recruiting a handful of Indian citizens.<sup>27</sup> Additional press reports claimed that the network was also interested in targeting Indian prime minister Narendra Modi or other Bharatiya Janata Party leaders;<sup>28</sup> in conducting attacks against prominent bloggers and writers based in Bangalore and New Delhi<sup>29</sup>; and in establishing a network or base in the Indian state of Gujarat, where a significant episode of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims took place in 2002.<sup>30</sup> It was likewise reported that one of the detained AQIS operatives, Abdul Rehman, had met with LeT leaders Hafiz Muhammad Saeed and Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi in Pakistan, raising questions about how LeT and AQIS might be cooperating in India or mutually leveraging each other's networks.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Al-Qaeda is and has been playing the long game in the South Asia region. As a result, officials and experts must maintain focus and not underestimate

the group. Further, while the group's external operations capability and its ability to centrally coordinate global activity have been degraded, much has changed since 9/11 and over the last five years. It is important for the United States to continue evaluating al-Qaeda in the region as regards its ability to attack the U.S. homeland and the West. Yet it would be a mistake to focus only on this metric, given that the group's regional activity is fueling localized instability and represents a significant long-term threat. Indeed, the danger of al-Qaeda in the region currently lies less in its ability to project power beyond South Asia and more in its role as a local instigator and destabilizer, and in how the group continues to carve out space for itself in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh.

Finally, there is still much to be understood about al-Qaeda core and AQIS, and their strength and influence in the region. To deepen such an understanding, the aperture must be expanded with the specific goal of learning more about local groups such as HuM and HuJI, which have—over decades—consistently played a role in aiding al-Qaeda's presence and development.

## NOTES

1. For background on the formation of AQIS, see Alastair Reed, *Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: A New Frontline in the Global Jihadist Movement?* ICCT Policy Brief (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2015), <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ICCT-Reed-Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-May2016-1.pdf>.
2. On historical al-Qaeda activity in Afghanistan, see Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973–2013* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); on al-Qaeda's more recent activity in Afghanistan, see Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "U.S. Military Is Hunting al Qaeda in at Least 7 Afghanistan Provinces," *Long War Journal*, September 24, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/us-military-is-hunting-al-qaeda-in-at-least-7-afghan-provinces.php>.
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com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/30/probably-the-largest-al-qaeda-training-camp-ever-destroyed-in-afghanistan/?utm\_term=.fe61Ga300a83.

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## The United Nations View on al-Qaeda's Financing Today

■ HANS-JAKOB SCHINDLER

PREPARED STATEMENT

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**D**URING THE LAST three years, a significant amount of the UN Security Council's work has been devoted to addressing the rise and operations of the Islamic State.<sup>1</sup> This has resulted in an overall strengthening of global measures countering terrorism financing. In addition to IS, al-Qaeda and its affiliates continue to pose a significant challenge to international security. Indeed, in some areas, such as Libya, West Africa, East Africa, or Yemen, al-Qaeda affiliates remain in a stronger position compared to IS groups operating in the same area.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, countering the threat emanating from al-Qaeda and its affiliates, particularly as far as terrorism financing is concerned, remains a priority for the global IS and al-Qaeda sanctions regime of the UN Security Council and for the work of the al-Qaida/Taliban Sanctions Monitoring Team.

Substantial resources have been applied by the Security Council and member states around the globe to safeguard the international financial system from abuse by terrorists, including al-Qaeda and those associated with it. To circumvent global counterterrorism financing efforts, terrorists have come up with diverse, adaptive, and innovative ways—both legal and illegal—to raise, move, and store funds to support their activities.<sup>3</sup>

In response to changed circumstances, the models employed by al-Qaeda to finance its activities have undergone significant transformations since the destruction of the centralized al-Qaeda structures in Afghanistan at the end of 2001. Prior to 2001, the financing of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan rested on two main pillars: the group's symbiotic relationship with the Taliban regime and external donations. The Taliban regime allowed the organization not only to obtain and maintain camp facilities in the country but also to set up a range

of ostensibly nongovernmental organizations as cover for the transfer of financial support from sympathizers to the organization in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, since the Taliban regime enabled and in part protected the financial infrastructure for the group, al-Qaeda was able to transfer significant amounts of external donations for its operations in Afghanistan and abroad.

However, with the destruction of the centralized al-Qaeda structure subsequent to the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and the development of al-Qaeda affiliates outside South Asia, the methods through which the various parts of the organization finance themselves diversified. Several member states explained to the monitoring team that al-Qaeda core in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region currently does not maintain a centralized financial structure for the organization as a whole and functions mainly as a central ideological and propaganda hub. In contrast to IS, which according to several member states continues to rely mainly on locally generated revenues,<sup>5</sup> external donations continue to play a significant role for the different al-Qaeda affiliates around the globe. In addition, the various al-Qaeda affiliates generate funds from within the areas in which they operate and have adjusted their funding methods to local conditions.

Jabhat al-Nusra (later Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), the affiliate of al-Qaeda in the Syrian Arab Republic, is currently the numerically largest al-Qaeda affiliate. The group comprises some ten thousand individuals, including five thousand foreign terrorist fighters, hailing mainly from the Maghreb, Gulf, and Commonwealth of Independent States regions.<sup>6</sup> Member states assess that Jabhat al-Nusra relies on external donations as one of its major income streams. However, the group also benefits from kidnapping for ransom, extortion of the local population, as well as war spoils.<sup>7</sup>

Other affiliates, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), while still receiving external donations, have mirrored the IS financing model by attempting to control significant amounts of territory, including cities. In April 2015, the difficult security situation in Yemen allowed AQAP to take control of the port city of al-Mukalla in Hadramawt governorate and hold it for about a year. Several member states assessed that the group was able to steal 13 billion Yemeni rials and \$1.5 million from the branch of the central bank and 20 million Yemeni rials from an agricultural bank. In addition, the group extorted revenue from “taxes” on shippers and traders, which, according to some member states, amounted to \$2 million per day.<sup>8</sup> AQAP continues to benefit from these assets, even after the group was forced to relinquish its control of the city in 2016.<sup>9</sup>

Al-Shabab, in Somalia, has also diversified its funding streams. In addition to extortion, ambushes, kidnapping for ransom, and smuggling of charcoal, several member states pointed out to the monitoring team that the group runs ostensibly legitimate small businesses and controls some port facilities in Somalia in order to benefit from their profits. These diversified funding streams ensured that the group remained operational despite sustained pressure by Somali forces and forces of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

In addition to generating funds through the control of territory or the involvement in small businesses, some al-Qaeda affiliates profit indirectly from criminal activities in their area of operations. For example, member states assess that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) receives some of its funding in the Sahel and North Africa through “taxing” criminal smugglers along established routes. This is particularly the case in southern Libya.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in some areas, individuals and cells loyal to al-Qaeda and IS are willing to support each other financially. According to several member states, IS individuals supported al-Qaeda operatives in the planning of a potential attack in Kenya in 2015.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, several member states confirmed that one part of the Abu Sayyaf Group has developed into a professional kidnapping-for-ransom outfit to finance the group’s operations. Kidnapping for ransom has been the preferred method for the Abu Sayyaf Group to raise funds for many years. Most recently, the Sulu-based faction of the group, led by Radullan Sahiron, who has not joined IS, has been more engaged in kidnapping-for-ransom operations. The faction led by Isnilon Totoni Hapilon benefits from the kidnapping-for-ransom activities of Sahiron’s faction,<sup>12</sup> despite Hapilon being named IS “emir” in the Philippines.<sup>13</sup>

## SANCTIONS REGIME AS A GLOBAL INSTRUMENT TO COUNTER AL-QAEDA FINANCING

Countering the different financing models of al-Qaeda and its affiliates in various regions of the world will necessitate a multipronged approach by the international community. Such an approach must necessarily continue to include counterfinancing measures by member states and regional organizations, addressing the specific challenges in a respective region, as well as a continued strengthening of the global counterterrorism financing structure. The IS and al-Qaeda sanctions regime of the UN Security Council can play a crucial role in these efforts. Since its inception, one of the main priorities

of the global sanctions list is the focus on the financial infrastructure of al-Qaeda as well as significant financiers of the organization.<sup>14</sup>

With the global and total asset freeze<sup>15</sup> as one of its main sanctions provisions<sup>16</sup> levied against listed individuals and entities,<sup>17</sup> the sanctions regime provides member states<sup>18</sup> with a powerful tool to target transnational clandestine financial networks and financiers. As the resolutions guiding this global sanctions regime are passed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the implementation of these sanctions provisions are binding on all member states and ensure an immediate and global implementation of measures against listed individuals and entities.<sup>19</sup>

The legally binding, global, and public nature of the IS and al-Qaeda sanctions regime and its provisions can make it an effective instrument in combating the financing of al-Qaeda and its associated individuals and entities. In many cases, significant financing activities for al-Qaeda and its affiliates transit national jurisdictions and therefore present challenges to national counterterrorism-financing legislation. The sanctions regime allows the targeting of such activities on a global scale. Furthermore, financial facilitators of al-Qaeda depend on access not only to formal financial institutions and mechanisms but also to economic sectors to obtain materials, launder money, or establish shell companies to cover their activities. Owing to established compliance and due-diligence procedures, the public nature of the sanctions regime ensures that listed facilitators are unable to interact with the formal economy, which significantly hinders their ability to function effectively. Finally, even if the IS and al-Qaeda sanctions lists are not targeting all financial facilitators of all al-Qaeda affiliates globally, targeting specific individuals and entities in some regions creates a ripple effect in other areas as facilitators are forced to increase their costs of doing business to factor in the risk of global sanctions actions against them. This reduces the overall sum of finances available to al-Qaeda and its affiliates to function and conduct terrorist attacks.

As al-Qaeda, IS, and their affiliates and financial facilitators around the globe continue to adapt to new hurdles established by the strengthening of the global counterterrorism financing structure, the IS and al-Qaeda sanctions regime will continue to evolve. In this regard, it will remain crucial that member states not only implement but actively participate in the development of the regime, in particular by proposing relevant individuals and entities for inclusion on the sanctions list. Such involvement must also include sharing with the regime and monitoring team their latest expertise and best

practices relating to countering terrorism financing. Only a properly targeted sanctions list can ensure that the sanctions regime is an effective one.

## NOTES

1. Listed by the United Nations Security Council as al-Qaida in Iraq (QDe.115). The UN Security Council passed a range of resolutions adjusting the global sanctions regime targeting al-Qaeda terrorism to the new challenges presented by ISIL (referred to in this compilation as the Islamic State, or IS) and its affiliates to international peace and security. Resolution 2170 (2014) was followed in quick succession by Resolution 2178 (2014), which focused on foreign terrorist fighters; Resolution 2199 (2015), targeting specifically ISIL and the “Al-Nusrah Front for the People of the Levant (ANF)” (QDe.137); Resolution 2214 (2015), looking at the challenge of ISIL and al-Qaeda in Libya; Resolution 2253 (2015), which added new elements to the overall global sanctions regime to target ISIL financing; Resolution 2309 (2016), highlighting the threat of terrorism to global aviation security; and recently Resolution 2331 (2016), focusing on trafficking, particularly the sale or trade in persons, undertaken by the ISIL.
2. UN Security Council, “Nineteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted pursuant to Resolution 2253 (2015) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities,” S/2017/35, January 13, 2017, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/35](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/35).
3. “Seventeenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted pursuant to Resolution 2161 (2014) concerning al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities,” S/2015/441, June 16, 2015, paragraph 49, [https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/N1509325\\_EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/N1509325_EN.pdf).
4. One of the best known of these organizations is the Wafa Humanitarian Organization (QDe.015), which remains sanctioned by the UN Security Council.
5. “Nineteenth Report of the Sanctions Monitoring Team,” S/2017/35, paragraph 21, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/35](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/35).
6. *Ibid.*, paragraph 27.
7. *Ibid.*
8. UN Security Council, “Eighteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted pursuant to Resolution 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities,” S/2016/629, paragraph 24, July 19, 2016, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/629](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/629).
9. “Nineteenth Report of the Sanctions Monitoring Team,” S/2017/35, paragraph 31, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/35](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/35).
10. “Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted pursuant to Paragraph 13 of Security Council Resolution 2214 (2015) concerning the

Terrorism Threat in Libya Posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Ansar al Charia, and All Other al-Qaida Associates, S/2015/891,” paragraph 56, available at <https://publicintelligence.net/un-isil-libya/>.

11. “Eighteenth Report of the Sanctions Monitoring Team,” S/2016/629, paragraph 3, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/629](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/629).
12. “Nineteenth Report of the Sanctions Monitoring Team,” footnote 78, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/35](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/35).
13. *Ibid.*, paragraph 72.
14. For example, alongside the Wafa Humanitarian Organization, referenced in an earlier footnote, one of the earliest sanctioned entities was the Afghan Support Committee (ASC) (QDe.069), set up by Osama bin Laden in order to collect funds from regional sympathizers. One of the earliest sanctioned financiers is Mohammad Hamdi Mohammad Sadiq al-Ahdal (QDi.020), who after his time with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan became responsible for the finances of AQAP in Yemen. The most recent listing also targets a key AQAP financier, Nayif Salih Salim al-Qaysi (QDi.402), who among other activities was responsible for financing AQAP camps in Yemen in 2015.
15. For the scope of the asset freeze, see “Assets Freeze: Explanation of Terms,” [www.un.org/sc/suborg/sites/www.un.org.sc.suborg/files/eot\\_assets\\_freeze\\_-\\_english.pdf](http://www.un.org/sc/suborg/sites/www.un.org.sc.suborg/files/eot_assets_freeze_-_english.pdf).
16. The others being a total, global arms embargo and a global travel ban: for the scope of these provisions, see “Arms Embargo,” [www.un.org/sc/suborg/sites/www.un.org.sc.suborg/files/eot\\_arms\\_embargo\\_english.pdf](http://www.un.org/sc/suborg/sites/www.un.org.sc.suborg/files/eot_arms_embargo_english.pdf), and “Travel Ban: Explanation of Terms,” [www.un.org/sc/suborg/sites/www.un.org.sc.suborg/files/eot\\_travel\\_ban\\_english.pdf](http://www.un.org/sc/suborg/sites/www.un.org.sc.suborg/files/eot_travel_ban_english.pdf).
17. The sanctions list can be found here: “Sanctions List Materials,” UN Security Council, [https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq\\_sanctions\\_list](https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list); additional information on listed individuals and entities is provided in the “Narrative Summaries for Reasons of Listing,” located at UN Security Council, [www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq\\_sanctions\\_list/summaries](http://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries).
18. All member states can propose individuals or entities associated with the Islamic State or al-Qaeda. An overview of the procedures for listing can be found at UN Security Council, [www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq\\_sanctions\\_list/procedures-for-listing](http://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/procedures-for-listing).
19. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) also supports the implementation of the IS and al-Qaeda sanctions regime through its recommendation 6. The document containing the 40 FATF recommendations is titled “International Standards on Combating Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism & Proliferation: FATF Recommendations” (February 2012), [http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/recommendations/pdfs/FATF\\_Recommendations.pdf](http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/recommendations/pdfs/FATF_Recommendations.pdf). In the interpretive note to recommendation 6, FATF stresses the obligation of member states “to implement targeted financial sanctions without delay”; see p. 43.

## Al-Qaeda Financing: Selected Issues

■ KATHERINE BAUER AND MATTHEW LEVITT

PREPARED STATEMENT

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AS THE ISLAMIC STATE burst onto the scene and quickly dominated the threat landscape, its financial underpinnings drew tremendous attention. Al-Qaeda funding, however, became less of a focus as IS overshadowed its precursor. Al-Qaeda financing also grew more difficult to track as the group took a back seat to the Islamic State and its financial infrastructure labored under the increasing irrelevance of its traditional core in Afghanistan. But al-Qaeda has more recently been able to exploit its safe havens in Syria and relocated some senior leaders to the country from South Asia. There and elsewhere, such as in Yemen, al-Qaeda has rebuilt its financial baseline. Altogether, the threat from al-Qaeda persists, and understanding its sources of revenue and resources is therefore critically important.

As most al-Qaeda affiliates have diversified their fundraising methods away from reliance on individual donors and the exploitation of charitable flows in order to mask their transactions, they have become less dependent on the core. The beginnings of this decentralizing trend could be recognized years ago with the rise of a reverse-directional flow of money going from affiliates toward the increasingly impoverished core.<sup>1</sup> In a 2005 letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, then leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI; aka al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers), Ayman al-Zawahiri, then al-Qaeda's number two, asked for money, noting that "many of the lines [of financing] had been cut off. Because of this we need a payment..."<sup>2</sup> Documents recovered from AQI in 2009 revealed that, in the intervening years, Zarqawi's organization, then called the Islamic State in Iraq and led by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, had made a strategic decision to derive revenues locally to avoid foreign dependence and direction.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, for years al-Qaeda affiliates have pursued more diverse funding streams as compared to the core, most prominently engaging in such tactics as kidnapping for ransom and extortion. In northwest Africa, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) received more than \$100 million in ransom payments between 2008 and 2014, according to estimates.<sup>4</sup> In 2016, the U.S. Department of State reported that AQIM continued to conduct kidnapping-for-ransom operations, primarily targeting Westerners whose governments were known to pay ransoms.<sup>5</sup> In Somalia, al-Shabab generated as much as \$25 million in revenue from the illicit charcoal trade alone when it controlled Kismayo port, according to the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea.<sup>6</sup> In Yemen in 2015, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) took advantage of the ongoing conflict between the internationally recognized government of Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi and the Houthi rebels, backed by former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, to take control of parts of Hadramawt governorate, seizing bank deposits, extorting funds from the national oil company, and raising as much as \$2 million per day in taxes on goods and fuel coming into the port of al-Mukalla.<sup>7</sup> Today, observers note more “terrorist economies”: areas where groups take advantage of weak, corrupt states lacking rule of law or even full territorial control to tax, extort, and exploit local resources.

In Syria, the rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) brought new opportunities for al-Qaeda both operationally and financially. Al-Qaeda leadership considers the Levant to be of strategic importance for the group’s future. A 2016 UN Security Council report claimed that Jabhat al-Nusra “remains one of the most effective branches of Al Qaeda worldwide.”<sup>8</sup> JN also continues to attract fighters and external support, according to the UN. The group’s budget could be as much as \$10 million a year, according to former Treasury Department undersecretary Adam Szubin.<sup>9</sup> Although JN’s split with the Islamic State in April 2013 undoubtedly hurt its bottom line, it is also possible that JN/JFS/HTS’s financial needs are relatively small: the group reportedly does not pay salaries to foreign fighters and can extort military and other nonlethal support from moderate groups in exchange for allowing them to operate in northern Syria. In addition, a crucial aspect of HTS’s long-term strategy has been to minimize its control over populated areas within Syria, focusing instead on practical power-sharing arrangements and the socialization of civilians and armed groups into gradual acceptance of its power.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the affiliate has not been overly burdened by costs of governance. In recent years, JN/JFS/

HTS has also received millions of dollars in ransom payments, with some reportedly facilitated by Qatar.

Nonetheless, HTS may have received as much as a few million dollars a year from private donors in the Gulf. U.S. Treasury designations of JN financiers based in Qatar and Kuwait paint a picture of what former Treasury undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence David Cohen called “permissive jurisdictions” for terrorist financing.<sup>11</sup> Gulf-based donors and fundraisers have long supported al-Qaeda core, as well as the group’s affiliates in Iraq and, more recently, Syria, often relying on an Iran-based facilitation network to move funds and operatives—including senior leaders—between the Gulf, South Asia, and the Levant.

The September 2014 designation of Abd al-Malik Abd al-Salam (aka Omar al-Qatari) demonstrates the connectivity between the various fundraising and facilitation networks. Qatari, a Jordanian with Qatari residency, provided “broad support” to JN, according to the Treasury Department, including funds and material support. In 2011 and 2012, he worked with associates in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Qatar, and Iran to raise and move funds and weapons, and enable fighter travel, including with al-Qaeda facilitators Khalifa Muhammad Turki al-Subaiy in Qatar and Muhsin al-Fadhli, who was then heading the group’s network in Iran.<sup>12</sup> Facilitators he worked with recruited fighters among Syrian refugees in Turkey and coordinated weapons procurements via Lebanon for the benefit of JN. Qatari himself raised funds through the Internet for al-Qaeda, moved funds on behalf of Subaiy to al-Qaeda senior leaders, and delivered funds to Fadhli in Iran.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Iran has provided safe haven to a central network of facilitators for al-Qaeda and its affiliates for moving money and aiding members’ transit from South Asia to Syria.<sup>14</sup> The relationship between Iran and al-Qaeda is long and complicated, dating back to at least the mid-1990s, when al-Qaeda negotiated safe passage for its members from Sudan through Iran to Afghanistan. Later, some al-Qaeda members and their families sought safe haven in Iran following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Although Iran arrested a number of al-Qaeda members residing within its borders in 2003—including Osama bin Laden’s son Saad—it was unclear if they remained in custody and whether Iranian detention constrained their activities.<sup>15</sup> In 2009, then Treasury undersecretary Stuart Levey called on Iran to “give a public accounting of how it is meeting its international obligations to constrain al-Qaida.”<sup>16</sup>

According to the State Department’s 2015 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, Iran has “remained unwilling to bring to justice senior al-Qa’ida (AQ) mem-

bers it continued to detain and refused to publicly identify the members in its custody.”<sup>17</sup> Over the last decade, U.S. sanctions against al-Qaeda have pointed to the significance of the Iran-based network. Sanctions actions in 2011 and 2012 highlighted “Al-Qaida’s critically important Iran-based funding and facilitation network”<sup>18</sup> and sought to expose “Iran’s secret deal with al-Qaida allowing it to funnel funds and operatives through its territory,”<sup>19</sup> according to the U.S. Treasury.

Sanctions that exposed the Iran-based network initially, in July 2011, targeted six al-Qaeda members, including facilitators in Kuwait and Qatar, as well as key supporters of ISI. According to the Treasury Department, the network, led by Yasin al-Suri, was “collecting funding from various donors and fundraisers throughout the Gulf and was responsible for moving significant amounts of money via Iran for onward passage to al-Qaida leadership in Afghanistan and Iraq.”<sup>20</sup> Suri also worked with the Iranian government to secure the release of al-Qaida personnel from Iranian prisons. In announcing a related action under the State Department’s Rewards for Justice program later in 2011, a Treasury official said that Iranian authorities had maintained a relationship with Suri and “allowed him to operate within Iran’s borders since 2005.”<sup>21</sup>

The Kuwaiti Muhsin al-Fadhli soon replaced Suri as al-Qaeda’s senior facilitator and financier in Iran.<sup>22</sup> Fadhli had been sanctioned in 2005 for financing aspects of the Iraqi insurgency, including “the Zarqawi network” and al-Qaeda. He had also been convicted by a Kuwaiti court and was wanted in Saudi Arabia for terrorism-related activities. According to the Treasury Department, Fadhli began working with the Iran-based network in 2009 but was later arrested by Iranian authorities. After being released in 2011, he assumed leadership of the network, which the State Department described as “a core facilitation pipeline through Iran, enabling al-Qaida to move funds and fighters to South Asia and to Syria.” As of October 2012, according to the Treasury Department, al-Qaida elements in Iran led by Fadhli were “working to move fighters and money through Turkey to support al-Qaida affiliated elements in Syria,” as well as leveraging his extensive network of Kuwaiti jihadists to send money to Syria.<sup>23</sup> Fadhli was killed on July 8, 2015, by a U.S. airstrike in Syria, where he was reportedly leading a group of seasoned al-Qaida operatives working with JN in hopes of recruiting Europeans and Americans to conduct attacks in the West.<sup>24</sup>

To further address al-Qaeda’s network in Iran, the U.S. Treasury in July 2016 announced new sanctions against three senior al-Qaeda members

located in Iran. The sanctions, characterized by the Treasury as “action to disrupt the operations, fundraising, and support networks that help al-Qaeda move money and operatives from South Asia and across the Middle East,”<sup>25</sup> echo congressional testimony from National Counterterrorism Center director Nicholas Rasmussen later that year in which he raised concerns that al-Qaeda was exploiting safe havens in Syria “by relocating some of its remaining leadership cadre from South Asia to Syria.”<sup>26</sup> These sanctions again highlight the ease of travel for al-Qaeda facilitators and operatives in Iran, as well as their ongoing contact with Iranian officials and operational roles. One designee, Yisra Muhammad Ibrahim Bayumi, has been in Iran since 2014 and has served as a mediator with Iranian authorities. Abu Bakr Muhammad Muhammad Ghumayn appears to have traveled between 2014 and 2015 to Iran, where he assumed control of the financing and organization of al-Qaeda members. Faisal Jassim Mohammed al-Amri al-Khalidi was an al-Qaeda battalion commander and had been responsible for liaison between al-Qaeda Central Shura members and U.S.-designated Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan.<sup>27</sup>

Another way in which al-Qaeda has successfully raised funds is through abuse of the charitable sector. In the years after the September 11 attacks, disrupting terrorists’ ability to abuse charitable giving as a means of raising, transferring, and laundering funds was a major focus of counterterrorism authorities around the world. Charities operating as fronts for terrorist groups were designated by national authorities and world bodies such as the UN, the charitable sector was encouraged to implement more sophisticated due-diligence procedures to protect the industry from abuse, and governments engaged in outreach and information campaigns.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, for a while, it seemed like terrorist abuse of charity had dissipated as a preferred illicit-finance typology. Then came the war in Syria and a series of other conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa, and the issue was back on the agenda as a counterterrorism priority. Consider the December 2016 conviction of two British men on charges of funneling cash to extremists in Syria. Syed Hoque and Mashoud Miah joined a hundred-vehicle British aid convoy as a cover to supply Hoque’s nephew with £3,000 in July 2013. The nephew had entered Syria some months before and fought with JN. Another £1,500 was sent with a second convoy in December 2013.<sup>29</sup> As the British prosecutor in the case noted, “Normal routes are not much use when you look at Syria. So if you want to get property or money out to Syria, the convoys would have provided a useful conduit. And you may think

[of] that [as] an abuse of the spirit of the convoys to [instead] convey the money and property to terrorists.”<sup>30</sup>

As conflicts continue with no end in sight across the Middle East and North Africa, from Syria to Yemen to Libya, charities are crucial for alleviating the accompanying humanitarian crises. A February 2016 Amnesty International report found that 13.5 million people were in urgent need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria alone,<sup>31</sup> and that number is only expected to rise. A UN official warned in December 2016 of a looming famine in Yemen, where nearly 19 million people already need “some form of humanitarian aid.”<sup>32</sup> The UN Security Council issued a resolution in February 2014 urging “all Member States to contribute or increase their support to...meet the spiraling needs of people affected” by the Syrian civil war.<sup>33</sup> The resolution sought state help for UN agencies, but donors and aid agencies of any type must be careful: some individuals will callously exploit such tragedies—whether natural or man-made—to divert, embezzle, and launder funds for terrorism or other illicit purposes. The result is significant for al-Qaeda. Consider AQAP, which as of January 2017 “continue[d] to receive significant donations, including under the cover of charitable organizations.”<sup>34</sup>

By the nature of the work carried out, the charitable sector can be uniquely vulnerable to the misuse and abuse of funds. Auditing the delivery of humanitarian supplies to war-torn areas is no easy task. A report by Australia and six other Southeast Asian countries noted that Australia had “experienced suspicious ‘pop-up’ NPOs (non-profit organizations) that appear to dissolve after raising funds for ‘humanitarian efforts’ in Syria and Iraq.”<sup>35</sup> In Britain, the Charity Commission struck two organizations from its official charity register in August 2016 after concluding that they had raised money and supplies for IS and al-Qaeda. The charities’ missions were ostensibly to help victims of Syria’s civil war and Kurdish Muslims in the English city of Birmingham. Instead, the founder of the two organizations, twenty-one-year-old Adeel ul-Haq, had bought “a high-powered laser pointer, night-vision goggles, and a secret waterproof money pouch.”<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the website of the Birmingham charity Didi Nwe was also featuring articles by Mullah Krekar and allowing him to use the charity’s online chat room to give live webinars. Krekar had been designated by the UN Security Council in 2006 for ties to al-Qaeda and served five years in jail for death threats against Norwegian politicians and Kurds.<sup>37</sup> Ul-Haq was jailed for twelve months, and the Charity Commission removed three of the Didi Nwe trustees from their positions shortly before Didi Nwe itself was shut down.

While terrorism financing through the abuse of charities has returned, perpetrators use large-scale false fronts less often than they did prior to 9/11. Facilitated by the rise of social media, fundraisers can now more easily set up false fronts online. Hajjaj al-Ajmi, who was sanctioned by the UN in 2014, used Twitter to solicit donations for JN.<sup>38</sup> Some have even openly crowd-sourced donations for JN and other jihadist groups operating in Syria, such as Saad bin Saad al-Kaabi, who posted solicitations on Facebook and WhatsApp accounts for “arming, feeding and treating” fighters in Syria.<sup>39</sup> Kaabi was listed at the UN in 2015.<sup>40</sup> Fundraisers have also used social media to thank and confirm to donors the delivery of funds and materials support to jihadist groups. In a video uploaded to YouTube in October 2016, U.S.-designated JN financier Abd Allah bin Muhammad al-Muhaysini thanked Gulf donors for supporting jihadists in Syria: “As for the businessmen, and I will mention some of them, the ones who prepared these hundred rockets, may God reward them. One hundred Elephant rockets...some from a group of brothers in Islam from Riyadh, some from our brother Abu Ahmad from Kuwait, some from our brother Abu al-Jud from Qatar, and some from brothers I have not mentioned...I tell all the businessmen of the Muslims, this is your money now, fighting in the path of God.”<sup>41</sup> According to the U.S. Treasury, between 2013 and 2015, Muhaysini raised millions of dollars for JN, claiming himself that he had secured \$5 million in donations to arm fighters.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, cases of major charity fronts remain, and large-scale organizations funneling money to al-Qaeda continue to come to light. For example, Saudi Arabia and the United States jointly acted against the al-Furqan Foundation Welfare Trust in May 2015. The U.S. Treasury identified al-Furqan as the successor entity to two organizations it had previously designated, the Afghan Support Committee and the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, and described it as a “charitable organization that is a major conduit of financial and material support for terrorist groups...in some cases under the guise of humanitarian work.” In addition to charging that it supported al-Qaeda, the Treasury called out al-Furqan for aiding the Taliban and the Pakistani jihadist group Lashkar-e-Taiba. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia designated al-Furqan under its own counterterrorism laws.<sup>43</sup>

Less than a year later, the United States and Saudi Arabia again took joint action against four individuals and two organizations for supporting the same three terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Among those sanctioned were the Scottish-born jihadist James McLintock and the al-Rahmah Welfare Organization (RWO), of which McLintock was the president, CEO,

and chairman. According to the Treasury Department, RWO and other associated outfits received “large amounts of money from British donors who were not aware of the NGOs’ Taliban ties.” Whereas the Treasury statement cited McLintock for supporting a variety of terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, he also appeared to be involved in Syria.<sup>44</sup> This designation evidently has more to do with the Taliban, but the UN in 2016 emphasized that close ties persist between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, as exemplified by the ascent of the Taliban’s deputy emir, Sirajudin Haqqani.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the recent designations made by Saudi Arabia against supporters of terrorism, the hardline ideology that the kingdom spreads can lead to sympathy with the very type of group Riyadh targeted. A report from Germany’s intelligence agencies, leaked in December 2016, raised worries about the domestic influence of hardline Salafi ideology imported from Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar. According to the report, fundamentalist Salafism is growing in Germany thanks to funding from Gulf groups that are “closely connected with government offices in their home countries.” One of the groups cited by the Germans, the Kuwaiti Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, has been blacklisted by the United States for “bank-rolling al-Qaeda.”<sup>46</sup> Just a few weeks before the report was leaked, the German government shut down a jihadist missionary group that had encouraged some 140 people to fight in Iraq and Syria.<sup>47</sup>

Western countries are not alone in combating such ideology. India banned an NGO, the Islamic Research Foundation, in November 2016. The government took action on the basis of laws addressing a threat to social and communal harmony rather than outright terrorism. However, in speeches collected by Indian intelligence agencies, the foundation’s founder and president praised Osama bin Laden and justified suicide bombings, among other objectionable statements. The preacher is also banned in Britain and Canada for his hate speech.<sup>48</sup>

Beyond abuse of charity, experts have also noted an increase in collaboration and assistance among and between al-Qaeda branches. For example, a January 2017 UN report claimed that al-Shabab operating in Somalia and elsewhere in East Africa has “relied on financial, logistical, and ideological guidance from AQAP.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the UN reported, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) has taken on “a more active supporting role” for Taliban groups in Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, there is historical precedent for such cooperation. A letter between the leaders of AQAP and AQIM in 2012 discussed kidnapping for ransom, calling the tactic a “profitable trade and a precious treasure.”<sup>51</sup>

Finally, it is important to step back, especially with regard to HTS in Syria, and keep in mind that the group has long enjoyed a (misplaced) air of legitimacy given its role fighting both the Assad regime and the Islamic State. Many major donors give to the cause because they see HTS as the “moderate extremists” in the conflict. HTS is often viewed in this light because people either agree with the ideology, see it as more moderate than the alternatives, or are simply willing to put ideological issues aside and back the force that offers a real possibility of ending Bashar al-Assad’s murderous regime, seeing the act as something other than explicitly financing al-Qaeda. Indeed, some have interpreted U.S. Treasury Department designations targeting JN/JFS/HTS financiers as a message that there should be no ambiguity regarding al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate and that financing the group will not be tolerated.<sup>52</sup> Al-Qaeda’s rebranding in Syria under the names JN, JFS, and then HTS has been assessed by several UN member states as a tactical measure at least partly intended to enable the group to evade sanctions. The reason: according to the United Nations, as of January 2017, what was then known as JFS continued to derive its income “mainly from external donations,” along with criminal sources of funding such as kidnapping for ransom, extortion, and war spoils.<sup>53</sup>

## NOTES

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“Al-Qaeda and its affiliate organizations never stopped being a primary terrorism concern for me, for the U.S. intelligence community, and for the broader counterterrorism community. Not a day has gone by in my entire tenure at NCTC where our emphasis on al-Qaeda has been anything less than a top priority. That’s the beauty of working on terrorism issues. You get the privilege of having multiple top priorities.”

—Nicholas Rasmussen  
*director, NCTC*

