

# The al-Qaeda of Today Has Changed Since 9/11 and the U.S Must Adapt

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Washington needs to do a better job of defeating the group's local political strategy and fighting the war holistically.

**W**hen American Airlines Flight 77 slammed into the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, I was working there as a relatively new civilian employee of the U.S. Department of Defense. I had little notion that as the plane pierced the building and the shock waves coursed through it that my life would become dominated by the events of that morning. I began the process to join the military and, after being sworn in as an officer in 2003, deployed five times to Afghanistan and Iraq (four with the military and once as a government civilian), confronting al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Iraqi nationalist insurgent groups and ISIS.

While the al-Qaeda of that time has been significantly weakened, it has also morphed and adapted and become much more global in its operations. Across the world, al-Qaeda affiliates in the Arabian Peninsula, west and central Africa, east Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia have grown and become entrenched terrorist groups.

While determined to attack western targets, al-Qaeda has also localized its strategy, aligning their efforts with the grievances of indigenous communities, making them more difficult to defeat. In many respects it operates more like an insurgent group than strictly a terrorist organization. While the U.S. military has aggressively confronted these groups, it must work to adapt its strategy to address the political and governance challenges that prompt some communities to shelter al-Qaeda.

One of the countries where al-Qaeda has adapted its strategy is Yemen, where it goes by the name Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In that country, AQAP has formed a basic system of governance to administer the territory it controls while concealing many of its efforts behind local tribal groups or civic organizations. It often uses a separate arm of its organization called Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law), a front group, to build support with local communities emphasizing the “Islamic” basis of its program.

This approach is particularly effective in semi-literate societies where the Koran is the one book with which most residents are familiar. In addition to administering “justice” programs for the population, al-Qaeda has also provided rudimentary health, education, and transportation programs as well as security. Many communities in the isolated areas of central Yemen haven’t had a functioning local government since the Arab Spring began in 2011 and frequently welcome these initiatives even if they know they come from al-Qaeda. While Yemenis desperately want a functioning government, they reluctantly welcome these efforts when local services have broken down and instability has become the norm.

The challenge for the U.S. is that while it can repeatedly attack al-Qaeda with drone strikes, direct action raids, and operations partnered with local security forces, it must also focus its efforts on the roots of al-Qaeda’s enduring strength—poor governance. Al-Qaeda’s affiliates thrive because indigenous governments are too weak to confront them, prey upon the population (e.g. corruption), or are so structurally centralized that local concerns receive little attention and community leaders lack the resources to address problems.

While the U.S. is adept at eliminating terrorist leaders, it has a mixed record at building local governance even though it has gained a wealth of experience doing just that in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is in these areas that our efforts are the weakest and most dependent on the political will of host governments to address these significant shortfalls in governance, service delivery, justice and security.

We must do a better job of defeating al-Qaeda’s local political strategy and organizing ourselves to fight the war holistically. As we remember the attacks of Sept. 11, the U.S. must remain vigilant as well as adaptive and apply the hard-fought lessons of the military campaigns against al-Qaeda even as the terrorist group metastasizes around the world.

*Daniel Green is a defense fellow with The Washington Institute and a reserve officer with the U.S. Navy. ❖*

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