

# Using the McKinsey 7S Framework to Assess Al-Qaeda Over Three Decades: Lessons for the Future

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Writing in 1992, noted terrorism scholar David Rapoport remarked that nearly 90% of terrorist groups lasted less than one year. Subsequent scholarship on terrorist group longevity has similarly noted the short average lifespan of the vast majority of such groups. Why then—more than three decades after it was originally founded—has al-Qaeda been able to enjoy a level of duration that most terrorist groups find elusive? This feat is especially impressive considering that al-Qaeda is arguably the most high-profile terrorist group ever, and one which the United States and other Western countries have been dedicated to eradicating for the better part of the last twenty years. What factors or variables have contributed to al-Qaeda's longevity and led to its staying power in the face of an historical global counter-terrorism campaign waged by the world's most capable militaries and intelligence services? And finally, what can we learn from the evolution of al-Qaeda that might be able to suggest where the group is heading in the future?

Keywords: al-Qaeda; McKinsey; 7s Framework; strategy; organizational structure; longevity; jihadism; leadership; Zawahiri; bin Laden; War on Terror

## Introduction

Writing in 1992, noted terrorism scholar David Rapoport remarked that nearly 90% of terrorist groups lasted less than one year.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent scholarship on terrorist group longevity has similarly noted the short average lifespan of the vast majority of such groups.<sup>2</sup> Why then—more than three decades after it was originally founded—has al-Qaeda been able to enjoy a level of duration that most terrorist groups find elusive? This feat is especially impressive considering that al-Qaeda is arguably the most high-profile terrorist group ever, and one which the United States and other Western countries have been dedicated to eradicating for the better part of the last twenty years. What factors or variables have contributed to al-Qaeda’s longevity and led to its staying power in the face of an historical global counter-terrorism campaign waged by the world’s most capable militaries and intelligence services? And finally, what can we learn from the evolution of al-Qaeda that might be able to suggest where the group is heading in the future?

Longevity is different than the ability to achieve objectives, which indicates a certain level of success or failure. There is an old adage in the literature on insurgency and counterinsurgency that insurgents win simply by not losing. In some respects, this applies to terrorist organizations as well. Longevity in and of itself can be a significant boon to terrorist groups which, by function of their duration, are able to establish their brand and in doing so, attract new recruits while maintaining a longstanding base of ideological sympathizers. Writing in 2017, noted terrorism expert Daniel Byman commented that “AQ’s message of the necessity of jihad as a pillar of faith seems a spectacular success and must be counted as a victory for the group,” going on to conclude, “the broader movement AQ fostered remains strong.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, according to an assessment by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), there are nearly four times as many jihadists operating today as there were on September 11, 2001, which means that even as al-Qaeda cannot claim all of these militants under its banner, it has indeed played an indispensable role in galvanizing the movement more broadly.<sup>4</sup>

In his own writings, jihadist master strategist Abu Musab al-Suri described al-Qaeda as “a call, a reference, a methodology,” and denied that it was a group or an organization. On the contrary, al-Suri argued that al-Qaeda’s “main goal should be to stimulate other groups around the world to join the jihadi movement.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the group was founded “so that the flame of Jihad should continue elsewhere.”<sup>6</sup> While the headlines over the past five years have been dominated by the Islamic State, and perhaps rightfully so, it is important to remember that without al-Qaeda, there would never have been an Islamic State. It was al-Qaeda that put the global jihadist movement on the map.

<sup>1</sup> David C. Rapoport, “Terrorism,” in *Encyclopedia of Government and Politics*, edited by Mary Hawkesworth and Maurice Kogan, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1992); for a dissenting point of view, see Brian J. Phillips, “Do 90 Percent of Terrorist Groups Last Less Than a Year? Updating the Conventional Wisdom,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan, “Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.8, No.2, April 2014, pp.2-23; see also, Laura Dugan, “The Making of the Global Terrorism Database and Its Applicability to Studying the Life Cycles of Terrorist Organisations,” in D. Gadd, S. Karstedt, and S. Farrall (eds.) *Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 2012; and Martha Crenshaw. 1991. “How Terrorism Declines.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3(1): 69-87.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Byman, “Explaining Al Qaeda’s Decline,” *The Journal of Politics*, 79:3, 2017, p. 1110.

<sup>4</sup> Seth G. Jones et al., “The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat: Current and Future Challenges from the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Other Groups,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), November 2018, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181221\\_EvolvingTerroristThreat.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181221_EvolvingTerroristThreat.pdf); see also, Eric Schmitt, “Two Decades After 9/11, Militants Have Only Multiplied,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/20/us/politics/terrorism-islamic-militants.html>

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Wright, “The Master Plan,” *New Yorker*, September 11, 2006, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/09/11/the-master-plan>

<sup>6</sup> Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda’s Leader*, New York: Free Press, 2006, p.8.

Throughout this paper, I will argue that three specific factors have played an outsized role in al-Qaeda's survival. To show this, the paper uses the McKinsey 7S Framework as a foundation for an analytic framework.<sup>7</sup> The 7S Framework was developed in the late 1970s by McKinsey consultants Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, who identified seven internal elements of an organization that should be aligned for an organization to achieve success: strategy, structure, style, staff, skills, systems, and shared values.

The framework seems appropriate to evaluate al-Qaeda, because as many scholars and analysts have pointed out, the terrorist group has often operated in a similar fashion to other transnational organizations, including multinational corporations.<sup>8</sup> In an article from 2004, Bruce Hoffman described the group in the following terms: "a vast enterprise" that is at once "nimble, flexible, and adaptive;" a "franchise operation with like-minded local representatives...but advancing their common goal independently of one another;" an organization boasting "a corporate succession plan," but which also faces "complaints about expensive cell-phone bills and expenditures for superfluous office equipment."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this description would be an accurate characterization of myriad private sector entities in the commercial world, concerned with everything from the vagaries of equipment and personnel to the more complex maneuvers associated with growth and expansion, including mergers and acquisitions.

There are obvious differences between terrorist organizations and multinational corporations, not least of which include the divergence of goals and objectives, not to mention the operating environments and trade-offs for terrorist groups that hinge upon operational security and attack planning.<sup>10</sup> Still, there are enough similarities from an organizational perspective that the McKinsey 7S Framework is an interesting lens through which to attempt to measure al-Qaeda's evolution across seven critical areas and to determine which matter most to the group's ability to survive.

## The McKinsey 7S Framework

The McKinsey 7S Framework is a simple and relatively straightforward model to assess an organization across a range of critical areas, including: strategy, structure, style, staff, skills, systems, and shared values.

**Strategy** is what the organization does to gain advantage over its competitors and advance its own interests, seeking to achieve core objectives while also dealing with internal and external challenges. In the case of al-Qaeda, the group's strategy has shifted over time, as priorities are periodically realigned and the organization seeks to adapt to macro-changes in its operating environment, e.g. the Arab Spring. The ability to implement strategy has been consistently challenged by counterterrorism efforts designed to disrupt and dismantle al-Qaeda's command-and-control network.

<sup>7</sup> "Enduring Ideas: The 7S Framework," McKinsey Quarterly, McKinsey & Company, March 2008, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/enduring-ideas-the-7-s-framework>

<sup>8</sup> See Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups." *International Security* 31(1): 7-48, 2006; and Seth G. Jones and Martin Libicki, *How Terrorism Ends*. Rand Corporation, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "The Changing Face of Al Qaeda and the Global War on Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 27:6, 2004, pp.549-560.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

**Structure** helps form the backbone of the organization and ensures that reporting requirements within the chain of command are clear to group members. There is a focus on lines of communication, division of tasks and responsibilities, and what organizational structure the group should assume—top-down, vertically structured; horizontal, flat and networked; or a hybrid of the two, with a strong core and a flexible periphery. Part of al-Qaeda’s strength has always been its ability to occupy this middle ground, retaining the efficiency of a centralized organization while also enjoying the benefits that decentralization can provide.

**Style** is shorthand for organizational culture, or alternatively, the way things are done. This is a byword not just for those rules officially enshrined or codified in legal memoranda and personnel policies, but also for the informal or unspoken rules of an organization. Style is heavily shaped and influenced by leadership and in organizations with charismatic individuals, style can permeate the organization and lead others to follow suit. Few would argue that al-Qaeda’s style has not suffered drastically in transitioning from Osama bin Laden to the more pedantic style of his longtime deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri. Particularly since the rise of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda’s style has become more pragmatic and less draconian in controlling local populations.

**Staff** is all about people and how the talents and specialties of these people are identified, nurtured, and refined. Effective organizations have a plan to deal with staff turnover and can move swiftly to fill positions. Recruitment, training, motivation and compensation are critical to a high-functioning staff, something al-Qaeda recognized at an early stage and thus devoted considerable bureaucratic effort toward dealing with. Despite high rates of attrition among key figures, al-Qaeda has done a remarkable job of retaining a nucleus of longtime senior leaders.

**Skills** are the specific capabilities and competencies of an organization’s members and need to constantly be reviewed and assessed to prevent atrophy. Skills include both institutional skills and individual skills and organizations often develop skill acquisition strategies to fill key knowledge gaps. Over time, al-Qaeda focused on recruiting members with a range of specializations, from bombmaking expertise to the ability to produce sophisticated propaganda using social media. For some of its most high-profile attacks, al-Qaeda opted to outsource specific parts of the plot in order to increase its comparative advantage, including harnessing the local knowledge of certain recruits. Skills also help the organization to rebuild and replenish its global network.

**Systems** are the processes of an organization, from human resources-type functions to risk management or risk mitigation capabilities. Systems eclipse merely technical requirements and impact how to prevent losses as well as how to refine and improve the organization. For al-Qaeda, systems helped ensure a level of consistency and predictability during periods of turbulence and volatility. This was the case after the group relocated to Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the organization became the target of an aggressive American drone campaign to eliminate its leadership. With the group’s core leadership focusing on survival, systems become even more important for operating a global logistics enterprise capable of planning and executing attacks.

**Shared values** are the organizational norms that guide behavior and group ethos, establishing guide rails and determining the critical pillars of the mission statement. Shared values should not change too much over time and greatly affect reputation and

brand, establishing a benchmark for others that may seek to join the organization. Even though much has been made of the split between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, overall, the warring groups have more in common with each other than they do with any other organization. Shared values created the initial bond of al-Qaeda's membership, and the fallout took place within the uppermost echelon of these groups, signaling more a clash of personalities than fundamental differences in ideology or objectives.

## Methodological Challenges

In order to properly measure or systematically evaluate an organization, there should first be agreement on exactly what that organization is and also, what it is not. This unit of analysis problem complicates any and all efforts to assess the evolution of a group or organization that often defies characterization. How does one define and bound the entity being observed, studied, and analyzed? Studying al-Qaeda presents scholars with "a common analytic problem" with regard to "defining just what the group is."<sup>11</sup> Thirty years after its founding, even the most accomplished terrorism analysts are still left to grapple with the question, "what is the current Al Qaeda? An organization? A movement? An ideology?"<sup>12</sup>

It is even challenging and somewhat misleading to attempt to characterize the group as a monolithic entity or at one particular snapshot in time. As this paper will show, the group's strategic objectives, organizational structure, and *modus operandi* have all fluctuated over time, contributing to disagreement over precisely what al-Qaeda is, which is partly to blame for why it remained, even after 9/11, such a "poorly understood phenomenon."<sup>13</sup>

In many ways, al-Qaeda has evolved because our understanding or conception of what al-Qaeda was, and is, has evolved. The most high-profile debate in the field of terrorism studies in the post-9/11 era was between Bruce Hoffman and Marc Sageman over what al-Qaeda was—a top-down, hierarchical organization, according to Hoffman, or a "leaderless jihad" far more decentralized and networked, held together by a shared ideology and a similar enough worldview. But perhaps al-Qaeda has been so successful at evolving because it has become, and has actually always been, both of these things. Al-Qaeda in Syria in 2019 is a much different entity than core al-Qaeda was in Western Pakistan in 2003, which itself was completely different than the small cadre of jihadists that helped Osama bin Laden keep the group intact during its exile in Sudan in the early to mid-1990s.

Al-Qaeda seems ubiquitous because it is. There is still al-Qaeda core based in Pakistan and led by Zawahiri, one of the group's most central figures, with a legacy dating back to the earliest discussions about what al-Qaeda should be. It is possible to see the influence and hand of al-Qaeda in the lion's share of some the most spectacular terrorist attacks of the last three decades. Some connections and linkages are comprehensive, while others are more tenuous.

The most difficult part of comparing al-Qaeda to a corporation is that al-Qaeda itself is amorphous and difficult to define. Some experts have described al-Qaeda as consisting

<sup>11</sup> Byman, "Al Qaeda's Decline," p. 1107.

<sup>12</sup> Brian A. Jackson, "Groups, Networks, or Movements: A Command-and-Control-Driven Approach to Classifying Terrorist Organizations and Its Application to Al Qaeda," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29:3, 2006, p. 241.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "Al Qaeda Trends in Terrorism and Future Potentialities: An Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol.26, Iss.6, 2003, p.430.

of separate “layers.”<sup>14</sup> One major challenge of relying on the McKinsey 7S Framework as an analytical tool is that, as an organization, al-Qaeda is unwieldy and at quite different in nature than more traditional terrorist groups motivated by ethno-nationalism or separatism and geographically fixed in a country or region. The discussion of whether to analyze al-Qaeda core as a separate entity from the organization considered more broadly—accounting for its affiliates and wider support base—is also relevant, given the comparison with multinational corporations, which can also adhere to a franchise model and have geographically distinct modalities represented by different brands and operating procedures. To be properly judicious in assessing al-Qaeda’s fortunes, it must also be recognized that the group has made many miscalculations along the way and even where successful adjustments have been implemented, e.g. the franchising model, these were at times unintentional or merely the result of circumstances that the group was forced into, rather than a deliberate calculation to adapt or a shrewd plan to evolve.

In an attempt to properly measure the evolution of al-Qaeda, this paper takes the approach of breaking down the group’s tenure into three distinct macro-phases, looking at its emergence before 9/11, the period between 9/11 and the death of bin Laden, and the post-bin Laden phase, with a distinct focus on al-Qaeda’s activities in Syria. To be sure, there are other ways to analyze the group, and future research efforts will be devoted toward analyzing micro-phases, taking a closer look at more discrete time periods and cycles of adaptation and counter-adaptation. But such a granular approach is beyond the scope of this paper.

## Al-Qaeda in Its Early Years

Al-Qaeda Al-Askariya, translated as “the Military Base,” was formally established in 1988 in Peshawar, Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> Borne from the fallout between bin Laden and his mentor, the Palestinian Abdullah Azzam, al-Qaeda was established in opposition to Azzam’s Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK), also known as the “Office of Services” or “Services Bureau.” Toward the end of the Soviet-Afghan War, bin Laden and some trusted aides began to perceive MAK as corrupt and ineffective and thus sought to establish a new organization dedicated to jihad.

This phase traces al-Qaeda’s path from its rather inauspicious beginnings in Afghanistan and Pakistan to temporary exile in Sudan, where bin Laden relocated the group and its members, especially those from Egypt, Libya, and Algeria who were unable to return home because they were sought after by the ruling regimes. In 1996, al-Qaeda returned to Afghanistan where it would establish camps that trained thousands of jihadist fighters as part of its emerging global network. Al-Qaeda launched several high-profile attacks during this period, including the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings and the attack in 2000 on the *USS Cole* off the coast of Yemen.

### Strategy

Al-Qaeda’s goals, and thus its strategy, were limited in nature during its nascent years. In these early years there was a lack of direction and to the extent that al-Qaeda pronounced any official political objectives, they tended to be quixotic and not backed up by a coherent strategy. The United States barely registered as a target, and mostly the organization was grasping for a purpose, hoping to keep the spirit and infrastructure

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Byman, “Al-Qaeda as an Adversary: Do We Understand Our Enemy?” *World Politics Review*, Vol.56, No.1, October 2003, pp.139-163.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, “Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of Its Formative Years,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35:1, 2012, p.4.

of jihad alive. To a lesser extent, bin Laden was also interested in the ongoing conflict with Communists in Yemen.

As Bergen and Cruickshank note about the group's formative years, "by keeping Al Qaeda's aims broad enough" bin Laden was able to "create a somewhat cohesive organization" by keeping "different militant strands on board."<sup>16</sup> Al-Qaeda's interest in attacking American targets was evident by the early 1990s, after attacks in Yemen in late 1992 and Somalia in 1993. The attacks themselves also served a strategic purpose. By launching symbolic and sophisticated external operations, al-Qaeda hoped to forge unity among "foreign militants" in the broader jihadist universe, with smaller groups recognizing al-Qaeda as the "strong horse" able to translate rhetoric into action and ultimately the jihadist movement behind it.<sup>17</sup>

## Structure

What began as a small conspiracy of several jihadists ultimately morphed into a transnational network with a presence in dozens of countries. In the first several years after its formation, the group has been characterized as "disorganized" and lacking a "well-defined hierarchy."<sup>18</sup> But over time this changed, as al-Qaeda formed a strong core under bin Laden's direction, while building layers of connective sinew through forging partnerships and alliances with other jihadists and jihadist groups that shared a worldview and ideology, even if objectives did not align perfectly. Following the end of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan in 1989, many of the Arab Afghans enjoying sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan were pressured to leave. Bin Laden and a small group of his closest associates left for Sudan. The years in Sudan were particularly challenging for al-Qaeda, given widespread disagreement amongst the top leaders during this time, especially about the future direction of the organization.<sup>19</sup> But despite the disagreement, al-Qaeda was able to use its time in Sudan to "build a significant degree of organization, cohesiveness, and operational capability," defined in part by its "meticulous planning and consultative process" for designing and executing external operations.<sup>20</sup> This would form the basis for its logistical expertise and ability to execute transnational terrorist attacks.

After al-Qaeda departed Sudan, the group's core returned to Afghanistan where it was based between 1996 and 2000, when it maintained sanctuary under Taliban protection and was able to operate openly throughout large swaths of the country.<sup>21</sup> During this time, al-Qaeda was already fashioning a hybrid organizational structure where it could be at once "a unitary organization, assuming the dimensions of a lumbering bureaucracy"<sup>22</sup> while also a transnational network with operatives and alliances that spanned North Africa to Southeast Asia.

## Style

Bin Laden's style has been compared to that of a venture capitalist and CEO, where he followed a model that relied on "soliciting ideas from below, encouraging creative approaches and 'out of the box' thinking, and providing funding to those proposals he

<sup>16</sup> Bergen and Cruickshank, "Early Al-Qaeda," p.11.

<sup>17</sup> Leah Farrall, "How Al Qaeda Works: What the Organization's Subsidiaries Say About Its Strength" *Foreign Affairs*, 90: 2011, 128.

<sup>18</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design" *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol.23, June 2018, p.73.

<sup>19</sup> Bergen and Cruickshank, "Early Al-Qaeda," p.17.

<sup>20</sup> Bergen and Cruickshank, "Early Al-Qaeda," p.23.

<sup>21</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty First Century*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp.49-50

<sup>22</sup> Hoffman, "Changing Face," p.551

thinks promising.”<sup>23</sup> In terms of attack planning, bin Laden adopted a method that could most aptly be described as “centralization of decision and decentralization of execution.”<sup>24</sup> This style would become a hallmark of al-Qaeda and allow it to plan attacks in different countries simultaneously, as it did with the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, attacks that bin Laden played a hands-on role in developing.<sup>25</sup>

Bin Laden’s style was unique, in some parts stoic, devout and austere, but also highly cognizant of the importance of notoriety. Bin Laden appreciated the power of media and gave several interviews with television producers, including his 1997 interview with CNN’s Peter Bergen. His interactions with the media led some al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders to mock him privately, criticizing him as vain and publicity-obsessed. But these interviews substituted as propaganda for al-Qaeda, elevating the group’s status and further increasing bin Laden’s profile in militant jihadist circles.

## Staff

Leaving aside those individuals like bin Laden and Zawahiri who were critical to leading the group throughout this period, al-Qaeda excelled at identifying, recruiting, and retaining a range of terrorist masterminds and facilitators that would help keep the group together as a cohesive entity. Since bin Laden spent the period between late 1989 and early 1991 living in Saudi Arabia, it was left to Abu Ubaidah al Banjshiri and Abu Hafsa al Masri (aka Mohammed Atef) to run al-Qaeda’s training camps system in Afghanistan with relatively little or no input from the group’s leader. Indeed, the influence of a small yet tight-knit cadre of jihadists from Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) was evident from the outset, including Zawahiri and al Masri (Atef), especially on core al-Qaeda’s central leadership. From its earliest days, al-Qaeda proved it could operate as a hybrid entity, with its leadership spread between different countries.

During this phase, al-Qaeda was able to call on numerous well-connected militants that boasted a diverse array of skills and contacts. This included Khaled Sheikh Muhammad (KSM), who Assaf Moghadam has described as “an independent jihadi entrepreneur,” and someone who possessed “technical and managerial skills coupled with an ability to generate ideas.”<sup>26</sup> Al-Qaeda also maintained close connections with jihadists worldwide, which formed a network that they would later tap into as they forged close partnerships with groups operating in Indonesia, Morocco, and elsewhere. Al-Qaeda’s expansion focused on cultivating individuals with local expertise, including knowledge of the strength of security forces and possible target selection.

## Skills

During this period, al-Qaeda emphasized tacit knowledge transfer among the organization and the groups it sought to support. In the early to mid-1990s, al-Qaeda dispatched militants to the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Horn of Africa, as well as Central and Southeast Asia to transmit specialized tactics and expertise. An office was opened in Azerbaijan, and as much as \$100,000 was provided to affiliates in Jordan and Eritrea. Other relationships were strengthened with jihadists in Algeria, Syria, Somalia, and Libya. Al-Qaeda even crossed the threshold of the Sunni-Shia divide to collaborate with Lebanese Hezbollah to exchange knowledge on bombmaking and target selection.<sup>27</sup> The

<sup>23</sup> Bruce Hoffman, “Rethinking Terrorism and Counterterrorism Since 9/11,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 25:2, 2002, pp.303-316.

<sup>24</sup> Assaf Moghadam, “How Al Qaeda Innovates,” *Security Studies*, 22:3, 2013, p. 484.

<sup>25</sup> Bergen and Cruickshank, “Early Al-Qaeda,” pp.19-21.

<sup>26</sup> Moghadam, “How Al Qaeda Innovates,” pp.479-483.

<sup>27</sup> Bergen and Cruickshank, “Early Al-Qaeda,” pp.18-19.

exchange of tactical training tips was a deliberate attempt on the part of al-Qaeda to build networks and craft working partnerships with other militants. Technical exchanges with other militant groups fosters cooperation but also increases the expertise of groups like al-Qaeda.<sup>28</sup>

Al-Qaeda vastly expanded its connections during this phase, with bin Laden's deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri traveling across the globe to raise funds and liaise with potential allies, even if much of his energy during this time was reserved for the Egyptian Islamic Jihad group he led. Zawahiri visited countries already central to al-Qaeda's growing network, but also made trips to Argentina, Austria, Iran, and Dagestan, among others, in order to further spread al-Qaeda's message, which was essential to raising the group's profile in the pre-Internet era.<sup>29</sup> To expand, al-Qaeda needed to remain active, particularly in conflicts throughout the Muslim world which had a sectarian dimension. Through financing militants in places like Bosnia, Chechnya, and Tajikistan, al-Qaeda worked to foster relationships and sustain alliances with other jihadist organizations. While based in Sudan, al-Qaeda helped compile the "Encyclopedia of the Afghan Jihad," which was then shared with other jihads in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Kashmir.<sup>30</sup> Historically, al-Qaeda has been far more effective establishing partnerships than most terrorist groups, and this strategy has benefited the group tremendously by expanding its reach.<sup>31</sup>

## Systems

From the very beginning, al-Qaeda always understood the value of an efficient and highly functioning human resources system. It kept meticulously detailed files on the profiles of its recruits. Al-Qaeda had a professional accounting system and recorded the credits and debits of the organization, tracking salaries and allocating funds for specific endeavors deemed necessary for further expansion. Militants were even able to request loans for a variety of reasons, including furniture, while the group's "benefit package" covered disability, vacation time, and severance, to compensate for separation.<sup>32</sup> Employment contracts detailed duties, salaries and vacation time; allotments for leave varied depending on whether a fighter was married or unmarried or had dependents. Al-Qaeda fighters had to sign a contract before participating in training camps, and the detailed nature of these documents suggest that by the mid-1990s, the group had developed an extensive bureaucracy governing most aspects of the militants' lives.<sup>33</sup>

Al-Qaeda was also an entrepreneurial organization. Endowed with millions of dollars from bin Laden's fortune that he inherited from his father, a Saudi construction magnate, the group did not rest on its laurels, instead diversifying its funding portfolio through a range of ventures. During al-Qaeda's stay in Sudan, Bin Laden owned some 80 companies around the world, including construction, manufacturing, currency trading, import-export, and agricultural enterprises.<sup>34</sup>

## Shared Values

The values held in high regard by al-Qaeda militants are a lifelong commitment to jihad and to ensuring that each individual defends Islam. Al-Qaeda's focus on attacking the

<sup>28</sup> Michael Kenney, "Beyond the Internet: *Metis, Techné*, and the Limitations of Online Artifacts for Islamist Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22:2, 2010, pp.177-197.

<sup>29</sup> Bergen and Cruickshank, "Early Al-Qaeda," p.25.

<sup>30</sup> Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, p.133.

<sup>31</sup> Tricia Bacon, "Hurdles to International Terrorist Alliances: Lessons from Al-Qaeda's Experience," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29:1, 2017, pp. 79-101.

<sup>32</sup> Bergen and Cruickshank, "Early Al-Qaeda," p.28.

<sup>33</sup> R. Kim Cragin, "Early History of Al-Qa'ida," *Historic Journal*, 51:4, December 2008, pp. 1064.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Bergen, *Holy Terror Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, New York: Touchstone, 2001, pp.47-49.

U.S. during this phase “did not progress linearly,” as Kim Cragin has observed, and instead vacillated between the U.S. as the epitome of the *far enemy*, and “apostate” regimes in the Muslim world, or *near enemy*, particularly those governments in the Arabian Peninsula. In other words, there was “both forwards and backwards movement” in how valuable of a target al-Qaeda perceived the United States to be, with this movement culminating in planning that would lead to the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.<sup>35</sup> The near enemy versus far enemy debate was a source of tension among al-Qaeda’s top strategists. Zawahiri tried to steer bin Laden toward focusing on targeting countries like Egypt, but eventually the al-Qaeda leader became convinced that attacking the United States should be the group’s main priority.

Bin Laden released two major statements, one in 1996 and another in 1998 that go a long way toward summarizing the shared values of al-Qaeda. In the 1996 statement, titled “Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,” bin Laden laid out in clear language the case for war against the United States.<sup>36</sup> In 1998, in a statement titled “World Islamic Front against Jews and Crusaders,” the al-Qaeda leader announced that it was “an individual duty of every Muslim” to “kill the Americans and their allies.”<sup>37</sup> The 1996 and 1998 statements by bin Laden were merely the culmination of years of back-and-forth strategic debate internal to the organization and reflective of the competing strands within al-Qaeda. Some members likely saw a contradiction between focusing on the far enemy at the expense of repressive regimes ruling over Muslim lands, while others, including bin Laden, believed that al-Qaeda could pursue both goals simultaneously, with one objective reinforcing the other.

## 2001-2011: The 9/11 Attacks and the Global War on Terrorism

The United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom in early October 2001 by invading Afghanistan in order to destroy al-Qaeda. And while the group was nearly decimated, its leadership remained intact and largely regrouped in the mountainous terrain over the border in Pakistan. Even with its leaders and top operational planners on the run, al-Qaeda still managed to execute a number of external attacks in the first several years of this phase, including in Tunisia, Indonesia, Kuwait, Kenya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Europe (see Table 1 below). In addition to these high-profile attacks, the group also remained active in the Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, the Philippines, and Yemen.

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<sup>35</sup> Cragin, “Early History,” p.1066

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp.1064-1065

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Lewis, “License to Kill: Usama bin Laden’s Declaration of Jihad,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1998, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/1998-11-01/license-kill-usama-bin-ladins-declaration-jihad>

<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>April 2002</b>	Tunisia	Vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attack on Jewish synagogue in Djerba; 21 people killed
<b>October 2002</b>	Indonesia	Al-Qaeda-linked Jemmah Islamiyah bombing kills 200+ at a tourist spot in Bali
<b>October 2002</b>	Kuwait	Two U.S. Marines were shot and killed during a training exercise off the coast of Kuwait City
<b>November 2002</b>	Kenya	Car bombing at Mombasa hotel; 2 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) fired at Israeli airliner
<b>May 2003</b>	Morocco	Suicide attacks in Casablanca kill at least 33 victims; perpetrated by al-Qaeda-linked group Salafia Jihadia
<b>May 2003</b>	Saudi Arabia	Multiple bombings at residential compounds in Riyadh; 39 killed and another 160 injured in attacks
<b>November 2003</b>	Turkey	Explosion at HSBC bank in Istanbul; 15 killed in the attack; linked to Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front
<b>March 2004</b>	Spain	Multiple bombs left aboard commuter trains in Madrid kills 191 and injures another 1800
<b>July 2005</b>	United Kingdom	Series of bombings targeting London's transportation system; 56 killed in the attacks

*Table 1: Overview of post- 9/11 high-profile attacks by al-Qaeda*

The post-9/11 operational environment for al-Qaeda was defined by a shift in resources from planning and executing attacks to operations security. Al-Qaeda did not necessarily choose to adapt; rather, the changes the group made during this phase were more of “an enforced evolutionary process” on which the group’s survival depended.<sup>38</sup> The group was also heavily focused on expansion, developing franchises and affiliates in Saudi Arabia (2003), Iraq (2004), Algeria (2006), and Yemen (2007). As the core receded, the periphery began to expand. This expansion brought with it a raft of new challenges, including how to manage these far-flung groups and keep them in line, using satellite organizations to further al-Qaeda’s transnational agenda without risking rogue commanders sully the organization’s well-established brand. Toward the end of this 2001-2011 phase, some of al-Qaeda’s franchise groups arguably eclipsed the core organization in terms of operational capabilities, especially al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its relentless pursuit of aviation targets. But even up until his death, bin Laden remained involved in managing the organization, analyzing the opportunities and obstacles that the Arab Spring posed for al-Qaeda.

## Strategy

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda’s leadership immediately recognized that the group’s strategy would have to change somewhat, given the inevitable U.S. response. Deprived of its Afghan sanctuary, al-Qaeda would be forced to

<sup>38</sup> Hoffman, “Changing Face,” p.551.

operate clandestinely and across vast distances, with high-level members of the group spread between Iran, the tribal areas of Western Pakistan, and various other locations in Pakistan, particularly in Sindh and Punjab provinces. To be clear, throughout this phase al-Qaeda's goals remained the same—it still sought to remain the vanguard for change leading to a broader Islamic revolution. But this would be exceedingly difficult to do while its leadership spent most of its time in hiding, on the run, and simply trying to survive. So, while the group's goals and objectives largely remained the same, what was called into question was the strategy needed to successfully achieve al-Qaeda's desired end.

Throughout the 2000s, al-Qaeda's leadership believed that external operations against the West would help it achieve its goals of "integration, unity, growth, and gaining strategic leadership in the militant milieu" and therefore required its franchises to attack Western interests.<sup>39</sup> Spectacular attacks were designed to achieve several interrelated objectives simultaneously, including garnering widespread attention for the global jihadist cause, bringing Muslims under the banner of al-Qaeda as a vanguard movement, and driving the United States from Muslim lands.<sup>40</sup> To be able to sustain the operational tempo needed to reach critical mass, al-Qaeda looked to expand through affiliates and franchise groups in different parts of the world. Expansion was just one part of a multi-pronged strategy that also included "bleeding wars" of attrition in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as building an infrastructure of supporters in the West, especially in Europe.<sup>41</sup> One of the major strategic debates during this phase was between those who called for a more decentralized approach versus those who advocated a centralized and hierarchical structure.

## Structure

Since its formation, al-Qaeda's organizational structure was deliberately designed to withstand significant losses. It is important to remember that by the time al-Qaeda attacked the U.S. on September 11, 2001, it had already been in existence for thirteen years, giving it a head start in preparing the organization to be resilient and adaptive. Senior leadership remained involved, even as mid-level commanders were empowered to execute the organization's strategic vision as they saw fit.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, it was the "group of middle managers" that were able to "provide the connective tissue that links the top of the organization with its bottom and, thus, makes it possible for Al Qaeda to function as a coherent and operationally effective entity," as Peter Neumann et al. observed back in 2011.<sup>43</sup> A critical debate that occurred in the years immediately following 9/11 was to what extent the group should adopt the model of "leaderless resistance." This method was favored by al-Suri, who laid out the case for a decentralized structure in his 1,600-page tome, *The Call for Global Islamic Resistance*.<sup>44</sup> Arguing against this approach was Abu Bakr Naji, whose book *The Management of Savagery* essentially called for holding

<sup>39</sup> Farrall, "How Al Qaeda Works."

<sup>40</sup> David Malet, "Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions," *Orbis*, Winter 2010, p. 105.

<sup>41</sup> Bruce Riedel, *The Search For Al Qaeda*, Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008, pp. 121-2; for an example of how Al-Qaeda sought to tailor its approach to individual European countries, see the example of The Netherlands including in *The Netherlands (Recruitment for Jihad in The Netherlands)*; see also, Lorenzo Vidino, "The Hofstad Group: The New Face of Terrorist Networks in Europe," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30:7, 2007, pp.579-592, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10576100701385933>; "Recruitment for Jihad in the Netherlands," General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, September 12, 2002, <https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2002/12/09/recruitment-for-the-jihad-in-the-netherlands>; and Bart Schuurman, *Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist: A Multilevel Analysis of Involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, 2002-2005*, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works," p.84.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Neumann et al., "Locating Al-Qaeda's Center of Gravity: The Role of Middle Managers," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 34:11, 2011, p.826.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Cruickshank, "Abu Musab al-Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30:1, 2007, pp.1-14; see also Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Musab al-Suri*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

territory and working to establish local governance mechanisms while implementing *sharia* law and providing social services to the population.<sup>45</sup> (Interestingly, this is the approach the Islamic State would later follow.)

Even under immense duress from the U.S.-led counterterrorism campaign during this period, al-Qaeda retained a centralized core, while also exercising command and control by “determining both the trajectory of the organization as well as its strategic direction.”<sup>46</sup> Al-Qaeda’s fingerprints were apparent in a number of high-profile attacks, including Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005.<sup>47</sup> What these links prove is that, despite the suggestions of some analysts who believed al-Qaeda’s top command was “isolated and irrelevant,” bin Laden remained an active leader that provided important input to tactics, operations, and strategy.<sup>48</sup> An inevitable trade off resulting from al-Qaeda’s decision to adopt the franchise model was that it traded some level of control for increased reach and relevance in conflicts in Iraq, Yemen, and Somalia.

## Style

Al-Qaeda’s style, which took form during the Global War on Terrorism, shares many similarities with the U.S. military’s concept of *mission command*. The idea of mission command is “the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, it is “trust in subordinates who can plan, coordinate, and execute flexible yet disciplined decision making throughout increasingly complex operational environments that gives commanders the confidence to conduct decisive action boldly.”<sup>50</sup> This stylistic feature made the whole of al-Qaeda greater than the sum of its parts—it enabled more attacks, which in turn made the group appear omnipresent, able to strike anywhere at any time.

Throughout the post-9/11 era, al-Qaeda central still played a major role in planning attacks, but there was also a tendency to let regional nodes implement the operations. Al Qaeda was designed to be an organization that could function as a hybrid, displaying characteristics of both centralization and decentralization. The group’s leader, or emir, still maintained the ultimate say over strategic matters, but the group’s members were encouraged to function semi-autonomously at the operational and tactical levels.<sup>51</sup> This model helped al-Qaeda balance the competing priorities of global versus local, affording regional commanders the necessary leverage to tailor the leadership’s objectives to local conditions.

45 Colin P. Clarke and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “How Will Jihadist Strategy Evolve as the Islamic State Declines?” *War on the Rocks*, November 10, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/how-will-jihadist-strategy-evolve-as-the-islamic-state-declines/>

46 Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, “How Al-Qaeda Works,” p.68.

47 On al-Qaeda’s connections to the Madrid attack, see Fernando Reinares, *Al-Qaeda’s Revenge: The 2004 Madrid Train Bombings*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017; on the London 7/7 attacks, see Raffaello Pantucci, “We Love Death as You Love Life.” *Britain’s Suburban Terrorists*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015.

48 Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Kyle Dabruzzi, “Is Al Qaeda’s Central Leadership Still Relevant?” *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2008, pp.27-36, <https://www.meforum.org/1875/is-al-qaedas-central-leadership-still-relevant>

49 ADP 6-0 Mission Command, Headquarters: Department of the Army, May 2012, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/adp6\\_o.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/adp6_o.pdf)

50 James D. Sharpe, Jr. and Thomas E. Creviston, “Understanding Mission Command,” July 10, 2013, [https://www.army.mil/article/106872/understanding\\_mission\\_command](https://www.army.mil/article/106872/understanding_mission_command)

51 Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, “How Al-Qaeda Works,” p.76.

## Staff

Nearly 80 percent of al-Qaeda's members in Afghanistan were killed immediately after 9/11.<sup>52</sup> For most organizations, being reduced to one-fifth of their previous operating capacity would be a crippling blow. But al-Qaeda was able to rebound in part by focusing on the professional development of its junior commanders. Al-Qaeda boasted a "deep bench" that helped supply "experienced young officials capable of filling a leadership vacuum should their superiors be removed from the battlefield," which they often were.<sup>53</sup>

Even though al-Qaeda suffered such critical losses, the upper echelon of the group was well-placed to rebuild the organization. Moreover, as it expanded throughout this phase, al-Qaeda affiliates would groom new leadership, including high-profile jihadists such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and Anwar al-Awlaki, the charismatic preacher and AQAP member. Throughout this entire period, al-Qaeda was also able to rely on prolific members with extensive experience, including Abu Yahya al-Libi, Saif al-Adel, and Ilyas Kashmiri. Al-Qaeda even boasted an American as one of its chief propagandists, Adam Gadahn, or Azzam the American.<sup>54</sup>

## Skills

Not only did al-Qaeda lose more than 80 percent of its members in the initial months following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, but equally devastating was that just as much, if not more, of its military capabilities and infrastructure were also destroyed.<sup>55</sup> This meant that al-Qaeda would need to rebuild its organization and in all likelihood be forced to do so with less-experienced militants. To minimize the impact of this loss of skills in the organization, al-Qaeda also sought to replenish its ranks by utilizing "talent spotters" who worked to identify recruits that offered a hint of specialized skills and the psychological make-up to hack it as a member of the group.<sup>56</sup> By expanding into Yemen and other conflict zones, al-Qaeda was able to regenerate its network by recruiting new members with the skills necessary to plot spectacular attacks, as witnessed by AQAP's continued obsession with attacking civilian aircraft.

The middle managers of al-Qaeda became "critical to forging linkages as well as facilitating the flow of information, resources, skills, and strategic direction between the top and the bottom of the organization."<sup>57</sup> A careful study of the network responsible for carrying out the 7/7 attacks in London reveals that the individuals most central to the plot—including Omar Khyam, Mohammed Qayum Khan, Abu Munthir, and Salahuddin Amin, formed the backbone of an al-Qaeda facilitation network that helped raise funds, procure materials, and transmit messages between the group's leadership in Pakistan and members of the plot in the UK.<sup>58</sup>

## Systems

Although al-Qaeda's leadership survived the initial assault by U.S. military forces in Afghanistan and survived by escaping to Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas

<sup>52</sup> Lawrence Wright, "The Master Plan," *New Yorker*, September 11, 2006, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/09/11/the-master-plan>

<sup>53</sup> Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works," p.75.

<sup>54</sup> Raffi Khatchadourian, "Azzam the American," *The New Yorker*, January 22, 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/01/22/azzam-the-american>

<sup>55</sup> Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Secret History of al Qaeda*, Berkeley: 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Mia Bloom, "Constructing Expertise: Terrorist Recruitment and 'Talent Spotting' in the PIRA, Al Qaeda, and ISIS," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 40:7, 2017, p.615.

<sup>57</sup> Neumann et al., "Middle Managers," p. 829.

<sup>58</sup> Seth G. Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of al Qaeda Since 9/11*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012.

(FATA), the organization's systems were under constant strain from a comprehensive counter-terrorism approach that included both kinetic and non-kinetic approaches to disrupt proper functioning. Unmanned drone strikes, special operations forces (SOF) raids and signals intelligence (SIGINT) were used in an attempt to strangle al-Qaeda's freedom of movement and ability to communicate.<sup>59</sup> Countering the financing of terrorism also became a critical pillar in the fight against al-Qaeda's ability to raise funds, eventually putting al-Qaeda in a position where it had to seek money from its affiliates.<sup>60</sup>

Despite immense counter-terrorism pressure, al-Qaeda still managed to "maintain frequent communications with their counterparts elsewhere," even if its lines of communication were somewhat strained from the stunted information flow that inevitably resulted from the tradeoff between communication and operational security.<sup>61</sup> It is likely that communication problems were responsible for the delay of the release of a document titled "General Guidelines for Jihad," which was the group's attempt to rein in and more closely manage the actions of its affiliates.<sup>62</sup> And although al-Qaeda emphasized expansion during this period, "homegrown cells and regional affiliates of the 'system of systems'" continued to look to the leadership for "overall theological inspiration and strategic guidance, along with tactical support, training, and resourcing."<sup>63</sup> Rosenau and Powell reiterate this theme in their research, noting that while affiliates might not always comply with the "expressed wishes" of core al-Qaeda, they continued to turn to consult its leaders for "high-level direction."<sup>64</sup> Moreover, even while hiding in some of the most austere terrain on Earth, al-Qaeda's leadership continued to operate a global logistics infrastructure. As proof, between 2004 and 2011, more than half of the most serious terrorist plots against the West had operational or training links to Pakistan, where al-Qaeda was based.<sup>65</sup>

## Shared Values

The issue of shared values was at the forefront of al-Qaeda's transformation throughout this period. Driven largely by the group's expansion, bin Laden and Zawahiri grew concerned that franchise groups in North Africa and the Levant would go rogue and, in the process, sully the brand al-Qaeda went to such great lengths to refine and manage. Beginning in earnest in 2007, al-Qaeda's leaders began to provide specific guidance to its affiliates on the priorities most important to the core group.<sup>66</sup> Given that between January 2005 and 2011, more than forty different organizations formed in alignment with al-Qaeda and its strategic objectives, some kind of internal recalibration was perhaps long overdue.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, given the difficulties presented by internal rifts that

<sup>59</sup> On drones see Asfandyr Mir, "What Explains Counterterrorism Effectiveness? Evidence from the U.S. Drone War in Pakistan," *International Security*, Vol.43, Iss.2, Fall 2018, pp.45-83, [https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/full/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00331](https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/full/10.1162/isec_a_00331); on SIGINT see Daniel Byman, "The Intelligence War on Terrorism," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.29, Iss.6, 2014, pp.837-863, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02684527.2013.851876?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

<sup>60</sup> Colin P. Clarke, *Terrorism, Inc.: The Financing of Terrorism, Insurgency and Irregular Warfare*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015; see also, Juan Zarate, *Treasury's War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare*, New York: Public Affairs, 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, "How Al-Qaeda Works," p.94.

<sup>62</sup> Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al Qaeda and Its Consequences*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p.222, fn 14.

<sup>63</sup> Martin Rudner, "Al Qaeda's Twenty-Year Strategic Plan: The Current Phase of Global Terror," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 36:12, 2013, p. 957.

<sup>64</sup> William Rosenau and Alexander Powell, "Al-Qaeda Core: A Case Study," Center for Naval Analysis (CAN) Report, October 2017, p.5, [https://www.cna.org/cna\\_files/pdf/DIM-2017-U-016117-2Rev.pdf](https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/DIM-2017-U-016117-2Rev.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> Paul Cruickshank, "The Militant Pipeline," *New America Foundation*, July 6, 2011, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/the-militant-pipeline/>

<sup>66</sup> Cragin, "Recent History," pp.812-813

<sup>67</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Kyle Dabruzzi, "Is Al Qaeda's Central Leadership Still Relevant?" *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2008, pp.27-36, <https://www.meforum.org/1875/is-al-qaedas-central-leadership-still-relevant>

emerged from the franchise model, chief among them the fallout between al-Qaeda core and AQI, recentralizing control consumed a significant amount of the leadership's bandwidth during this phase.

In May 2011, bin Laden was killed by U.S. Special Forces raid on his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. It would now be incumbent upon al-Qaeda's longtime deputy, al-Zawahiri, to help al-Qaeda remain as a cohesive entity and lead it through one of its most turbulent periods. Lacking bin Laden's charisma and hero-like status within the global jihadist movement, Zawahiri would be forced to rely even more closely on the shared values that formed the foundation of the organization. With the onset of the Arab Spring and the loss of its leader, al-Qaeda was once again poised to transform, entering the next phase of its evolution with a turn inward, adopting what Daveed Gartenstein-Ross has dubbed a "covert growth strategy" aimed at expanding its presence while taking advantage of the West's reluctance to intervene in the Middle East and North Africa to prop up sclerotic regimes and the autocrats, tyrants, and dictators who led them.

## 2012-present: Post-bin Laden Al-Qaeda the Struggle to Survive

In the beginning of its third and current phase, al-Qaeda expanded through the development of more franchises, officially establishing affiliate relationships with al-Shabaab in Somalia (2012), Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria (2012), and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)<sup>68</sup> in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (2014). And while this expansion covered territory stretching from the Horn of Africa to South Asia, the story of post bin-Laden al-Qaeda has primarily been driven by the group's attempt to remain relevant in Syria and its competition with the Islamic State. Indeed, the center of gravity for al-Qaeda has shifted from South Asia to the Levant. To capitalize on the opportunities that the Syrian civil war presented to al-Qaeda, the group moved significant assets from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Levant in September 2014.<sup>69</sup> This development constitutes a major change and one with implications still not fully understood by counter-terrorism officials worldwide.

For al-Qaeda, this most recent phase has witnessed several key developments: its leadership has focused on joining local insurgencies, not completely usurping them, engaging in parasitic behaviors compared to IS's more predatory approach; unlike the Islamic State, al-Qaeda has been careful not to overreach by fighting too many enemies at once; it has pursued an aggressive media strategy, even if its output is not nearly as sophisticated or aesthetically inviting as that produced by IS; and finally, it has primarily focused on parochial concerns in an attempt to build political legitimacy and grassroots support, while IS adopted the slogan "remain and expand" with the objective of growing its caliphate beyond Iraq and Syria.<sup>70</sup>

Al-Qaeda's evolution in Syria epitomizes some of the challenges and opportunities facing the group in the future. In what is now well-documented recent history, Jabhat al Nusra

<sup>68</sup> The Soufan Center, "Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS): The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia," January 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/al-qaeda-in-the-indian-subcontinent-aqis-the-nucleus-of-jihad-in-south-asia/>

<sup>69</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Introduction," in Aaron Y. Zelin, ed., *How al-Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State: The Nature of the Current Threat*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, June 2017, p.5, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-al-qaeda-survived-drones-uprisings-and-the-islamic-state>

<sup>70</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "Al-Qaeda's Resurrection," Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), March 6, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>

was established in Syria in January of 2012 but split from the Islamic State in April of the following year.<sup>71</sup> Jabhat al Nusra's leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, made a public pledge of allegiance to Zawahiri and al-Qaeda, and maintained an open affiliation for the next several years.<sup>72</sup> In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra rebranded itself to become Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS).<sup>73</sup> A mere six months later, in January 2017, JFS joined an umbrella organization with Noor al-Deen al-Zenki, Liwa al-Haqq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, and Jaysh al-Sunna, as well as defectors from Ahrar Sham who had formed Jaysh Ahrar.<sup>74</sup> This subsequent rebranded led to the formation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, otherwise known as HTS.<sup>75</sup>

There was real disagreement among counter-terrorism experts about whether this newest rebranding from JFS to HTS signified a true split with al-Qaeda or something less consequential. Throughout the course of 2017, however, it was becoming increasingly clear that the splintering was more than a feint. Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir confirmed the split with al-Qaeda and in March 2017, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi criticized the break between HTS and an al-Qaeda, blaming the former for the fallout.<sup>76</sup> In October 2017, Zawahiri further admonished HTS.<sup>77</sup> That same month, several veteran al-Qaeda members formed a group named Ansar al-Furqan.<sup>78</sup> At the end of November, Zawahiri released yet another message, this time stressing the fact that a real split had indeed occurred between HTS and al-Qaeda.<sup>79</sup> Throughout the summer of 2019, HTS has behaved in ways completely inimical to al-Qaeda's worldview. The group publicly acknowledged its willingness to abide by an externally negotiated cease-fire crafted by Turkey, Iran, and Russia. HTS also engages in periodic elections, devolves power to a technocratic (rather than theocratic) government, and has periodically sought to establish a political dialogue with Western countries.<sup>80</sup> Finally, in late February 2018, a group of veteran al-Qaeda operatives, many of whom are Jordanian and draw inspiration from Maqdisi and Abu Qatada, formed Hurras al-Din (HAD), or the Guardians of Religion Organization.<sup>81</sup> As of the time of this writing in late 2019, the group is still not an official

<sup>71</sup> Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda's Complex Balancing Act in Syria," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.11, No.6, 2017, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/661/html>

<sup>73</sup> Colin Clarke, "Al-Nusra is Stronger Than Ever," *The Cipher Brief*, November 2, 2016, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/al-nusra-stronger-than-ever>; see also, Daniel Byman, "What's In a Name? The New Jabhat al-Nusra and the Future of Al Qaeda," *Lawfare*, October 24, 2016, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/whats-name-new-jabhat-al-nusra-and-future-al-qaeda>; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Thomas Joscelyn, "Rebranding Terror: Nusra's Renaming is Part of al Qaeda's Plan," *Foreign Affairs*, August 28, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-08-28/rebranding-terror>; and Hassan Hassan, "Jabhat al Nusra and Al Qaeda: The Riddle, The Ruse, The Reality," *The National*, November 1, 2017 <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/jabhat-al-nusra-and-al-qaeda-the-riddle-the-ruse-and-the-reality-1.672221>

<sup>74</sup> Mona Alami, "HTS Continues to Evolve," *The Atlantic Council*, December 1, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/hts-continues-to-evolve>

<sup>75</sup> Colin Clarke, "Al Qaeda in Syria Can Change Its Name, But Not Its Stripes," *The Cipher Brief*, March 23, 2017, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/al-qaeda-in-syria-can-change-its-name-but-not-its-stripes>

<sup>76</sup> Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," *Jihadica*, March 29, 2017, <http://www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad/> for more detail, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda Dispute: Primary Texts (IX)," February 5, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/02/the-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-qaeda-dispute-primary-8>

<sup>77</sup> Seth G. Jones et al., "Al Qaeda's Struggling Campaign in Syria: Past, Present, and Future," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), April 2018, p.2, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180403\\_Jones\\_AlQaedaSyria\\_Web.pdf?BFUos3SNr4wr\\_quys45nmWdrObYPOQjA](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180403_Jones_AlQaedaSyria_Web.pdf?BFUos3SNr4wr_quys45nmWdrObYPOQjA)

<sup>78</sup> Charles Lister, "Turkey's Idlib Incursion and the HTS Question: Understanding the Long Game in Syria," *War on the Rocks*, October 31, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/turkeys-idlib-incursion-and-the-hts-question-understanding-the-long-game-in-syria/>

<sup>79</sup> Charles Lister, "How al-Qa'ida Lost Control of Its Syrian Affiliate," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.11, Iss.12, February 2018, p.6, <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaeda-lost-control-syrian-affiliate-inside-story/>

<sup>80</sup> Charles Lister, "What's Next for Al-Qaeda After the Death of Hamza bin Laden?" *Middle East Institute*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/whats-next-al-qaeda-after-death-hamza-bin-laden>

<sup>81</sup> Hassan Hassan, "Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.11, Iss.9, October 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/two-houses-divided-conflict-syria-shaped-future-jihadism/>

al-Qaeda affiliate although many believe this is inevitable and that negotiations to formalize the relationship are ongoing.<sup>82</sup>

## Strategy

Throughout this phase, al-Qaeda has consistently attempted to portray itself throughout the Middle East as the moderate alternative to the Islamic State, and in many ways this image makeover has been successful—al-Qaeda-linked groups have secured direct and indirect state support in both Yemen and Syria.<sup>83</sup> Drawing specifically on the example of al-Qaeda in Syria, some scholars have compared the group’s strategy to that of a “lean startup model,” wherein strategy can be developed in both a bottom-up and top-down fashion, which for al-Qaeda means through its senior leadership as well as through its regional representatives.<sup>84</sup>

In both its propaganda and internal communications, al-Qaeda has warned against not heeding important lessons from failed jihadist campaigns in Algeria and Iraq, where draconian measures alienated local populations. Zawahiri’s release of the aforementioned *General Guidelines for Jihad* was an attempt to remind al-Qaeda’s followers of the importance of its brand, urging them to eschew attacks on civilians and juxtaposing the group’s methodology to that of the Islamic State.

## Structure

Al-Qaeda might have been sidelined during the Arab Spring protests, but in the immediate aftermath of these revolutions, it dispersed militants into new locales and sought to take advantage of power vacuums wherever they appeared. Front groups were created through Ansar al-Sharia branches in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, while al-Qaeda-linked militants have sought to make themselves indistinguishable from rebel fighters in Yemen, Mali, and Syria.<sup>85</sup> Al-Qaeda spread its roots throughout West Africa and built an infrastructure that would allow its affiliates to conduct a string of devastating high-profile attacks in Bamako, Mali in November 2015; Ougadougou, Burkina Faso in January 2016; and Grand-Bassam, Cote d’Ivoire in March 2016. In terms of publicity, these attacks were largely overshadowed by Islamic State attacks in Paris and Brussels during this same period, but it nevertheless demonstrated al-Qaeda’s ability to cultivate networks in weak states and ungoverned spaces.<sup>86</sup> Throughout this period, a growing proxy war in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran has fueled sectarianism and wrought further devastation in countries like Yemen, much to the benefit of al-Qaeda.<sup>87</sup>

Al-Qaeda has devoted significant resources to ensuring a presence in Syria and other parts of the Middle East through various Ansar al-Sharia offshoots, but its activities in

<sup>82</sup> Tore Refslund Hamming and Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “The True Story of al-Qaeda’s Demise and Resurgence in Syria,” *Lawfare*, April 8, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/true-story-al-qaedas-demise-and-resurgence-syria>

<sup>83</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Varsha Koduvayur, “How to Win Friends and Wage Jihad: Understanding al-Qaeda’s Pragmatism,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2019, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-07-01/how-win-friends-and-wage-jihad?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter\\_cta&utm\\_campaign=cta\\_share\\_buttons](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-07-01/how-win-friends-and-wage-jihad?utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter_cta&utm_campaign=cta_share_buttons)

<sup>84</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “A Strategic History of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s Formation,” in Aaron Y. Zelin, ed., *How al-Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State: The Nature of the Current Threat*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, June 2017, pp.34-35. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-al-qaeda-survived-drones-uprisings-and-the-islamic-state>

<sup>85</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “Introduction,” in Aaron Y. Zelin, ed., *How al-Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State: The Nature of the Current Threat*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, June 2017, pp.3-5, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-al-qaeda-survived-drones-uprisings-and-the-islamic-state>

<sup>86</sup> Colin P. Clarke, “How Terrorist Groups Learn: Implications for al-Qaeda,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI)*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/03/how-terrorist-groups-learn-implications-for-al-qaeda/>

<sup>87</sup> Bruce Riedel, “Al-Qaida Today, 18 Years After 9/11,” *Brookings*, September 10, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/09/10/al-qaeda-today-18-years-after-9-11/>

Africa appear to be more geared toward the long-term. Al-Qaeda is moving assets and allocating resources for jihad in Africa, which it sees as a major opportunity for future expansion.<sup>88</sup> Al-Qaeda has increased its operations throughout the entire African continent, dominating large swaths of territory in West Africa and the Horn of Africa, while also laying the foundation for a comeback in parts of North Africa.<sup>89</sup> As it has in Syria, al-Qaeda has restructured its organization in West Africa, with Ansar al-Din, al-Murabitoun, and AQIM's Sahara branch merging to form Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), or "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims."<sup>90</sup>

## Style

Given the death of bin Laden, it seemed imminent that al-Qaeda would undergo at least a slight change in style. Terrorism scholars have widely observed that in the current phase, al-Qaeda has laid out somewhat more limited aims with a focus on incrementalism. Charles Lister calls this "controlled pragmatism"<sup>91</sup> while Ali Soufan has dubbed it "strategic patience."<sup>92</sup> Hoffman agrees, arguing that al-Qaeda's current trajectory is a deliberate one that involves the group "quietly and patiently rebuilding" as it lets IS bear the brunt of the West's counterterrorism campaign.<sup>93</sup>

This pragmatism has been evident in how the group continues to operate in Syria, where even in the face of serious challenges resulting from splintering and fractionalization, al-Qaeda has remained acutely aware as ever about the importance of how its brand is perceived by locals.<sup>94</sup> Accordingly, the group has maneuvered deftly to position itself as a serious player in a country located in the heart of the Middle East. Although some of the alliances have since dissolved, in Syria, al-Qaeda has demonstrated a propensity for deal-making and coalition-building at various points.<sup>95</sup>

## Staff

Throughout the post-bin Laden phase, al-Qaeda has dealt with numerous leadership setbacks, especially where its affiliates are concerned. In July 2015, one of al-Qaeda's leading bombmakers, Abu Khalil al-Sudani, was killed in Afghanistan. Al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane was killed in September 2014, while AQAP leader and al-Qaeda's number two overall Nasir al-Wuhayshi was killed in June 2015. All three al-Qaeda leaders were killed by U.S. air strikes. A report from the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)

<sup>88</sup> Jacob Wirtschafter and Karim John Gadiaga, "Africa Becomes the New Battleground for ISIS and al-Qaeda as They Lose Ground in Mideast," USA Today, October 25, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/10/25/africa-becomes-new-battleground-isis-and-al-qaeda-they-lose-ground-mideast/796148001/>

<sup>89</sup> Glen Carey, "Al Qaeda is as Strong as Ever After Rebuilding Itself, U.S. Says," *Bloomberg*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-01/al-qaeda-is-as-strong-as-ever-after-rebuilding-itself-u-s-says>

<sup>90</sup> "Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM): TNT Terrorism Backgrounder," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2018, <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/jamaat-nasr-al-islam-wal-muslimin>

<sup>91</sup> Charles Lister, "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham: To Unite or Divide the Ranks?" in Aaron Y. Zelin, ed., *How al-Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State: The Nature of the Current Threat*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, June 2017, p.20. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-al-qaeda-survived-drones-uprisings-and-the-islamic-state>

<sup>92</sup> Ali Soufan, "The Resurgent Threat of Al Qaeda," *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-resurgent-threat-of-al-qaeda-1492786991>

<sup>93</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "Al Qaeda: Quietly and Patiently Rebuilding," *The Cipher Brief*, December 30, 2016, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/al-qaeda-quietly-and-patiently-rebuilding>; see also, Bruce Hoffman, "Al-Qaeda's Resurrection," *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>

<sup>94</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "The Moderate Face of Al-Qaeda," *Foreign Affairs*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-24/moderate-face-al-qaeda>

<sup>95</sup> Colin P. Clarke and Assaf Moghadam, "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," *Orbis*, Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), Vol.62, Iss.3, 2018, p.350, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438718300425>

on terrorism noted that the deaths of al-Wuhayshi and al-Sudani “hindered the organization’s core functions.”<sup>96</sup>

Considering al-Qaeda’s recruitment struggles during this phase, especially when confronted with the much flashier style exhibited by the Islamic State, Zawahiri does not exactly inspire confidence. Al-Qaeda’s precarious situation in Syria is instructive. At various points, Zawahiri has “had difficulty communicating with local groups” and overall, has “been slow to respond to debates in the field”<sup>97</sup> Some prominent terrorism analysts suggested that Hamza bin Laden, Osama’s son, was in line to be the next leader to assume control of al-Qaeda, and was being groomed by Zawahiri for a prominent position?<sup>98</sup> Experts at one point referred to Hamza as the group’s “leader in waiting.”<sup>99</sup> But Hamza’s death was announced in late July 2019, meaning that al-Qaeda will not be able to count on Osama’s scion to lead the group into the next generation.<sup>100</sup>

## Skills

Writing in 2016, Brian Michael Jenkins observed that “al Qaeda’s central command has been reduced to exhorting others to fight.”<sup>101</sup> Al-Qaeda senior leadership has been significantly attenuated, few would debate that, but even in its more reduced form, the group can continue to be effective by harnessing the skills it has honed over the past three decades. Hinting at what this future might look like, J.M. Berger has predicted that the organization “could conceivably revert to something like its pre-September 11 model – an underground actor that operates behind the scenes, lending professionalism to other jihadist organisations through training, money or by providing operatives.”<sup>102</sup> And even if al-Qaeda exists in a much weaker state than it has in previous phases, the group has demonstrated tangible interest in recruiting individuals with the skills to help the group engineer a spectacular terrorist attack. Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani woman known as “Lady Al-Qaeda” who studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and received a doctorate from Brandeis University, was arrested in Afghanistan and found with sodium cyanide and documents detailing how to make chemical weapons, so-called “dirty bombs” and how to weaponize the Ebola virus.<sup>103</sup>

Throughout his tenure as al-Qaeda’s leader, bin Laden consistently used Al-Qaeda’s media platforms to emphasize issues that many across the Arab and Islamic world are passionate about, including the liberation of Palestine, the American occupation of Iraq, and the corruption of “apostate” governments and regimes throughout the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>104</sup> Al-Qaeda has always been acutely aware of the importance of the

<sup>96</sup> The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Counterterrorism 2016 Calendar, [https://www.dni.gov/nctc/pdfs/ct\\_calendar.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/nctc/pdfs/ct_calendar.pdf)

<sup>97</sup> Seth G. Jones et al., “Al Qaeda’s Struggling Campaign in Syria: Past, Present, and Future,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), April 2018, p.2, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180403\\_Jones\\_AlQaedaSyria\\_Web.pdf?BFUos3SNr4wr\\_quys45nmWdrObYPOQjA](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180403_Jones_AlQaedaSyria_Web.pdf?BFUos3SNr4wr_quys45nmWdrObYPOQjA)

<sup>98</sup> Barbara Sude, “Assessing Al-Qa’ida Central’s Resilience,” CTC Sentinel, Vol.8, Iss.9, September 2015, <https://ctc.usma.edu/assessing-al-qaida-centrals-resilience/>

<sup>99</sup> Ali Soufan, “Hamza Bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to Al-Qa’ida’s Leader in Waiting?” CTC Sentinel, Vol.10, Iss.8, September 2017, <https://ctc.usma.edu/hamza-bin-ladin-from-steadfast-son-to-al-qaidas-leader-in-waiting/>  
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/01/like-terrorist-father-like-terrorist-son/>

<sup>101</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, “Fifteen Years After 9/11: A Preliminary Balance Sheet,” RAND Corporation, Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee on September 21, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT458.html>

<sup>102</sup> J.M. Berger, “Jabhat al-Nusra Splits from al Qaeda,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)- The Hague, July 28, 2016, <https://icct.nl/publication/jabhat-al-nusra-splits-from-al-qaeda/>

<sup>103</sup> Shane Harris, “Lady Al-Qaeda: The World’s Most Wanted Woman,” *Foreign Policy*, August 26, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/26/lady-al-qaeda-the-worlds-most-wanted-woman/>; see also, Terence McCoy, “Lady Al-Qaeda: The American-educated PhD The Islamic State Desperately Wants Freed,” *Washington Post*, August 28, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/28/lady-al-qaeda-the-american-educated-doctor-the-islamic-state-desperately-wants-freed/?utm\\_term=.90147564778a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/28/lady-al-qaeda-the-american-educated-doctor-the-islamic-state-desperately-wants-freed/?utm_term=.90147564778a)

<sup>104</sup> Marc Lynch, “Al Qaeda’s Media Strategies,” *The National Interest*, Spring 2006 Vol. 83, pp. 50–52.

information environment and nowhere is this more evident than in the captured correspondence between Zawahiri and Zarqawi in which the former admonished the latter and reminded him that “more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media.”<sup>105</sup> While al-Qaeda has produced media since its inception, over the years its presentation has grown more nuanced and Zawahiri prizes the “jihadi information media” as an indispensable element of al-Qaeda’s war against the United States.<sup>106</sup> To keep pace with technology and media savvy groups like IS, al-Qaeda will be forced to recruit younger members who have experience in social media, publication, graphic design, and other emerging technologies poised to become more prominent in the future.<sup>107</sup>

## Systems

In the post- bin Laden phase, al-Qaeda has shifted emphasis from its core organization to the activities of its affiliates. Some would argue that AQAP, AQIM, and al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria have eclipsed the core in importance.<sup>108</sup> In many ways, AQAP has proven itself as the archetype or model for how al-Qaeda wants its affiliates to function. As chaos spread throughout Yemen, this provided an opening to AQAP, which subsequently mobilized its forces to take control of the governorates of Abyan and Shabwa.<sup>109</sup> Once it was in control of territory, AQAP launched public works projects in the areas under its control, including refurbishing water wells and fixing damaged infrastructure, while also providing basic necessities to the poorest citizens.<sup>110</sup> Perhaps most troubling of all, AQAP has managed to cut deals with nation-states, including the United Arab Emirates, which has been accused of colluding with the militants in Yemen’s civil war.<sup>111</sup> Other recent reporting suggests that Bahrain has cooperated with al-Qaeda militants to target Shia dissidents in that country, making it clear that in some parts of the world, governments and security services see the terrorist group as a viable partner in certain situations.<sup>112</sup>

AQAP has developed relationships with al-Shabaab to help the Somali group improve its bombmaking capabilities while also partnering with AQIM in areas of media operations, logistics, facilitation, and funding.<sup>113</sup> And AQIM has passed on critical training to other groups in Africa including the al-Qaeda-linked elements of Boko Haram as well as Ansaru.<sup>114</sup> The focus on cooperation between affiliates is intended to make al-Qaeda’s systems more robust and resilient to exogenous shocks, including the loss of leadership

<sup>105</sup> Catherine A. Theohary and John Rollins, “Terrorist Use of the Internet: Information Operations in Cyberspace,” Congressional Research Service (CRS), March 8, 2011, p.3.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Scheuer, “Al Qaeda’s Media Doctrine,” The Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 4, No. 5, May 30, 2007; see also, Manuel R. Torres et al., “Analysis and Evolution of Global Jihadist Media Propaganda,” *Terrorism & Political Violence*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2006, pp. 399–421; and Philip Seib, “The Al-Qaeda Media Machine,” *Military Review*, May/June 2008, pp.79.

<sup>107</sup> The Islamic State has a deliberate and targeted recruitment strategy to reach militants with a background in media and production, see Colin Clarke and Charlie Winter, “The Islamic State May Be Failing, But Its Strategic Communications Legacy is Here to Stay,” *War on the Rocks*, August 17, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/the-islamic-state-may-be-failing-but-its-strategic-communications-legacy-is-here-to-stay/>

<sup>108</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, “Al Qaeda After Bin Laden: Implications for American Strategy,” Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee, June 22, 2011, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT365.html>

<sup>109</sup> Lucas Winter, “The Ansar of Yemen: The Houthis and al-Qaeda,” *Small Wars Journal*, May 1, 2013, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-ansar-of-yemen-the-huthis-and-al-qaeda>

<sup>110</sup> Michael Horton, “Fighting the Long War: The Evolution of Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.10, Iss.1, January 2017, <https://ctc.usma.edu/fighting-the-long-war-the-evolution-of-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula/>

<sup>111</sup> Maggie Michael et al., “AP Investigation: US allies, al-Qaida Battle Rebels in Yemen,” *Associated Press*, August 6, 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/f38788a561d74ca78c77cb43612d50da>

<sup>112</sup> “Bahrain: Playing with Fire,” *Al Jazeera World*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/aljazeeraaworld/2019/07/bahrain-playing-fire-190727093038378.html>

<sup>113</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “Introduction,” in Aaron Y. Zelin, ed., *How al-Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State: The Nature of the Current Threat*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, June 2017, p.6, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-al-qaeda-survived-drones-uprisings-and-the-islamic-state>

<sup>114</sup> Jacob Zenn, “Boko Haram’s Al-Qaeda Affiliation: A Response to ‘Five Myths about Boko Haram,’” *Lawfare*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/boko-harams-al-qaeda-affiliation-response-five-myths-about-boko-haram>

or critical safe havens.<sup>115</sup> Al-Qaeda's move to expand its system into Africa has been met with increased counter-terrorism pressure from the U.S. over the past several years.<sup>116</sup> Yet in the summer of 2018, the Trump administration a massive shift in priorities from combating terrorism to countering Russia and China. The Department of Defense acknowledged that most of the troop withdrawals and scaled-back missions were expected to occur in Central and West Africa, precisely where al-Qaeda is surging.<sup>117</sup>

## Shared Values

As al-Qaeda continues to undergo change as an organization, one of the most pressing questions for policymakers and government officials is to what extent the group is still focused on attacking the West. Does the absence of spectacular attacks attributed to al-Qaeda during this phase represent a lack of capability, or merely a shift in priorities? As discussed earlier in this paper, al-Qaeda has long viewed terrorist attacks as a means of galvanizing support for the global jihad, but more recently the group has transitioned to focusing on the local aspects of conflicts where its fighters are embedded.

Writing in late 2016, terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman referenced an Al Jazeera interview from May 2015 in which Julani explained that Zawahiri had instructed him not to use Syria as a sanctuary from which to attack the West.<sup>118</sup> Yet, around this same time, the U.S. government repeatedly voiced concerns about the so-called Khorasan Group, which was a small cadre of al-Qaeda operatives dispatched by Zawahiri from Pakistan to Syria with the explicit intention to attack the West.<sup>119</sup>

Perhaps to avoid any confusion over whether the U.S. and the West remained in al-Qaeda's crosshairs, the group released a series of messages over the next several years. In a message from April 2017, Zawahiri reiterated the importance of al-Qaeda's global struggle.<sup>120</sup> The next month, messages from both Osama bin Laden's son Hamza and AQAP emir Qassim al-Raimi both released videos urging al-Qaeda's followers to launch attacks in the West.<sup>121</sup> Unsurprisingly, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Dan Coats concluded in Congressional testimony that "Europe will remain vulnerable to terrorist attacks, and elements of both ISIS and al-Qa'ida are likely to continue to direct and

<sup>115</sup> For more on terrorist group cooperation, see Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017; and Tricia Bacon. *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.

<sup>116</sup> Joe Penney et al., "C.I.A. Drone Mission, Curtailed by Obama, Is Expanded in Africa Under Trump," New York Times, September 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/09/world/africa/cia-drones-africa-military.html>; and Declan Walsh and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Strikes Qaeda Target in Southern Libya, Expanding Shadow War There," New York Times, March 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/25/world/middleeast/us-bombs-qaeda-libya.html>

<sup>117</sup> Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Prepares to Reduce Troops and Shed Missions in Africa," New York Times, August 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/01/world/africa/us-withdraw-troops-africa.html>; see also, Eric Schmitt, "Where Terrorism is Rising in Africa and the U.S. is Leaving," New York Times, March 1, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/01/world/africa/africa-terror-attacks.html>

<sup>118</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "The Global Terror Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration," CTC Sentinel, Vol.9, Iss.11, November/December 2016, p.4, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-global-terror-threat-and-counterterrorism-challenges-facing-the-next-administration/>; see also, Charles Lister, "An Internal Struggle: Al Qaeda's Syrian Affiliate is Grappling With Its Identity," Brookings Institution, May 31, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/05/31/an-internal-struggle-al-qaedas-syrian-affiliate-is-grappling-with-its-identity/>

<sup>119</sup> Clayton Thomas, "Al Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa," Congressional Research Service (CRS), February 5, 2018, p.11, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43756.pdf>

<sup>120</sup> Charles Lister, "How al-Qa'ida Lost Control of Its Syrian Affiliate," CTC Sentinel, Vol.11, Iss.12, February 2018, p.6, <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaeda-lost-control-syrian-affiliate-inside-story/>

<sup>121</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Introduction," in Aaron Y. Zelin, ed., *How al-Qaeda Survived Drones, Uprisings, and the Islamic State: The Nature of the Current Threat*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, June 2017, p.6, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-al-qaeda-survived-drones-uprisings-and-the-islamic-state>

enable plots against targets in Europe.”<sup>122</sup> Ansar al-Furqan, the previously referenced group of al-Qaeda veterans and loyalists formed in Syria in November 2017, allegedly adhered to “newly stated objectives in Syria: guerilla warfare with an eye on targeting the West.”<sup>123</sup> Yet another speech from Zawahiri, this one titled “America is the First Enemy of the Muslims” and released in March 2018, incited al-Qaeda’s followers to strike the U.S.<sup>124</sup> A recent United Nations assessment of al-Qaeda’s links to groups in Syria observed the following: “HTS and HAD are assessed to share a history and an ideology but to differ on policy. HTS centred its agenda on [Syria], with no interest in conducting attacks abroad. HAD, by contrast, was said to have a more international outlook.”<sup>125</sup> On the eighteenth anniversary of the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Zawahiri urged al-Qaeda supporters to launch attacks against the West.<sup>126</sup> None of this should be surprising, as al-Qaeda’s overarching narrative has always been that the West is at war with Islam.<sup>127</sup>

## Final Analysis of McKinsey 7S Framework as an Analytical Tool

Taken together, this analysis of the McKinsey 7S framework aims to trace the evolution al-Qaeda over three distinct time periods by examining critical components of the terrorist organisation that can be compared to various processes of multinational corporations. After more than three decades of successes and failures, what does the future hold for al-Qaeda? Assessing the group’s transformation reveals several of the most salient factors leading to its remarkable duration and longevity.

For al-Qaeda, three categories within the McKinsey 7S Framework were particularly important to the group being able to achieve such longevity—structure, skills, and systems. Strategy, style, staff, and shared values were also important, but not to the same extent or for the same reasons. Structure allowed al-Qaeda the flexibility to function as a hybrid entity, which in turn allowed the group to survive the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism. Skills were essential to al-Qaeda’s ability to regenerate its network following the loss of critical personnel. And a systems focus helped al-Qaeda to operate an efficient logistics capability, which has been crucial to bolstering both operational and organizational capabilities, as well as to supporting its goals of strengthening the global jihadist movement as a whole.

<sup>122</sup> Daniel R. Coats, Statement for the Record, Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, May 11, 2017,

<https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/SSCI%20Unclassified%20SFR%20-%20Final.pdf>

<sup>123</sup> Charles Lister, “Turkey’s Idlib Incursion and the HTS Question: Understanding the Long Game in Syria,” War on the Rocks, October 31, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/turkeys-idlib-incursion-and-the-hts-question-understanding-the-long-game-in-syria/>

<sup>124</sup> Tore Refslund Hamming and Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “The True Story of al-Qaeda’s Demise and Resurgence in Syria,” Lawfare, April 8, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/true-story-al-qaedas-demise-and-resurgence-syria>; see also, Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda Chief Says America is the ‘First Enemy’ of Muslims,” Long War Journal, March 21, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/03/al-qaeda-chief-says-america-is-the-first-enemy-of-muslims.php>

<sup>125</sup> Letter dated 15 July 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council. <https://undocs.org/S/2019/570>

<sup>126</sup> “On 9/11, al Qaeda Leader Calls for Attacks on U.S. and Slams Jihad ‘Backtrackers,’” CBS News, September 11, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/september-11-attacks-anniversary-al-qaeda-leader-ayman-al-zawahri-calls-for-attacks-on-us-today-2019-09-11/>

<sup>127</sup> Alex P. Schmid, “Al-Qaeda’s ‘Single Narrative’ and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives: The State of Knowledge,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)- The Hague, September 2014, <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/Schmid-Al-Qaeda-s-Single-Narrative-and-Attempts-to-Develop-Counter-Narratives-January-2014.pdf>

## Strategy

Over time, al-Qaeda's strategy has evolved from grand pronouncements of building a worldwide caliphate to more pragmatic means of achieving parochial objectives in different regions of the world. Al-Qaeda has always viewed militant jihad as its overarching strategy to accomplish a range of goals, some of which have been more politically focused than others. Following the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, al-Qaeda came under immense pressure from a global counterterrorism regime that sought its destruction. By moving to a franchise model, al-Qaeda was able to offload certain responsibilities to its affiliates, although this also came with drawbacks for the group, particularly preference divergence with its branches in Iraq, Algeria, and elsewhere. Its current efforts are focused on ingratiating itself at a grassroots level in Syria, Yemen, and throughout parts of West Africa in an effort to cement political legitimacy.<sup>128</sup> This is not to suggest that strategy is not important to al-Qaeda specifically or to terrorist organizations more broadly. However, strategy figured less prominently as the organization's command-and-control network was weakened.

## Style

While style was important for how al-Qaeda gained traction and ultimately a growing following, due in large part to bin Laden's ability to promote his vision in the media, it mattered more for how the group approached intra-group roles and relationships. Because al-Qaeda fashioned itself akin to a start-up company, with ideas solicited from multiple levels of the organization, it was able to engage in mutually beneficial relationships with a range of actors. Cooperation could either be one-off or a more long-term marriage of convenience, as evidenced by its relationship with the Afghan Taliban. The ability to function semi-autonomously at the operational and tactical levels effectively lowered barriers to entry for aspiring jihadists, while also insulating the upper reaches of the group's leadership if nodes on the periphery were compromised. A flexible style continues to be evident today as witnessed by al-Qaeda's outreach efforts in the Syrian civil war.

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One of al-Qaeda's pioneering efforts was to form a truly transnational network, which allowed the leadership to tap into a global pool of militants with specialized expertise and their own local contacts. This greatly expanded al-Qaeda's options to conduct attacks, or merely sub-contract the work to trusted operatives with likeminded objectives. Over time, as the international dragnet to disrupt al-Qaeda's network expanded, the leadership based in Pakistan was forced to adapt, relying more on individuals like Zarqawi who frequently chafed at following orders from bin Laden and Zawahiri.

Al-Qaeda's reliance mid-level commanders allowed it to build a cadre of experienced and committed members that provided a sense of resilience, even as a U.S.-led drone campaign relentlessly stalked the group's leadership in Pakistan's FATA for a decade and a half after 9/11. With the death of Hamza bin Laden, al-Qaeda must be concerned over the future of its organization, especially with current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri growing older and seemingly less effective in his ability to inspire younger jihadists. Still, there are a few of al-Qaeda's "old guard" who are active, including longtime jihadi commander

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<sup>128</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Varsha Koduvayar, "How To Win Friends and Wage Jihad," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-07-01/how-win-friends-and-wage-jihad>

Abu Muhammad al-Masri, who as Ali Soufan has noted, has played a critical role as both an operational commander and as a member of the governing shura council.<sup>129</sup>

## Shared Values

Shared values are important to any organization, but perhaps more so in the early stages of its formation, when coherence is essential to survival. Over time, as organizations grow and expand, priorities could shift and values once held in high esteem by an organization could become less important. For al-Qaeda, the primary tension at the heart of the organization has always been a struggle between those who wanted to prioritize targeting local regimes in the Middle East and North Africa deemed to be apostate governments, and others who interpreted al-Qaeda's core mission as bringing the United States to its knees, crippling the West economically, and launching spectacular attacks against non-believers and infidels. Thus, shared values have always been a subject open to debate within al-Qaeda and in fact, its hybrid organizational structure allows for multiple points of view among its members, even when seemingly contradictory.

## Structure

Structure has been among the most important components of al-Qaeda's ability to survive. Even as it maintained a bureaucratic infrastructure, al-Qaeda sought out working relationships with other entities that shared a similar enough outlook, even if longer term objectives diverged. Senior leadership provided appropriate oversight, delegating responsibility on tactical issues even to individuals who were more akin to contractors than actual members of the group. This allowed al-Qaeda to operate on a truly global scale, something that would have been otherwise impossible given the breadth of operations planned across time and space.

Within the organization, leaders often pride themselves on the ability of al-Qaeda to regenerate its networks and move into power vacuums as they emerge. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, al-Qaeda strengthened its connections throughout Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, while also moving to embed its fighters with groups operating in Yemen, Mali, and Syria. The group's ability to move assets into place and take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves demonstrates an agility few terrorist groups can boast.<sup>130</sup> Al-Qaeda's structure, as outlined in one of its official documents titled "Structure and By-Laws," stressed the need for "the right man for the job without taking into consideration previous regional, organizational affiliations, or ethnicity."<sup>131</sup> This demonstrates a clear understanding that by adopting novel organizational structures and a willingness to collaborate with independent terrorist actors, al-Qaeda would be more able to achieve what Moghadam calls "multidirectional and integrative forms of innovation."<sup>132</sup>

The greater decentralization has afforded al-Qaeda the flexibility to function as a hybrid entity, which in turn allowed the group to survive the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism. While the core leadership's influence has certainly been attenuated, as al-Qaeda enters 2020 it is structured in such a way that allows it to pursue quasi-political objectives in Syria while building an affiliate in the Indian subcontinent entirely committed to militancy. In other words, al-Qaeda is attempting to "walk the line between ultra-

<sup>129</sup> Ali Soufan, "Next in Line to Lead al-Qa'ida: A Profile of Abu Muhammad al-Masri," *CTC Sentinel*, November 2019,

<sup>130</sup> Colin P. Clarke and Charles Lister, "Al-Qaeda is Ready to Attack You Again," *Foreign Policy*, September 4, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/04/al-qaeda-is-ready-to-attack-you-again/>

<sup>131</sup> "Al-Qa'ida's Structure and Bylaws," Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), AFGP-2002-600178, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/al-qaidas-structure-and-bylaws-original-language-2/>

<sup>132</sup> Moghadam, "How Al-Qaeda Innovates," pp.470-471.

extremist (or exclusivist) and controlled-extremist (or inclusivist) trends within an increasingly disparate international movement.”<sup>133</sup> The hybrid nature of al-Qaeda’s structure means that it can simultaneously protect its remaining senior leadership while also working at a local level to consolidate its influence wherever the movement maintains a presence.<sup>134</sup>

The group is well-positioned to operate as a hybrid entity and has always retained elements of a hybrid structure. Because the group remained at once both strong at its core but also capable at the periphery, particularly valuable to the functioning of al-Qaeda are those who act as critical links between the leadership “and the rest of the vast, amorphous movement.”<sup>135</sup> Its evolution over time and ability to adapt to extenuating circumstances, some of them self-inflicted, has nevertheless been impressive. Once considered merely a vanguard group of exiles with weak roots in social networks throughout the Middle East, over decades al-Qaeda has transformed itself into a broad movement whose central leadership provides strategic guidelines while its branches embed in regional social movements.<sup>136</sup>

## Skills

Al-Qaeda emphasized tacit knowledge transfer among the organization and the groups it sought to support. In the early to mid-1990s, al-Qaeda dispatched militants to the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Horn of Africa, as well as Central and Southeast Asia to transmit specialized tactics and expertise. Skills can be taught and are not personality-dependent like some of the most important attributes of leadership. Finding the right individuals with the necessary skills to carry out complex operations can help organizations regenerate after the loss of key operatives. The cell that carried out the 7/7 attacks in London was a critical part of an al-Qaeda facilitation network that operated globally and demonstrated proficiency across multiple areas including finance, procurement, and communications

As aforementioned, to replenish its ranks, al-Qaeda relied on “talent spotters” whose responsibility it was to identify militants with specialized skills and the discipline to function effectively as part of a global network that practiced paramount operations security.<sup>137</sup> In some ways, success for al-Qaeda could mean an organization that more closely resembles the earliest versions of itself—a group operating surreptitiously to provide key facilitation and logistical expertise to other jihadist groups, acting as a force multiplier. As the strategic environment continues to shift, terrorist organizations adapt or risk growing irrelevant. Accordingly, groups like al-Qaeda are in constant need of new infusions of skills to keep pace with emerging trends.

Skills were essential to al-Qaeda’s ability to regenerate its network following the loss of critical personnel. And for al-Qaeda, the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of its arch-rival in October 2019, could usher in an era of rapprochement between itself and

<sup>133</sup> Charles Lister, “The Syria Effect: Al-Qaeda Fractures,” Hudson Institute, December 11, 2019, <https://www.hudson.org/research/15533-the-syria-effect-al-qaeda-fractures#>

<sup>134</sup> Bruce Hoffman, “Al-Qaeda’s Resurrection,” Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), March 6, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>

<sup>135</sup> Burke, p.231.

<sup>136</sup> Colin P. Clarke and Barak Mendelsohn, “Al-Qaeda’s Ruthless Pragmatism Makes It More Dangerous Than the Islamic State,” Reuters, October 27, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-counterterrorism-commentary-idUSKCN12RoAL>

<sup>137</sup> Mia Bloom, “Constructing Expertise: Terrorist Recruitment and ‘Talent Spotting’ in the PIRA, Al Qaeda, and ISIS,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 40:7, 2017, p.615.

the Islamic State.<sup>138</sup> And if willing reconciliation does not occur, al-Qaeda could look to poach Islamic State fighters and seek to replenish its network with battle-hardened operatives seasoned by years of fighting in Iraq and Syria.<sup>139</sup>

## Systems

Al-Qaeda's most valuable asset has always been logistics. It had inhouse expertise, to be sure, but it was also able to deconflict and engender collaboration among various entities, many if not most of them forced to operate clandestinely, to coordinate a transnational organization with operations in dozens of countries worldwide. Al-Qaeda is a facilitator, a central node in a broad and redundant network with the logistical capabilities to operate on a global level. Al-Qaeda has always excelled at "connecting terrorist nodes—pairing skill sets, financing and operatives" and its brain trust has been adroit at connecting militants "with specific skill sets across regions" but perhaps most importantly, what separates al-Qaeda from other terrorist groups is its understanding of how to manage its logistical resources.<sup>140</sup> As Sageman pointed out a decade and a half ago, al-Qaeda's calling card will always be its ability to launch attacks that result in large-scale lethality, which will always require "coordination, skills, and resources."<sup>141</sup>

Al-Qaeda's understanding of the value of systems has been apparent from its well-maintained bureaucracy and penchant for detailed record keeping. Both the group's "Constitutional Charter" and its employment contracts reveal an organization deeply committed to process.<sup>142</sup> The importance of a systems approach extends beyond mere bureaucracy, however, and includes a commitment to ensuring open lines of communication between the core and the periphery. As discussed above, al-Qaeda also uses its affiliate organizations to network with each other and transfer tacit knowledge in areas ranging from explosives to media and propaganda.

And a systems focus helped al-Qaeda to operate an efficient logistics capability, which has been crucial to bolstering both operational and organizational capabilities, as well as to supporting its goals of strengthening the global jihadist movement as a whole, even if that happens while al-Qaeda as an organizational entity becomes less overtly influential or prominent. Accordingly, it is important not to mistake decentralization for fragmentation. On the contrary, in recent years, al-Qaeda's "overall trajectory has been toward political consolidation."<sup>143</sup> This consolidation does not preclude the possibility that al-Qaeda could also seek to target the West, even as it makes inroads among political powerbrokers in the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and large swaths of West Africa.

<sup>138</sup> Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, "After Baghdadi: What Hurts the Islamic State May Help Al-Qaeda," Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), October 29, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/after-baghdadi-what-hurts-islamic-state-may-help-al-qaeda>

<sup>139</sup> Rita Katz, "What Baghdadi's Death Means for al-Qaeda—and Why It Matters," *Daily Beast*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/what-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadis-death-means-for-al-qaeda-and-why-it-matters>

<sup>140</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Kyle Dabruzzi, "Is Al Qaeda's Central Leadership Still Relevant?" *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2008, pp.27-36, <https://www.meforum.org/1875/is-al-qaedas-central-leadership-still-relevant>

<sup>141</sup> Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p.54.

<sup>142</sup> See "Employment Contract," Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), AFGP-2002-600045, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/employment-contract-original-language-2/>; and, "Al-Qa'ida Constitutional Charter," Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), AFGP-2002-600175, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/al-qaeda-constitutional-charter-original-language-2/>

<sup>143</sup> Asfandiyar Mir, "Al-Qaeda's Continuing Challenge to the United States," *Lawfare*, September 8, 2019, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/al-qaedas-continuing-challenge-united-states>

## Conclusion

What factors could propel al-Qaeda into its fourth decade? With an easing of counterterrorism pressure offering the group new life in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, al-Qaeda is well-positioned to take advantage of the pending drawdown of U.S. troops from key battlefields in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan.<sup>144</sup> The Trump administration has shifted its focus from the global war on terrorism to great power competition with near-peer state adversaries like China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran. A recent report from the United Nations concluded that, “While there is as yet little evidence of a re-emerging direct global threat from Al-Qaida, improved leadership and enhanced communication will probably increase the threat over time, as will any rise in the tendency, already visible in some regions, of ISIL supporters to join Al-Qaida.”<sup>145</sup>

In early August, the Trump administration announced that in a preliminary deal with the Taliban, the U.S. would be withdrawing as many as 6,000 troops from Afghanistan.<sup>146</sup> Although the agreement fell apart, the Trump administration resumed talks in late November, and the President has repeatedly promised to withdraw a significant portion of troops from Afghanistan.<sup>147</sup> An announcement of a drawdown of 4,000 troops was expected by the end of 2019 and Trump has promised to have all U.S. troops out of Afghanistan before November 2020.<sup>148</sup> A withdrawal of American troops could provide al-Qaeda with the operational space necessary to rebuild its organizations in South Asia and once again begin using Afghanistan as a hub to plan external operations against the West.<sup>149</sup> And even as Trump has declared his intentions to withdraw troops from conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan, he also put in motion plans to send an additional 2,000 troops to Saudi Arabia to deter Iranian aggression. The presence of U.S. troops on Saudi soil was one of bin Laden’s main rallying cries and was frequently featured in al-Qaeda propaganda.

Al-Qaeda’s three most effective lines of effort (e.g. structure, skills, and systems) will go a long way toward the new strategy of covert growth that has been defined by a period of quietly and patiently rebuilding, which already seems to be paying off.<sup>150</sup> Accordingly, the benefits of these lines of effort—a flexible, hybrid structure; the ability to regenerate its networks; and a logistical infrastructure that remains crucial to al-Qaeda’s operational and organizational capabilities—are apparent. Terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, will seek to harness emerging technologies and could potentially benefit from developments in end-to-end encryption, additive manufacturing (3-D printing), unmanned aerial

<sup>144</sup> Seth G. Jones, “Will Al-Qaeda Make a Comeback? The Factors That Will Determine Its Success,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 7, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-08-07/will-al-qaeda-make-comeback>

<sup>145</sup> “Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” United Nations Security Council, July 27, 2018, <https://undocs.org/S/2018/705>

<sup>146</sup> Dan Lamothe et al., “U.S. Preparing to Withdraw Thousands of Troops From Afghanistan in Initial Deal With Taliban,” *Washington Post*, August 1, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-preparing-to-withdraw-thousands-of-troops-from-afghanistan-in-initial-deal-with-taliban/2019/08/01/01e97126-b3ac-11e9-8f6c-7828e68cb15f\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f33f7632ebaf](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-preparing-to-withdraw-thousands-of-troops-from-afghanistan-in-initial-deal-with-taliban/2019/08/01/01e97126-b3ac-11e9-8f6c-7828e68cb15f_story.html?utm_term=.f33f7632ebaf)

<sup>147</sup> Michael Crowley, “Trump Visits Afghanistan and Says He Reopened Talks With Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/28/us/politics/trump-afghanistan.html>

<sup>148</sup> Courtney Kube and Carol E. Lee, “Trump Admin Intends to Announce Withdrawal of 4,000 Troops from Afghanistan,” *NBC News*, December 14, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-admin-intends-announce-withdrawal-more-4-000-troops-afghanistan-n1102201>

<sup>149</sup> Bruce Hoffman and Seth G. Jones, “Early Withdrawal Will Lead to More Terrorism,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/early-withdrawal-will-lead-to-more-terrorism-11547165066>

<sup>150</sup> Glen Carey, “Al-Qaeda is as Strong as Ever After Rebuilding Itself, Says U.S.,” *Bloomberg*, August 2, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-01/al-qaeda-is-as-strong-as-ever-after-rebuilding-itself-u-s-says>

systems (UAS), and virtual currencies.<sup>151</sup> Al-Qaeda will also rely on its logistics infrastructure to utilize social media to both recruit and spread propaganda.

As al-Qaeda continues to morph and transform, it will become increasingly more difficult to assess it as an organization, even as the group remains dangerous. According to Congressional testimony from Peter Bergen on the eve of the eighteenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, even with a network that has been enervated, counterterrorism officials would be wise not to dismiss the threat still posed by the group.<sup>152</sup> As the November 2019 attack by a Saudi Air Force officer at a U.S. military base in Pensacola, Florida demonstrates, al-Qaeda, and not just the Islamic State, still serves as a source of inspiration for jihadists and extremists.<sup>153</sup> The group's ideology has long been described as "resonant and resilient."<sup>154</sup> Al-Qaeda has also used its propaganda arm to discuss a range of issues that gain traction with Muslims worldwide, including the rise of right-wing extremism—senior leaders called for revenge attacks in the wake of the Christchurch, New Zealand mosque attack. Al-Qaeda propaganda has also highlighted the mistreatment of Muslims by governments in India, China, Myanmar, and elsewhere. Al-Qaeda will continue to take advantage of opportunities that arise from geopolitical developments, including civil wars and insurgencies, the enduring nature of sectarianism in the Islamic world, as well as Western countries' shifting priorities, and thus diversion of resources, away from counterterrorism and toward great power competition with nation-states.

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<sup>151</sup> For more on how some of these technologies might be employed, see Audrey Kurth Cronin, *Power to the People: How Open Technological Innovation is Arming Tomorrow's Terrorists*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

<sup>152</sup> Peter Bergen, "Global Terrorism: Threats to the Homeland, Part 1," House Committee on Homeland Security, September 10, 2019, <https://homeland.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony-Bergen.pdf>

<sup>153</sup> Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, "Tweet Purportedly from Gunman in Pensacola Navy Base Shooting Suggests al Qaeda Inspiration," *CNN.com*, December 8, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/07/us/pensacola-shooting-gunman-analysis/index.html>

<sup>154</sup> Ali Soufan, "How to Beat Salafi-Jihadi Terrorism," Cato Institute, February 7, 2018, <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2018/02/07/ali-soufan/how-beat-salafi-jihadi-terrorism>; see also, Andrew Liepman and Philip Mudd, "Al Qaeda is Down. Al Qaedaism Isn't," *CNN.com*, January 6, 2014, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2014/01/06/al-qaeda-is-down-al-qaedism-isnt/>

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Colin P. Clarke is a political scientist at the RAND Corporation, where his research focuses on terrorism, insurgency and criminal networks. At RAND, Clarke has directed studies on ISIS financing, the future of terrorism and transnational crime, and lessons learned from all insurgencies between the end of WWII and 2009.

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Clarke has briefed his research at a range of national and international security forums, including the U.S. Army War College, US Air Force Special Operations School, Society for Terrorism Research International Conference, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and the Counter ISIS Financing Group (CIFG), which is part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Clarke has testified as an expert witness on terrorism before the United States Congress, including both the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the House Homeland Security Committee.

He appears frequently in the media, has been quoted in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal, and has published his research in Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, The Atlantic, Politico, Lawfare, and numerous scholarly journals, including Small Wars & Insurgencies, Historical Methods, and Military Operations Research.

Clarke is the author of *Terrorism, Inc.: The Financing of Terrorism, Insurgency, and Irregular Warfare*, published in 2015 by Praeger Security International and is currently working on *Terrorism: The Essential Reference Guide*, also by Praeger and due to be published in 2018.

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# Using the McKinsey 7S Framework to Assess Al-Qaeda Over Three Decades: Lessons for the Future

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