

The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda

Lessons in Post-September 11 Transnational Terrorism

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou

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About the Author

Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou is Associate Fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) and Visiting Professor at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. Previously Director of Research of the International Council on Human Rights Policy (1998-2004) and Associate Director of the Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research at Harvard University (2004-2008), where he founded the Transnational Non-State Armed Groups Project, he served as Ambassador and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Mauritania (2008-2009). A frequent international media commentator and widely published author, Dr. Mohamedou recently published *Understanding Al Qaeda – Changing War and Global Politics* (London, Pluto Press, 2011) and *Contre-Croisade – Le 11 Septembre et le Retournement du Monde* (Paris, l'Harmattan, 2011).

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Executive Summary

Al Qaeda rose and fell between 1989 and 2011. Ten years after it conducted its most lethal operation in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, it had mutated into a movement that no longer resembled what it started as. From a hierarchical and centralised group, led by the bicephalous leadership of Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al Dhawahiri, it had become a regionalised and decentralised organisation with several competing leaders following the death of Bin Laden in May 2011.

The impact of Al Qaeda on global politics is then a long standing affair. Its inception reaches back decades to the contemporary emergence and transformation of a non-state armed group which has sought to create unprecedented regional and international dynamics anchored in a privatised usage of force for a political purpose. Beyond solely triggering domestic or foreign crises, this organisation has aimed, in particular, to adapt, achieve and prosper open-endedly as it pursued such novel strategy. It is in that sense that the metamorphosis of Al Qaeda was planned for all along. From the very beginning, this was an inevitable way for the group to ensure its perennation and set it apart from previous and subsequent Islamist factions.

Whereas traditional Islamist groups began establishing themselves through a combination of religious preaching, political discourse and, most importantly, networks of domestic social services, Al Qaeda's first embodiment was to serve as a welfare service provider originating in the rentier state Arabian Gulf but one whose action was fundamentally oriented outwardly and militarily with the Jihad against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The ascendancy of this rationale meant not the premorse of a frustrated local ambition but, rather, that domestic opposition to the "near enemy" should be separated strategically from the "far enemy".

In such a general context of failed Arab and Islamic state-building, Al Qaeda sprang forth as a politico-religious project built upon (i) the relocation of authority, (ii) the circumventing of the state, and (iii) the militaristic empowerment of a non-state actor.

However, the early “successes” of Al Qaeda masked a self-inflicted structural defeat. If initially the rapid proliferation of the five regional representations of Al Qaeda were arguably an added indication of the organisation’s impressive global reach (in Europe, the Nile Valley, the Levant, the Maghreb and the Gulf) and its ability to operate transnationally years after a War on Terror had been launched against it, it gradually emerged that the regional entities differed significantly and their relationship to the mother Al Qaeda was, at best, tenuous.

Whereas in its first fifteen years Al Qaeda had been able to advance globally, cumulatively, and against important odds – for each tactical loss, Al Qaeda came to earn a strategic gain: retreat in Afghanistan but advance in Iraq; confined leadership but proliferating cells; curtailed physical movement but global, transnational impact; additional enemies but expanding recruits – in the period 2006-2011, its leadership had morphed into a meta-commandment ultimately offering only politico-religious and militaro-strategic commentary, not operational direction.

All in all, what can be read as a regionalisation strategy of Al Qaeda ended up confusing the global picture of the organisation. The necessary elasticity the group adopted, partly voluntarily, partly as a way to adapt to the international counter-terrorism campaign, created an ever-growing distance with already independent units.

Osama Bin Laden’s disappearance from Al Qaeda and the War on Terror scene marks therefore the end of the era of the original group set up in Afghanistan. It opens a new phase in which the regional franchises will enact further their existing independence and in so doing endow the conflict with a new configuration by stretching the centre of gravity of transnational terrorism.

Introduction

“Spirits that I’ve called
My commands ignore”
Goethe, *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*

By the summer of 2011, Al Qaeda had completed the mission it set out to achieve in the summer of 1989 and ten years after it had conducted its most lethal attack in New York and Washington. Against all odds, the latter phases in the conflict with its foes – outliving the George W. Bush administration; engineering further political decrepitude in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan; attempting new attacks on Western targets; and expanding into new territories such as the Sahel – were but additional opportunities to the group’s global gains in the 1990s and early 2000s. The death, on 2 May 2011, of its founder and leader, Osama Bin Laden, would essentially confirm the formal close of that saga, as the man had in many respects become obsolete in relation to his own organisation.

Osama Bin Laden’s saga has been about changing war and global politics. He has wrestled an embryonic and local group of aging, if battle-tested, “Arab Afghans”, merged it with a younger generation of transnational fighters and transformed the whole into a full-blown, dynamic and technologically advanced organisation (Al Qaeda), before embracing the loosening and diffused expansion of that matured structure into an umbrella federation (which can be termed the mother Al Qaeda, *Al Qaeda Al Oum*).

In that context, the conventional wisdom rehearsed from 2004 onwards held that it was the transformation of Al Qaeda that had been the key reason for its survival in the face of the massive international War on Terror campaign. Close examination of the group’s history reveals that the strength of Al Qaeda has laid, in point of fact, not so much in its post-11 September mutation but more so in its faculty to innovate constantly. In contradistinction to its state adversaries who professed to be on the offensive but were more often than not confined to a structurally defensive position, this transnational terrorist group had been writing its own story all along.

Al Qaeda reached, however, a paradoxical milestone. In spite of the constant augmentation of its global impact, the organisation ultimately found itself immersed in the local management of conflicts. Since the 11 September 2001 attacks it conducted on the United States, this strategic about-face had played out with an urgent concern; the avoidance of predictability. Whereas the raid on New York and Washington had endowed them overnight with global notoriety, the group's leaders did not seek to replicate those strikes in the United States. Blurring the picture, the group opted to shift its attention to Europe targeting those states – Spain on 11 March 2004 and the United Kingdom on 7 July 2005 – whose leaders had assisted the United States in its war in Iraq.

When that pattern proved successful, putting on high alert other European states, Al Qaeda did not expand it. Ushering another phase in its post-11 September strategy, it proceeded to concentrate on the conflict in Iraq. After spearheading the insurgency in that country, it took a back seat and moved on, from 2006 onwards, to support the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan.¹ By 2011, the United States had lost more than two thousand men in Afghanistan with 2009 and 2010 as the two deadliest years. This scheme has had an unexpected twist illustrated by the return of Al Qaeda to its initial ground and to the very aim it had originally sought to steer away from, namely the engagement of local rulers.

What, in the 1990s and early 2000s, constituted the group's unique strength – thought-out geographic expansion on a rebooted transnational terrorist mode² – ended up, in the mid-to-late 2000s, being held back by the immediacy and “provincialism” of the various franchises' immediate concerns. To the extent that Al Qaeda developed as a transnational movement but got trapped by local contingencies, we may, in the final analysis, ask whether ultimately there is compatibility between transnational and local terrorist movements.

Paradoxically, twenty years into this design, the dominant narratology about Al Qaeda almost systematically takes on the form of an awkward scientific resistance

1 On the evolution of the relations between Al Qaeda and the Taliban, see S. S. Shahzad, *Inside Al Qaeda and the Taliban – 9/11 and Beyond*, London, Pluto, 2011.

2 During the 1970s, terrorism experienced a first moment of transnationalism wherein various groups with different identities and objectives, such as Baader-Meinhof, Black September, the Japanese Red Brigades, and Carlos, had collaborated, often joining forces during coordinated attacks to constitute a global threat against a number of states.

to registering the innovation of Al Qaeda's terrorist project. From hatred, barbarity and irrationality, we are merely being presented with a brew of elements rooted in denial, reductionism, and personalisation of that martial revolution of terror. Some attempt to discern the mechanics of what would make Al Qaeda disappear thus bypassing the lasting impact of a group which has already reached the status of being emulated (in Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq, Somalia, Indonesia, etc.). Hence, "attacking the ideology", "breaking links", "denying sanctuary" or indeed "engaging peripherally" remained policy options that held sway within many quarters. These analyses share a common emphasis on locating the initiative on the states' side, painting the misleading portrait of a reactive Al Qaeda only moving about along gaps created by these states' actions and inactions, when it is precisely the opposite that has so often proved true.

Though there has been an increasing recognition of "structural" reasons that allowed for Al Qaeda to blossom, the overall perception persists that this "superempowered competition" is a reality guided by the centre. Whereas it can be argued that by forcing its enemy to allocate attention and resources (including political capital and military materiel) to areas unforeseen originally in this conflict, Al Qaeda impacted events more consequentially from the periphery in.

A full decade after Al Qaeda struck in the heart of the United States triggering worldwide transformations, seasoned observers of the organisation would admit that Al Qaeda was far from defeated, that it may take years before its founding leaders could be apprehended or killed and that name-calling and self-imagined moral superiority would certainly not win the day against Al Qaeda.³ There is partial truth in that, for Osama Bin Laden's disappearance may well come to sound the death knell for the mother Al Qaeda (*Al Qaeda al Oum*) while simultaneously releasing the lethal energy of mini-Al Qaedas round the world with more unpredictability and proliferating counterterrorism fronts.

³ See P. L. Bergen, *The Longest War – The Enduring Conflict Between America and Al Qaeda*, New York, The Free Press, 2011, p. 348; and M. Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 186.

The Birth of Militarised Islamism

If, by the late 2000s, the group created and led by Osama Bin Laden and his associate Ayman al Dhawahiri⁴ had grown into a *sui generis* powerful global private entity, the transnational war inaugurated by Al Qaeda in the late 1980s represented initially merely a change of scale and nature of the post-colonial struggle in the Arab and Muslim region. This genesis owed much to an original displacement of the focus of opposition of several Islamist groups from battling local regimes, denounced as authoritarian, corrupt and repressive, to fighting directly the United States for their support of said regimes. Such evolution – a so-called move from *al adou al qareeb* (the near enemy, i.e., the local dictatorial regimes) to *al adou al ba'eed* (the far enemy; i.e., their Western supporters), as referred to in the literature of the Islamist groups⁵ – represented a conscious choice on the part of a number of Islamist leaders that had come to cluster in Afghanistan during the period of the Soviet invasion. The strategic shift was also the objective result of the standoffed and at times counterproductive results of the domestic campaigns, which many of these Islamist groups had led in their respective countries, notably in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen and Algeria.

Rebellion as Export

Historically, from the early 1950s to the mid-1990s, the majority of Arab and Muslim states had been faced, at varying degrees, with steadily mounting Islamist

4 A surgeon by profession, al Dhawahiri (usually misspelled al Zawahiri due to colloquial Egyptian pronunciation) is a radical Egyptian Islamist theologian who, after having been imprisoned in Egypt in the early 1980s, moved to Afghanistan where he merged his Egyptian Islamic Jihad organisation into Al Qaeda associating himself with Bin Laden (whom he had first met in Saudi Arabia in 1986).

5 See, notably, the writings of Abu Musab Al Suri; P. Cruickshank and M. H. Ali, "Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 30, Iss. 1, 2007, pp. 1-14; and B. Lia, *Architect of the Global Jihad – The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al Suri*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008.

opposition. The context of these conflicts was fourfold. First, in many of these places, the post-colonial governments that had inherited power following the countries' respective independence in the 1950s and 1960s had often simply succeeded over existing religious options put forth by alternative (Islamist) groups beginning in the 1930s and 1940s. Consequently, the initial contest fought around the founding of the state persisted beyond the time of the induction of the nationalistic regimes; an often violent engagement playing out at times underground, other times on the front pages of newspapers.

Second, the new nationalist regimes rapidly, if not immediately, displayed authoritarian tendencies of which the Islamist groups, by virtue both of their oppositional nature and of their threatening potential, bore, first and foremost, the full brunt. Egypt, in particular, was the theatre of a violent struggle between the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Muslim Brotherhood. The writings of one of the leading figures and theologians of that movement, Sayyid Qutb, executed in August 1966, would, in time, become a leading ideological reference for Al Qaeda and an influence on many of its actors, Ayman al Dhawahiri in particular (who often quotes Qutb's major work *Ma'aleem Fil Tareeq* or "Milestones along the Way" published in 1964).

Third, the failed political performance by the regimes and poor socioeconomic record pushed many segments within these societies into the open arms of the Islamists. From a peripheral option, the alternative choice and social services offered by the groups therefore gained ground, ultimately reaching mainstream appeal in many a Muslim theatre. In Algeria, for instance, a better-organised and more committed Islamist Salvation Front (FIS) than the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) earned in the period 1988-1991 the support of vast numbers of Algerians, leading to an electoral victory in December 1991 thwarted by the military. Finally, the multifaceted association – political, economic, military and of a security type – that most of these governments came to enjoy with the United States allowed, insofar as that country provided support to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the Islamist groups to denounce the "corruption" and "crimes" committed against both their specific countries and the *Umma* (Islamic community) at large.

Underlying this tapestry were accusations levelled by the Islamist groups at unmet expectations and ineffective state-building conducted by the post-colonial regimes. Religiosity aside, the arguments centered on the fact that in failing to resist the influence of the United States (and the West generally), the successive and different governments in the region had defrauded their populations. Consequently, it was argued, these states were illegitimate and had to be removed, including by forceful measures.

It is important to recognise this oft-overlooked motivation of most Islamist groups, including Al Qaeda, which, as it were, claim much legitimacy from the very illegitimacy that resulted from the post-colonial state performance and behaviour.⁶ Too, this state-building dimension ought not – particularly in the aftermath of the 2003 US war on Iraq – be confused with the state fragmentation scenario. When the contemporary Islamist movements were set in motion, dispute resolution procedures did exist and the differences were merely concerned with the identity of those who would be allowed to capture the state and conduct the “building” work. In a context like the one in Iraq after the American and British invasion of 2003, or indeed in Afghanistan for most of the second half of the 20th Century and into the 21st, the contest was far more primal and encompassed wider ethnic, tribal and sectarian dimensions.

In contradistinction to most previous forms of Islamism, Al Qaeda was therefore inherently and eminently martial in its conception and outlook. Whether in Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq or elsewhere in the Muslim world, the leading Islamist groups that had seen the day over the past half century had overwhelmingly been characterised by solid social anchoring in their national environment, and the presence of a program of societal reform which expressed itself in ideological and religious terms. Groups like *Al Ikhwan al Muslimeen* (the Muslim Brotherhood) rose up as popular movements in 1930s Egypt, grew radical in the midst of mid-1950s nationalist turmoil and Nasserist repression and embraced violence temporarily before renouncing it formally. Others like *Al Jabha Al Islamiya lil Inqadb* (Islamist Salvation Front (FIS)) in Algeria built a large infrastructure of social welfare services at the communal level in response to the severe socioeconomic crisis that rocked that country throughout the 1980s, and hoped, to no avail, to achieve political power through the ballot in 1991.

6 For a comprehensive history of contemporary Islamist movements, see F. Burgat, *Islamism in the Shadow of Al Qaeda*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2008.

If, however, the Islamic Brotherhood ended up transcending Egypt's borders with the founding of sister organisations in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, thus expressing an early form of transnationalism and pan-Islamism, and if the Algerian FIS had come in the late 1980s on the heels of Mustapha Bouyali's early 1980s crime-driven *Al Jama'a Al Islamiya Al Musalaba* (Islamic Armed Movement) in that country, both were undeniably first and foremost the expression of local Egyptian and Algerian socioeconomic frustration and political anomie wherein religious revival was seen as remedying state failure and embodying hopes for a better future for the nation.

Removed from such, admittedly limited, belief in the reform of the system on the part of those Islamist factions that began by playing by the rules, Al Qaeda, for its part, was never concerned with electoral contests or national development questions. Al Qaeda started as an Arab-dominated group set up outside of an Arab country with a global Islamist program of action meant first and foremost to counter perceived Western hegemony in Muslim lands, and to respond to that dominion through the use of terroristic force targeting centrally the United States and its allies.

A Transnational Islamist Army

Al Qaeda's *differencia specifica* as a transnational Islamist army was characteristically illustrated by the first set of programmatic actions it undertook during its set-up phase. Between 1989 and 1995, the group's focus was to staff this army and train its men. As Al Qaeda saw it, it had been born as a result of the failure of discredited Arab governments to defend their countries. The evolution towards armed politics of a group of Arab Islamists from the Middle East and North Africa allied with Asian and African Muslims was, in its eyes, the consequence of a dual realisation, wherein private actors came to the conclusion that their states were too weak to defend their citizenry, but equally too strong to be overtaken. At the core of the group's genesis stands, thus, a mixture of defiance, not, as is often argued, hopelessness and despair.⁷

The strategy meant, too, the husbanding of financial and logistical resources

7 A portent of this strategy was the operation conducted by Hezbollah in Beirut on 18 April 1983 against the US Marine barracks and the French paratroopers' headquarters, which had killed 241 Marines and 58 paratroopers and led to the United States' withdrawal from Lebanon.

and the formation of professional, disciplined and dependable soldiers, as well as a corps of officers and permanent contacts. The assertiveness of the movement sprang as well from its battle-hardened status. Starting in the early 1980s, a number of these Islamist militants began migrating to Afghanistan to take part in the resistance against the Soviet occupation. Later known as the “Arab Afghans”, these operators formed rapidly a relatively contiguous group which achieved both regional notoriety and some success in its jihad against the Soviets. In particular, and while liaising with the local Afghan Islamist factions – in time building an alliance with the Taliban (who would take over the country in 1996) and influential local leaders such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf – these Arab fighters came to be organised under a loose coordination. A Palestinian named Abdallah Yusuf Azzam, who had emerged as leader of these “Arab Afghans” set up the office which functioned as an international bureau and serviced some twenty thousand individuals.

Under Azzam’s leadership, the matrix for Al Qaeda thus materialised as a replenishing way station for fighters on their way to the Afghan-Soviet front. Known as *Maktab Al Khadamat lil Mujabideen Al Arab* (Office of Works for the Arab Combatants) and sometimes referred to as *Maktab Al Dhiyafa* (Hospitality House), this office had been set up in Kabul in 1983 to coordinate the increasingly organised activity by those Islamist operatives that had travelled to Afghanistan since the early 1980s to battle, in the name of Jihad, the Russian troops.

To the extent that the “Arab Afghans” were indeed the core membership of Al Qaeda and that their role was instrumental in subsequently establishing Al Qaeda as a successful venture throughout the 1990s and more so in the 2000s, it is important to note that we can, in retrospect, identify three such successive waves of “Arab Afghans”. A first group establishing itself as early as 1980, following Abdullah Azzam’s fatwa declaring it a “*fard ayn*” (personal obligation)⁸

8 Underscoring the flight logic, Azzam had declared: “Whoever can, from among the Arabs, fight jihad in Palestine, then he must start there. And, if he is not capable, then he must set out for Afghanistan.” See Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, *Al Difa’ ‘An Aradi Al Muslimeen – Aham Fouroudh Al I’Yaan* (Defence of the Muslim Lands – The First Obligation after Iman) [belief], mimeographed, 1984. Audio footage of Azzam making the same point was integrated in a 4 July 2007 message by Ayman al Dha-wahiri. Also see Abu al Wali al Masri (Mustapha Hamid), “The History of the Arab Afghans, from the Time of their Arrival in Afghanistan until their Departure with the Taliban”, *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, London, 8-14 December 2004.

on all Muslims to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan was comprised of readymade Islamists, in majority from the Gulf and the Nile Valley, who had already gone through significant engagements with the local governments during the 1970s. As much as these individuals brought in a seasoned dimension to their militancy, they also looked upon the migration to Afghanistan as relief from the stalemated fight against their “near enemy”.

The addition of a second contingent, largely North African, clustered in mid-1986 in the aftermath of the successes encountered by the original group in its involvement in the insurgency against the Soviets, and ahead of the increasing prospects of the latter’s withdrawal. Following the formal set up of Al Qaeda in 1988-1989, a third layer, including arrivals from Europe and the United States, added strength to the organisation and was instrumental, in particular, as preparations were underway for a series of assaults on US targets around the world. Moreover, with the departure of a number of first and second wave fighters (either to their home countries, notably Algeria where the Islamist Salvation Front was becoming engaged in a violent conflict with the government, or to take part in the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina), there was a measure of natural filtering among the fighters of the new generation. In sum, whereas the first group brought in commitment and energy, and the second added numbers and dedication, the third group injected renewal and focus, at a crucial phase.

Hence, the initial Al Qaeda army took the form of a transnational grouping of some twenty thousand men that sprang from three distinct horizons: (i) disbanded, aging, but battle-hardened “Arab Afghans” available in the wake of the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan; (ii) new, younger recruits lured by the appeal of the Afghan “success” story and functioning as mid-level operational actors under the supervision of a guild of senior managers (Abu Ubaida Al Bانشiri, Abu Hafs Al Masri and Abu Zubayda); and, increasingly after the mid-1990s, (iii) secret transnational cells immersed in the Middle East, Europe and Eastern Africa waiting to be activated for a new type of attacks in the Western metropolises. The latter subgroup, which would be best embodied in the Hamburg cell led by Mohammad Atta and which would in time produce the model for the decentralised Al Qaeda from 2006 onwards, was to become the vehicle for the series of spectacular operations led by Al Qaeda in the 1995-2005 decade.

Capitalising on waves of riots and uprisings (notably in Cairo, Casablanca and Algiers in the 1980s), which had sealed the historical failure of the post-colonial Arab state – painting a compelling picture of accumulating resentment, alienation and anomie which would eventually lead to the popular revolutions in 2011 – a modern-day Islamist movement came to be born on the very factor alternatively enabling state-building, namely the reinvention of the “political” sphere through the export of terrorism.

In that sense, Al Qaeda’s action was something akin to a statement that there is nothing inevitable about the vulnerabilities of the states; that their conditions are but products of a history and as such can be remedied similarly, and, more revolutionarily, that violence – including offensive international force – is not solely a state prerogative. Thus usurping authority that traditionally accrued to the state and offering a prescriptive agenda unacceptable internationally, Al Qaeda was from the very beginning immune to statist deterrence.

Globalising and Franchising

In so autonomising the use of force in the 1990s and generating mimetism on the part of several other regional groups in the 2000s, Al Qaeda had taken the international system to pre-Westphalian notions of legitimacy in the conduct of warfare. It also led itself into an impasse as the US-led Global War on Terror replied in kind to the group's transnational attacks with extraterritorial operations that targeted Al Qaeda's leadership and membership throughout the world (with drone attacks in Yemen, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and secret prison sites in Eastern Europe), ultimately leading to Bin Laden's arrest and killing in Abbottabad, Pakistan in May 2011. What is more, as an actor whose very violence was anchored in its ability to disrupt and paralyse its enemies through regular restatement of its indefatigability, Al Qaeda faced a new challenge of its own, namely how to sustain its increasing empowerment without succumbing to overstretch.

In that respect, the 7 July 2005 bombings in London arguably represented the last operation initiated and coordinated directly by the central Al Qaeda organisation. In July 2006, Ayman al Dhawahiri released a videotaped message aired on the Al Jazeera network in which he threatened the United Kingdom of further attacks and presented video footage of a statement by London underground bomber Shehzad Tanweer on the same filmed testament model that the organisation had used for some of the 11 September commando members and released through its Mouassassat Al Sihab media branch. In that respect, the attacks which took place, beginning with the 1 October 2005 bombings in a shopping mall and beachside restaurant in Bali, have arguably been the works of local organisations – which became more prominent in their standings – now loosely inspired by Al Qaeda and acting on their own (even when, for publicity sake, they claimed Al Qaeda links). This development, the result of two coincidental phenomena, namely Al Qaeda's conscious strategy of regionalisation and

decentralisation, and a franchise demand within regional Islamist organisations themselves after the 11 September attacks, would nonetheless paradoxically yield a weakening and confused picture for the original Al Qaeda group. In subsequent years, it would become impossible to speak of Al Qaeda in the singular.

As early as 2002, seemingly compelled as it was to enact a strategic retreat in the face of advancing US and British troops in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda's leadership appeared to have realised the value of multiplying the number of its operational sites, both as a survival mechanism and as a force-multiplier. However, increased surveillance of Islamist pockets in both the Western and Muslim worlds (in mosques, universities, businesses and other organised public venues) rendered the work of the cells far more dangerous and harder to supervise from headquarters under assault in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In such a context, Al Qaeda appeared then to order, in the period 2002-04, a series of operations in the periphery of Western states (in Tunisia, Pakistan, Yemen, Indonesia, Kenya, Morocco, Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia) in order to spread militarily the centre of gravity of the engagement and confuse its opponents, who consequently found themselves unable to know precisely what to expect, where, when and under what guise.

Though a substantial measure of independent decentralised decision-making was already in place, notably in the case of Saudi Arabia, the attacks usually but not exclusively targeted countries whose governments Al Qaeda accused of enabling the US war against it (Germans in Tunisia; Australians in Bali; Israelis in Kenya; Spaniards in Morocco; and so forth). All these attacks were claimed and regular pronouncements made by the organisation in videotaped messages released – usually to Middle Eastern media outlets, notably Al Jazeera – by Al Qaeda's official media branch. The group's savvy use of technology, including sporadic postings on Islamist websites (e.g., ansar.info, al-ekhlaas.com, ansarnet.info, alned.com, jehad.com and azzam.com), was also a distinctive feature of the organisation's *modus operandi* transcending boundaries. To the extent that these operations necessarily relied, in the post-11 September context, on increased independence by mid-level operators (who could select, for instance, the nature of targets), they ended up highlighting to the mother Al Qaeda the value of decentralisation setting the stage for a strategy of regionalisation which appeared to have been pursued actively from 2005 onwards.

A Conglomerate of Affiliates

Generally, we can observe the following in relation to the regionalisation phase in Al Qaeda's history. When the franchises were created *ex nibilo* (Egypt) or when independently-organised existing groups (Somalia's Al Shabaab, Lebanon's Fajr Al Islam) announced that they were ready to rally Al Qaeda, the latter's strategy was minimally impacted and, in the case of the Egyptian attempt, adversely so as there was public opposition to the design on the part of Al Jama'a Al Islamiya. When groups came into existence in the context of a tactical campaign designed carefully by the mother Al Qaeda (weakening the United States in Iraq, exposing Western vulnerabilities in Europe), the strategy was more successful. Finally, when the franchises were established on top of formally existing Islamist groups (Algeria's Salafist Group for Predication and Combat (GSPC, from its commonly-used French appellation, *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*) or conflict hubs (Yemen/Saudi Arabia), there was impact but the newly-created organisations reverted rapidly to their own *modus operandi* (kidnappings in North Africa and insurgency in the Gulf). An important nuance in the Arabian Peninsula is that whereas in Saudi Arabia the insurgency initially failed due to a successful repression campaign by the Saudi authorities, in Yemen the militants' behaviour appeared to shift from 2008 onwards towards more frontal opposition to the state.⁹

As time went by, talk of a reconstituted, strengthened and resurrected Al Qaeda proliferated among officialdom, security experts and the mainstream media. In early 2007, the *New York Times* reported that Al Qaeda was working precisely as Osama Bin Laden had initially envisaged. In July of the same year, using language echoing the prescient August 2001 memorandum to President George W. Bush ("Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US"), the US National Intelligence Council produced an estimate entitled "Al Qaeda Better Positioned to Strike the West".¹⁰

9 G. Johnsen, "The Expansion Strategy of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 2, issue 9, 2009, pp. 8-11; and C. Boucek, "The Evolving Terrorist Threat in Yemen", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 3, Issue 9, 2010, pp. 5-7.

10 National Intelligence Council, "The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland", National Intelligence Estimate, July 2007; P. Grier, "Why US Sees Al Qaeda as a Growing Threat", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 17 July 2007; M. Mazzetti and D. E. Sanger, "Al Qaeda Threatens, US Frets", *The New York Times*, 22 July 2007; M. Mazzetti, "New Leadership is Seen on Rise within Al Qaeda", *The New York Times*, 2 April 2007, pp. A1 and A11; and P. Haven, "Al Qaeda Ops Show Leadership in Control", Associated Press, 13 July 2007.

Such narrative of ongoing success could just as well have been delivered every year since the autumn of 2001. But for the loss of the ability to use at will the Afghan territory (as it was able to for the training of its foot soldiers throughout the 1990s) and the killing or arrest of several senior and mid-level operatives (most of whom had been involved in the planning of the 11 September attacks; notably Mohammed Atef, Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Zubayda, and Ramzi Bin Al Shaiba), no significant – decisive and lasting – blows had been dealt to the group. Al Qaeda was thus arguably just as strong as it was in 2001, then enjoying its status of stealth menace largely ignored by its enemies, now mutated into a multifaceted global powerhouse whose enemies are kept guessing its next moves, until the death of its symbolic leader Bin Laden. Such development – surprising given the resources allocated, urgency of the issue and amount of attention – was due in large part to the investment which Al Qaeda had placed in its forward-looking strategy.¹¹

However, such efficient performance and survival by Al Qaeda may paradoxically mask the tipping point of the group's leadership control over both its "brand name" and the restrained and paced strategy Bin Laden and al Dhawahiri had long sought to painstakingly assemble. With more and more self-starting insurgent groups (the Islamic State of Iraq), fledgling Islamist movements (the Algerian GSPC) or new generation radicalised nationalists turned Islamists (the Lebanese Fatah Al Islam) seeking the mother Al Qaeda's imprimatur, it will inevitably become harder in the long run for Ayman al Dhawahiri to remain in full control of the movement. A sense of such concern was noticeable in al Dhawahiri's July 2007 video in which he took pains to explain to his "Iraqi brothers" that his "advice" was offered "modestly" as regards matters to which they are "closer" than he is. This was a telling departure from the time (late 2005/early 2006) when instructions were given authoritatively by the same al Dhawahiri to Abu Musab al Zarqawi to restrain his attacks on the Iraqi Shiites.¹² Ultimately, though, a phasing out of the "mother Al Qaeda" – which may come out as a natural temporal factor or as result of the death of Bin Laden – is not necessarily something envisioned

11 See R. O. Nelson and T. M. Sanderson, *A Threat Transformed: Al Qaeda and Associated Movements in 2011*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, February 2011.

12 J. Binnie, "Dead Man's Shoes: Al Qaeda Looks to a Future Without Bin Laden", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, June 2011, pp. 8-13.

with apprehension by the group's leaders. The two men have indicated repeatedly that the movement should go on in their absence.

In that perspective, in the second half of the 2000s, Al Qaeda formally created five official branches. These were:

- (i) Al Qaeda in Europe (*Qaedat Al Jihad fi Europa*) with no known official leadership;
- (ii) Al Qaeda in Egypt (*Tandhim Al Qaeda fi Misr*) headed by Mohammed Al Hukayma;
- (iii) Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia (*Tandhim Al Qaeda fi Bilad Al Rafidayn*) led successively by Abu Musab al Zarqawi (killed on 8 June 2006), Abu Hamza al Mouhajir also known as Abu Ayub al Masri (killed on 18 April 2010), Abu Omar al Baghdadi (also killed on 18 April 2010) and Noman Nasser al Zaidi known as Nasser al Din Abu Suleiman;
- (iv) Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (*Tandhim Al Qaeda fil Maghreb Al Islami*) directed by Abdelmalek Droukdel known as Abou Musab Abdelweddoud;
- (v) Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (*Tandhim Al Qaeda fil Jazira Al Arabiya*) spearheaded serially by Yusuf al Ayeri (killed on 31 May 2003), Khaled Ali al Haj (killed on 15 March 2004), Abdelaziz al Muqrin (killed on 18 June 2004), Salah al Oofi (killed on 18 August 2005), Nasser al Wuhaychi and Said Ali Al Shihri.

Moreover, a short-lived, non-official Al Qaeda in Palestine would issue a communiqué¹³ in October 2006, and the Lebanese group Fatah Al Islam claimed, in May 2007, inspiration from Al Qaeda and expressed readiness to follow Osama Bin Laden's fatwas. Similarly, the Somali rebel group Al Shabaab would in February 2010 unilaterally declare that it was joining Al Qaeda's global jihad campaign.¹⁴ Finally, the presence amongst Al Qaeda's central leadership of a US citizen, Adam Gadahn (Azzam Al Amriki), and his regular messages to America were a constant indication of the group's permanent threat to the United States, as would subsequently those of another US citizen of Yemeni origin, Anwar al Awlaki.

13 R. F. Ali, "Al Qaeda's Palestinian Inroads", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 6, issue 8, 17 April 2008; S. Erlanger and H. M. Fattah, "Jihadist Groups Fill a Power Vacuum", *The New York Times*, 31 May 2007, p. A1; and E. Cunningham, "Up Next: Al Qaeda in Palestine?", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 11 January 2011.

14 DPA/AFP, "Somalia's Shabaab Join Al Qaeda's Global Jihad", 2 February 2010.

Al Qaeda in Europe

Little is known about the European branch, which, within hours of the 7 July 2005 London bombings had claimed the attack, by way of an online message, under a denomination indeed stressing the secretive nature of the group: *Jamaat Al Tandhim Al Sirri li Munadhamat Qaedat al Jibad fi Europa* (Group of the Secret Organisation of Al Qaeda in Europe). The group had certainly operated within the *modus operandi* of the mother Al Qaeda, and Ayman Al Dhawahiri would, in July 2006, confirm that the operation had been commandeered by Al Qaeda; the commando's leaders – Mohammed Siddiq Khan and Shezhad Tanweer – having reportedly travelled to Pakistan and Afghanistan to be trained in preparation for the operation. European-based Al Qaeda militants had also previously conducted the 11 March 2004 attack on the Atocha train station in Madrid and had claimed that attack through an e-mail sent to the London newspaper *Al Qods Al Arabi* and signed under the name *Abu Hafs Al Misri* Brigades, in reference to Al Qaeda's original chief of military operations Mohammed Atef who had been killed in November 2001 during the US bombing of Kabul. The relationship between the two European groups was demonstrably asserted when on 30 May 2005, ahead of the London attacks, the *Abu Hafs Al Misri* Brigades had posted a message on several Islamist websites stating: "We ask all waiting mujahideen, wherever they are, to carry out the planned attack".¹⁵ Since the London attacks both entities have remained silent.

Al Qaeda in Egypt

The episode of the Egyptian avatar is the less significant in Al Qaeda's international pedigree, and met in effect with failure. On 5 August 2006, Ayman al Dhawahiri announced that the Egyptian Al Jama'a Al Islamiya (Islamic Group) had joined Al Qaeda to form a branch in Egypt under the leadership of Mohammad Khalil al Hukayma. In short order, the Jama'a denounced the announcement, and it turned out that al Hukayma was a low-level Egyptian Islamist operator with no significant following in Egypt or elsewhere. As this might have been known to al Dhawahiri himself, alternatively the move may have constituted a way for the former Egyptian Islamist leader to tactically use al Hukayma to offset the legiti-

¹⁵ Adnkronos International (ADI), "The Abu Hafs al Misri Brigades Have Called their 'Sleeping' European Cells to Action", 30 May 2005.

macy of non-violent Islamist groups in Egypt and lure a new generation of violent recruits from the region to the newly-announced entity. Worthy of a try as this may have seemed to headquarters, Al Qaeda in Egypt did not, however, conduct any operations and little was heard of it subsequently except for a call made by al Hukayma in June 2007 to attack American and Israeli targets in Egypt “including women and children”.¹⁶

Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia

In contradistinction to the European and Egyptian incarnations, the Iraqi, North African and Gulf Al Qaeda franchises turned out to be more lasting and serious menaces though they evolved in different ways. The case of the Iraqi branch is particularly illustrative of Al Qaeda’s flexible deployment strategy. Though, Al Qaeda al Oum had supported (in its statements) from the very beginning the Iraqi insurgency, and was seen as a rising menace in that theatre, it was not formally present in the country until, on 28 October 2004, Abu Musab al Zarqawi – who had rapidly emerged as the most lethal threat to US and coalition forces in Iraq, notably following his 2003 back-to-back attacks on the Jordanian embassy on 7 August, the United Nations on 19 August, and the International Committee of the Red Cross on 27 October – sent a public letter to Osama Bin Laden praising his leadership and requesting that his own organisation (*Al Tawhid wal Jihad*) receive the imprimatur of Al Qaeda. A sign of the times, such modern-day merger of a successful local start-up with an established and recognisable global brand was also equally in line with age-old *bay’a* ceremonials among Arab tribes whereby one swears an oath of allegiance to a leader and receives the latter’s blessing. In an equally public message, Bin Laden responded the following 27 December agreeing to the request.¹⁷ Two days after the killing of al Zarqawi in June 2006, his replacement, Abu Hamza al Muhajir, confirmed the *bay’a* addressing Bin Laden thus: “We are at your disposal, ready for your command.”¹⁸

Following Bin Laden’s official agreement, al Zarqawi launched what probably was the fiercest and most violent Al Qaeda campaign, hitting indistinctly

16 ABC News, “Al Qaeda in Egypt Leader Calls for Attacks on Women and Children”, 25 June 2007.

17 Audiotaped message aired on Al Jazeera. Also see CNN, “Purported Bin Laden Tape Endorses al Zarqawi”, 27 December 2004.

18 Audiotaped message aired on Al Jazeera. Also see S. Moubayed, “Meet the New Leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq”, *Asia Times*, 14 June 2006.

at Westerners in Iraq and at Iraqi Shia. Near-daily bombings, kidnappings and beheadings would mark the brutal reign of al Zarqawi until his death on 8 June 2006.¹⁹ His successors, al Muhajir and al Baghdadi, oversaw a decreasing level of violence until their death in April 2010. Ultimately the organisation would come to be subsumed under an Iraqi national umbrella resistance syndicate initially known as the Mujahideen Shura Council and then *Dawlat Al Iraq Al Islamiya* (Islamic State of Iraq) formed on 15 October 2006 alongside several other Iraqi groups including *Junud Al Sababa* (the Soldiers of the Prophet's Companions) and *Jaysb Al Fatiheen* (the Army of the Liberators). In spite of the 2008 US partial withdrawal, Al Qaeda in Iraq continued its relentless attacks in the country, whether as Islamic State or on its own, often targeting anti-Al Qaeda units and recruits and displaying its flag on the scene of attacks it had conducted under the new leadership, in late 2010 and 2011, of Nasser al Din Abu Suleiman.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI)

Such tactical manoeuvring was not needed in the case of another leading Islamist group. On 11 September 2006, Ayman al Dhawahiri declared that the Algerian GSPC was also joining Al Qaeda to lead the fight in North Africa. Accordingly, the GSPC altered its name and, on 11 January 2007, became Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (*Al Qaeda fi Bilad al Maghrib Al Islami*). Subsequently, in a videotaped message aired on 3 November 2007, al Dhawahiri announced that a Libyan group, the Fighting Islamic Group (a little-known organisation which briefly emerged in 1995 vowing to overthrow Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi) had joined AQMI and urged the mujahideen in North Africa to topple the leaders of the Maghreb.

As it were, the GSPC had unilaterally pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda in September 2003, and had also shared a long-distance anti-French strategy with al Zarqawi after the latter threatened that country on 18 May 2005 for its treatment of Muslims. The evolving radicalisation of Al Qaeda's branch in the Maghreb is certainly cause for the local states' concern as its design was always meant to target the wider region.²⁰

19 See F. Hussayn, "Al Zarqawi: The Second Al Qaeda Generation", *Al Qods Al Arabi*, London, 21-22 May 2005.

20 See C. S. Smith, "North Africa Feared as Staging Ground for Terror", *The New York Times*, 20 February 2007, p. A1 and A6. Also see M.-M. O. Mohamedou, "The Many Faces of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", *GCSP Policy Paper* n°15, Geneva, May 2011.

From islands of connection but no full picture of regional and intercontinental cooperation, the AQMI move has increasingly been towards more formal expansion underscored by the mother Al Qaeda's renewed local preoccupations. In spite of the publicised name change, the new North African group reverted to the original GSPC mode of sporadic skirmishes with Algerian police and military forces, and regular kidnapping of Westerners in the larger Sahel region. However, by 2011, the group had visibly expanded its domain of action throughout the Maghreb and striking alliances in Sub-Saharan Africa with groups such as the Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Finally, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (*Tandhim Al Qaeda fil Jazira al Arabiya*) was established in a context strongly linked to the history of the mother Al Qaeda itself. Firstly, Bin Laden's dual personal links to Yemen, from where his father originated, and Saudi Arabia, of which he is a national, always coloured Al Qaeda's dynamic towards the area with a special dimension. In that respect, the 1996 and 1998 declarations of war made extensive and specific references to the "occupation of the Land of the Two Holy Places" as the mainstay of the *casus belli*. Secondly, the region itself has a long history of Islamist activity, which is closer in nature to the eventual military expression of Al Qaeda than the socially- and economically-oriented Islamists of the Nile Valley, the Maghreb and the Levant. At regular intervals, most notably with the November 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, armed militancy would express itself in the country. Similarly, the chronic tribal agitation in Yemen, which often had a religious coloration as well, provided additional natural ground for Bin Laden's restless desire to foment rebellion against the Saud.

In the aftermath of the 11 September attacks, the loose Gulf network, which had served as springboard for the dispatching of the fifteen men that had joined Mohammad Atta's commando in mid-2001 to attack the United States, reorganised into a more formal structure aligned with the mother Al Qaeda's global strategy and composed of several smaller cells. Under the initial leadership of Yusuf al Ayeri, the Saudi Arabia-centered group went on to launch a wave of attacks in 2003-2004. The operations grew to a crescendo targeting Westerners' housing

compounds in Riyadh (12 May and 8 November 2003), oil facilities in Yanbu (1 May 2004), the US consulate in Jeddah (6 December 2004) and the Saudi Ministry of Interior (29 December 2004). In the face of stepped-up and efficient Saudi police work and several setbacks for the group,²¹ including the August 2005 killing of Salah al Oofi, the branch adopted a lower profile and, in a replay of the 1980s Afghan campaign flight, large numbers of its members travelled to Iraq to conduct Jihad against the US troops in that country.

The rather swift defeat of the first generation of Al Qaeda's branch in the Gulf after a series of impactful attacks in Saudi Arabia was important. It then took several years of new underground work and an alliance with a Yemeni branch for a second generation Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to emerge in 2008, announcing its arrival with an attack on the US embassy in San'aa (Yemen) on 17 September of that year. The merger was led by Nasser al Wuhaychi and Said Ali al Shihri (who had been released from the Guantanamo prison in November 2007), assisted by Mohammad Said al Umda Gharib al Taizzi, the group's military commander in Yemen. The introduction of the Yemeni element (which had previously been targeting foreign embassies) spelled as well an added element of insurrection-cum-guerrilla. Hence, the new group combined traditional terrorist technique – on 29 August 2009, it attempted to assassinate Saudi Arabia's Deputy Minister of Interior, Prince Nayef Bin Sultan; in June 2010, it attacked the Yemeni intelligence services headquarters in Aden – with insurgency battle with the Yemeni and Saudi armies at the countries' borders in December 2009.²² The latter battles also took place in the context of the wider Sa'da conflict highlighting the fact that the simultaneous development of that secessionist movement blurred further the nature of the local Al Qaeda membership while colouring its militancy with long-standing insurgency dynamics.

21 See D. Murphy, "All-Out War between Al Qaeda and the House of Saud Under Way", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 June 2004.

22 See also the report by M. Abdel'ati, "Tandhim Al Qa'ida: Qiraa Jadida" (The Organisation of Al Qaeda: A New Reading), Doha, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, July 2010.

Back to the Future: Al Qaedaism

Overall, akin to franchises and with some important differences, all of these operationally-independent regional organisations acted initially per the methods and signature of the central mother Al Qaeda. Announced formally in audio-, videotaped or online messages by Ayman al Dhawahiri, the creation of these units was initially a telling sign of the group's global reach and the coalescence of its design.

In parallel, Al Qaeda's official media branch, *Moussassat al Sihab* (the clouds' organisation) increased both the quantity and quality of its output. No longer merely releasing semi-annual static videos of Bin Laden or al Dhawahiri delivering lengthy statements in the form of actual VHS tapes sent to the Doha-based all news Arabic channel Al Jazeera, it added a variety of formats (including hour-long online documentaries with graphs and computer simulation) and articulate speakers (such as Adam Gadahn) to its releases (up to a high fifty-eight in 2006 and sixty-seven in 2007). The recordings became increasingly sophisticated (mp3, avi and PDF formats) featuring computer graphics (re-enacting attacks), statistical graphs (on Gulf economies), excerpts from documentaries (on the US-Saudi alliance), commentary on the group (by Al Jazeera analysts), and lengthy quotations from current affairs books (Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack* for example). In an indication of the group's ability to coordinate efficiently among its units, the group curtailed the reaction period in putting out its message from about six weeks in 2002-2005 to an average ten days – issuing professionally-produced digital messages eleven days after Hamas' Gaza takeover in May 2007, and eight days after the July 2007 Red Mosque siege in Pakistan. In late 2007, the group innovated further through an open interview with al Dhawahiri. In a 16 December release by Moussassat al Sihab, private individuals, journalists and organisations were invited to submit, within a month-long frame, questions sent to specific Islamist websites to which al Dhawahiri subsequently responded in a two-part release the following April.²³

23 International Research Centre (for the US Department of Defence), "Zawahiri Tries to Clear Name, Explains Strategy", *Transnational Security Report*, 21 April 2008.

All in all, the routinisation of messages, their customisation, integration of external footage about Al Qaeda and addressing of different audiences spoke, first and foremost, to a strategy of diversification and decoupling. In that sense, Al Qaeda's ability to persuade local groups to link their struggles with a broader, pan-Islamist campaign has arguably been the organisation's signal achievement. It also unveiled a desire on the part of Al Qaeda to establish the "normality" of such a long-term process whereby these activities on the part of the organisation are to be expected regularly ("this year, next year, the year after that, and so on" as Gadahn stated in May 2007).²⁴ To the extent that the release of a message was no longer an event in and of itself (as was the case in 2001-2002), it became important to distinguish the specific purpose of each release; hence the use of titling (e.g., "Message of One Concerned", "The Power of Truth", "The Wills of the Heroes of the Raids on New York and Washington", "One Row", "Legitimate Demands", "From Kabul to Mogadishu", "Winds of Paradise", "The Path of Doom", "Security... a Shared Destiny", "The West and the Dark Tunnel"). Paradoxically, this controlled proliferation effort also rendered obsolete the United States' attempt to play down the impact of each new message coming from Al Qaeda though it also revealed a hybridisation of the organisation whose centre of gravity was no longer easily identifiable in the face of the proliferation of associated entities.

Yet for all its radicalism, Al Qaeda has attracted or spun uncontrollable factions acting in its name. Just as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) saw a radical wing emerge in its midst as it was opting out of violence, the prospect of a less political, decentralised, younger and more violent "Real Al Qaeda", which would displace the group we already know – merely by rendering obsolete – is now a real possibility, particularly in the wake of Osama Bin Laden's death.

In the first active phase of the regionalisation plan (2006-2008), al Dhawahiri's near-trimestrial audio and video releases provided a sort of strategic review and executive update to the global jihadists, often accompanied by targeted messages to specific audiences (in Iraq, the Maghreb, Afghanistan, Pakistan and so on). From 2009 onwards, as al Dhawahiri's pronouncements became less focused, constituting progressively a sort of background noise to international affairs, the branches themselves increased their own pronouncements, which ultimately made

24 See M. Orris, "Fear and Loathing in Waziristan: Al Qaeda Propaganda", *Small Wars Journal*, 1 November 2008.

little or no reference to the mother organisation. An indication of this perceptible independence is that the franchises began to resort less and less to Al Qaeda's official media outlet, *Mouassassat Al Sibab*, and developed their own media organs whose logos they displayed on their videos (e.g., Al Malahem Media for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula; Al Andalus for AQMI).

Above and beyond these variances, the very strategies of the centre and periphery Al Qaeda groups were increasingly noticeably at odds. Whereas the mother Al Qaeda has sought to maintain a level of familiarity with the inner workings of Western societies, the off-shoot branches have resorted to more local concerns with unsophisticated leaderships composed of former inmates or mid-to-low level army officers (notably in Iraq and Algeria), which, to the relative exception of Anwar al Awlaki, compared poorly to Hamburg cell leader Mohammad Atta's *summa cum laude* Ph.D. credentials. For instance, the replacement of senior Al Qaeda operator Khaled Shaikh Mohammed – Atta's alleged liaison officer for the 11 September 2001 operation who had been detained by Pakistani and US authorities in March 2003 in Pakistan – was Adnan Shukrijumah, who has lived extensively in the United States. Accordingly, Shukrijumah has been reportedly linked with attempted attacks on New York's subway system in 2009, and two other subsequently thwarted attacks in the United Kingdom and Norway.

This seems a minimal result for a regionalisation strategy, which on its face appeared as well to pursue a peripheral encirclement of its enemies, with the North African group being able to hit Europe, Al Qaeda in Iraq meant to engineer a quagmire for foreign troops in that country and the Gulf branch replaying a penetration of the United States as the original 11 September group had been able to. This last aim was partly achieved as senior Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula officer Anwar al Awlaki (who is also regenerating the mother Al Qaeda's ideological base through increased familiarity with the West, as demonstrated by his alleged launch of an Al Qaeda English-language magazine, *Inspire*, in June 2010, with five issues following in the next eight months) was allegedly linked to US Army Major Nidal Hassan who killed thirteen people at Fort Hood on 5 November 2009 and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the perpetrator of the failed 22 December 2009 attack on the Detroit-bound Northwest Airlines flight. Abdulmutallab had reportedly been in contact with al Awlaki during a year spent in San'aa in 2004-2005 and subsequently in 2009 (video footage of Abdulmutallab's filmed testament was featured in October 2010 by senior Al Qaeda operator Adam Gadahn).

Conclusion

The continued mutation of Al Qaeda is precisely what has made counter-terrorism measures against it so difficult, almost doomed to failure in the face of an evanescent organisation. The strength of Al Qaeda lies, too, in its proactive approach. Whereas several analysts, too often indulging a theological reading, misread the complex nature of the movement, Al Qaeda was invariably tactically ahead. By 2007, and mostly due to the failure in Iraq, policy thinking in the United States started recognising in retrospect that just a year after the start of the War on Terror, the terrorist threat started to evolve. Even such late assessments were, however, faulty for this threat never ceased to evolve. Though there has been an increasing recognition of structural reasons that allowed for Al Qaeda to blossom, the overall perception persisted that this *über*-competition was a reality guided by the centre. Whereas it can be argued that by forcing its enemies to allocate attention and resources (including political capital and military materiel) to areas unforeseen originally in the conflict, Al Qaeda impacted events more consequentially from the periphery in.

Beyond the individual case of Bin Laden, now solved to the US advantage, what, we may ask, have been the results of Al Qaeda's war and strategy? In the post-11 September 2001 period, Al Qaeda has remained a security threat of the first order to a large group of Muslim and Western states for at least six reasons.

First, the group designed and implemented a successful battle plan. It forecasted most of the reactions of its enemy and dealt adroitly with a large-scale global counterattack by the world's superpower and its strong allies. Most importantly, it set, from the beginning, its struggle on a long-term track.

Second, in the face of a massive invasion of the country – Afghanistan – that had housed it for several years (a foreign advance supported by a powerful domestic force in that country, namely the Northern Alliance), Al Qaeda implemented a layered tactical retreat instead of succumbing to the cut-and-run syndrome that has often marked the end of lesser-organised terrorist groups. Focusing on evad-

ing, regrouping and downsizing, the transforming organisation multiplied attacks across the globe in places where the United States did not expect it to strike, and refrained from attacking America anew. Al Qaeda's inaction during that period confused its enemies who oscillated between expectations of imminent attacks and conclusions that there were no longer any terrorists.

Third, its losses during this phase were minimal and, for a group of this sort, strategically acceptable. Some setbacks took place but few significant leaders were killed or arrested. A new generation of leaders was brought forth and the ultimate disappearance of the bicephalous Bin Laden-al Dhawahiri leadership prepared for. By late 2011, that new generation was apparently in control of operational levels little about which is really known by counter-terrorism bodies.

Fourth, its main leadership remained intact (and, as John Arquilla remarked, "if you can't find, you can't fight")²⁵ for ten long years, acquiring instant global visibility for their cause after the attacks on New York and Washington. That international elevation was capitalised on for several years and only dealt an important blow with Bin Laden's death in mid-2011.

Fifth, Al Qaeda turned its enemies' strategic miscalculations against them. The war in Iraq, in particular, was used opportunistically as a battleground to attack the United States through a spearheading of the local resistance movement. Yet Al Qaeda, there, sought ultimately not to enjoy local decision-making but to provide decisive support and oversight. The dialectic between *jihad* export as necessity and as improvised design was, in that context, initially fertile and lethal to the coalition.

Sixth, an international strategy of decentralisation was pursued successfully. Assembling, as it were, "near" and "far" all-volunteer allies in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Gulf, the Levant, East Africa, North Africa, Europe and, possibly, the United States, the leaders of Al Qaeda have extended the reach of their virtual dominion. Such exaltation led US intelligence to conclude that the challenge of defeating Al Qaeda has become more complex than it was in 2001, and the organisation potentially more dangerous today than it has ever been. Consequently, the focus is not on the end of the conflict after the killing of its leader but on the

25 J. Arquilla, "The War on Terror: How to Win", *Foreign Policy*, n°160, May-June 2007, p. 45. Arquilla notes that "there has been hardly a hint that the pursuit of Al Qaeda and its allies is guided by any serious thinking about the new types of problems posed by adversaries who operate in small, interconnected bands with minimal central control".

end of the organisation itself – an exercise that cannot be centred solely on the quantitative disruption of cells or franchises.

After more than two decades of operation and having spawned or inspired at least ten other groups and witnessed the death of its founding leader, the central question for Al Qaeda has now become the one of singular versus plural identity. Years after its creation in Afghanistan, the group has experienced global success of a peculiar nature but has the focus on a militarisation of transnational terrorism not been pursued at the expense of militant political cogency? Has not “Al Qaeda-ism” proved detrimental to Al Qaeda?

Chronology

2001

11 September: In an Al Qaeda-organised operation conducted by 19 kamikazes, two hijacked planes destroy New York's World Trade Centre twin towers, and another plunges into the Pentagon. A fourth hijacked plane crashes in Pennsylvania. More than 3,000 people are killed.

7 October: The United States together with a coalition of states launch military operations in Afghanistan aimed at removing the Taliban from power. Al Jazeera airs a taped message by Osama Bin Laden: "America will no longer be safe".

22 December: A British national of Sri Lankan origin, Richard C. Reid, attempts to blow up American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami, using C-4 explosives inserted in one of his shoes.

2002

28 March: Abu Zubayda, senior member of Al Qaeda and coordinator of the August 1998 attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, is arrested in Faisalabad, Afghanistan.

11 April: A truck bomb attack is conducted by Tunisian Islamist Nizar Naouar against the Al Ghriba synagogue on the island of Jerba in Tunisia, killing 21 individuals including 14 German tourists.

8 May: In Karachi, Pakistan, a bomb explodes in front of the Sheraton Hotel killing 14 individuals, 11 of whom are French naval construction engineers.

14 June: A bomb explodes in front of the US consulate in Karachi killing 12 people and wounding 45.

11 September: Ramzi Ben al Shaiba is arrested in Karachi, Pakistan, along with eight Yemenis, a Saudi and an Egyptian.

6 October: A bomb attack takes place against a French oil tanker, *the Limburg*, near Sana'a, Yemen.

12 October: A bomb attack takes place at a nightclub in Bali, Indonesia, killing 202 people, mostly Australian tourists.

28 November: In Mombasa, Kenya, two SAM-7 missiles are fired on a Boeing 757 of the Israeli charter company Arkia. Simultaneously, a car bomb attack takes place outside the Paradise Hotel where several Israeli tourists reside. The assault kills 18 individuals including three Israelis.

2003

1 March: Khaled Sheikh Mohammad, planner of the 11 September attacks, is arrested in Rawalpindi, near Islamabad, Pakistan.

20 March: The United States and the United Kingdom invade Iraq. Baghdad falls to the US army on April 9.

12 May: In Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the Al Hamra residential complex, housing Americans and Britons, is the target of three bomb attacks, which kill 39 individuals including 12 US citizens; 149 are wounded.

16 May: In Casablanca, Morocco, 14 suicide bombers conduct five simultaneous attacks on the Belgian Consulate, the Spanish cultural centre (Casa de España), an Italian restaurant (housed in the Hotel Farah-Maghreb), and the Israeli Circle Alliance; 45 people are killed and 100 wounded.

5 August: A car bomb targets the Hotel Marriott in Jakarta, Indonesia, killing 15 and wounding 150.

8 November: In Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, a bomb attack targets a residential building housing foreign diplomats; 17 individuals are killed and 120 wounded.

15 November: In Istanbul, Turkey, a truck bomb attack takes place against two synagogues killing 24 and wounding 300.

20 November: Two car bombs target the British Consulate and the British bank HSBC in Istanbul; 27 people are killed and 400 wounded.

2004

11 March: Four simultaneous attacks, claimed by the European wing of Al Qaeda, take place in Madrid. Between 7:39 and 7:55 am, ten bombs planted in four different trains explode at the Atocha, El Pozo, Alcalá de Henares and Santa Eugenia stations killing 190 and wounding 1,434 individuals.

15 April: In an audio message aired by the Arabic satellite channels Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera, Bin Laden renews his commitment to fight the United States and offers to “cease operations” against the European countries, which would stop “aggressions against Muslims”. The truce proposal is rejected by European leaders.

1 May: An oil refinery in Yanbu, Saudi Arabia, is attacked by gunmen targeting senior executives at the facility, partly owned by Exxon Mobil. Five foreigners are killed, including two Americans.

29 May: In Khobar, Saudi Arabia, gunmen attack a building housing Western companies’ offices killing 22 individuals.

18 June: US engineer Paul M. Johnson Jr. is abducted and beheaded in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

29 October: Al Jazeera airs a videotaped message from Bin Laden to the United States.

2005

7 July: Coordinated explosions take place in three underground trains and one double-decker bus in central London, killing 56 people and injuring 700.

23 July: Three bombs are detonated in the Egyptian resort city of Sharm al-Sheikh, killing 63. Two of the bombs target resort hotels housing Western tourists and the third goes off in the city’s marketplace.

1 October: Three suicide bombers strike tourist restaurants in Bali in Indonesia, killing 20.

9 November: Three bomb attacks target three hotels in Amman housing Westerners, the Radisson SAS Hotel, the Days Inn Hotel and the Grand Hyatt, killing 76 and wounding 300.

2006

7 January: Al Jazeera airs a message by Ayman al Dhawahiri in which he claims that George W. Bush has lost the war in Iraq.

19 January: In an audiotape message aired by Al Jazeera, Osama Bin Laden offers a truce to the United States and threatens new attacks inside the United States.

8 June: Abu Musab al Zarqawi and several of his men are killed by a US airstrike on a house near Baquba, Iraq.

1 July: Al Jazeera airs an audiotaped message by Bin Laden in which he calls on Abu Hamza al Muhajir, al Zarqawi's replacement as head of Al Qaeda in Iraq, to pursue attacks on Americans.

12 July: The sixth Arab–Israeli war starts. It takes place between the state of Israel and the Lebanese non-state armed group Hezbollah and lasts 33 days.

27 July: Al Jazeera airs a videotaped message in which al Dhawahiri declares that Al Qaeda will not stand by while Lebanon and Palestine are attacked, and warns that: "the entire world is an open battlefield for us, and since they are attacking us everywhere, we will attack everywhere".

11 September: Al Dhawahiri announces that the Algerian Islamist organisation originally set up in 1998 and known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) has joined the ranks of Al Qaeda.

2007

11 January: The GSPC announces that it is formally changing its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (commonly referred to as AQMI, from its French acronym).

11 April: Using car bombs, AQMI targets the Algerian Prime Minister's office and a police precinct in Algiers. The blasts kill 33 people.

11 December: AQMI attacks several targets in Algiers including the Algerian Constitutional Council and the United Nations office. 63 people are killed.

2008

2 June: Al Qaeda claims the bombing of the Danish embassy in Pakistan in which six people perish. Al Qaeda leader in Afghanistan and Pakistan Mustapha Abu Al Yazid issues a statement indicating that the attack was in retaliation for the publishing in Denmark of cartoons depicting negatively the Prophet Mohammad.

19 November: Al Sahab releases a message by Al Dhawahiri in which he argues that the replacement of President Bush by President Obama does not alter the fundamentals of the conflict between Al Qaeda and the United States.

26 November: In a series of coordinated attacks lasting three days across Mumbai, India, Lashkar-e-Taiba militants landing on inflammable speedboats kill 164 people in two hotels, the city's train station, a café, a Jewish centre, a hospital and the port area.

2009

7 January: A US Army Major, Nidal Malik Hassan, who had been in contact with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula cleric Anwar al Awlaki, kills 13 people at the Fort Hood US military installation in Texas.

31 May: AQMI kills a British hostage, Edwyn Dwyer, who had been kidnapped along with three other Europeans on 22 January.

27 August: A suicide bombing by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula targeting Saudi Arabia's Assistant Interior Minister is thwarted in Riyadh.

25 December: A Nigerian national, Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab, with connections with the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, attempts to trigger a bomb onboard Delta Flight 253 bound from Amsterdam to Detroit.

2010

1 May: A US national of Pakistani origin and budget analyst, Faisal Shazad, attempts a foiled car bombing in Times Square, New York.

25 July: AQMI leader Abdelmalek Droukdel announces that his group has executed a French hostage who had been kidnapped on April 19. The announcement takes place three days after a failed French and Mauritanian military raid on an AQMI camp in northern Mali.

16 September: In Niger, AQMI kidnaps seven workers of the French Industrial conglomerate Areva, including five Frenchmen.

29 October: Two mail packages containing explosives are discovered onboard cargo planes bound from Yemen to the United States. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claims the foiled operation.

2011

7 January: AQMI attempts to kidnap two Frenchmen from a restaurant in Niamey, the capital of Niger. French forces intercept the militants near the Mali border. The two hostages and four of their abductors are killed during the engagement.

2 May 2011: US Special forces locate and kill Osama Bin Laden in a villa in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

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GCSP

avenue de la Paix 7bis

P.O. Box 1295

CH - 1211 Geneva 1

T +41 22 906 16 00

F +41 22 906 16 49

info@gcsp.ch

www.gcsp.ch



Geneva Centre for Security Policy
Centre de Politique de Sécurité, Genève
Genfer Zentrum für Sicherheitspolitik

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