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Prospects for Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates

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Al-Qaeda remains a serious threat to international security, and its current losses will not end the organisation in the foreseeable future. Al-Qaeda's strength is determined by its jihadist South and Central Asian allies and affiliates in the Middle East and Africa. All of these entities are able to continue their terrorist activities individually and could play influential roles in the Afghan and Syrian conflicts.

Al-Qaeda Central's Latest Losses. On 4 June, CIA drones launched the 22nd attack on a target in northwestern Pakistan this year. Fifteen people were killed as a result, including, most probably, the Libyan Abu Yahya al-Libi, one of Al-Qaeda's most important leaders, often touted as a successor to the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri. Because of his prominence in Al-Qaeda's propaganda materials and his famous escape from the American Bagram base in Afghanistan in 2005, the charismatic al-Libi has become one of the most recognisable jihadist leaders. His stature was further augmented by his credentials as an Islamic scholar and a theologian—a rare occurrence amongst militant Islamic fundamentalists. The potential loss of al-Libi is a major blow to Al-Qaeda Central, which continues to operate on the Afghan-Pakistani border, though after the 2011 death of Osama bin Laden it is having serious difficulty reconstituting its leadership cadre.

Al-Qaeda in South and Central Asia. Afghanistan, Pakistan, and neighbouring countries, remain Al-Qaeda Central and its regional allies' most important logistical hub. The importance of these countries does not diminish even if the organisation is seriously weakened. The remaining terrorist leaders have the trust (often strengthened by family links) of the Pashtun tribes there and they also mediate in conflicts between local and regional groups that operate out of North Waziristan. This area is well suited to support a plethora of different armed entities involved in the continuation of global jihad. Combating Al-Qaeda Central and its regional allies is dependent on the relations these groups maintain with the Pakistani security services, which utilise jihadists for activities aimed at Afghanistan and India. One should not discount the complex relations that have been developed between some of the Arab Al-Qaeda members and the Iranian authorities. In 2001, groups of the former escaped from Afghanistan to Iran, which officially put them under house arrest. In the event, however, of a further escalation of tensions between Iran and the U.S. and its ally Saudi Arabia, the Iranian authorities could release Al-Qaeda Central members from custody.

The involvement of Al-Qaeda's allies in the Afghan conflict is again more visible. Members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have replaced the Arab Al-Qaeda members as experienced instructors who boost the military capabilities of the Afghan Taliban. Their activities are of special significance in the provinces of Badakhshan and Kabul, from which they are attempting to rebuild their presence in the north of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Yet another Central Asian group, the Islamic Jihad Union, is gaining new recruits amongst Turkish speaking radicals in Turkey and Western Europe. There are no reasons to suppose that Mullah Omar and the Afghan Taliban are likely to completely cease their contacts with Al-Qaeda Central. They are convinced that after 2014, when ISAF withdraws from Afghanistan, they will emerge victorious from their struggle with the current authorities in Kabul. The Afghan Taliban agenda is seemingly local but does not rule out the reconstitution of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates' bases in Afghanistan after 2014. The limited U.S. military presence in the country and personal links between Al-Qaeda and the so-called Haqqani Network, the Afghan Taliban's most dangerous faction, are likely to facilitate such a scenario (however, one

has to take into consideration that Al-Qaeda will remain a primary target for U.S. forces in Afghanistan).

South Asia remains an important hub for the realisation of Al-Qaeda's global ambitions. After 2007, certain groups of Pakistani Taliban (including Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP) became important partners, hosting Middle Eastern and European terrorists and attempting, for example, terrorist attacks in New York in 2010. Al-Qaeda is also unlikely to terminate its cooperation with Kashmiri radicals in Pakistan. This cooperation more likely will be strengthened as organisations such as Lashkar e-Taiba (LeT), responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, become attractive partners because of their recruitment and logistical potential outside South Asia.

Middle Eastern Al-Qaeda Affiliates. The killings of important Al-Qaeda Central leaders evidently weakens the organisation's bonds with regional affiliates active in northern Africa, Somalia, Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. Nonetheless, their operational capabilities remain unchanged. Some of them have recently achieved notable successes, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's alliance with the Tuareg rebels in Northern Mali who in April this year won control of the northern part of that country.¹ In turn, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula won control of a part of southern Yemen, which is used as a launching pad for more terrorist attacks aimed at the U.S.²

After the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, the Al-Qaeda affiliate there has continued to pose a substantial threat to the country and to Middle Eastern stability and security. Against the backdrop of bickering between Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Shiite Dawa party and representatives of Iraq's Sunnis, the political impasse has intensified and Al-Qaeda in Iraq has staged more attacks on civilian targets in various parts of the country, which together could lead to yet another escalation of Iraq's internal conflict.

Moreover, Al-Qaeda Central could use its Iraqi affiliate to establish a long-lasting presence in neighbouring Syria, which is engulfed in civil war. During the U.S. intervention in Iraq (2003–2011), the Syrian authorities tolerated the transit through their territory of Al-Qaeda members and foreign volunteers of the anti-American jihad. A tactical alliance between President Bashar al-Assad's secular regime and the Islamic fundamentalists of Al-Qaeda was terminated with the uprising in Syria, which was supported by al-Zawahiri and al-Libi. In its fight with the Syrian regime, Al-Qaeda could use its Iraqi supply routes to allow the organisation to reverse the flow of fighters and arms, i.e., from countries neighbouring Syria and from South Asia directly to the front lines in Syria. Such activities are bound to strengthen the position of Islamic fundamentalists, such as the Front for the Protection of the People of the Levant, amongst the Syrian rebels. Moreover, provided the international community fails to support the Free Syrian Army, the main rebel group, which is negatively attuned to Al-Qaeda, it may not be able to limit the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Syria. This could result in a second civil war in the aftermath of President Assad's expected downfall.

Implications and Conclusions. Al-Qaeda finds itself in a transition phase. The successful activities of the U.S. security services have led to substantial losses in Al-Qaeda's ranks, and its fundamentalist ideology has lost a lot of appeal during the Arab Spring. The international community should not, however, discount the threat posed by the activities of this organisation, because Al-Qaeda, mostly through the actions of its allies and affiliates, will continue to function as a wider, transnational, radical armed movement. Some elements could gain serious influence in situations in the Middle East (Yemen) and Africa (Mali, Somalia). Al-Qaeda will remain, however, in a special role in southern Asia where prospective military successes by allied Taliban could allow it to rebuild its pre-2001 terrorism infrastructure and hasten the reconstitution of its presence in the Middle East and northern Africa, especially Syria and Libya. Even with less danger of spectacular attacks such as 9/11, it might be expected that there will be a continuous and present threat to the Western countries originating from smaller cells and individual sympathisers of Al-Qaeda.

¹ K. Rekawek, "Mali's Political Crisis and Its International Implications", *PISM Bulletin*, No. 53 (386), 22 May 2012.

² M.A. Piotrowski, K. Rekawek, "Yemen's Increasing Importance for Al-Qaeda and the US Anti-terrorism Effort", *PISM Bulletin*, No. 57 (390), 1 June 2012.