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WHAT IF THERE IS NO AL-QAEDA? PREPARING FOR FUTURE TERRORISM

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More than a year after the death of Osama Bin Laden, the debate over how big of a threat al-Qaeda poses to the United State continues. Official U.S. government statements regarding al-Qaeda's relative strength often appear contradictory. Current Secretary of Defense—and former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency—Leon Panetta has signaled al-Qaeda's near demise.¹ Meanwhile, U.S. National Security Advisor John Brennan continues to justify armed drone strikes to temper an immediate threat to the U.S. homeland posed by the Yemeni-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).² Academic experts and counterterrorism pundits have been noticeably more cautious than Secretary Panetta, with some suggesting that al-Qaeda may actually be stronger than it was a year prior. These analysts cite al-Qaeda's recent formal accession of al-Shabaab in Somalia and AQAP's expanded control of territory in Yemen for their bullish assessment of al-Qaeda's strength.³ In addition, the expansion of drone strikes outside of Pakistan and the U.S. government's turn from counterinsurgency operations toward a counterterrorism-centric strategy has further complicated collective understandings over the relative strength or weakness of al-Qaeda.

For terrorism prognosticators, suggesting that there will be no future al-Qaeda terrorist attacks would be foolish as the odds of a core al-Qaeda member, an al-Qaeda affiliate or self-declared al-Qaeda wannabe attacking an American target must surely be close to one hundred percent. In contrast, counterterrorism analysts struggle to define the circumstances under which the U.S. can look past al-Qaeda as simply a past adversary informing our understanding of future terrorism. The proliferation of al-Qaeda analyses (including this paper) continues to boost the public profile of the terror group and likely clouds the collective view of other emerging threats and future adversaries.

¹ Elisabeth Bumiller, "Panetta Says Defeat of Al-Qaeda is 'Within Reach'," *New York Times*, July 9, 2011. Accessed July 3, 2012 available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/world/asia/10military.html>.

² Ken Dilanian, "Brennan defends U.S. drone attacks despite risks to civilians," *LA Times*, April 29, 2012. Accessed on July 3, 2012, available at: http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2012/04/brennan-drone-attacks.html

³ See Mary Habeck, "Evaluating the war with al-Qaeda, part IV: How well are we doing?," *Foreign Policy*, April 17, 2012. Accessed on July 5, 2012. Available at:

http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/04/17/evaluating_the_war_with_al_qaeda_part_iv_how_well_are_we_doing. See also Seth Jones, "Think Again: al-Qaeda," *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2012. Access July 5, 2012. Available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/04/23/think_again_al_qaeda.

Thus, a year after the death of Osama Bin Laden, what is the threat posed by al-Qaeda? Effectively assessing al-Qaeda's current state requires an examination of the group's pace of violence, manpower, operational safe havens, resource base, ideological popular support, and command and control.

UNDERSTANDING AL-QAEDA'S PACE OF VIOLENCE: HOW SIZE MATTERS

Research on terror groups suggests that on any given day five trained al-Qaeda operatives are as likely as 5000 members of the group to successfully execute a massive attack on the U.S. Essentially, the size of al-Qaeda does not matter with regards to the scale of any given al-Qaeda attack.⁴ However, size does matter when it comes to the pace of attacks. For al-Qaeda to remain relevant, the terror group must execute violent attacks against the West on a regular basis. Mass, one of the key principles of warfare, provides terror groups the ability to recruit new members, train cadres, and plan and execute attacks on a routine basis.

Today, in comparison to ten years ago, al-Qaeda does not have the ability to execute attacks on a regular basis due to its declining mass—a function of limited safe havens, dwindling recruits, loss of critical human capital (leaders and technical experts), and a reduction in financial support. Al-Qaeda has not executed a successful attack on the West in the West since the London subway bombings of 2005. Three of the most credible al-Qaeda plots in recent years have arisen from an affiliate, AQAP in Yemen, rather than the group's central leadership in Pakistan.⁵ Does this mean that al-Qaeda will dry up and never attack the U.S. again? Absolutely not! But the decline in the pace of al-Qaeda's attacks illustrates the group's broader struggles to recruit foreign fighters, prepare operations, and effectively resource missions.

FOREIGN FIGHTERS: INCREASING COMPETITION IN A CROWDED MARKET

For two decades (1988-2008), al-Qaeda represented one of the only opportunities for extremists to pursue global jihad. Al-Qaeda provided the gateway to jihadi conflicts around the globe: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Somalia during the 1990s and Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq in the 2000s. Each of these conflicts inspired their own waves of foreign fighter recruits attracted to al-Qaeda's message and the opportunity to pursue a jihadi adventure fantasy repeated amongst generations of young Arab and North African males.

Beginning in 2007, the wind powering waves of al-Qaeda foreign fighter recruits began to subside. Foreign fighters to Iraq became suicide bomber manpower for local Iraqi tribal fights and sectarian squabbles. Young foreign fighter recruits seeking Bin Laden inspired jihadi dreams were instead settling old scores for local Iraqi sheikhs with varying commitment to al-Qaeda's strategic vision.⁶ Likewise, the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command virtually dismantled al-Qaeda in Iraq by killing off key leaders and disrupting operations. The combination of internal fracturing and JSOC devastation soured foreign fighter recruitment pipelines keeping future recruits at a distance. By 2009, the Iraq jihad had lost momentum. A few committed foreign fighters made their way to Afghanistan, but some survivors of al-Qaeda's Iraqi jihad began returning home - just in time for the Arab Spring.⁷

A linear analysis of al-Qaeda would suggest its foreign fighter veterans would remain loyal to the terror group for life. Veterans would be expected to form al-Qaeda cells and affiliates in their home countries amongst the chaos of the Arab Spring. But will this be the case? Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have introduced a wide range of resistance groups seeking manpower, resources and operational space. New upstart groups enmeshed in the Arab Spring may cooperate with al-Qaeda at times, but in the long run, these groups may be more incentivized to compete with al-Qaeda for influence among young vulnerable male populations.

⁴ Aaron Clauset, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "The developmental dynamics of terrorist organizations." *Physics and Society*, July 26, 2011. Available at: <http://arxiv.org/abs/0906.3287>. See also Clint Watts, "Understanding the Developmental Dynamics of Terrorist Organizations," *Selected Wisdom*, Jan 20, 2012. Available at: <http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=522>.

⁵ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has generated three failed operations against U.S. aviation industry with an underwear bombing plot over Detroit on December 25, 2009, a sophisticated but less lethal plot from an ink cartridge explosive built into a cargo flight and finally a foiled underwear plot uncovered by an intelligence operation in 2012.

⁶ Clint Watts, "Foreign Fighters: How are they being recruited?," *Small Wars Journal*, June 22, 2008. Available at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/foreign-fighters-how-are-they-being-recruited>.

⁷ Clint Watts, "Countering Terrorism from the Second Foreign Fighter Glut," *Small Wars Journal*, May 28, 2009. Available at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/countering-terrorism-from-the-second-foreign-fighter-glut>.

The path chosen by al-Qaeda's second generation of foreign fighters from the post 9/11 battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan will be most telling of the group's future. Veteran foreign fighters can: 1) Remain tied to the few old guard al-Qaeda members holed up in Pakistan or 2) Break off to form or lead a new jihadi group. For foreign fighters frustrated with al-Qaeda's inability to deliver on its ideological goals, new upstart groups may provide respected veterans a fresh start for leading their own terrorist organizations. The most adventurous and the most talented have likely moved on to the opportunities available with emerging groups. Al-Qaeda's only hope for retaining authority over groups among the Arab Spring will come through the provision of resources more than ideology, and al-Qaeda's supplies appear to be quite short.

FINANCING: WHERE'S AL-QAEDA'S MONEY?

Financing problems quite likely represents the most overlooked and potentially significant factor contributing to al-Qaeda's decline in recent years. A fundamental misperception after 9/11 was that al-Qaeda's brand of terrorism was "cheap." Citing the relatively small expense of a singular attack, analysts concluded that al-Qaeda could operate on a shoestring budget. However, Bin Laden's documents and reports from Pakistan suggest that, prior to Bin Laden's death, it was hurting for cash. Analysts of al-Qaeda have understated: 1) the importance of Bin Laden for keeping the terror group afloat financially and 2) the significant recurring operational costs for the group to sustain its safe havens and personnel.

While al-Qaeda did have some legitimate and illegitimate fronts through which it gained resources during the group's first 15 years, it largely operated on donor funds—money and resources given in pursuit of its global agenda. This donor stream depended largely on Bin Laden's personal network and represented a critical factor in the terror group's operational independence. Donor support to terror groups provides many times the value of funds generated from legitimate and illegitimate schemes. Donor funds provide al-Qaeda with --

1. the ability not to be fixed geographically and dependent on a specific population for generating revenue;
2. increased time for planning and executing attacks rather than expending effort to secure the next round of funds to sustain operations;
3. the ability to avoid having to pursue illegitimate fundraising operations—extortion, drug smuggling, kidnapping -- that undermine the organization's ideological pronouncements and can alienate popular support; and
4. assistance in disguising operations from Western counterterrorism efforts. Illicit and even licit activities broadcast a series of signatures more easily identified by those pursuing al-Qaeda.

With Bin Laden dead, funding for al-Qaeda in Pakistan appears to be drying up. Locals in Pakistan note that donors have shifted their funds to more profitable endeavors—particularly promising groups among the Arab Spring.⁸ Vendors in Pakistan's frontier regions selling Middle Eastern goods have closed up shop and al-Qaeda operative transportation has shifted from armed motor caravan to motor scooters. Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian, likely commands far lower levels of donor support than his predecessor.

Possibly, the strongest indicator for where al-Qaeda might emerge in the future will be revealed in the tracking and analysis of donor funds from the Persian Gulf. News reporting suggests that the largest portion of donations have shifted to the Arab Spring. If any al-Qaeda affiliate were to be receiving support in the wake of Bin Laden's death, one might hypothesize AQAP as the preferred al-Qaeda outlet—although this theory needs closer examination and research. If AQAP proves to be operating largely from donor financing, the affiliate may well assume the role of al-Qaeda's central leadership globally. As money transfers shift, influence, authority and strategic direction will drift.

⁸ Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, "Al-Qaeda on the Ropes: One Fighter's Inside Story", *Newsweek*, Jan 2, 2012. Accessed July 5, 2012. Available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/01/01/al-qaeda-on-the-ropes-one-fighter-s-inside-story.html> and Clint Watts, "al-Qaeda: Where's the money?", *Selected Wisdom*, January 2012, available at: <http://selectedwisdom.com/?p=514>.

SAFE HAVENS: A DWINDLING COMMODITY

Conducting attacks of a significant scale on a routine basis requires a substantial safe haven for al-Qaeda. Today, remaining al-Qaeda members reside in many locations in Africa, South Asia and the Middle East. Some have suggested that this geographical dispersion of al-Qaeda members is emblematic of the terror group's increased strength. However, none of these current environments offer al-Qaeda members the safe haven needed to repeat September 11-style attacks. A quick assessment of al-Qaeda's primary safe havens (Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and the Sahel) illustrates the group's particularly vulnerable position.

The U.S. drone campaign in Pakistan makes the safe haven there an inhospitable location for al-Qaeda to plan, train, and deploy terrorists. Bin Laden himself noted in the Abbottabad documents the need for a new safe haven and specifically mentioned Yemen as a potential alternative.⁹

Yemen provides a natural safe haven physically, a proximate location to Persian Gulf donors and a hospitable population in which al-Qaeda can enmesh its ideology. AQAP and its parallel insurgent group, Ansar al Sharia, have made gains at times controlling large swathes of territory. However, U.S. counterterrorism operations along with Yemeni military efforts have begun to erode this sanctuary as well. The real debate over AQAP rests now on their long-run intentions to attack the U.S. or focus on governing rural Yemen. If the former, the U.S. must continue its reallocation of counterterrorism effort to dismantle this al-Qaeda affiliate and deny Yemen as a safe haven. If the latter, the U.S. must delicately balance its level of counterterrorism effort to contain but not antagonize an insurgent group (Ansar al-Sharia) that may best be disrupted through non-kinetic influence.

As a safe haven, Somalia presents al-Qaeda an unsettling amount of local clan conflict. The al-Shabaab—al-Qaeda merger may have initially appeared as a sign of both groups' growing strength. However, less than six months after the announced merger, al-Shabaab has crumbled from internal disunity, showing the naivety of al-Qaeda for again getting involved in unstable clan fighting.

The Sahel has recently shown glimpses of hope as jihadist groups have overtaken northern sections of Mali in the wake of Libya's collapse. Despite the upheaval in Mali, disparate groups appear to be contesting each other's claims to the desert. Isolated in remote portions of the Sahara and almost entirely dependent on illicit funding streams, the Sahel offers few advantages as an enduring global safe haven for al-Qaeda and many logistical burdens.

Positioned next door to the Free Syrian Army and rife with sectarian conflict, al-Qaeda in Iraq, once defeated by U.S. forces, may provide a small glimmer of safe haven hope for al-Qaeda. Ultimately, aside from Yemen, a resurgent AQ-Iraq, or an emerging safe haven in North Africa or Syria, al-Qaeda has few options during the drone era to create a safe haven on par with its late 1990s base in Afghanistan.

AL-QAEDA'S IDEOLOGY: TIME TO REBRAND

The most telling revelation of Bin Laden's Abbottabad documents was his desire to change the organization's name—effectively rebrand the terror group into another form. Why rebrand? In the decade after September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda failed to wage sustained attacks on the West, fell short in its ideological goals, and killed more Muslims than Westerners ultimately resulting in Bin Laden and al-Qaeda losing support within Muslim populations globally year after year.¹⁰

Al-Qaeda commonly cited these four justifications for its violence against the West and other apostates:

1. Create a global caliphate governed by Sharia law.
2. Attack the far enemy (the U.S. and the West) in retaliation for propping up corrupt near-enemy regimes

⁹ Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, "The Abbottabad Documents: Bin Laden's Cautious Strategy in Yemen," *The Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 22, 2012. Accessed July 5, 2012. Available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-abbottabad-documents-bin-ladins-cautious-strategy-in-yemen>.

¹⁰ "Osama bin Laden Largely Discredited Among Muslim Publics in Recent Years," *Pew Research Center*, May 2, 2011. Accessed July 5, 2012. Available at: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-largely-discredited-among-muslim-publics-in-recent-years/>.

(dictators in the Middle East and North Africa).

3. U.S. occupation of Muslim holy lands and Arab countries.
4. U.S. support for Israel.

Of these primary justifications for global jihad, only one likely appears to hold significant resonance among large swathes of young Muslim males: Israel. Bin Laden must have been quietly pained to watch the toppling of dictatorships around the Middle East and North Africa, not at the hands of al-Qaeda, but instead via largely non-violent protests.¹¹

Today, across disparate locations within the Arab Spring, al-Qaeda's black flag appears frequently, but the once vaunted al-Qaeda name remains mostly absent from the most significant set of revolutions in Arab history. Bin Laden's rebranding strategy called for a refocus on local jihad. This rebranding process may be appearing on at least two current jihadi fronts: Yemen (Ansar al-Sharia) and the Sahel (Ansar al-Din). In two other locations, Somalia (al-Shabaab) and Nigeria (Boko Haram), the al-Qaeda name has been avoided in preference for local names coinciding with local issues. In addition, al-Qaeda in Iraq may have been the first to pursue the rebranding strategy when declaring the Islamic State of Iraq (2006). A current assessment might instead suggest those groups most closely aligned with al-Qaeda seem to be shedding the "al-Qaeda" name to strengthen their local credibility, while those groups least connected to al-Qaeda and harboring little popular support have taken on the moniker to boost their global credibility. Essentially, those calling themselves al-Qaeda today appear less like al-Qaeda than those groups avoiding the name.

Some have argued the next real threat of al-Qaeda will come from self-recruited Westerners inspired by online propaganda initiating independent attacks in the West while having no formal attachment to al-Qaeda organizationally. Inspired al-Qaeda terrorism, best generated by the now dead American al-Qaeda cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, exists but has generated more failures than true threats. Do-it-yourself al-Qaeda terrorism, to date, has brought only a small level of violence from a disparate group of recruits. For those that suggested al-Qaeda's online ideological inspiration would empower an enduring global social movement, there seems little evidence to support this hypothesis.

IS THERE REALLY AN AL-QAEDA CENTRAL?

A headquarters provides strategic vision outlined by ideological principles, structured planning of operations, sustained communications for command and control, indoctrination and training programs for the accession of new recruits, financial resources for sustaining global operations, and logistical support for executing attacks. Inadequate recruitment, limited operational safe havens, reduced financial support, and a general lack of ideological appeal place al-Qaeda in an unprecedented position begging the question: As of the summer of 2012, does a global al-Qaeda organization even exist?

Regardless of whether one considers al-Qaeda to be decentralized or centralized in their organizational structure, Bin Laden and his fellow veteran leaders in Pakistan provided al-Qaeda a headquarters function, guiding the terror group in a certain direction. As of the summer of 2012, Bin Laden and numerous other al-Qaeda key leaders have been killed or captured. Zawahiri likely still commands respect among certain al-Qaeda members he encountered in the past and those remaining particularly loyal to the group's oath. However, Zawahiri's communications likely take weeks to reach their recipients. Zawahiri probably directs little money to affiliate groups and, if he commands anything, he's likely limited to routing veteran al-Qaeda survivors from Pakistan to other safe havens. From the perspective of al-Qaeda affiliates, there is little incentive to continue seeking direction from a buttoned-up Zawahiri. AQAP in Yemen or AQIM in the Sahel likely respects Zawahiri's input, but these groups have probably moved on largely to pursue their own agendas while publicly paying allegiance to a leader they'll never see again in person. Essentially, the al-Qaeda of the 9/11 attacks does not exist. A threat remains, but this terrorist threat looks quite different from past frameworks of al-Qaeda.

¹¹ William McCants, "Al-Qaeda's Challenge: The Jihadist' War With Islamist Democrats," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2011. Available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68160/william-mccants/al-qaedas-challenge>.

WHAT WOULD AN AL-QAEDA WITHOUT AN AL-QAEDA CENTRAL LOOK LIKE? WOULD IT BE AL-QAEDA?

Counterterrorism analysts now face a similar challenge to those studying the Soviet Union in 1991—what do we do now? Analysts of al-Qaeda and its affiliates still have plenty to do. Instead of approaching al-Qaeda as central to global terrorism, counterterrorism analysts will be best served by opening the aperture to see al-Qaeda as one of many potential forms of future terrorism. Rather than seeking linkages between Zawahiri and every terrorist group, analyses should explore several questions, some old and some new, that break from al-Qaeda constructs seen in 2001 rather than 2012. Here are several areas of future terrorism analysis needing exploration:

- **Competition versus Cooperation:** Absent an al-Qaeda governing body, will al-Qaeda affiliates, al-Qaeda upstart groups, and other militant Islamist groups in the Arab Spring compete or cooperate? Today, in comparison to ten years ago, more extremist groups occupy the global landscape. Effective counterterrorism analysis should identify when these terror groups compete and when they cooperate. Knowing when terror groups compete will help the West construct an environment around threat groups replicating the conditions most prone for destructive interference. In contrast, understanding when disparate terror groups cooperate will help analysts detect the emergence of larger groups able to execute global terror attacks on a routine basis.
- **Focus on national and regional forces rather than al-Qaeda's global strategy:** Al-Qaeda analysts in recent years have invested great effort attempting to forecast the group's global strategy. Absent some form of centralized or decentralized governing body, sufficient financing and new crops of operatives, an al-Qaeda grand strategy appears nothing more than misplaced optimism for the terror group. For the few remaining core al-Qaeda leaders, survival and reconstitution likely weigh heavy on their minds. Despite global al-Qaeda's decline, those with language skills and regional experience should concentrate their analysis on national and regional militant groups emerging throughout Africa, the Levant and South Asia examining the linkages between al-Qaeda and these new upstarts as a peripheral rather than primary factor of their emergence. In short, counterterrorism analysts' regional expertise, cultural knowledge, and language skills will trump knowledge of al-Qaeda's 2001 organizational chart and Bin Laden's fatwas.
- **Follow the money; track the pace of attacks:** Future extremist group growth will depend heavily on financing. Bin Laden ran the most popular terrorism operation on the planet and personally provided the seed capital to get his group going. Emerging groups in North Africa will depend on wealthy benefactors and illicit operations. Emerging groups seeking funding will generate attacks to raise their credibility, and as they grow in size, they'll produce attacks at a quicker pace. Analysts of terrorism finance and attack trends may prove particularly valuable in detecting the next generation of global terrorism.
- **Syria - al-Qaeda's last great hope:** While most eyes have shifted to study AQAP in Yemen, Syria's protracted civil war may breathe some life into al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda cites lessons learned from the failure of past fighting against the Syrian regime.¹² Al-Qaeda has an established operational safe haven in Western Iraq through which to funnel fighters and ally with Sunni tribesmen in sectarian battles against the Shia majority government in Baghdad. Additionally, Syria's proximate location to Israel provides a parallel jihadi cause for which al-Qaeda can pursue an enduring agenda beyond the Assad regime. However, a Muslim Brotherhood-backed parallel resistance force might likely outpace a Syrian Al-Qaeda front. Only time and good analysis will provide clarity on a poorly understood Syrian rebel landscape.
- **The Iran wild card:** For many years, rumors of Iranian involvement and maybe conflict with al-Qaeda have persisted.¹³ Some senior al-Qaeda leaders, most notably Saif al-Adel, have allegedly been in a strange state of house arrest or operational support in Iran. Iran has always been a sly state sponsor of terrorist groups, both Sunni and Shia. If tensions were to arise between Iran and Israel or the U.S., would Iran seek to sustain

¹² Joseph Felter, Jacob Shapiro, Jeffrey Bramlett, and Brian Fishman, *Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting Al-Qaeda's Organizational Vulnerabilities*, *Combating Terrorism Center*, West Point, NY, Feb. 14, 2006. Available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/harmony-and-disharmony-exploiting-al-qaidas-organizational-vulnerabilities>.

¹³ Seth Jones, "Al-Qaeda in Iran: Why Tehran is Accommodating the Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan 29, 2012. Accessed July 5, 2012. Available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137061/seth-g-jones/al-qaeda-in-iran>.

al-Qaeda as a proxy? Analysts deliberating this issue may provide invaluable insights in the near future.

- Where are the most talented al-Qaeda veterans going? Today, analysts should seek to identify what path al-Qaeda's most talented veterans are choosing to pursue. Al-Qaeda's limited centralized control has likely encouraged some talented terrorists to move on to new groups. Knowing where these veterans go will be essential for anticipating future threats.

In between conflicts, the U.S. is prone to prepare for, train for, and want to refight the last battle (al-Qaeda 2001) rather than the next battle (al-Qaeda and other terror groups in 2012). While the battle with al-Qaeda is not entirely over, the U.S. and its allies should begin imagining how the remnants of the old al-Qaeda threat will re-emerge as a new manifestation among regional and transnational extremist upstarts. The West should work vigorously to identify what this new frontier in terrorism will look like.

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