



THE THREE VERSIONS OF AL QAEDA:

A PRIMER

By Clint Watts



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Al Qaeda today only slightly resembles the al Qaeda of yesteryear. Al Qaeda operatives or "al Qaeda-like" organizations stretch throughout North Africa, across the Middle East and into South Asia. This disparate string of organizations hosts a handful of al Qaeda's original Afghanistan and Pakistan veterans but mostly consist of newcomers inspired by al Qaeda's message -- disenfranchised young men seeking an adventurous fight in the wake of a tumultuous Arab Spring. Al Qaeda, or more appropriately jihadism pursued under al Qaeda's banner, has morphed in several waves over the course of more than two decades.

Over twenty years, Al Qaeda has harnessed the collective energy of various conflicts in the Middle East, South Asia and now Africa to perpetuate an enduring conflict against the West and specifically the United States. Each Muslim country conflict attracted its own set of foreign fighters ensconced in al Qaeda's ideology and operational umbrella. But each conflict and al Qaeda affiliate varies in shape, size and capability. Evaluating al Qaeda through three incarnations may help us fully understand the group's evolution into the present day and what it may become in the future. Al Qaeda may be examined in three periods: al Qaeda 1.0 (1988 – 2001), al Qaeda 2.0 (2002 – 2011) and al Qaeda 3.0 (2011 – present). Note, these periods are not distinct entities. Al Qaeda has transformed slowly through each phase. Some affiliates carrying al Qaeda's name have rapidly morphed based on changing local conditions while others have adjusted more pragmatically. However, two significant events, the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the death of Osama Bin Laden on May 1, 2011 provide natural turning points for tracing al Qaeda's evolution.

AL QAEDA 1.0: FINDING THEIR WAY

The Beginning – August 1988

For a decade spanning from 1979 to 1989, Pakistan and Afghanistan became the destination for an unprecedented global migration of young Muslim men seeking to wage jihad against the Soviet Union in response to the Soviet

invasion of Afghanistan. Men from the United States to Southeast Asia, although predominantly from the Middle East, descended on Pakistan to join forces with Afghan resistance fighters. A Palestinian Sunni Islamic scholar named Abdallah Azzam played an essential role in fomenting this global migration. Azzam's preaching and advocacy of jihad to defend Afghan Muslims persecuted by the Soviets reached audiences throughout the world via audio broadcasts, magazines and flyers. Advocating that jihad was a personal obligation of all Muslims, Azzam became an essential fundraiser soliciting donations from the international Islamic community while establishing the Maktab al Khadamat in Peshawar, a guesthouse and staging base for transitioning Arabs into his training camps in Afghanistan. One of Azzam's followers that traveled to Pakistan was a young college graduate named Osama Bin Laden. Under the tutelage of Azzam, Bin Laden spent a brief period fighting alongside other Arab volunteers in Afghanistan, but more importantly copied Azzam's model, establishing and helping to finance his own guesthouse in Peshawar to support Azzam's system.

In 1988, the Soviet Union commenced its withdrawal from Afghanistan providing the Afghan mujahideen a triumphant victory, while leaving behind legions of Muslim foreign fighters. For the most part, Arab foreign fighters were not welcome in their home countries and were thus left without direction. Bin Laden's respect amongst Arab mujahideen combined with his personal wealth placed him in a unique position to harness the energies of fighters as the Soviets completed their withdrawal. While Azzam and others considered re-directing these foreign fighters to fight in Palestine, Bin Laden instead created a separate organization known as "The Base" – al Qaeda. Al Qaeda sought to be a training base and integration center to help Arab fighters support other jihads around the world. Not long after, Azzam, Bin Laden's mentor-turned-potential rival, was assassinated in Peshawar by unknown assailants, paving the way for al Qaeda's ascendance.

Bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia just as Iraq invaded Kuwait and threatened the Kingdom. Freshly returning from his success in Afghanistan, Bin Laden offered his foreign fighter force of al Qaeda to the Saudi government as a defense against Iraqi aggression. Instead, Saudi Arabia sought the protection of the United States, insulting bin Laden and introducing what Bin Laden referred to as non-believers into Muslim holy lands. Bin Laden vocally condemned this action, bringing upon himself the ire of the Saudi government, which banished him from the country.

The Transition - 1992

In 1992, Bin Laden was exiled to Sudan setting the trajectory for al Qaeda's development and operations against the U.S. Al Qaeda's headquarters shifted to Khartoum where Bin Laden established licit businesses while secretly turning his organization's violence onto the West. Al Qaeda's first attack can be traced to the December 1992 bombing at the al Gidor hotel in Yemen. Reflecting the terrorist organization's infancy, this botched attempt to kill U.S. soldiers en route to a humanitarian mission in Somalia resulted instead in the murder of two Austrian tourists.

During these early days in Sudan, al Qaeda dispatched teams to integrate with Islamist clans in southern Somalia. From 1992 -1994, al Qaeda unsuccessfully attempted to train and indoctrinate Somali militias while goading them to attack Western and United Nations forces.¹ More than five years from its inception in Afghanistan, al Qaeda had failed to mount an attack of consequence or to gain significant traction in resisting the West. Bin Laden continued to pressure the Saudi government into expelling Americans from Saudi Arabia. International pressure led the Sudanese government to expel a frustrated Bin Laden, who then sought safe haven in Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban.

The Two Fatwas – 1996 & 1998

Bin Laden's retreat to Afghanistan quickly led to a strong partnership with the Taliban. Al Qaeda established training camps in eastern Afghanistan, trained fighters for combat against the Indians in Kashmir, and deployed operatives to support Taliban efforts to further secure Afghanistan. More importantly, 1996 brought Bin Laden and al Qaeda's first declaration of war against the United States. In August 1996, Bin Laden's fatwa, "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," appeared in the London newspaper al Quds al Arabi.² While met with little attention, the announcement represented al Qaeda's first official declaration of

¹ Shapiro and Watts, *al Qaeda's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa*. Combating Terrorism Center, 2007. Available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaidas-misadventures-in-the-horn-of-africa>.

² For a translation of Bin Laden's fatwa, see "Bin Laden's Fatwa," PBS, August 23, 1996 available at: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military/july-dec96/fatwa_1996.html.

war against the United States.

Bin Laden's second fatwa, issued in February 1998, suggested a further expansion of al Qaeda's objectives and the growing strength of its network.³ This fatwa, entitled "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," was co-signed by several other leaders of Islamic terrorist groups, most notably Ayman al Zawahiri, leader of the Jihad Group in Egypt. The fatwa, similar to the preaching of Bin Laden's mentor Abdallah Azzam, stated jihad was a duty of every Muslim and that jihad should target the U.S. and Israel. These two fatwas, along with the strategic writings of Zawahiri,⁴ make the case for the creation of a global caliphate governed by Sharia law. The offenses committed against Muslims, as the fatwas and Zawahiri recount them, include the US presence on the Arabian peninsula; the harm to the Iraqi people caused by Western sanctions (during the period between the two Iraq wars); the occupation of Muslim lands in Palestine, Kashmir and elsewhere; and the propping up of corrupt dictatorial regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (i.e., the "near enemy"). The means to secure the global caliphate would be attacks on the "far enemy" -- the US and its allies -- and the eventual toppling of the "near enemy."

The Buildup – 1998, 2000

Having officially declared war on the United States through public declarations and protected by the Taliban in a distant safe haven, al Qaeda initiated several plans to directly target the United States. Using their networks and experience from the early 1990's foray into Somalia, al Qaeda plotted and executed its first spectacular attack simultaneously bombing the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The twin attacks killed hundreds and signaled a significant shift in al Qaeda's capabilities and intentions. The U.S. responded with cruise missile strikes in both Sudan and Afghanistan, but these counterattacks did nothing to slow down al Qaeda.

In October 2000, al Qaeda attacked the USS Cole outside the Port of Aden, Yemen. This attack killed 17 U.S. sailors and evoked no response from the U.S. Al Qaeda continued to plot more elaborate attacks on the U.S. through their training camps and network operatives spread throughout the Middle East, Africa and Europe. In either 1998 or 1999, Bin Laden gave approval to Khalid Sheikh Muhammed to prepare and execute attacks on the U.S. on 9/11/2001.

The first version of al Qaeda (aka, 1.0) represented a continuation of the reception and training model originally developed by Azzam & Bin Laden for Arab volunteers joining the Afghan mujahideen during the 1980's. Bin Laden used operational safe havens in Sudan and Afghanistan to train, indoctrinate and integrate foreign fighters into Islamic conflicts around the world while also developing increasingly sophisticated plots against the U.S. Bin Laden and his first deputy Zawahiri designed the ideological principles for al Qaeda's pursuit of violence while operating in a centralized manner; hosting a specified structure with a supporting chain of command as well as funding mechanisms. More notably, al Qaeda operated quite freely meeting little counterterrorism resistance. Many of these factors, which enabled Al Qaeda's rise, would quickly vanish after the 9/11 attacks.

AL QAEDA 2.0: A TRANSFORMATION – CORE, AFFILIATES, AND INSPIRED

Al Qaeda Core On the Run – 2001 & 2002

From al Qaeda's perspective, the 9/11 attacks were successful beyond their wildest dreams. During the terror groups' buildup to the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. had shown only a limited response to attacks on their embassies and even U.S. Navy ships. The 9/11 attacks awakened an unprecedented U.S. and international response. By October 2001, U.S. airstrikes and Special Forces deployments began in Afghanistan. Bin Laden and al Qaeda's core members were on the run and the Taliban, al Qaeda's hosts in Afghanistan, faced annihilation.

Tora Bora became al Qaeda's hideout while U.S. forces circled Afghanistan, destroying Taliban enclaves. By February 2002, Bin Laden and his core cadre were surrounded in Tora Bora by U.S. forces integrated with local militias. However, Bin Laden's long relationships in Afghanistan saved him and his force. Late one night, Bin

³ For a translated copy of Bin Laden's second fatwa, see "Al Qaeda's Second Fatwa," PBS, February 23, 1998 available at: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military/jan-june98/fatwa_1998.html.

⁴ Zawahiri's strategic writing that correlates with Bin Laden's fatwas might be best observed through his 2001 work, "Knights Under the Prophets Banner." See Yousef H Aboul-Enein, "Ayman al-Zawahiri's Knights Under the Prophet's Banner: The al Qaeda Manifesto," *Military Review*, January – February 2005. Available at: <http://usacac.leavenworth.army.mil/CAC/milreview/download/english/JanFeb05/Bbobjan.pdf>.

Laden and some of his associates slipped out of Tora Bora and into Pakistan. Once in Pakistan, U.S. forces could no longer pursue him militarily. Some key al Qaeda operatives were caught in Pakistan during this period, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Abu Zubaydah. But Bin Laden, Zawahiri and many other key members integrated themselves into Pakistan to begin leading al Qaeda globally from a distance. Rather than hosting training camps in protected safe havens, Bin Laden and his deputies began commanding their operatives tucked away in several different countries. Attacks in Kenya, Morocco, Turkey, Tunisia and later the 2005 bombing of the London metro system demonstrated al Qaeda's reach during its containment in Pakistan. Bin Laden became what is often referred to as al Qaeda Central – a global headquarters providing ideological direction, propaganda, attack guidance, and resource distribution. Amidst their retreat into Pakistan, two fortuitous events revived al Qaeda at a time of retreat: the emergence of the Internet and the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The Affiliates: Into Iraq – 2003 – 2009 and Yemen – 2009 – 2011

Bin Laden and al Qaeda's leadership were likely quite surprised when only a year after being chased from Tora Bora, the U.S. invaded Iraq. The invasion shifted the U.S. focus from pursuing the 9/11 attackers to removing the regime of Saddam Hussein – a character and country with few links to al Qaeda and no role in the 9/11 attacks. Hussein's Iraq regime fell quickly but this rapid success created a security vacuum ripe for al Qaeda's narrative of far-enemy aggression. A jihadist group founded in Iraq in 2003, officially swore allegiance to Bin Laden in 2004, becoming al Qaeda in Iraq. Abu Musab al Zarqawi led this affiliate, conducting a series of attacks against American and Shiite targets. Zarqawi reinvigorated an al Qaeda in retreat, inspiring a second round of foreign fighters to travel to and fight in Iraq. As an insurgency raged against U.S. forces, al Qaeda in Iraq grew stronger, more violent and concerning for both the U.S. and al Qaeda. In 2006, a letter from Zawahiri in Pakistan intended for Zarqawi in Iraq was intercepted.⁵ The letter instructed Zarqawi to control his violence against Shia and civilians as it was creating backlash against al Qaeda.

Meanwhile, the Internet became a rising opportunity for al Qaeda. Unable to communicate directly with their supporters via traditional media and means, al Qaeda websites began popping up providing ideological guidance, references, training manuals, targeting guidance and video footage of al Qaeda attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq. At a time when maintaining their operational security was a must, al Qaeda benefited from the Internet, for it allowed them to continue to connect with disaffected men who found purpose in pursuing jihad in Iraq.

U.S. forces killed Abu Musab al Zarqawi in 2006, and al Qaeda in Iraq turned ever more violent and sectarian, fully alienating their popular support. Foreign fighter supply lines to Iraq continued strong through 2007 but al Qaeda in Iraq's excessive violence combined with the decimation of the group by U.S. Special Forces resulted in the group's decline amongst Iraqi Sunni tribes fed up with their indiscriminate killing.

As al Qaeda Central's operational control waned, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula began to fill the void. By 2005, al Qaeda cells in Saudi Arabia were launching or preparing attacks against Saudi government and oil sector targets. Adjacent conflict in Iraq inspired droves of Saudi men who traveled north to fight Americans before coming back home. Veteran Saudi members of al Qaeda and recent returnees from Iraq joined in Saudi Arabia to initiate an insurgency. The Saudi government cracked down hard on these al Qaeda cells, killing or detaining many key members and sending survivors fleeing the country, many of whom found refuge in Yemen.

By 2003, most al Qaeda elements in Yemen had been destroyed or imprisoned. Yemenis captured on other al Qaeda battlefields were repatriated to the country. However, Saudi Arabia's purge of al Qaeda fighters combined with prison breaks in Yemen breathed new life into al Qaeda's Yemen affiliate. In 2009, former al Qaeda members from Saudi Arabia combined with al Qaeda veterans in Yemen to form al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Increased drone strikes in Pakistan and disinterest in Iraq pushed al Qaeda veterans and new recruits to Yemen where Nasir al Wuhayshi, Bin Laden's one time personal secretary, and Said Ali al Shihri, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, consolidated al Qaeda's regional resources and began a string of attacks. AQAP also attracted the Yemeni American cleric Anwar al Awlaki, who accelerated the group's global appeal through online preaching. AQAP undertook the lead in external attacks in the West, orchestrating sophisticated attack attempts trying to take down an airliner over the U.S. on Christmas day 2009 and installing bombs in printer cartridges shipped via airliners. AQAP's rise was marked by an uptick in U.S. drone strikes in Yemen, signaling the perceived shift in threat to the

⁵ For a translated copy of the letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, see the Combating Terrorism Center at this link: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2>.

U.S. homeland.

Enduring Battle in Afghanistan – 2008 – 2011

While Iraq took center stage, war with al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan endured. A steady trickle of foreign fighters continued traveling to Pakistan to fight the U.S. in eastern Afghanistan. Meanwhile, al Qaeda became further ingrained in the Pakistani conflict, helping support the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) battle the central government. The union of TTP and al Qaeda helped sustain al Qaeda Central as the global headquarters of terrorism until the introduction of targeted drone strikes. Increasing substantially in 2008, drone strikes on Pakistani Taliban sanctuaries began inflicting a significant toll on al Qaeda's and the TTP's leadership. For the first time, al Qaeda's key leaders, while not defeated, were pinned down in Pakistan and the leadership losses started to slow al Qaeda's global coordination.

Al Qaeda-Inspired Attacks and Attempts in the U.S.: 2001 – 2011

Throughout the decade, Westerners and immigrants to the West either joined ranks with al Qaeda or undertook plots in the West on behalf of al Qaeda. In both Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, al Qaeda recruits or wannabes conducted massive bomb attacks on transportation systems, killing hundreds. In the U.S., a string of loosely affiliated groups were interdicted by law enforcement. The least serious were bungled aspirational plots of al Qaeda wannabes lacking any coordination with al Qaeda itself. More serious plots, such as the Najibullah Zazi attempt to attack the New York City subway system, showed al Qaeda's ability to train individuals to execute attacks in their home countries. In its entirety, the decade after 9/11 showed the weaknesses of al Qaeda-inspired terrorism in achieving any enduring objectives or lasting recruitment.

After nearly being destroyed at Tora Bora, al Qaeda endured by empowering its global network of affiliates and inspired supporters. Rather than planning and executing attacks, al Qaeda's central leadership morphed to inspire, guide, and provide resources for a global al Qaeda network spread across many affiliates. Slightly less than ten years after the 9/11 attacks, al Qaeda would undertake another transformation – one that remains to be completed.

AL QAEDA 3.0: AFFILIATES RISING POST-BIN LADEN AND THE ARAB SPRING

U.S. forces killed Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan on May 1, 2011, ending a nearly decade-long manhunt. By this point, al Qaeda's central headquarters already faced challenges controlling its array of affiliates and operatives. Drone strikes and years of counterterrorism pressure limited the group's appeal. Shortly after Bin Laden's death, Anwar al Awlaki, an inspiring emerging AQAP leader, was also killed in a drone strike in Yemen. Throughout the Arab world, the deaths of al Qaeda leaders were largely overshadowed by the revolutions of the Arab Spring. Al Qaeda, who vowed to topple near enemy dictators by attacking the far enemy of the U.S., watched as mostly peaceful popular uprisings sacked dictators across North Africa and the Middle East.

Initially, these revolutions posed a direct challenge to al Qaeda's message of violence. However, the weakened state of governance that accompanied each conflict has provided ample opportunity for al Qaeda affiliates to chart a course for their own rise.

Ansar al Sharia, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen – 2011 - 2012

AQAP in Yemen, which had already become al Qaeda's top affiliate prior to Bin Laden's death, quickly became the first to attempt to develop its own caliphate in Yemen. Through the winter of 2011 and into the spring of 2012, AQAP built a sister militia, Ansar al Sharia, to better focus on winning over local support. Ansar al Sharia seized large portions of Yemen and began governing as a caliphate, instituting Sharia law. However, their harsh tactics combined with U.S. drone strikes and Yemeni military advances eroded this caliphate and safe haven.

Al Shabaab in Somalia – 2011-2013

From the ashes of the Islamic Courts Union rose al Shabaab. After Ethiopia's invasion in 2007, Shabaab took control of the resistance and, over time, gained control of central and south Somalia. Provided operational space, Shabaab established the beginnings of an Islamic State, implementing an extremely harsh version of Sharia law. In February 2012, Shabaab officially merged with a Zawahiri-led al Qaeda. The merger, instead of demonstrating the group's strength, signaled a downward spiral for Shabaab. Since the fall of 2012, Shabaab has been fraught with internal fractures and pushed from most major cities by the Somali National Army and their allies. However, the September 2013 Westgate Mall attacks in Kenya demonstrated Shabaab is still a threat despite its setbacks.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mali – 2012 - 2013

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb along with several local affiliates seized control of Northern Mali in the spring of 2012. Successfully timed amidst a Tuareg rebellion and Malian government coup, AQIM gained control of Timbuktu and pushed south threatening the nation's capital. Like Shabaab, AQIM implemented a harsh form of Sharia law over those they conquered and, for a time, the affiliate created the largest geographical caliphate of any al Qaeda branch in the terror network's history. Similar to their sister affiliate in Yemen, AQIM's gains were short-lived, curbed by a French counterattack into Northern Mali in January 2013 that put AQIM on the run across the Sahara.

Ansar al Sharia in Libya: 2012 - 2013

In the wake of Muammar al Gaddafi's fall, the security vacuum in Libya not only enabled the rise of AQIM in the Sahel but also freed previously suppressed extremist elements in the country. Ansar al Sharia, a grassroots extremist group sharing the name of AQAP's insurgent organization in Yemen, emerged in the former bastions of eastern Libya previously home to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and known for supplying numerous foreign fighters to Iraq. The group rose to international prominence after being connected to the 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy in Benghazi, killing a U.S. ambassador, among others. The group has been challenged locally but appears a natural conduit for al Qaeda activities in Libya.

Al Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula – 2012 – 2013

The Mubarak regime's collapse amidst the Arab Spring brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power and created a long sought opportunity for the Egyptian Zawahiri to re-enter Egypt. Starting in 2012, al Qaeda cells were disrupted in Cairo and operatives continue to be interdicted in the Sinai Peninsula. The 2013 overthrow of the Morsi regime by the Egyptian military further supported al Qaeda's rhetoric that only violence, not democracy, will bring about Islamic governance. Today, Egypt provides a ripe opportunity for a resurgent al Qaeda.

Boko Haram: 2012 – 2013

Boko Haram, a Nigerian Islamic extremist group, accelerated its violence in Nigeria around 2011. While not an official al Qaeda affiliate, open source reporting suggests the group maintains connections with African al Qaeda affiliates and benefits from al Qaeda trainers and facilitators. The country's ethnic conflict provides potential fuel for a future al Qaeda safe haven.

Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham in Syria: 2011 – 2013

No battlefield presents a greater opportunity to al Qaeda than Syria. Syria's revolution has endured for two years allowing a small group of al Qaeda-connected extremists to emerge as a dominant force against the Assad regime. To date, the Syrian jihad has likely produced the largest migration of foreign fighters in history, eclipsing the supplies of both Afghanistan in the 1980s and Iraq and Afghanistan during the 2000s. Jabhat al Nusra initiated the first jihadist effort in Syria but has since been matched by a creeping al Qaeda in Iraq that has challenged both Nusra and al Qaeda's leader Zawahiri by creating the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) in an attempt to take control of the jihad in Syria. This public rift provides the only buffer to a jihadist movement unmet by Western counterterrorism efforts.

CLOSING THOUGHTS: THREE INCARNATIONS OF AL QAEDA

What should we think of al Qaeda moving forward? Al Qaeda has evolved in many ways since the attacks of 9/11/2001. Moving forward, one can expect lots of "al Qaeda-like" terror groups but there are several factors that should be observed and analyzed to understand what the threat will be to the U.S. Here are some factors that might be considered:

- ***Resources:*** A key difference of today's al Qaeda 3.0, when compared to that of previous generations (1.0 & 2.0), is independent resourcing. Bin Laden largely managed al Qaeda's funding and support during the group's inception, which compelled loyalty to his leadership. Today, al Qaeda affiliates maintain their own resource support and funding mechanisms, likely changing the leadership dynamic in the organization.
- ***Coordination or Competition:*** During al Qaeda versions 1.0 and 2.0, affiliates appeared to coordinate in their pursuit of al Qaeda's objectives. As witnessed in the conflict between Nusra and ISIS in Syria, affiliates of the third generation may be competing to meet their own objectives first before following al Qaeda's global objectives.

- ***Leadership:*** Most Western media focuses coverage on al Qaeda's global leaders. Aside from Zawahiri, these leaders are in short supply and of lesser clout than during al Qaeda's early years. For al Qaeda to endure as a global movement, new jihadi leaders must emerge that can inspire future focus on attacking the West.
- ***Africa as an opportunity for al Qaeda:*** Al Qaeda's early forays into Sudan and Somalia were largely failures, but since bin Laden's death, Africa's instability has provided many new opportunities for al Qaeda. Generation 3.0 of al Qaeda will likely see renewed and expanded activity in Africa, a frontier that may shift al Qaeda affiliate targeting and even ideological goals.
- ***Syria:*** The future of al Qaeda will likely be determined by the outcome of the Syrian jihad. The latest incarnation and direction of al Qaeda will be undertaken by the legions of foreign fighters today battling in Syria. Where they choose to go at the end of the Syrian conflict is where al Qaeda, if there is a singular version of the group, will likely go.
- ***Trajectory:*** Up to bin Laden's death, al Qaeda's focus pointed directly at the U.S. Today, al Qaeda affiliates primarily focus on developing local operational space and bases of support. Will these affiliates automatically focus their strategic objectives on attacking the U.S.? Will they shift focus to Israel? Might they be re-directed to attacking those supporting the Assad regime such as Russia, Iran, or the Shia in general? Or will they ultimately be content to hold their own fiefdoms? Moving forward, al Qaeda's focus is likely to be less U.S.-focused and instead, more distributed to a number of "far enemies."

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