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Al Qaeda-Affiliated Groups: Middle East and Africa

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Summary

After more than a decade of combating Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United States now faces an increasingly diverse threat from Al Qaeda affiliates in the Middle East and Africa and from emerging groups that have adopted aspects of Al Qaeda's ideology but operate relatively or completely autonomously from the group's senior leadership.

U.S. counterterrorism debates have focused on "formal" Al Qaeda affiliates, and policymakers increasingly are considering options for addressing the range of threats posed by the wider spectrum of groups inspired by—or similar in goals and aspirations to—Al Qaeda. An additional challenge is the fluid nature of the threat, given the apparent fragmentation of Al Qaeda, and Ayman al Zawahiri's struggle to assert leadership of the group in light of challengers such as Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Finally, concerns regarding these issues might shape ongoing reevaluations of the federal statutes that underpin current U.S. counterterrorism policy, including the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF, P.L. 107-40).

In addition to the AUMF, Congress has addressed the emergence of Al Qaeda affiliates through a number of channels, including oversight of executive branch counterterrorism policies and practices; authorization and appropriations of U.S. funds for counterterrorism operations; and assistance for partner nations engaged in such operations.

Note: In addition to focusing on Al Qaeda affiliates, or groups that have publicly sworn allegiance to Al Qaeda leadership and been formally accepted as affiliates, this report also profiles a selection of other groups such as the Islamic State (formerly known as ISIL or ISIS) and Boko Haram.

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Introduction

Since the 2001 attacks of September 11, groups espousing Al Qaeda's ideology have proliferated in the Middle East and Africa. Some of these groups have pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, and others have not. Even among the groups that have formal alliances with Al Qaeda, there is significant variation over the extent to which they are operationally integrated with Al Qaeda's senior leadership in practice. Some of these groups, despite the formal alliances, emerged in the context of local conflicts and are self-sustaining. In a 2014 interview, Zawahiri appeared to acknowledge a degree of decentralization, stating that "Al Qaeda is a message before it is an organization."¹ President Obama in a speech at West Point in May 2014 stated, "Today's principal threat no longer comes from a centralized Al Qaeda leadership. Instead, it comes from decentralized Al Qaeda affiliates and extremists, many with agendas focused in the countries where they operate." While the groups discussed in this report focus the majority of their attacks on local targets, they have been identified by U.S. officials as posing a credible threat to the United States or its allies, or to U.S. interests in the Middle East and Africa.

The rise and rapid expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has reignited a debate over the type and scope of policies and legislation needed to provide the tools to fully address the threats posed by such groups. In addition, the ongoing debates within Al Qaeda itself—over leadership and tactics—may prompt a reexamination of previous understandings of the group, and the ways in which it may have evolved since the September 11 attacks. This report will provide an overview of select groups, and address the debates and evolution ongoing within Al Qaeda that may change the nature of the problem U.S. policymakers will be confronting. Additionally, it will discuss the tools Congress uses to address this problem, and the debates over policies and legislation.

Scope and Sourcing Note: This report focuses on Al Qaeda affiliates, or groups that have publicly sworn allegiance to Al Qaeda leadership and been formally accepted as affiliates. This includes Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the Nusra Front, and Al Shabaab. This report also profiles a selection of other groups that are not Al Qaeda affiliates but may have organizational links or ideological similarities with Al Qaeda or its affiliates and pose a credible threat to the United States or to U.S. interests in their areas of operation (see **Appendix**). These include the following:

- The Islamic State (formerly known as ISIL or ISIS). A successor to Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which targeted U.S.-led forces. Al Qaeda leadership in February 2014 disavowed the group in response to its brutal tactics, infighting with other Sunni groups, and a long-running dispute over limits to its areas of operation.
- Al Murabitoun. The group publicly swore allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2014, and U.S. officials have described it as the greatest threat to U.S. interests in the Sahel. Al Qaeda's leadership to date has not publicly accepted Al Murabitoun as an affiliate.
- Groups sometimes referred to as "affiliates of affiliates," such as Boko Haram, Ansar al Sharia, and Ansar Bayt al Maqdis. These groups are reported by some

¹ Ayman al Zawahiri interview with Al-Sahab Establishment for Media Production, entitled "Reality between pain and hope," April 18, 2014.

sources to have some operational ties to Al Qaeda affiliates, and Ansar al Sharia has staged attacks on U.S. diplomatic facilities in the region.

This report draws from a variety of open sources, most of which CRS is not able to verify independently.

Al Qaeda: Background and Ideology

In 1988, Osama bin Laden formally established Al Qaeda from a network of veterans of the Afghan insurgency against the Soviet Union. The group conducted a series of terrorist attacks against U.S. and allied targets, including the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the 2000 attack on the U.S.S. *Cole* docked in Aden, Yemen. After the attacks of September 11, the United States redoubled its counterterrorism (CT) efforts, forcing the group's leadership to flee Afghanistan—where they had been hosted by the Taliban—and seek refuge in the tribal belt of northwest Pakistan. U.S. forces in 2011 located and killed Bin Laden in Pakistan, and Bin Laden's deputy Ayman al Zawahiri assumed leadership of the group. U.S. intelligence officials have argued in open testimony to Congress that persistent CT operations against Al Qaeda since 2001 have significantly degraded the group's ability to launch another major attack in the United States.

Al Qaeda's ideological agenda, which is shared in varying degrees by its affiliates and other groups, focuses on the expulsion of foreign forces and influences from traditionally or predominantly Islamic societies and the eventual creation of an Islamic state ruled by a system of Islamic law (*sharia*). To achieve these goals, Al Qaeda reportedly calls upon its members to pursue a range of measures, including

- *Salafist² Islamic reform.* The group advocates for the enforcement of a strict interpretation of *sharia*, although Al Qaeda leadership has differed on how quickly *sharia* should be imposed on populations under the group's control or that of its affiliates.
- *Defensive jihad.* Adherents are called to pursue armed resistance to counter what Al Qaeda describes as Western aggression. They are instructed to fight Western encroachment, such as the presence of U.S. troops in the Arabian Peninsula or in other areas they consider to be Muslim lands.³
- *Attacks on the "far enemy."* The organization largely achieved its notoriety for the series of fatal attacks it planned and implemented against symbolic targets, including the September 11 attacks in the United States and subsequent attacks in London, Madrid, and Istanbul. It justifies these attacks as part of its effort to eradicate foreign influences.

² "Salafism" refers to a broad subset of Sunni revivalist movements that seek to purify contemporary Islamic religious practices and societies by encouraging the application of practices and views associated with the earliest days of the Islamic faith. The world's Salafist movements hold a range of positions on political, social, and theological questions and include both politically quietist and violent extremist groups.

³ This is Bin Laden's interpretation. Jihad literally means "striving" or "struggle" and can refer to either an internal or external struggle. Defensive jihad in traditional Islamic thought refers to the obligation of Muslims to defend one another from external attack.

- *Removal of apostate regimes.* Al Qaeda calls for the removal of governments not based on its interpretation of sharia law because it views such governments as empowering human rulers and man-made legal systems over divine law. Al Qaeda leaders have described democratic principles as un-Islamic and tantamount to apostasy, which is punishable by death. They have also called for the overthrow of regimes they judge to be insufficiently Islamic, such as the Saudi monarchy.
- *Economic warfare.* Bin Laden and Zawahiri urged followers to attack economic targets to weaken both the West and local regimes. In particular, they called on supporters to conduct attacks on oil infrastructure in the region to deny the West access to the region's oil resources.
- *Attacks on non-Sunni Muslim religious groups.* Al Qaeda considers Shia Muslims to be apostates, and some leaders have encouraged attacks against local Shia populations. Other Al Qaeda leaders argue that such attacks should not be a priority as they can alienate the broader Muslim population. Al Qaeda leaders also regularly espouse anti-Israeli rhetoric, although there have been few, if any, operational missions against Israel.⁴

In their advocacy and recruitment efforts, Al Qaeda leaders have expressed support for and appealed to non-Arab Muslims—particularly those engaged in conflicts in Chechnya, Bosnia, Kashmir, and the Philippines—emphasizing that Muslims constitute one global nation or *ummah*.

Rise of Affiliate Groups

Al Qaeda began as a hierarchical movement but began to decentralize after the American-led invasion of Afghanistan overthrew the Taliban, eliminating Al Qaeda's sanctuary in that country.⁵ Affiliate groups, many of which had existed in some form prior to 9/11 but without formal ties to other groups, gradually began to formally align with Al Qaeda. Despite these alliances, most affiliates continued to focus primarily on local grievances and did not adopt Al Qaeda's call for global jihad against the West as an immediate priority. While Bin Laden in 2004 referred to the confrontation between the U.S. and its allies on one side and jihadist movements on the other as a "Third World War," open source data indicates that affiliate groups to date have remained focused primarily on local disputes. AQAP, which has attempted at least two failed attacks on U.S. soil, is a possible exception—although the overwhelming majority of its attacks target Yemeni military and security forces.

Analysts disagree on the level of threat posed to the United States by affiliate groups relative to the remnants of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Administration has drawn a sharp distinction between groups that actively seek to target the United States and those that it believes are focused on local attacks and/or lack the capability to launch a major strike on U.S. soil. At the same time, some observers contend that Al Qaeda, its affiliates, and like-minded actors are growing in strength and influence; they argue that these diverse groups—if considered as a single

⁴ "Zawahiri aims at Israel: behind al Qaeda's pivot to the Levant," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2, 2014.

⁵ Joseph Felter et al, *Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities*, Combating Terrorism Center, p. 709.

entity—control more territory in the Middle East and Africa than at any previous time.⁶ Local affiliates could eventually grow to pose a threat comparable to that of Al Qaeda senior leadership, some argue. Even groups that start out with local aims may see themselves as part of an international struggle and expand their areas of operation once resources permit—as was the case with Somalia-based al Shabaab, which in 2013 attacked the Westgate mall in Nairobi, Kenya.⁷

Another point of debate is the amount of control that Al Qaeda leadership is able to exercise over affiliate groups. At a press conference following the 2011 Abbottabad raid that killed Bin Laden, a U.S. intelligence official noted that initial analyses of recovered documents “clearly show that Bin Laden remained an active leader in Al Qaeda, providing strategic, operational and tactical instructions to the group.”⁸ However, researchers at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point used internal Al Qaeda documents released after the raid to assert that the organization’s leadership was internally divided over how to deal with its affiliate groups and frustrated at its inability to control some local fighters.⁹ Researchers studied the limited documents declassified following the raid—including letters and other communications from Bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders—and noted that, “far from being in control of the operational side of regional jihadi groups, the tone in several letters authored by Bin Laden makes it clear that he was struggling to exercise even a minimal influence over them.”¹⁰

A separate set of documents recovered by the *Associated Press* in Mali suggest that just as Al Qaeda’s leadership may struggle to control its affiliate groups, those affiliates, in turn, may struggle to control their own members. In one document, AQIM’s governing board censures a local commander for his refusal to follow directives.¹¹ The fighter in question later split from AQIM to form Al Murabitoun. In the same set of documents, AQIM leaders also claim that there is distance between themselves and Al Qaeda leaders, noting that AQIM had received little communication from Bin Laden and Zawahiri since formally becoming an affiliate in 2006. However, some observers who argue that Al Qaeda is expanding geographically contend that the ability of Al Qaeda leaders to assert command and control is irrelevant if affiliate groups are committed to the same objectives.¹²

Despite the tension captured in internal communications between Al Qaeda leadership and some affiliate groups, leaders on both sides generally have maintained a public display of unity, possibly calculating that this strengthens the image of both parties. However, the apparent unity of objectives does not appear to be matched by a similarity of capabilities, and thus different counterterrorism policies and programs might be more effective than one standard approach. Policymakers may also calibrate responses to various groups based on the extent to which they see the affiliates as integrated versus independent.

⁶ “Al Qaeda controls more territory than ever in Middle East,” *CNN*, January 7, 2014.

⁷ “The franchising of al Qaeda,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2014.

⁸ “Background Briefing with Senior Intelligence Official at the Pentagon on Intelligence Aspects of the U.S. Operation Involving Osama Bin Laden,” Department of Defense News Transcript, May 7, 2011. <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4820>.

⁹ “Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 3, 2012. https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CTC_LtrsFromAbottabad_WEB_v2.pdf.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p13.

¹¹ “Rise of Al Qaida Sahara terrorist,” *Associated Press*, May 28, 2013.

¹² “Report: Obama admin never defined Al Qaeda,” *Washington Free Beacon*, April 24, 2014.

Regional Context

Some affiliates have refined their tactics as a result of Al Qaeda's experience in past conflicts—including against the United States—which may give them an advantage over other, newer groups that lack access to similar institutional knowledge.

- *U.S. CT policy.* Effective counterterrorism operations against Al Qaeda's leadership have made it difficult for those leaders to travel and communicate. Their need to avoid detection may have hindered their ability to closely manage groups or enforce directives. The U.S. factor thus presumably prompted affiliates to become more self-reliant—even groups that may have preferred greater direction and guidance from Al Qaeda's senior leadership.
- *Experience.* Some leaders of affiliates and ideologically similar groups—including those of AQAP, the Islamic State, and the Nusra Front—were able to draw from their experiences fighting U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan to help inform their tactics as they expanded into new geographic areas.
- *Organization.* The training, discipline, and structure provided by Al Qaeda affiliated groups may have increased the appeal of these groups relative to newer—and often more disorganized—armed groups. In Syria, for example, a new recruit described the Al Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front as “professional,” and said he decided to join them—rather than other armed groups—after observing their skill in planning operations.¹³

U.S. Government Terminology

The Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF, P.L. 107-40) enacted by Congress in September 2001 is the primary law authorizing U.S. operations against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. U.S. administrations later established categories of Al Qaeda-linked groups, each of which carries potentially distinct legal and policy implications. The terms below do not appear in the original AUMF text; rather, they have been delineated in a series of subsequent legal rulings and executive branch strategy papers.

- **Associated Forces:** organized, armed groups that have entered the fight alongside Al Qaeda or the Taliban, and are co-belligerents with Al Qaeda or the Taliban in hostilities against the United States or its coalition partners.¹⁴ Once established as co-belligerents, associated forces are considered legal targets of U.S. military force per the laws of armed conflict—which are commonly interpreted to permit a country at war to use force against those fighting alongside its enemy.
- **Affiliates:** groups that have aligned with Al Qaeda. This includes associated forces as well as groups and individuals against whom the Obama Administration considers the United States is not authorized to use force based on the authorities

¹³ “Syrian rebels tied to Al Qaeda play key role in war,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2012.

¹⁴ Testimony of Stephen W. Preston, General Counsel of the Department of Defense, before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, May 21, 2014.

granted by the AUMF.¹⁵ The United States may use force against affiliates that have been further classified as associated forces.

- **Adherents:** individuals who form collaborative relationships with Al Qaeda or act on its behalf or in furtherance of its goals—including by engaging in violence—regardless of whether such violence is directed at the United States.¹⁶
- **Al Qaeda “Inspired”:** Groups or individuals not affiliated with identified terror organizations but inspired by the Al Qaeda narrative.¹⁷

U.S. officials occasionally use these terms interchangeably, with some mixing the category of Al Qaeda affiliates—groups that have publicly sworn allegiance to Al Qaeda leadership and been formally accepted as affiliates—with the category of groups considered “affiliates” under the AUMF—groups aligned with Al Qaeda against which the United States is not authorized to use force.¹⁸ The United States to date has not publicly categorized most individual groups into one of the above designations, nor has it identified consistent criteria by which to do so. A Pentagon spokesperson in mid-2013 stated that a list identifying which groups the Administration viewed as associated forces should remain classified, arguing that its release would damage national security by bolstering the groups’ credibility.¹⁹ Department of Defense General Counsel Stephen Preston in a May 2014 hearing before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations stated that he could not speak publicly about which groups the Administration had determined it could target under the AUMF.

Establishing Criteria for “Associated Forces”

In a 2008 court case, the Bush Administration argued that a group should be considered an “associated force” if 1) it was part of a supporting force associated with Al Qaeda or the Taliban and 2) that supporting force was engaged in hostilities against the United States or its coalition partners. The court noted that, under this definition, a group’s connection to Al Qaeda or the Taliban would need to be “considerably closer than the relationship suggested by the usual meaning of the word ‘associated,’” a standard that the court found the government unable to meet in that case. The Obama Administration in a 2009 brief declined to define “associated forces,” stating that the definition would require further development through its “application to concrete facts in individual cases.” In habeas cases to date, the term “associated forces” has generally covered only armed groups assisting the Taliban or Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. However, the Obama Administration has suggested that it may apply the term to groups based in other countries, and testimony by the Defense Department’s General Counsel in May 2014 referred to AQAP as “part of, or at least an associated force of, Al Qaeda.”²⁰ For more information on the AUMF, see CRS Report R42143, *Wartime Detention Provisions in Recent Defense Authorization Legislation*, by Jennifer K. Elsea and Michael John Garcia.

¹⁵ 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism. Note: previous versions of the National Strategy for Counterterrorism were issued in 2003 and 2006. http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See for example, “Strategy for Homeland Defense and Defense Support of Civil Authorities,” Department of Defense, February 2013. <http://www.defense.gov/news/Homelanddefensestrategy.pdf>.

¹⁸ See for example, Testimony of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SOLIC) Mike Lumpkin, and the Commander of Special Operations Command, Admiral Bill McRaven, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 11, 2014. On page 12, Lumpkin states, “If it’s, again, one of those al Qaeda affiliates, then the AUMF gives us the authority to act as necessary.” <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/14-17%20-%2011-14.pdf>. He later states, “I think that if there is an affiliate, an associate, and it’s been recognized, regardless of what they call themselves in the relationship, I think that—of course we’d go to the lawyer’s group, but my sense is that we would probably be in a good place to use the AUMF.”

¹⁹ “Who are we at war with? The answer is (still) classified,” *The National Interest*, July 26, 2013.

²⁰ Testimony of Stephen W. Preston, General Counsel of the Department of Defense, before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, May 21, 2014.

A broader category is that of “like-minded groups” that may or may not be operationally linked with Al Qaeda, but potentially share at least some of its traits—particularly its salafi-jihadist ideological orientation. Salafi-jihadist groups advocate a return to what they consider the pure principles of early Islam, and support the use of force to achieve the application of those principles. Al Qaeda affiliates are salafi-jihadist groups who have sworn *bay’at* (allegiance) to Al Qaeda’s leadership, and have in return been formally accepted as affiliates. However, most salafi-jihadist groups are not part of Al Qaeda. On occasion, they may cooperate with Al Qaeda, its affiliates, or individuals belonging to these groups. Various salafi-jihadist groups hold a wide range of differing beliefs on issues such as the nature of an Islamic emirate and whether or to what extent to attack non-Muslims and Shi’a.²¹

“Affiliates” as a Framework for U.S. Policy

U.S. discussions of violent armed religious extremist groups in the Middle East and Africa have often focused on whether groups have sufficient ties to Al Qaeda to be considered formal affiliates. However, with the proliferation of local armed groups that share aspects of Al Qaeda’s ideology, a group that fails to meet the formal threshold for “affiliate” status can nevertheless pose an active threat to U.S. interests. In some cases, there may be few meaningful differences between operations conducted by affiliates and those conducted by non-affiliates. Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia, for instance, allegedly attacked U.S. diplomats and infrastructure in Tunis in 2012. Ansar al Sharia in Libya and other groups reportedly were involved in the 2012 attack on the U.S. facilities in Benghazi that killed the U.S. Ambassador and killed or wounded other government personnel. Neither group is considered by the U.S. government to be a formal Al Qaeda affiliate, although each has been designated as a foreign terrorist organization. The Islamic State, which has seized significant territory in Iraq and Syria, was disavowed by Al Qaeda’s leadership, undermining its previous status as an affiliate. Acknowledging that the term “affiliates” no longer covers all the major groups of concern, intelligence officials increasingly reference “like-minded” groups in threat assessments regarding Al Qaeda.²²

The policy focus on the affiliate label is partially a legal one, since the executive branch has interpreted the AUMF to authorize force against associated forces but not against all affiliates. Some groups—such as the Nusra Front—initially sought to portray themselves as opposition groups rather than Al Qaeda affiliates,²³ prompting questions as to whether groups could legalistically avoid the AUMF framework by foregoing a public declaration of allegiance to the group.²⁴ However, it is unclear whether groups that hide their affiliation with Al Qaeda are doing so primarily to sidestep U.S. targeting efforts or simply because they think such an approach will broaden their appeal within local communities. In addition, a group’s public statements are likely only one of several factors that contribute to the broader assessment by the executive branch of whether or not it considers a group to be an Al Qaeda affiliate. The Department of State

²¹ “A Persistent Threat: The evolution of al Qaeda and other salafi jihadists,” Rand Corporation, 2014.

²² The term “like-minded” individuals or extremists was used when discussing Al Qaeda in the 2013 and 2014 Worldwide Threat Assessments, but not in prior assessments.

²³ “State Dept. on Designation of Al Nusra Front as Terrorist Group,” U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, December 11, 2012.

²⁴ Testimony of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SOLIC) Mike Lumpkin, and the Commander of Special Operations Command, Admiral Bill McRaven, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 11, 2014. <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/14-17%20-%20203-11-14.pdf>. See p. 12.

designated the Nusra Front as an alias for Al Qaeda in Iraq in late 2012,²⁵ even though Nusra Front leader Muhammad al-Jawlani did not publicly pledge allegiance to Al Qaeda until April 2013.²⁶

Jihadist Debates over Al Qaeda's Future

As affiliate groups expand and conduct operations independently of Al Qaeda's leadership, affiliates, Al Qaeda leaders and other members of the international jihadist community are engaged in an ongoing debate over competing visions for the organizations' future.

Internal Al Qaeda documents from the Abbottabad raid suggest an internal debate among senior leaders over the group's relationship with affiliates. As noted by researchers at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, captured correspondence between Al Qaeda leaders show that some urged the group to "declare their distance, and even to dissociate themselves, from groups whose leaders do not consult with Al Qaeda yet still act in its name."²⁷ Others argued that the group should embrace affiliates as critical to the organization's growth. Bin Laden argued for maintaining communication with affiliates to "urge restraint and provide advice" but resisted incorporating groups he viewed as excessively violent or undisciplined, whose tactics could turn Muslim public opinion away from the group.²⁸ Zawahiri echoed this concern in a 2014 interview, stating that it was better to have ten responsible followers than "scores of thousands making the *ummah* hate them, their deeds, and their behaviors."²⁹ Taken together, these communications appear to show a group torn between highlighting its strength and geographical scope and maintaining control over its brand.

Zawahiri also appears to be struggling to recapture the legitimacy and popularity among Al Qaeda members and other salafi jihadists enjoyed by Bin Laden. Observers argue that he lacks Bin's Laden's charisma and that the new generation of jihadists may not fully recognize his authority.³⁰ While Bin Laden at times also struggled to rein in some affiliates, Zawahiri has faced a higher level of public defiance, as evidenced by the routine disregard reportedly given to directives he has issued to avoid infighting and collateral damage.³¹ In 2013 Zawahiri reportedly ordered ISIL to return to Iraq and refrain from conducting operations in Syria. ISIL leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi refused to adhere to Zawahiri's directive, which he publicly denounced as a "command opposing Almighty God's command."³²

²⁵ "State Dept. on Designation of Al Nusrah Front as Terrorist Group," U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, December 11, 2012.

²⁶ Open Source Center (OSC) Report GMP20130410061001, 10 April 2013. See also, "Syrian rebel group pledges allegiance to al Qaeda," *Associated Press*, April 10, 2013.

²⁷ "Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?" Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 3, 2012 (p21). https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CTC_LtrsFromAbottabad_WEB_v2.pdf.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Ayman al Zawahiri interview with Al Sahab Establishment for Media Production, "Reality between pain and hope," released April 18, 2014.

³⁰ "The unquenchable fire: Adaptable and resilient, al Qaeda and its allies keep bouncing back," *Economist*, September 28, 2013.

³¹ "Qaeda affiliates gain regional influence as central leadership fades," *New York Times*, April 30, 2014.

³² OSC Report TRN2013061535984332, June 15, 2013.

Some observers, including both AQ watchers and members of the international jihadist community, have suggested that Baghdadi—not Zawahiri—may be best positioned to fill the leadership vacuum left after Bin Laden’s death.³³ Others have identified Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) leader Nasir Wuhayshi as the most prominent Al Qaeda leader with the best chance of unifying jihadist groups.³⁴ Still others look to ideological figures such as Jordan-based Abu Mohammed Al Maqdisi, who regularly engages in debates about the future of the international salafi-jihadist cause, but refrains from direct involvement in terrorist operations or affiliation with individual groups.

Zawahiri has sought to minimize the significance of ongoing leadership disputes by emphasizing that the core of Al Qaeda lies in its message rather than in its organizational structure.³⁵ However, the internal Al Qaeda correspondence recovered in Mali and Pakistan suggests an expectation among Al Qaeda leaders that regional groups would defer to their directives.

Comparing the Aspirations of Various Affiliates

According to U.S. intelligence and counterterrorism officials, the threat posed by Al Qaeda affiliates to the United States varies widely across groups. AQAP has launched at least two failed attacks on U.S. soil, and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper in early 2014 described it as the affiliate posing the most immediate threat to the U.S. homeland.³⁶ Clapper also stated that the Nusra Front has aspirations to launch an attack against the United States.³⁷ Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in a 2014 audio statement warned the United States of an impending “direct conflict,”³⁸ and U.S. officials interviewed by the *New York Times* expressed concern that Al Qaeda affiliates or like-minded groups in Syria could recruit individuals capable of traveling to the United States to conduct attacks.³⁹

Other Al Qaeda affiliates are seen by intelligence officials primarily as a potential danger to U.S. interests abroad, rather than direct threats to the U.S. homeland. U.S. officials have described Al Shabaab and Al Murabitoun as the greatest threats to U.S. interests in East Africa and the Sahel, respectively.⁴⁰ AQIM and Boko Haram also have been described as primarily regional threats. However, while these groups to date have conducted only local or regional attacks, most have stated aspirations of attacking the West. In addition, the majority of these groups also seek to destabilize countries that the United States considers key to regional security; to disrupt regional commerce; or to conduct sectarian attacks that could be widely destabilizing.

The capabilities of affiliates and other groups hinge on a number of factors, some external to the groups themselves. Attacks by Somali affiliate Al Shabaab have been confined to East Africa, but U.S. officials have expressed concern about the group’s efforts to recruit in the United States and

³³ “Al Qaeda’s new star rises,” *TIME*, December 16, 2013.

³⁴ “How does the U.S. counter Al Qaeda while Al Qaeda fights itself?” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 5, 2014.

³⁵ Ayman al Zawahiri interview with Al-Sahab Establishment for Media Production, entitled “Reality between pain and hope,” April 18, 2014.

³⁶ Testimony of DNI James Clapper before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2014

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ OSC Report TRR2014011980831299, January 19, 2014.

³⁹ “Syria militants said to recruit visiting Americans to attack U.S.,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2014.

⁴⁰ State Department, 2013 *Country Report on Human Rights Practices*, April 2014.

other Western countries and its call for lone wolf attacks in the United States.⁴¹ In some cases, the operational ability of a group is magnified by the absence of capable forces to restrain it; the threat posed by Boko Haram, for example, is in part a function of the weakness of the Nigerian security forces.

Sub-regional Profiles of Al Qaeda Involvement

The Levant and Iraq

Origins and evolution of Al Qaeda affiliate(s)

Iraq and Syria are home to one Al Qaeda affiliate—Al Nusra—and to the Islamic State, a group with shared roots that has sought to position itself as a global rival to Al Qaeda. The ideological and organizational roots of the Nusra Front and the Islamic State lie in the forces built by the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq in the aftermath of the ouster of Saddam Hussein. In 2004 Zarqawi formally merged his group Tawhid wal Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad) with Al Qaeda to form Al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (also known as Al Qaeda in Iraq, or AQ-I). Following Zarqawi's death in a U.S. airstrike in 2006, AQ-I leaders repackaged the group as a coalition known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, presently emir of the Islamic State, assumed leadership of ISI in 2010 and rebuilt its capabilities while reasserting the group's independence from Al Qaeda's senior leadership.

In late 2011, the Nusra Front emerged in Syria, rising to prominence through high profile attacks on Syrian government military and leadership targets. Nusra distinguished itself from other armed groups not only with the lethality and efficiency of its operations, but with its religiously inspired rhetoric and objectives. ISI leader Baghdadi stated that he had dispatched Nusra's leaders to Syria to serve as ISI's vanguard in the struggle against the Assad government.⁴² The State Department in late 2012 amended its designation of AQ-I to include the Nusra Front as an alias for the group.⁴³ The designation noted that AQ-I emir Abu Du'a—an alias for Baghdadi—controlled both AQI and Nusra, stating that “Abu Du'a also issues strategic guidance to al-Nusra's emir, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, and tasked him to begin operations in Syria.”

By early 2013, ISI was conducting dozens of deadly attacks a month inside Iraq, largely ceding operations in Syria to the Nusra Front under Jawlani's command. During this period, the Nusra Front did not publicly acknowledge its ties to ISI or Al Qaeda. In April 2013, Baghdadi announced his intent to merge his forces in Iraq and Syria with those of the Syria-based Nusra Front, to form the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Nusra Front and Al Qaeda leaders publicly rejected the merger and Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri ordered ISIL to confine its activities to Iraq, which Baghdadi refused. Under Baghdad's leadership, ISIL continued a wave of attacks across northern, western, and central Iraq, while in Syria the group consolidated control

⁴¹ Majority Investigative Report, House Committee on Homeland Security, “Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim American Community and the Threat to the Homeland,” July 27, 2011.

⁴² Baghdadi audio recording released April 8, 2013, in which he declared the merging of the two groups.

⁴³ “Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah Front as an Alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq,” State Department Press Statement, December 11, 2012.

over the city and province of Raqqa and expanded its presence in northwestern areas then controlled by other rebel forces.

In January 2014, clashes erupted between ISIL and other armed groups in northern Syria, as groups began to resist what they viewed as ISIL's severe tactics and attempts to dominate other groups. Nusra leaders sought to mediate between ISIL and other secular and Islamist oppositionists, but later became embroiled in outright conflict with ISIL. Meanwhile, ISIL forces in Iraq seized parts of Ramadi and Fallujah, although the government was able to recapture much of Ramadi. In February 2014 Zawahiri formally severed ties with ISIL, stating that Al Qaeda was not responsible for ISIL's actions. On June 29, 2014, ISIL declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate extending from Aleppo province in Syria to Diyala province in Iraq and changed its name to the Islamic State (IS).⁴⁴

Political and Regional Context

Many experts attribute the 2014 uprising in Iraq and subsequent IS gains to unresolved differences among the country's major communities, particularly its Sunni and Shiite Arabs. Iraq's Sunni Arabs accused then-Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki, who led a large coalition of mostly Shiite political leaders, of abrogating a 2010 agreement to share power with Sunni leaders and of concentrating power in his and his faction's hands.⁴⁵ According to this view, Maliki's centralization of power provided "political space" for long-standing violent Sunni elements led by the Islamic State to reassert themselves after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.

The Islamic State's advances also exposed weaknesses in the 800,000-person Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), which have operated since 2012 without direct U.S. military participation. President Obama and other U.S. officials reportedly attributed the ISF collapse largely to the failure of Iraqi leaders, particularly Maliki, to build an inclusive government that could hold the allegiance of Sunni citizens or Sunni ISF personnel.

Nusra and IS operations in Syria appeared to benefit from the security vacuum created by Syria's civil war. Syrian armed forces, which have focused on defending major urban centers in the country's western half, withdrew from large swaths of the countryside in Syria's northeast, enabling opposition groups to establish a foothold in the area. Nusra's ability to operate in Syria was also seemingly facilitated by its reputation among Syrians as one of the most capable armed groups in the country, with the potential to bring about the fall of the Asad government. The group was seen by many as disciplined and professional and was reputed to treat the population relatively well, in contrast to other armed groups. Nusra also has a ready supply of weapons, funding, and technical expertise, which led other groups to turn to Nusra for assistance even if they did not share its ideology.

Interaction with Local Actors

In its 2014 offensive in Iraq, the Islamic State reportedly has been either joined, supported, or enabled by Sunni tribal fighters, former members of the late Saddam Hussein's Baath Party and

⁴⁴ OSC Report TRR2014062966139093, June 29, 2014.

⁴⁵ Karen DeYoung and Ernesto Londono. "Iraq's Parliament Speaker Says Sunnis Hope Cooperation in Anbar Crisis Will Yield Gains." *Washington Post*, January 23, 2014.

military, and other Sunni residents.⁴⁶ This includes elements from the “Sons of Iraq”—Sunni tribal militias formed to combat AQ-I during the U.S. intervention in Iraq—as well as members of the Naqshabandi Order, known by its Arabic acronym “JRTN.” Their enabling of the offensive, despite reservations among many Sunnis about the Islamic State’s brutal tactics against opponents and its intention to impose a harsh version of Islamic law, appears to reflect broad Sunni dissatisfaction with the then-Maliki government.⁴⁷ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on June 18, 2014, that “ISIL is almost undistinguishable from the other groups” currently fighting the Maliki government.⁴⁸ It remains to be seen whether new Prime Minister Haydar al-Abbadi, who also hails from Maliki’s Shiite Da’wa Party, will be able to forge a more durable relationship with Iraqi Sunnis.

In Syria, the Islamic State was able to co-opt some tribesmen in Syria’s northeast, but many of its gains reportedly resulted when local and tribal rebel forces surrendered to the group and withdrew from their positions, seeking to avoid a forcible IS takeover.⁴⁹ In contrast, the Nusra Front has shown a willingness to collaborate with a broad range of armed groups in Syria, and has participated in military operations alongside non-Islamist fighters in spite of their ideological differences. In a December 2013 interview, Nusra Front leader Jawlani spoke about avoiding the mistakes of other hardline jihadist groups and about the value of collaborating with other rebel forces as part of a comprehensive military, political, and social strategy.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Tim Arango. “Uneasy Alliance Gives Insurgents an Edge in Iraq.” *New York Times*, June 19, 2014.

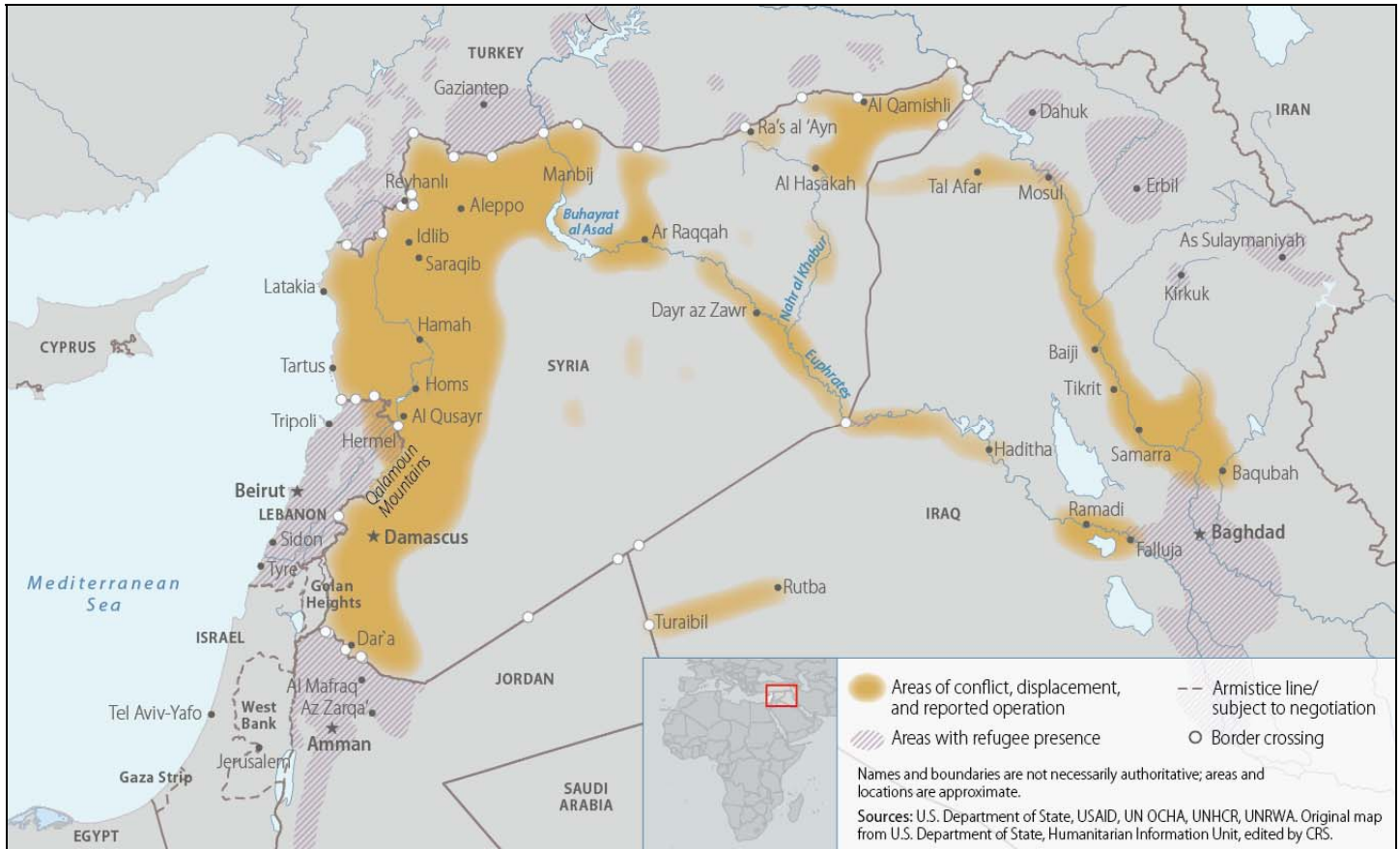
⁴⁷ “Unlikely Allies Aid Militants in Iraq.” *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2014.

⁴⁸ Testimony of Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey, Senate Armed Services Committee, June 18, 2014. For more information, see CRS Report R43612, *The “Islamic State” Crisis and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman et al.

⁴⁹ “Resistance emerges as ISIS consolidates in Deir ez-Zour,” Institute for the Study of War, July 15, 2014.

⁵⁰ OSC Report PLL2013121972257182, December 19, 2013.

Figure I. Areas of conflict and/or Islamic State and Nusra Front Operations



Yemen and the Horn of Africa

Yemen

Origins and evolution of Al Qaeda "affiliate(s)"

In the late 1980s, after U.S.- and Saudi-supported Afghan rebels ended Soviet occupation of their country, Arab volunteers who fought alongside the Afghan *mujahidin* (Islamist fighters) returned to Yemen and were subsequently embraced by the government and treated as heroes by many Yemenis. Some veterans of the Afghan war were integrated into the military and security forces or were used during the civil war of 1994 to fight against southern secessionists.

Perhaps because the Yemeni government successfully co-opted some Islamist hardliners and employed them to reinforce regime rule, and because Al Qaeda was building a capacity to conduct global terrorist operations, Yemen was not a major theater of Al Qaeda operations in the 1990s. However, Al Qaeda's attack against the *USS Cole* in 2000, coupled with the attacks of September 11, 2001, made Yemen a front in the U.S. confrontation with Al Qaeda. After the 9/11 attacks, the Yemeni government became more forthcoming in its cooperation with the U.S. campaign to suppress Al Qaeda. Former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh embraced the idea

of a “war on terror,” presumably at least partly to draw the United States closer to Yemen and receive as much intelligence and military support as possible in order to thwart threats to his position and preserve Yemen’s political stability.

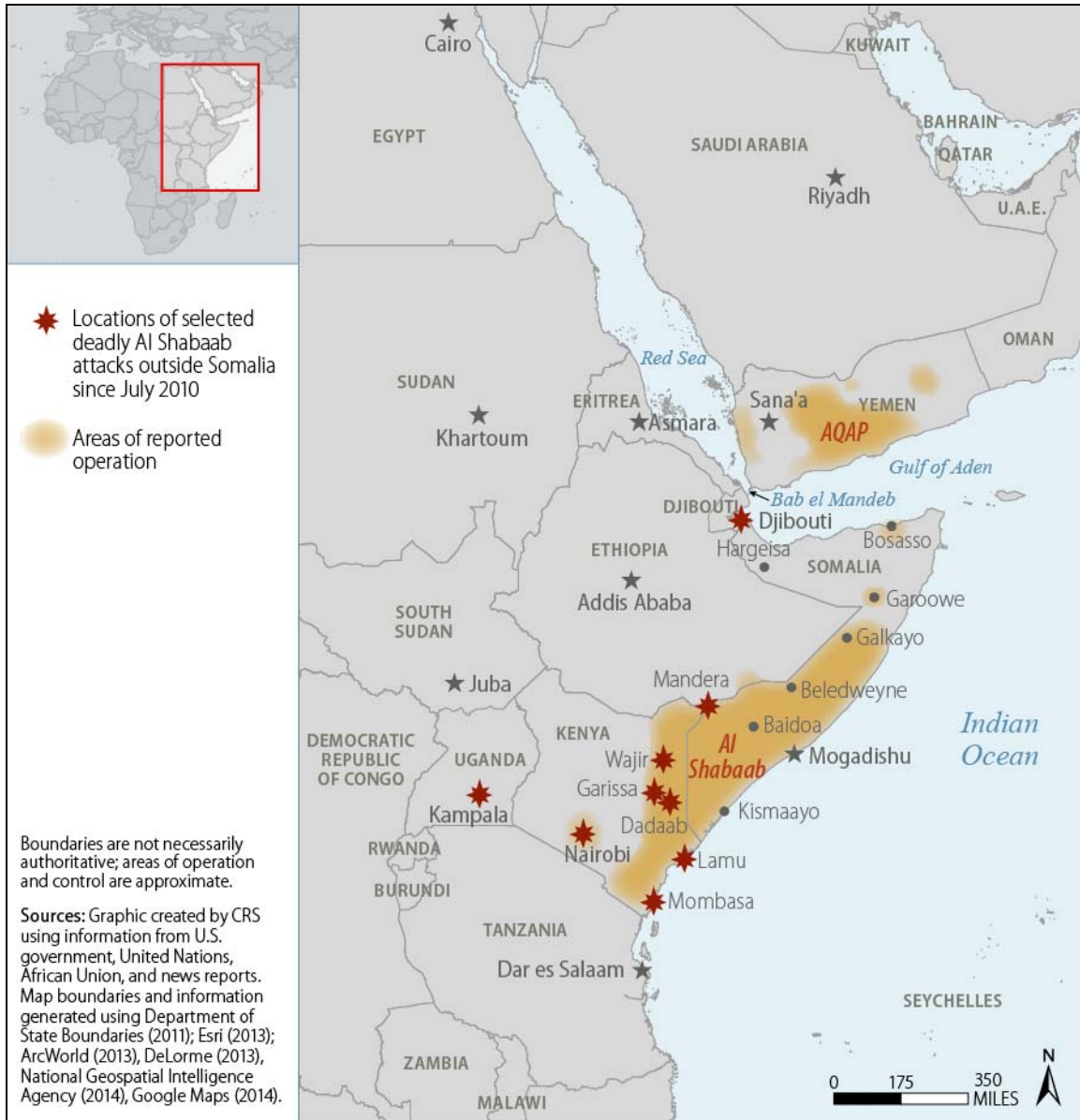
Despite their acceptance of U.S. counterterrorism support, Yemeni authorities were sensitive to possible public backlash against perceptions of close U.S.-Yemeni military cooperation. At times, Yemen was accused of playing a “double game,” with former President Saleh periodically easing pressure on Al Qaeda and its sympathizers inside the country as part of his delicate balancing of competing domestic and international interests.⁵¹ In 2006, 23 of Yemen’s most wanted terrorists escaped a Public Security Organization (PSO) prison, in what many analysts believe was an inside job from within a Yemeni intelligence organization notorious for employing former “Arab Afghan” volunteers and other jihadists.⁵²

Some of these escapees would eventually form a Yemeni affiliate of Al Qaeda, called, “The Al Qaeda Organization in the Southern Arabian Peninsula,” though most observers simply referred to it as Al Qaeda in Yemen. In January 2009, Al Qaeda-affiliated militants based in Yemen announced that Saudi militants had pledged allegiance to their leader and that the group would now operate under the banner of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). A previous Saudi Arabia-based version of AQAP was largely dismantled and destroyed by Saudi security forces after a long and costly counterterrorism campaign from 2003 through 2007. Some Saudi militants fled to Yemen to avoid death or capture, helping to lay the groundwork for a reemergence of the organization there.

⁵¹ “Yemen’s Double Game,” *Foreign Policy*, December 7, 2013.

⁵² “Whose Side is Yemen on?” *Foreign Policy*, August 29, 2012.

Figure 2. Al Qaeda in Yemen and the Horn of Africa



Political and Regional Context

AQAP is primarily based in some of Yemen’s southern governorates where central government control is either weak or non-existent; tribal families rule; and hostilities against the central government run high due to historic government neglect and lack of development. In areas where oil is extracted, local tribes often claim that they rarely receive revenues generated from oil produced on their lands. In the south, economic and political grievances are both evident, making the region somewhat more receptive to an AQAP presence. According to the U.S. State Department, AQAP “retains a sanctuary” in the southern governorates of Abyan, Shabwah, Hadramawt, and in the cities of Rada` (in Al Bayda` governorate), Sana`a (the capital), Wadi Abidah (Ma`rib governorate), and Yatamah (Al Jawf governorate).

In addition, the State Department in October 2012 designated Ansar al Sharia (AAS), based in Yemen, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) due to its affiliation with AQAP. According to the U.S. State Department, “AAS represents a rebranding effort designed to attract potential followers in areas under AQAP’s control.”

Interaction with Local Actors

In some provinces, there are connections between some of Yemen’s tribes and AQAP. Yemeni AQAP members tend to operate in their home provinces where they receive a certain level of protection from their host tribe. Protection is generally granted out of tribal custom. At times, the Yemeni government has attempted to co-opt local tribes to fight against AQAP, using tribal “Popular Committee” units.

Horn of Africa

Origins and evolution of Al Qaeda “affiliate(s)”

Al Qaeda operatives and other violent Islamist extremist groups have had a presence in East Africa for almost 20 years, although the extent of their operations there has varied over time.⁵³ Al Shabaab emerged in the early 2000s amid a proliferation of Islamist and clan-based militias that flourished in predominately Muslim Somalia in the absence of central government authority. In 2006, an alliance of local Islamic courts established control over Mogadishu with support from Al Shabaab. Loosely affiliated with local Islamic courts, Al Shabaab, unlike the clan militias, drew members from across clans, ascribing to a broader irredentist and religiously driven vision of uniting ethnic Somali-inhabited areas of Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia under an Islamist caliphate.⁵⁴ Several of Al Shabaab’s leaders had reportedly trained and fought with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and known Al Qaeda operatives in the region were associated with the group in its formative years.

Al Shabaab grew in prominence in 2006, when hardliners within the Islamic courts called for jihad against neighboring Ethiopia. Ethiopia, reportedly supported by the United States, had backed a group of Mogadishu warlords, purportedly to capture suspected Al Qaeda operatives and counter the growing Islamist presence in the Somali capital. When Ethiopia intervened directly, deploying its own forces to Mogadishu in late 2006 to defeat the courts’ militias, Al Shabaab played upon historic anti-Ethiopian sentiment in the country to fuel an increasingly complex insurgency against the Ethiopian army and other regional forces deployed under the auspices of the African Union. Some analysts argue that Al Shabaab and other hardliners benefited directly from the U.S.-backed Ethiopian intervention that removed their rivals and gave credence to Al Shabaab’s anti-foreign rhetoric.

⁵³ For further background, see CRS Report R41473, *Countering Terrorism in East Africa: The U.S. Response*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard; CRS Report R43245, *The September 2013 Terrorist Attack in Kenya: In Brief*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard; House Homeland Security Committee, “From Al-Shabaab to Al-Nusra: How Westerners Joining Terror Groups Overseas Affects the Homeland,” October 9, 2013.

⁵⁴ The courts’ leaders varied in their ideological approaches, which reflected diverse views on political Islam, clan identity, and Somali nationalism.

Political and Regional Context

The region's porous borders, proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, weak law enforcement and judicial institutions, and pervasive corruption have combined with more than 20 years of state collapse in Somalia to provide an enabling environment for violent extremist groups. Somalia offered a permissive setting for Al Qaeda operatives like Harun Fazul and Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, co-conspirators in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, to train recruits. The country continues to be used as a training site for groups like Al Shabaab, which U.S. officials currently consider to pose the most significant terrorist threat in the region.⁵⁵

U.S. air strikes in January 2007 against suspected Al Qaeda operatives fighting among the insurgents were incorporated into Al Shabaab's narrative that Islam in predominantly Muslim Somalia was under attack by the West and its proxy African "Crusader" forces. Countries contributing to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the United Nations have both been targets for the group, and Al Shabaab has launched multiple deadly attacks against U.N. facilities in Somalia. Al Shabaab has repeatedly used this narrative against Kenya, which launched its own military offensive against Al Shabaab in 2011 with the stated aim of defending itself against terrorist threats and incursions. In claiming responsibility for the September 2013 attack on the Westgate mall in Nairobi, the group charged that the Kenyan military had "massacred" innocent civilians in southern Somalia during its operations.⁵⁶ It used a similar justification for its deadly July 2010 bombings in Kampala, Uganda.

Al Shabaab has also sought to position itself as a champion of Muslim grievances in the broader region, citing, for example, failure of French forces to prevent the massacre of Muslims in the Central African Republic as justification for a 2014 attack targeting French citizens in Djibouti (along with French support for Djiboutian participation in AMISOM). In claiming responsibility for June 2014 attacks on the Kenyan coast, Al Shabaab accused the Kenyan government of oppressing Muslims in the country and directing the extrajudicial killing of radical Muslim clerics.

Al Shabaab, which has long sought to discredit Somalia's fledgling central government, appears increasingly focused on sowing dissent and fomenting insurgency in Kenya. By some accounts, abuses committed by Kenyan security forces in the context of anti-terrorism operations have fueled existing grievances among some in the country's Muslim minority. Kenya, with its porous borders, and comparatively developed infrastructure and banking system, has been vulnerable to extremist transit and recruitment, and it provides easier access to high-profile Western targets than Somalia. While the death of Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Godane in September 2014 may pose challenges for the organization in the near-term, many regional experts argue that the growing extremist influence in Kenya will not be easy to contain.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Somalia nevertheless poses organizational and logistical challenges for foreign operatives and fighters. Banditry, poor roads, and weak financial services create additional costs for groups moving personnel and resources through the area. Reports suggest that AQ operatives found Somalis' clan identities and suspicion of foreigners, as well as the unreliability of local "allies," to be impediments to their operations in the 1990s. See The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point's Harmony Project, *Al-Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa*, 2006.

⁵⁶ OSC Report AFL2013092380722161, "Somalia, Kenya—Al Shabaab Vocal in Claiming Responsibility for Nairobi Attack," September 23, 2013. According to the State Department, Kenya has successfully disrupted several large-scale terrorist threats, but more than three dozen small-scale terrorist incidents were reported in Kenya in 2012. State Department, "Kenya," *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012*, May 30, 2013.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., David M. Anderson, "Why Mpeketoni Matters: Al Shabaab and Violence in Kenya," Noref Policy Brief, (continued...)

Al Shabaab's network extends beyond East Africa—it has reportedly maintained ties with AQAP in nearby Yemen, among other AQ affiliates. In March 2014, AQAP's *Inspire* magazine featured a checklist of AMISOM troop-contributing countries, accompanied by a message from an Al Shabaab spokesman, "Westgate was not a fight, it was a message. The real fight is on the way." The group reiterated similar threats against regional targets in the aftermath of Godane's death. Since 2011 AMISOM and allied Somali offensives have delivered notable military setbacks to Al Shabaab but the group continues to control territory in parts of southern and central Somalia. (See **Figure 2**). It continues to conduct attacks against a variety of government, civilian, and international targets, primarily in Somalia, but also in Kenya, and periodically, elsewhere in the region.

Interaction with Local Actors

In addition to maintaining relationships with some local clan leaders in parts of south-central Somalia, Al Shabaab has expanded its East Africa network in recent years. In January 2012, Al Shabaab announced its merger with a Kenyan group, the Muslim Youth Center, which subsequently changed its name to Al Hijra. In Kenya, Al Shabaab seeks to manipulate local political grievances and capitalize on the perceived marginalization of both Somali and non-Somali Muslim communities to build its fundraising and recruiting network, and to facilitate external attacks. Other Islamist extremist groups in East Africa are also alleged by some to have ties with Al Shabaab, including the Ansar Muslim Youth Center (AMYC) in Tanzania and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a Ugandan group operating in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.⁵⁸

North and West Africa

Origins and Evolution of Al Qaeda Affiliate(s)

Armed Islamist groups have proliferated in North and West Africa amid political upheaval in the Arab world, governance and security crises in Libya and Mali, and a growing Islamist insurgency in northern Nigeria. Many of these groups appear primarily focused on a domestic or regional agenda, but some groups also have targeted U.S. or other foreign interests in the region and some may aspire to more international aims. The United States has sought to empower regional partners to counter the threat of violent extremist groups, with mixed results. U.S. and French forces also have occasionally intervened directly against terrorist actors in the region, with recent U.S. operations focused on capturing terrorist suspects in Libya. U.S. officials now describe Libya as a terrorist safe haven and have warned about the threats posed by Libya-based extremists and flows

(...continued)

Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, September 2014.

⁵⁸ On AMYC links, see U.N. Security Council, *Somalia report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea submitted in accordance with resolution 2060 (2012)*, S/2013/413, July 12, 2013. The Ugandan government has accused the ADF of ties to Al Shabaab, but U.N. reports express various views on evidence of links. See U.N. Security Council, *Midterm Report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo*, S/2014/428, June 25, 2014 and *Final Report of the Group of Experts on the DRC submitted in accordance with resolution 2021 (2011)*, S/2012/843, November 15, 2012.

of weaponry from Libya into surrounding countries.⁵⁹ This region also remains a source of volunteers and recruits for Al Qaeda and other extremist groups outside the continent.

The region of North and West Africa is host to at least one Al Qaeda “affiliate”: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM. AQIM was formed when a former armed faction in Algeria’s 1990s civil conflict known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) declared allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2003, “united” with Al Qaeda in 2006, and renamed itself the following year.⁶⁰ The largest-scale AQIM attacks to date, a series of bombings targeting Algerian and international institutions, were carried out in 2007 and 2008 in Algiers and surrounding areas.

AQIM remains largely led by Algerian nationals. The group was long seen as internally divided between a more ideologically driven leadership based in northeastern Algeria, which focused on attacking Algerian state targets, and cells based in southern Algeria and the Sahel whose activities were more focused on raising funds through kidnap-for-ransom and transnational smuggling activities. (The Sahel region of West Africa refers to a vast stretch of sparsely populated terrain that cuts across Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad.) The Sahel-based commanders appeared to operate relatively independently of the group’s leadership, and at times even as rivals. At times, tensions also surfaced between AQIM’s predominantly Algerian senior leaders and fighters from Sahelian states who have called for a greater focus on carrying out attacks in West Africa.

These apparent divisions have erupted since 2011 as several of AQIM’s former Sahel-based commanders have founded new groups. Notably, former prominent AQIM figure Mokhtar bel Mokhtar founded a new group, Al Murabitoun, in 2013 after merging with another AQIM breakaway faction, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), led by Mauritanian and Malian nationals also previously associated with AQIM. Bel Mokhtar has since sworn allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, and the State Department now considers Al Murabitoun to be “the greatest near-term threat to U.S. and international interests in the Sahel.”⁶¹ The State Department continues to identify AQIM as the primary terrorist threat in Algeria. At the same time, AQIM has reportedly pursued ties to other violent extremist groups throughout the region, including groups operating in Libya, Tunisia, Mali, and Nigeria, which may involve coordinating operations and/or sharing training and personnel.⁶² In May 2014, AQIM carried out its first confirmed attack in Tunisia.

In 2012, a loose coalition of AQIM, MUJWA, and an allied Malian-led extremist group occupied most major population centers in northern Mali, taking advantage of a domestic ethnic separatist insurgency and political crisis. AQIM reportedly used this expanded terrain to run training camps; pursue connections to other extremist organizations, including Nigeria’s Boko Haram; bolster arms stocks; and recruit new fighters. French military operations in Mali, initiated in January

⁵⁹ See CRS Report RL33142, *Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

⁶⁰ See CRS Report RS21532, *Algeria: Current Issues*, by Alexis Arieff. The GSPC split from the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria, which was notorious for its brutal attacks against civilians. The GSPC initially differentiated itself by disavowing attacks on civilians and focusing instead on Algerian state targets.

⁶¹ State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*, released April 2014. The group’s name appears to be a reference to the Al Moravid (Marabout) dynasty, which ruled parts of North Africa and southern Spain. The Arabic word *marabit* refers to sentries or garrisoned troops.

⁶² See State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*, op. cit.; and the U.N. sanctions committee concerning Al Qaeda and associated individuals and entities, “Narrative Summaries of Reasons for Listing,” at http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/entities_other_groups_undertakings_associated_with_Al-Qaida.shtml, especially “Al Mourabitoun,” “Boko Haram,” “Muhammad Jamal Network,” and “Ansar Eddine.”

2013, have killed several AQIM commanders and disrupted logistical networks purportedly used by AQIM and AQIM-linked groups. Yet, these groups have not been eradicated. Some leaders have reportedly relocated in search of safe-havens and targets, while others continue to conduct sporadic attacks within Mali.

In North Africa, according to U.S. officials, operatives from several regional terrorist groups, including AQIM, the Mohammed Jamal Network, and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have used eastern Libya as a training, logistics, and transit hub since Qadhafi's ouster in 2011.⁶³ At least three groups calling themselves Ansar al Sharia ("defenders of the faith") are active in Tunisia and Libya, where they are reportedly carrying out a combination of terrorist and insurgent activity, local-level charity and proselytizing work, and facilitation of foreign fighter and weapons flows to Syria. Elements of these groups appear to be in contact with AQIM and with each other, and to coordinate certain activities, but the full extent and nature of their relationships remain unclear.

In recent months, amid the escalating contest for supremacy between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS/ISIL), Al Murabitoun's Mokhtar bel Mokhtar has issued a pledge of allegiance to AQ leader Zawahiri, and AQIM has reiterated its allegiance to Al Qaeda core—while also calling for greater unity among global jihadists.⁶⁴ Observers have posited, however, that the question of whether to shift allegiance to the Islamic State is a matter of debate and contestation within these and other Islamist extremist groups in North and West Africa.⁶⁵ Boko Haram, for example, has issued recent statements expressing support for both the Islamic State's Baghdadi and for Zawahiri, as well as for Taliban leader Mullah Omar.⁶⁶

Political and Regional Context

In North Africa, violent extremist groups have exploited political uncertainty and tensions over national identity in the wake of domestic uprisings in Tunisia and Libya that toppled authoritarian regimes. Numerous reports suggest that southwestern Libya is a growing hub for regional terrorist actors. Political institutions in Algeria and Morocco have remained comparatively stable. The Algerian government has brought relative security to most of its national territory since the 1990s civil conflict with Islamist groups. Still, terrorism remains a threat within the country, and Algerian leaders have expressed growing concern about security threats emanating from neighboring states, especially Libya. Morocco has not been the target of a large-scale terrorist attack since Al Qaeda-linked suicide bombings in Casablanca in 2003, but Moroccan authorities regularly claim to have broken up terrorist cells within the country, including some from AQIM. Occasional small-scale attacks in Morocco have been blamed on small, isolated cells adhering to salafist-jihadist ideology. According to numerous media reports, individuals of Tunisian and Moroccan origin, including European nationals, constitute among the largest groups of "foreign

⁶³ The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's declassified report, *Review of the Terrorist Attacks on U.S. Facilities in Benghazi, Libya* (January 15, 2014) references a 2012 CIA-produced report stating that Muhammad Jamal's Egypt-based network, AQAP, and AQIM "have conducted training, built communication networks, and facilitated extremist travel across North Africa from their safe haven in parts of eastern Libya."

⁶⁴ AFP, "Algerian Jihadist Vows Allegiance to Al-Qaeda Chief," May 1, 2014; AQIM statement on Twitter, via OSC Report TRR2014071450354044, July 14, 2014.

⁶⁵ Magharebia, "Maghreb Al-Qaeda Torn Apart by ISIS," August 15, 2014.

⁶⁶ AFP, "Boko Haram Chief Voices Support for IS 'Caliph'," July 14, 2014 and "Nigerian Town Seized by Boko Haram 'Part of Islamic Caliphate', Leader Says," August 24, 2014.

fighters” in Syria.⁶⁷ Moroccan and Tunisian leaders have publicly expressed acute concerns that such fighters could return to perpetrate attacks in their countries of origin.

The countries of West Africa’s Sahel region are among the poorest in the world and face complex security challenges, including periodic ethnic conflict and separatism, banditry, transnational organized crime, and violent religious extremism. These countries also have a history of poor governance and military intervention in politics. The vast terrain of eastern Mauritania, northern Mali, and northern Niger, where AQIM appears to have been most active over time (see **Figure 3**), is home to several ethnic and social groups with cross-border ties and historic grievances against the central governments of those countries. While extremist ideology does not appear to have been embraced by most Sahel residents, it likely resonates with certain marginalized populations, as do the financial resources wielded by AQIM and potentially other groups. AQIM and linked groups have also proven highly opportunistic in exploiting security gaps.

Particular conditions have given rise to the terrorist and insurgent group Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria, which is responsible for a far higher level of deadly violence than any other Islamist organization in the region.⁶⁸ Key factors include a legacy of overlapping intercommunal, Muslim-Christian, and north-south tensions within Nigeria and popular frustration with elite corruption and other state abuses. The Nigerian security forces’ heavy-handed counterterrorism response in the northeast may be driving recruitment in some areas. The recruitment of Nigerian nationals by transnational terrorist groups other than Boko Haram also continues to be of concern to U.S. officials. The State Department has identified various dynamics limiting the government’s response to Boko Haram, including a lack of coordination and cooperation between Nigerian security agencies, corruption, misallocation of resources, limited requisite databases, the slow pace of the judicial system, and a lack of sufficient training for prosecutors and judges to implement anti-terrorism laws.⁶⁹ Both Boko Haram and a splinter faction known as Ansaru are reported to have cultivated close ties with AQIM.⁷⁰

Interaction with Local Actors

AQIM cells—including those that are now associated with Al Murabitoun—have established significant ties to local communities in northern Mali and potentially elsewhere in the Sahel. These ties have reportedly been cemented through cooperation in transnational smuggling activities, local recruitment, and intermarriage between key AQIM/Al Murabitoun figures and locally powerful families.⁷¹ AQIM and other extremist groups may be pursuing similar linkages in Libya. In Algeria, AQIM’s leadership may benefit from longstanding mistrust between

⁶⁷ See, e.g., Magharebia, “Thousands of Moroccan Jihadists in Syria, Iraq,” July 16, 2014; *The Wall Street Journal*, “After Guantanamo, Freed Detainees Returned to Violence in Syria Battlefields,” June 3, 2014; *Al Hayat* via BBC Monitoring, “Tunisia Sending Highest Number of Salafis, Mujahidin to Syria,” October 19, 2013.

⁶⁸ See CRS Report R43558, *Nigeria’s Boko Haram: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard.

⁶⁹ State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*, op. cit.

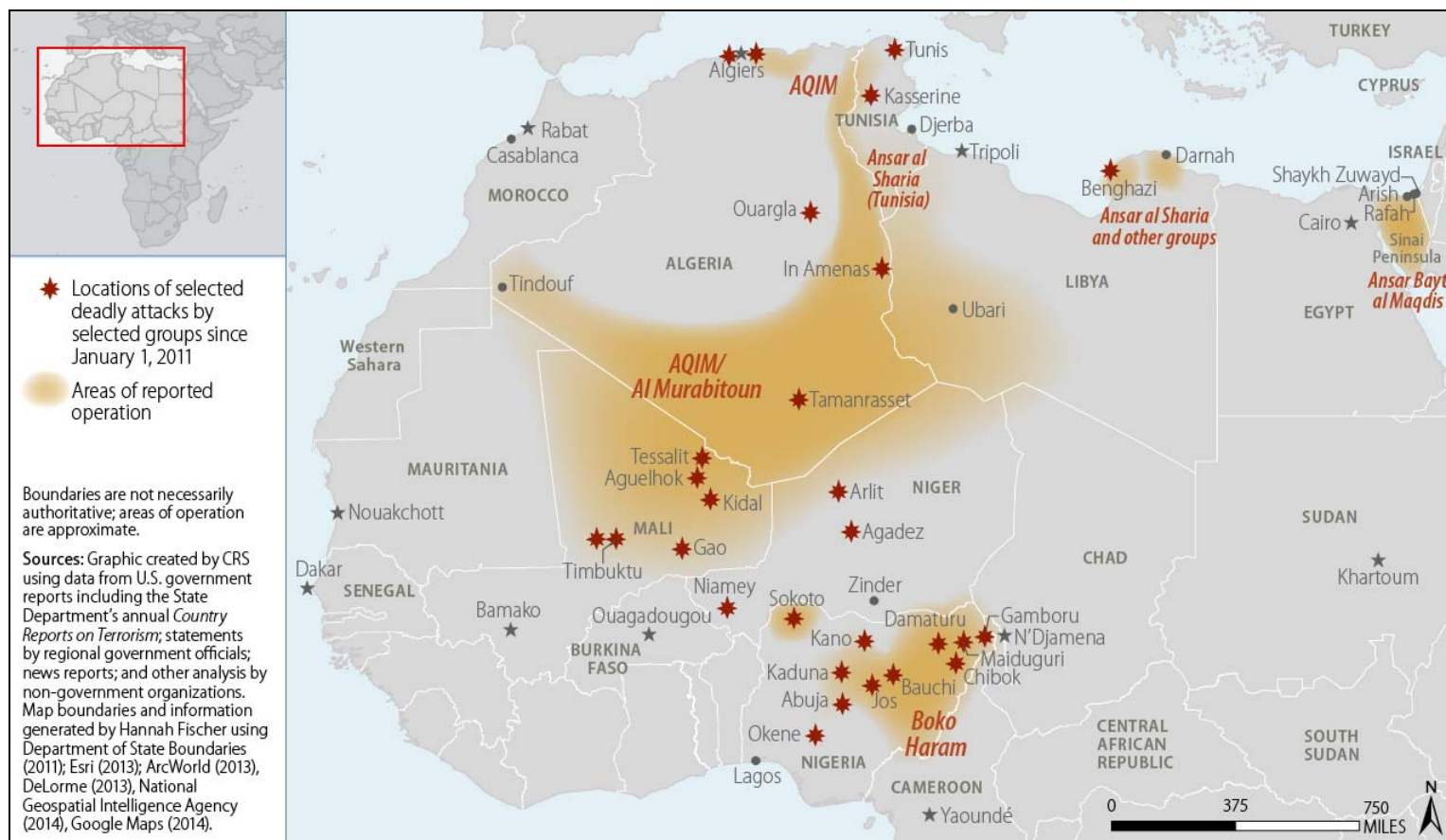
⁷⁰ Admiral William H. McRaven, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, testified before Congress in early 2014 that “We see Boko Haram beginning to conflate with AQIM in North Africa.” House Armed Services Committee Hearing on Proposed Fiscal 2015 Defense Authorization for the U.S. Special Operations Command and U.S. Transportation Command, February 27, 2014.

⁷¹ See, among others, Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2010; Modibo Goïta, *West Africa’s Growing Terrorist Threat: Confronting AQIM’s Sahelian Strategy*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February 2011; and International Crisis Group, *Mali: Eviter l’escalade*, esp. “Implantation durable d’AQIM au Nord-Mali,” July 2012.

government actors and local Berber communities in the mountainous region of Kabylie, who, while not apparently sympathetic to AQIM's ideology, may be disinclined to cooperate with Algeria's national security forces. In Nigeria, Boko Haram appears to draw support predominately from an ethnic Kanuri base in the northeast, where the group is most active, although extremist operatives linked to both AQIM and Boko Haram appear intent on expanding the group's recruitment base, its operational reach, and the scope of its targets.⁷² The group's seizure of several towns in northeast Nigeria in mid-2014 and declaration of an Islamic caliphate mark a new phase in Boko Haram's evolution, although it is unclear whether its territorial expansion will correlate to an expanded fighting force or to a change in its relationship with other extremist groups in the region.

⁷² See, e.g., Jacob Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria," *CTC Sentinel*, February 24, 2014.

Figure 3. Al Qaeda in North and West Africa



Select Policy Debates

Competing Views of the Al Qaeda Threat

Policymakers, while agreeing that jihadist violence represents a significant threat to the United States, continue to debate the level of threat posed specifically by elements directly under the control of Al Qaeda's senior leadership in comparison to other groups. Those who view Al Qaeda as weakened generally reference the decline of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and treat affiliates largely as a separate threat. Those who view Al Qaeda as growing in strength tend to focus on the rise of Al Qaeda affiliate groups, which they view in conjunction with Al Qaeda senior leadership as a single global network.

Al Qaeda Weakened

In a 2013 speech on counterterrorism policy, President Obama described Al Qaeda's senior leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan as being "on the path to defeat."⁷³ He discussed the rise of Al Qaeda affiliates, characterizing them as lethal but "less capable" than the central organization that planned the 9/11 attacks. He also discussed a third category of armed militants, which he described as "simply collections of local militias or extremists interested in seizing territory," with primarily local objectives. Obama stated that U.S. efforts should not be viewed as a "boundless global war on terror" but rather as a discrete set of targeted efforts against specific extremist networks.

Administration officials have balked at the notion that attacks against U.S. interests abroad are necessarily directed by Al Qaeda. State Department officials have stated that the Libyan militant group Ansar al Sharia, reportedly responsible for the 2012 attack on the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, is not considered an Al Qaeda affiliate by State Department and intelligence agencies, despite some reported links to AQIM. Others have questioned whether Americans are giving Al Qaeda "too much credit" by ascribing them ultimate responsibility for every attack.⁷⁴

Al Qaeda Expanding

Those who point to an expanding Al Qaeda note that the group—when Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Al Qaeda affiliates are considered in the aggregate—controls more territory now than at any previous point in its history. In early 2014, DNI James Clapper responded in the negative to a question on whether Al Qaeda was on the path to defeat, noting that the group was instead, "morphing and franchising itself."⁷⁵ Retired Marine Corps general James Mattis in late 2013 described predictions of Al Qaeda's demise as "premature" and "discredited."⁷⁶ He argued

⁷³ Remarks by the President at the National Defense University, *The White House Office of the Press Secretary*, May 23, 2013 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.

⁷⁴ Testimony of Jane Harman, Director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, before the House Foreign Affairs Committee –Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, April 8, 2014.

⁷⁵ James Clapper, Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, February 11, 2014.

⁷⁶ "Al Qaeda more dangerous than ever," *AFP*, December 15, 2013.

that the organization is resilient and has adapted to changes. Proponents of this view contend that there is an undue focus on Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, even as Al Qaeda affiliates expand into Syria, Iraq, and North Africa. They argue that these groups, by virtue of their affiliation or ideological similarity with Al Qaeda, will inevitably pose a threat to the United States.⁷⁷ Moreover, some of these observers argue that the fallout of the Arab Spring has vindicated Al Qaeda in places such as Egypt, where the military deposed an elected Islamist government—potentially giving credence to Al Qaeda’s assertion that real political change can only come through violent jihad.

The views discussed above are not necessarily binary or mutually exclusive, and some Al Qaeda watchers point out that the group may simply be evolving in ways whose effects are not yet known. While one could argue that Al Qaeda’s geographic presence appears to be spreading, another perspective could emphasize the fact that a number of Al Qaeda’s affiliates are the product of the consolidation and rebranding of preexisting militant groups already operating in the area. While these to some extent competing views pervade the U.S. public discourse on Al Qaeda, it is unclear whether or how these views are likely to shape significantly different proposals regarding counterterrorism, diplomatic, or military policies. In addition, local public opinion may affect Al Qaeda’s ability to operate in some communities over the long term.

AUMF Reform⁷⁸

U.S. strikes against Islamic State forces in Iraq and Syria have prompted heightened attention to a longstanding debate over the scope of the AUMF, and whether it should be expanded, repealed, or restructured. Passed by the House and Senate three days after the September 11 attacks, the 2001 AUMF authorizes the President to

use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.

Since 2001, the AUMF has been used to authorize the detention of persons captured in Afghanistan and other locations for the “duration of the relevant conflict.”⁷⁹ The executive branch has also used the AUMF to justify NSA warrantless surveillance⁸⁰ and drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen—including strikes that have targeted American citizens.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Transcript, Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Holds Hearing on President Obama’s Proposed Fiscal 2015 Budget Request for the Homeland Security Department, March 13, 2014.

⁷⁸ This section includes contributions from Michael John Garcia and Jennifer K. Elsea, Legislative Attorneys, American Law Division, including material from CRS Report R43720, *U.S. Military Action Against the Islamic State: Answers to Frequently Asked Legal Questions*, by Michael John Garcia and Jennifer K. Elsea.

⁷⁹ Plurality opinion, *Hamdi v. Rumsfeld*, 542 U.S. 207 (2004). <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/pdf/03-6696P.ZO> Remarks by Harold Hongju Koh, legal adviser to the Department of State, to the annual meeting of the American Society of International Law, March 25, 2010 <http://www.state.gov/s/l/releases/remarks/139119.htm>.

⁸⁰ Justice Department Office of Public Affairs, “The NSA program to detect and prevent terrorist attacks myth v. reality,” January 26, 2006. http://www.justice.gov/opa/documents/nsa_myth_v_reality.pdf.

⁸¹ U.S. Department of Justice Office of Legal Counsel, “Memorandum for the Attorney General Re: Applicability of Federal Criminal Laws and the Constitution to Contemplated Lethal Operations Against Shaykh Anwar al-Aulaqi,” July 16, 2010 (publicly released in June 2014).

In August 2014 the U.S. began airstrikes against Islamic State targets in Iraq, and in September these strikes were expanded to IS positions in Syria. Congress did not enact legislation specifically authorizing U.S. force against the Islamic State prior to U.S. airstrikes. Initially, the Obama Administration cited the President’s authority under Article II of the Constitution as the legal basis for U.S. operations against the Islamic State. However, in a congressional notification submitted on September 23, 2014, the Administration cited to both the 2001 AUMF and the 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq (2002 Iraq AUMF; P.L. 107-243) as providing statutory authorization for at least some aspects of U.S. operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.⁸² Nonetheless, some have debated whether either AUMF could be construed to provide statutory authorization for U.S. military action against the Islamic State and other security threats.⁸³ For additional information, see CRS Report R43720, *U.S. Military Action Against the Islamic State: Answers to Frequently Asked Legal Questions*, by Michael John Garcia and Jennifer K. Elsea.

The case of the Islamic State has highlighted the issue of whether the AUMF allows the U.S. to target groups with little to no connection to the 9/11 attacks, or with unclear links to Al Qaeda’s senior leadership. Former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center Michael Leiter in 2013 referred to the need for occasional “shoehorning” by U.S. intelligence officials and lawyers to apply the AUMF to groups or individuals that pose a “clear and imminent” threat to the U.S.⁸⁴ In early 2014, some executive branch officials, including in the intelligence community, argued that Al Qaeda’s decision to publicly sever ties with the Islamic State—then known as ISIL—removed the group from the category of Al Qaeda associates that the United States could strike under the AUMF.⁸⁵ However, the Administration in September argued that AUMF covers the Islamic State because the group is a successor to the version of Al Qaeda responsible for the 9/11 attacks.⁸⁶

Administration legal advisors also have examined whether the AUMF can be determined to authorize the use of force against groups sometimes called “associates of associates” or “affiliates of affiliates,” such as Ansar al Sharia in Libya, which was linked to the 2012 attack on U.S. facilities in Benghazi that killed four Americans. The group has no acknowledged ties to Al Qaeda’s senior leadership, but some Ansar al Sharia members reportedly have ties to affiliate group AQIM, raising the question of whether these individuals’ ties are sufficient to implicate the

⁸² See White House, Office of Press Secretary, *Letter from the President—War Powers Resolution Letter regarding Military Action in Iraq*, September 23, 2014, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/letter-president-war-powers-resolution-regarding-iraq>.

⁸³ See, e.g. Alexander Bolton, *Obama, Democrats Back in Iraq*, The Hill, June 18, 2014 (quoting a few lawmakers’ conflicting views concerning the applicability of the 2002 Iraq AUMF to military action against IS); Jack Goldsmith, *The 2002 Iraq AUMF Almost Certainly Authorizes the President to Use Force Today in Iraq (and Might Authorize the Use of Force in Syria)*, Lawfare Blog, June 13, 2014 (arguing that plain text of 2002 Iraq AUMF may be reasonably construed to permit military action to deal with the threat posed by an IS-destabilized Iraq), at <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/06/the-2002-iraq-aumf-almost-certainly-authorizes-the-president-to-use-force-today-in-iraq-and-maybe-syria/>; Jennifer Daskal, Ryan Goodman, & Steve Vladeck, *The Premature Discussion of ISIS and the 2001/2002 AUMFs*, Just Security Blog, June 17, 2014 (arguing that 2002 Iraq AUMF does not authorize hostilities against IS, as purpose and design of the enactment concerned the Saddam Hussein regime).

⁸⁴ Michael Leiter, remarks before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations hearing, “Counterterrorism Policies and Priorities,” March 20, 2013. <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/in-case-you-missed-it-corker-calls-for-updating-2001-authorization-for-use-of-force-against-al-qaeda-to-address-new-and-emerging-threats>.

⁸⁵ “Al Qaeda expulsion stirs debate over U.S. law,” *Washington Post*, February 11, 2014.

⁸⁶ For additional discussion, see CRS Report R43720, *U.S. Military Action Against the Islamic State: Answers to Frequently Asked Legal Questions*, by Michael John Garcia and Jennifer K. Elsea.

entire group.⁸⁷ Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff testified in October 2013 that the AUMF does not authorize the use of force against the perpetrators of the Benghazi attacks.⁸⁸ However, the U.S. government previously has cited authorities provided under the AUMF to conduct capture or lethal operations against individuals that it determines are part of Al Qaeda, even when those individuals are members of groups that have not been publicly identified as associated forces, such as Al Shabaab.⁸⁹ The AUMF also has been cited to authorize the conduct of capture or lethal operations outside Afghanistan in Yemen, Somalia, and Libya.⁹⁰

Executive Branch Authorities and the Separation of War Powers

The executive branch has suggested that it believes the President is authorized to conduct extensive counterterrorism operations pursuant to his role as commander-in-chief under Article II of the Constitution. Article II has traditionally been interpreted by the executive branch as allowing the President to use the military for defense purposes absent a congressional declaration of war for specific purposes, although this interpretation—and the definition of “hostilities” that could arguably necessitate a congressional declaration—has been subject to significant debate.⁹¹

Statements by Administration officials over the past several years suggest that they may deem strikes against certain militants to be lawful under Article II independently from the AUMF.⁹² These officials assert that the President has authority under the U.S. Constitution to use military force as needed to defend the nation against armed attacks and “imminent” threats of armed attack, and that the inherent right of national self-defense is also recognized in international law.⁹³ Others have argued that many U.S. tools for combatting Al Qaeda depend on the continued existence of a congressionally recognized state of “armed conflict” with the group, and that this state of conflict triggers the applicability of the Laws of Armed Conflict on which many U.S. authorities—including the authority to detain—are based. Under this view, a postwar framework would significantly limit the government’s ability to target and detain Al Qaeda members. However, Administration lawyers have argued that the provisions they cite in both domestic and international law grant the President the authority to respond militarily to terrorist threats, even after the conclusion of armed conflict.⁹⁴

Prior to September 11, 2001, U.S. administrations targeted Al Qaeda under domestic and international law without invoking a state of armed conflict. Following Al Qaeda’s 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania which killed 224 people, the United States launched

⁸⁷ “Administration debates stretching 9/11 law to go after new al-Qaeda offshoots,” *Washington Post*, March 6, 2013.

⁸⁸ Testimony of General Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the House Committee on Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, October 20, 2013. See p. 27. http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=C628BC78-60B3-4E44-B6BC-D4A0920E57E5.

⁸⁹ Testimony of Stephen W. Preston, General Counsel of the Department of Defense, before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, May 21, 2014.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ For more information, see CRS Report RL31133, *Declarations of War and Authorizations for the Use of Military Force: Historical Background and Legal Implications*, by Jennifer K. Elsea and Matthew C. Weed.

⁹² “Is the Obama Administration Relying on Article II for Targeted Killings?” *Lawfare*, September 17, 2010.

⁹³ Testimony of Stephen W. Preston, General Counsel of the Department of Defense, to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, May 21, 2014.

⁹⁴ Testimony of Mary E. McLeod, Principal Deputy Legal Advisor, U.S. Department of State, to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, May 21, 2014.

cruise missile strikes against targets in Afghanistan and Sudan. In a letter to congressional leaders, President Clinton stated that the United States acted “in exercise of our inherent right of self-defense consistent with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.” He further noted that the strikes were a necessary response to the “imminent threat of further terrorist attacks against U.S. personnel and facilities” and that he had directed these actions “pursuant to my constitutional authority to conduct U.S. foreign relations and as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive.”⁹⁵

Overlapping or Competing Interests

As the United States pursues its counterterrorism policies abroad, some have asked how a strong focus on counterterrorism affects other U.S. priorities, including the following:

- **Regional stability.** The United States places a high value on preserving the security and stability of key partners and shielding them from the effects of worsening violence. There is some debate over whether current U.S. counterterrorism efforts reduce or heighten threats to regional allies. The increasing U.S. profile in Jordan, for example, seeks to bolster the security of the Hashemite kingdom, but a large U.S. presence there could trigger unrest aimed at the King, who reportedly faces internal criticism for his close ties to the United States. U.S. support for its East African partners’ military operations against Al Shabaab in Somalia appears to have contributed to the success of those campaigns, but Al Shabaab has struck back against troop-contributing countries using high profile terrorist attacks.
- **Building partner capacity.** Admiral William McRaven, head of U.S. Special Operations Command, in early 2014 described building partner capacities as one of the most effective tools for reducing the threat to the United States from extremist groups.⁹⁶ While acknowledging circumstances under which the United States would need to conduct direct action, he emphasized the importance of long-term engagement with partners that would enable them to manage threats within their own borders.⁹⁷ However, U.S. partners occasionally hold diverging interests that lead them to take measures at odds with U.S. counterterrorism, human rights, and other policies. The United States maintains cooperative security relationships with countries including Nigeria, Iraq, and Egypt, but local security forces occasionally employ heavy-handed tactics against domestic opponents. In addition, as events in Iraq suggested, security forces trained by the United States could potentially fold when confronted with jihadist groups, allowing those groups to acquire U.S. weapons and equipment.
- **Democracy promotion.** Successive U.S. administrations have supported the spread of representative government overseas, arguing that institutions built

⁹⁵ “Letter to Congressional Leaders Reporting on Military Action Against Terrorist Sites in Afghanistan and Sudan,” Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton (1998, Book III) August 21, 1998. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PPP-1998-book2/html/PPP-1998-book2-doc-pg1464.htm>.

⁹⁶ Testimony of Admiral William McRaven, Commander of Special Operations Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 11, 2014. <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/14-17%20-%203-11-14.pdf>.

⁹⁷ House Armed Services Committee Hearing on Proposed Fiscal 2015 Defense Authorization for the U.S. Special Operations Command and U.S. Transportation Command, February 27, 2014.

around popular sovereignty and consensus stand the best chance for preserving long-term stability and security. In Syria, the Nusra Front and the Islamic State share U.S. opposition to the autocratic rule of Syrian President Bashar al Asad, although the groups hope to replace Asad with an Islamic state. While encouraging a transition away from Asad's rule, U.S. policymakers may consider whether efforts to bolster the opposition could strengthen terrorist groups or weaken Syrian state institutions, reducing their ability to counter extremist influences. U.S. reliance on regional partners viewed as internally repressive may also undermine U.S. messaging on promoting democratic norms.

- **Improving U.S. image in the region.** U.S. officials reportedly hope to bolster the United States' image in the Middle East and Africa, as part of a wider process to counter extremist messaging. However, U.S. messaging efforts at times appear to be undermined by counterterrorism operations that result in civilian deaths. In Yemen, U.S. drone strikes—while effective at targeting local Al Qaeda elements—arguably contribute to the ongoing radicalization of the Yemeni population, particularly when civilians are killed in U.S. attacks. One Yemeni activist claimed that many recruits did not join AQAP for ideological reasons but rather to avenge relatives killed in drone strikes.⁹⁸
- **Broad regional coverage.** U.S. focus on counterterrorism may limit the attention or resources devoted to tracking other global developments key to U.S. interests, such as gradual political or military shifts on the part of state actors—including Russia—that could alter the political landscape.

Long-term Goals

Debate continues regarding the United States' long-term strategic goal vis-à-vis Al Qaeda, its affiliates, and similar groups. President Obama, in his May 2013 speech to the National Defense University, argued that United States should focus on those that directly threaten the United States:

We must define the nature and scope of this struggle, or else it will define us [...] Neither I, nor any President can promise the total defeat of terror [...] But what we can do—what we must do—is dismantle networks that pose a direct danger to us and make it less likely for new groups to gain a foothold.

Congress may seek to identify criteria that will better enable policymakers to determine when a group's capacity is sufficiently dismantled so no further direct U.S. action is required. They also may consider whether and how action could be taken against groups whose threat potential may not have directly manifested itself, and how to use military, economic, diplomatic, intelligence, and law enforcement resources in an optimally calibrated way to mitigate threats without harming other interests.

However, some Al Qaeda watchers argue that if U.S. policies to counter the group and its affiliates focus primarily on terrorist designs on U.S. targets, these policies may not be ideally configured to work against what these watchers consider to be the ultimate purpose for which Al

⁹⁸ "Yemenis seek justice in wedding drone strike," *Al Jazeera*, May 21, 2014.

Qaeda uses terrorism—to seize and govern territory in areas historically associated with Islam.⁹⁹ Continuing debate on this point could focus on the extent to which Al Qaeda groups' prospects and ambitions to rule threaten overall U.S. interests, and to what extent U.S. capabilities and public opinion can support operations to counter Al Qaeda's potentially broad, long-term, and likely non-negotiable aspirations.

Debates over how to best address threats from Al Qaeda and its affiliates also may consider the issue in the context of other U.S. domestic and foreign policy priorities competing for public attention and resources. To what extent has the nature and acuity of the threats these groups pose to the United States changed from the time of Al Qaeda's rise in the 1990s to now? How has the conflict with the Islamic State shaped U.S. counterterrorism policy? What other policy priorities have emerged, and how do these relate to priorities regarding Al Qaeda and efforts to counter terrorist threats against U.S. interests?

Possible Tools for Congress

U.S. counterterrorism programs, often conducted in partnership with other countries, are administered by the Department of Defense, State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and others, including various law enforcement, financial, and intelligence agencies. Through the appropriations process, Members of Congress may condition agencies' use of funds, specify funding levels for specific programs, and stipulate how an agency's budget can be reprogrammed. Congress also oversees programs through its hearings, requests for audits, and the establishment of reporting requirements. By reviewing and endorsing nominees for key leadership posts, Congress has an opportunity to consider the strategic outlooks and priorities of individuals placed in leadership positions in key counterterrorism, diplomatic, and military entities. In the ongoing debates surrounding counterterrorism policy, congressional input and participation can have an effect in several broad areas, including the following:

Military Force

Successive administrations since 2001 have adopted a broad interpretation of the AUMF and/or Article II of the Constitution to conduct a range of military and intelligence operations. As the United States continues to withdraw from Afghanistan—while at the same time initiating airstrikes against the Islamic State in Iraq—Members might propose legislation to constrain, repeal, or expand the AUMF to reflect a changing international environment. Members might also continue to shape the contours of the U.S. footprint and the parameters of direct intervention overseas by providing oversight and legislating on issues such as drone strikes and other special operations.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Testimony of Fredrick W. Kagan, American Enterprise Institute, before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, April 8, 2014.

¹⁰⁰ "Congress restricts drones program shift," *New York Times*, January 16, 2014.

Building Partner Capacity

The Obama Administration has requested \$5 billion for the creation of a Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF) to build the capacity of allied states to combat terrorism inside their own borders. Congress is considering the request as part of its broader consideration of the FY2015 request for Overseas Contingency Operations funding for the Departments of Defense and State.¹⁰¹ Several existing programs also support security assistance to international partners, including

- Section 1206 of the FY2006 NDAA (P.L. 109-163), as amended, which provides the Defense Department (DOD) with the authority to train and equip foreign military forces for counterterrorism and stability operations;¹⁰²
- Section 1208 of the FY2005 NDAA (P.L. 108-375), which authorizes DOD to fund “foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals” that support counterterrorism operations by U.S. Special Operations Forces;
- Section 1207 of the FY2012 NDAA (P.L. 112-181) which created the Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF). This joint State-DOD fund is designed to provide security and counterterrorism assistance, including equipment, supplies, and training, to countries designated by the Secretary of State with the concurrence of the Secretary of Defense;
- International security assistance under Title IV of annual State and Foreign Operations appropriations bills, which provides funding for anti-terrorism programs, military training, and foreign military assistance.

Counter-Radicalization/Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Programs

Multiple U.S. agencies, including the State Department, USAID, and DOD, implement a range of programs designed to counter extremist recruitment overseas. These programs may target communities viewed as susceptible to radicalization by promoting moderate Muslim voices, expanding access to information, supporting alternative livelihoods, and otherwise promoting alternative narratives through public messaging. The United States also supports programs in some counterterrorism partner nations to promote de-radicalization in prisons.

Development Aid

Development aid, generally administered through USAID, is often seen as complementing U.S. military or security operations by enabling societies to reform, rebuild, and strengthen key social, political, and economic institutions and infrastructure that would mitigate terrorism or make its resurgence less likely. USAID also administers counter-radicalization programs in some Middle East and Africa countries. In many cases, the recipient countries face security challenges that

¹⁰¹ “Fact Sheet: The Administration’s Fiscal Year 2015 Overseas Contingency Operations Request,” The White House Office of the Press Secretary, May 28, 2014.

¹⁰² For more information, see CRS Report RS22855, *Security Assistance Reform: “Section 1206” Background and Issues for Congress*, by Nina M. Serafino.

make it difficult to deliver or implement aid. Corruption, mismanagement, and waste also can limit the effectiveness of aid in some situations.

Democracy Promotion

The Administration has emphasized the role of democratization in combatting terrorism, but has been viewed by some as prioritizing stability over representative government in parts of the Middle East and Africa. Through annual foreign operations and State Department appropriations legislation, Congress provides funding for democracy promotion in the Middle East and Africa through avenues including USAID, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the Millennium Challenge Account, the Near East Regional Democracy fund, and the Foundation for the Future.

Terrorist Financing

Following the 9/11 attacks, Congress passed P.L. 107-56 (the USA PATRIOT Act) which expanded the ability of the Treasury Department to detect, track and prosecute those involved in money laundering and terrorist financing. In 2004, the 108th Congress adopted P.L. 108-458, which appropriated funds to combat financial crimes, made technical corrections to P.L. 107-56, and required the Treasury Department to report periodically on the current state of U.S. efforts to curtail the international financing of terrorism. Congress may consider additional issues such as regulation of alternative remittance systems in the United States, reducing overlap among federal agencies that cover this issue, and increasing cooperation with other nations to increase the implementation and enforcement of terrorist financing laws. However, affiliates and other extremist groups may still find ways to bypass restrictions or may finance their activities through other means.

Intelligence Collection and Gaps

Congress oversees the intelligence community (IC) through the select committees and has used legislation to direct and restrain IC activities related to counterterrorism, with implications for the Middle East and Africa.

Multilateral Engagement

The 2011 National Counterterrorism Strategy discussed the need to leverage multilateral institutions to increase partner engagement, reduce financial burdens on the United States, and enhance the legitimacy of counterterrorism efforts. Most recently, the Administration has requested the participation of a broad coalition of countries as part of U.S. strategy to defeat the Islamic State. The United States has sought a range of support from international partners, including participation in an air campaign against IS forces, assistance to Iraqi government and Iraqi Kurdish forces, arming and training of moderate Syrian rebels, increased intelligence sharing, commitments to curb the flow of fighters and resources to the Islamic State, and the provision of financial support.

Other possible channels for multilateral cooperation include the following:

- Using the Counterterrorism Engagement fund (CTE) in the Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR) account of annual State and Foreign Operations appropriations bills to focus specifically on counterterrorism aid and multilateral organizations. For example, CTE funds the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, whose Terrorism Prevention Branch provides counterterrorism assistance to U.N. member states.
- Working with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an international body established by the G-7, and FATF-style regional bodies. The FATF develops global regulatory standards for combating money laundering and terrorist financing, and FATF-style regional bodies bring regional governments together to better combat financial threats and monitor each other's compliance with international obligations.
- Working with regional multilateral bodies, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the African Union, which might provide resources and manpower for CT initiatives.

Outlook

Al Qaeda and the ideological movement it has sought to lead are in a state of flux. The goals of Al Qaeda affiliates will probably remain diverse, encompassing a range of local, regional, and international aims—sometimes within the same group. The ability of Al Qaeda's senior leadership to exert control over affiliates is likely to fluctuate, or, if current trends hold, possibly weaken further. However, ongoing dynamics are likely to include

- **Spillover.** Al Qaeda is likely to seek continued expansion, as shown by its support for combatant groups in Syria. Countries bordering ongoing civil conflicts are particularly vulnerable to a spillover Al Qaeda presence, although some of the offshoots established in these countries may initially assume financing or logistical support roles rather than directly seeking to destabilize the countries in which they are based.
- **Leadership Struggles.** Al Qaeda and the broader international salafist-jihadist movement also are likely to continue to struggle with internal divisions and legitimacy issues. Al Qaeda's center of gravity may continue to shift from Afghanistan and Pakistan to areas of Yemen or Syria, although the planned withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in late 2014 could relieve some pressure on the group's senior leadership. At the same time, Al Qaeda is likely to encounter ongoing competition from the Islamic State, which split from Al Qaeda earlier this year and later emerged as the group's most prominent rival.
- **Potential Threats to U.S. Interests.** It is unclear how current and future dynamics will affect the ability of Al Qaeda and similar groups to target the United States, U.S. allies, and U.S. regional interests. Some argue that divisions within the organization diminish its capacity to organize attacks against the United States. Others contend that these types of splits lead to greater violence as

rival groups both inside and outside the Al Qaeda umbrella compete for financing and recruits by launching attacks against the West and its local allies.¹⁰³ The Islamic State’s prominent emergence as a peer competitor to Al Qaeda is a case in point.

These considerations provide Members of Congress with opportunities for significant deliberation. Lessons learned from past counterterrorism efforts and the evolving threat picture might inform congressional views and engagement with the Administration and the U.S. public on these issues. The evolving struggle against jihadist terrorist threats has occupied a prominent place in national debate for more than a decade and has the potential to precipitate sudden emergencies and calls for immediate action.

Table I. FTO and SDGT Designations

	Initial FTO and SDGT Designation	Designation last amended
GSPC / AQIM	March 2002 ^a (FTO), September 2001 ^b (SDGT)	February 2008
AQ-I / ISIL/Islamic State	December 2004 ^c	May 2014
Al Shabaab	February 2008	-
AQAP	January 2010	-
Nusra Front	December 2012 ^d	May 2014
Boko Haram and Ansaru	November 2013	-
Al Murabitoun ^e	December 2013	-
Ansar al Sharia – Tunisia	January 2014	-
Ansar al Sharia – Libya	January 2014	-
Ansar Bayt al Maqdis	April 2014	

Source: State Department.

Notes: This chart reflects the initial dates in which groups were designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists. Some groups have adopted new names since the time of their initial designation, and this change has been reflected in later amendments. This chart does not include individuals, who have often been designated separately—and in some cases earlier—than their respective groups.

* FTOs are designated by the Secretary of State in accordance with the Immigration and Nationality Act. The legal criteria are the following: (1) it must be a foreign organization; (2) it must engage in terrorist activities, as statutorily defined, or retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism; and (3) the organization’s terrorist activity or terrorism must threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security of the United States.

*SDGT designations are made under Executive Order (E.O.) 13224, which targets terrorists and those providing support to terrorists or acts of terrorism. As a result of the designation, all property subject to U.S. jurisdiction in which designated entities have any interest is blocked and U.S. persons are prohibited from engaging in any transactions with them or to their benefit.

- a. The State Department designated AQIM’s predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), as an FTO in 2002 and amended the designation in 2008 to AQIM.
- b. Executive Order 13224, issued September 23, 2001 <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/122570.htm>.

¹⁰³ Bruce Hoffman, remarks at the Carnegie Endowment, May 30, 2014.

- c. The State Department designated the Islamic State's predecessor, AQ-I, as an FTO in December 2004. The designation was amended in May 2014 to make ISIL the group's primary name and to remove all aliases linked to the Nusra Front.
- d. Nusra Front was designated in December 2012 as an alias of FTO group Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQ-I). The designation was amended in May 2014 to list Nusra as a separate group independent of AQ-I and its successor groups ISIL and the Islamic State.
- e. This designation also applies to Al Mulathamun Battalion, which the State Department describes as an alias of Al Murabitoun.

Appendix. Group Profiles

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)¹⁰⁴

Overview. AQIM, which evolved from an Islamist insurgent faction in Algeria’s 1990s civil conflict, was formed when the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) “united” with Al Qaeda in 2006 and renamed itself in 2007. AQIM has conducted bombings against Algerian state targets, attacks on security forces in Algeria and the Sahel region of West Africa, and kidnappings, including Westerners, across the region. It has also reportedly provided support to other Africa-based violent extremist groups. U.S. officials have assessed AQIM to be focused on local and Western targets in North and West Africa, potentially including U.S. interests and personnel in the region. The group has leveraged instability in North and West Africa since 2011 to expand the scope of its operations. At the same time, its capacities may have been degraded by French military operations since 2013. See also Al Murabitoun, below.

Figure A-1. AQIM



Source: AQIM social media.

Leadership. AQIM’s emir, Abdelmalik Droukdel, an Algerian national, is reportedly based in northeastern Algeria. Long-reported leadership disputes within AQIM have erupted since 2011, as several of AQIM’s former Sahel-based commanders have joined or founded new groups.

Objectives. AQIM’s rhetoric broadly focuses on achieving an Islamic caliphate in Algeria and throughout North Africa, and on countering Western influence, notably that of former colonial power France.

Areas of Operation. AQIM has claimed responsibility for attacks, kidnappings, and other activities in Algeria, Mauritania, Niger, and Mali. AQIM has also pursued ties to groups in Tunisia and Libya, and elements of the group are reported to have moved to southwestern Libya since 2013.

- **Algeria.** AQIM claimed responsibility for a series of bombings in Algiers in 2007-08 targeting the prime minister’s office, Constitutional Council, U.N. office in Algiers, and a police precinct, which killed dozens of people. Bombings and attacks on Algerian police and military institutions have continued outside Algiers, occasionally killing a dozen or more people at a time.
- **Mali.** AQIM has long had a presence in Mali, which has served as a hub for kidnap-for-ransom operations and other fundraising. AQIM asserted territorial control in parts of northern Mali in 2012, in coordination with two other Islamist

¹⁰⁴ Drawn from State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013* and “Rewards for Justice” profiles; White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, 2011; statements by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence; statements by U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) commanders; Department of the Treasury documents and statements; U.N. Al Qaeda sanctions committee analysis; and news and non-governmental organization reports.

extremist groups. France's military intervention in January 2013 restored nominal Malian state control and weakened—but did not eliminate—AQIM's presence. Recent attacks attributed to AQIM have targeted French, Malian, and U.N. forces.

- **Niger.** AQIM has conducted multiple kidnappings in Niger. Two French citizens kidnapped in the capital, Niamey, in 2011 were killed during a French rescue attempt.
- **Mauritania.** Between 2005 and 2009, AQIM carried out multiple attacks on Mauritanian security forces and foreign nationals in Mauritania. In 2008, AQIM used small arms to attack the Israeli Embassy in the capital, Nouakchott. No fatalities were reported.

Attacks against U.S. interests. AQIM claimed responsibility for the 2009 murder in Mauritania of American citizen Christopher Leggett, who was conducting missionary work. According to the State Department, AQIM was linked to the Benghazi attacks on September 11, 2012. AQIM has publicly urged its supporters to attack U.S. embassies and kill U.S. ambassadors.

Size, Financing, and Capabilities. According to the State Department, as of 2013 AQIM had under a thousand fighters in Algeria and a “smaller number” in the Sahel. Sources of funding include kidnap-for-ransom, involvement in regional smuggling operations, local “taxation” and extortion, and possibly aid from supporters in Europe. In 2012, U.S. officials described AQIM as the “best funded” Al Qaeda affiliate.

Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates. “Union” with Al Qaeda was announced by Al Qaeda's then-deputy leader Ayman al Zawahiri in 2006. The Obama Administration considers AQIM an Al Qaeda “affiliate.”¹⁰⁵ In July 2014, the group publicly reiterated its pledge of allegiance to Zawahiri; however, news reports suggest that the group's members may be torn over whether to switch allegiance to the Islamic State.

¹⁰⁵ See, e.g., State Department Daily Press Briefing, January 10, 2014.

Al Shabaab

Overview. Al Shabaab (aka *Harakat Shabaab al Mujahidin*, or Mujahidin Youth Movement) is an insurgent and terrorist group that evolved out of a militant wing of Somalia's Council of Islamic Courts in the mid-2000s. In its formative years, Al Shabaab drew on historic anti-Ethiopian sentiment among Somalis for recruits and support, including among the Somali diaspora in the United States and Europe. The group held significant territory in south-central Somalia, including the capital, Mogadishu, in the late 2000s, until the U.N.-authorized African Union mission in Somalia (AMISOM) gained momentum against the insurgency through a series of military offensives in 2011-2012. Al Shabaab continues to wage an asymmetric campaign against government, AMISOM, and international targets in Somalia, and thousands of civilians have been killed in its attacks. While Al Shabaab has primarily focused on its agenda in Somalia, it has threatened the countries contributing troops to AMISOM and has successfully conducted deadly terrorist attacks in Djibouti, Kenya, and Uganda.

The group's ability to recruit abroad and the presence of foreign fighters, among them U.S. citizens, in Somalia have been of significant concern to U.S. policymakers. Some foreign fighters have reportedly deserted in recent years, either out of disillusion with military losses or because of internal dissent. Reports suggest some may have left for other jihadist theaters, while others, including recruits from Kenya, may be trained in Somalia and then deployed to conduct attacks against targets elsewhere in East Africa.

Leadership. Al Shabaab's emir, Ahmed Abdi Godane (aka Ahmed Abdi aw-Mohamed, Abu Zubeyr), was killed in a U.S. airstrike on August 31, 2014. His predecessor, Aden Hashi Ayro, was killed in a 2008 U.S. missile strike. The group had suffered infighting within its senior ranks in recent years, and Godane, who reportedly aspired to pose a global threat, had consolidated power by neutralizing his rivals within the movement in 2012-2013. In announcing his successor, Ahmed Umar (aka Abu Ubaidah), who is viewed as a close Godane ally, Al Shabaab reaffirmed its allegiance to AQ leader Zawahiri.

Objectives. Al Shabaab broadly ascribes to an irredentist and religiously driven vision of uniting ethnic Somali-inhabited areas of Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia under an Islamist caliphate. Its leaders have also repeatedly expressed their commitment to the global jihad movement. The group has justified its attacks outside Somalia as retaliation for participation in, or support for, AMISOM and/or as retribution for alleged abuses against Muslims in Somalia and the broader region.¹⁰⁶

Figure A-2. Al Shabaab



Source: Open Source Center.

¹⁰⁶ See, e.g., Hamza Mohamed, "Q&A: Al-Shabab Defends Nairobi Attack," *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2013; "Al Shabaab Claims Responsibility for Djibouti Suicide Attack," Reuters, May 27, 2014; and "Al Shabaab Claim Responsibility for Mpeketoni Attack," AFP, June 16, 2014.

Areas of Operation. Al Shabaab attacks have been primarily concentrated in Somalia, although it has increasingly claimed responsibility for attacks in Kenya since 2011, and has demonstrated its ability to strike targets in Uganda and Djibouti as well. Security offensives against Al Shabaab in 2011-2012 pushed Al Shabaab out of Mogadishu and other major southern cities and ports, but it continues to control territory and run training sites in parts of south-central Somalia. Al Shabaab reportedly maintains cells and/or relationships with affiliated groups in Kenya, Tanzania, and other countries in the region.

Attacks against U.S. interests. Al Shabaab leaders have issued repeated threats against U.S. and Western targets in Somalia and beyond, and have called for strikes against the United States. Two Sudanese citizens who were involved in the January 2008 murder of a U.S. diplomat in Sudan are believed to be among Al Shabaab's ranks.¹⁰⁷ The group's July 2010 bombings in Kampala, Uganda, killed more than 70 people, including one American. While no Americans were killed in the September 2013 assault on the upscale Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, that and subsequent attacks have underscored the serious threat to Western citizens in the country. In confirming the death of Godane in a U.S. strike, Obama Administration officials cited his oversight of "plots targeting Westerners, including U.S. persons in East Africa" and suggested that the strike was conducted in response to an "imminent threat" to U.S. interests in the region.¹⁰⁸

Size, Financing, and Capabilities. The State Department estimates Al Shabaab to have several thousand members, including a few hundred foreign fighters. Allied clan militias may augment Al Shabaab's strength in some areas of south-central Somalia. Reports of increased recruitment in Kenya in recent years are also of concern. While Al Shabaab's loss of Mogadishu and other strategic port cities deprived the group of valuable revenue sources, reports suggest it continues to tax charcoal production, despite a U.N. embargo on the Somali charcoal trade, and exports from smaller ports still under its control. Foreign donations also contribute to its financing; the United States and others have sought to sanction several Kenyan clerics, for example, who are alleged to raise funds and recruit for the group.

Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates. The Obama Administration characterizes Al Shabaab as Al Qaeda's largest affiliate in Africa and considers elements of the group to be associated with Al Qaeda in the context of the AUMF.¹⁰⁹ Some of Al Shabaab's founding members fought with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and senior Al Qaeda operatives in East Africa, including Fazul Mohammed, mastermind of the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, have been associated with the group. After multiple public expressions of allegiance by Al Shabaab to Al Qaeda, the two entities announced their formal alliance in February 2012. The practical effect of the merger is unclear—Al Shabaab appears to operate largely independently. It maintains ties with other AQ affiliates, most notably AQAP in nearby Yemen.

¹⁰⁷ These two individuals, who were convicted of the crime in 2009 and subsequently escaped a Sudanese prison, have been listed by the United States as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).

¹⁰⁸ The White House, Statement by the Press Secretary on the Death of Ahmed Godane, September 5, 2014; and CNN.

¹⁰⁹ The White House, Text of a Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, June 12, 2014.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)¹¹⁰

Overview. AQAP is a Sunni Muslim terrorist organization led by Saudi and Yemeni nationals who are determined to overthrow their respective “apostate” governments and who target the United States for its history of support to the Saudi royal family. AQAP is based primarily in the remote southern provinces of Yemen that largely spurn control by Yemen’s central government. There, the group has concentrated its efforts at sowing an insurgency against the central government in Sana’a. Generally described as one of the most dangerous Al Qaeda affiliates to U.S. interests, AQAP has repeatedly attempted to attack the United States and has been one of the first Al Qaeda offshoots to publish its propaganda in English in order to attract Americans and other Westerners to its cause. Since AQAP was formed through a merger of Saudi and Yemeni Al Qaeda-aligned terrorists in 2009, AQAP has targeted the U.S. Embassy in Sana’a and the Saudi royal family, and has made at least two unsuccessful attempts to bomb airlines over U.S. air space (Christmas Day 2009, Parcel bombs October 2010).

Figure A-3. AQAP



Source: AQAP social media.

Leadership. The leader of AQAP is a former secretary of Osama bin Laden’s named Nasir al Wuhayshi, who became the leader of AQAP’s Yemeni predecessor in 2007, a year after escaping from prison, along with 23 other wanted militants. Al Wuhayshi’s personal connection to Bin Laden reportedly enhanced his legitimacy among his followers. After Bin Laden was killed in 2011, Wuhayshi pledged AQAP’s allegiance to Bin Laden’s successor, Ayman al Zawahiri. In 2013, Zawahiri reportedly ordered Wuhayshi to carry out large scale terrorist attacks against the United States. In response, Wuhayshi apparently vowed to carry out an attack that would “change the face of history,” leading the U.S. State Department to take immediate precautionary measures. These included issuing a worldwide travel alert and suspending diplomatic operations in 19 Muslim countries, including Yemen. In March 2014, AQAP released a video showing Wuhayshi addressing a large, open-air gathering of followers.

Objectives. AQAP actively seeks to attack U.S. territory and American interests abroad. In the third edition of its online magazine (entitled *Inspire*), AQAP claims that its long-term strategy is to launch many small-scale attacks against the United States. The group also apparently seeks to assassinate members of the Saudi royal family, as was illustrated by a failed assassination attempt in August 2009 against former Assistant Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdelaziz Al Saud, the director of the kingdom’s counterterrorism campaign. Finally, AQAP also apparently seeks to build an anti-government insurgency in southern Yemen that would ultimately be capable of holding territory.

¹¹⁰ Drawn partially from the U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Terrorism 2013.

Areas of Operation. Although AQAP has a presence throughout Yemen, it is most active in the southern provinces that were formerly part of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (also known as South Yemen), and which united with their northern counterparts in 1990. Despite unification, political and economic power remains in the hands of northern leaders and tribes, and AQAP has benefitted from southern resentment directed against the government. In the spring of 2014, the Yemeni armed forces launched a major offensive against AQAP, and President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi remarked that "Army and security forces have to be prepared for cleansing operations in Abyan, Maarib, Shabwa and Bayda."¹¹¹

Attacks against U.S. interests. AQAP has attempted on several occasions to bomb U.S. commercial aircraft and indoctrinate what the intelligence community refers to as "homegrown violent extremists" or HVEs. Its most high-profile attempted attack to date was the failed bomb attack against Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on Christmas Day 2009. Before 2009, militants in Yemen targeted Western embassies in Sana'a, foreign oil companies and their facilities, and tourists. Two attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a in 2008 killed 17 people, including one U.S. citizen, and injured dozens of Yemenis. In October 2010, AQAP, through its U.S.-designated terrorist bombmaker, Ibrahim Hassan al Asiri, again attempted to attack the United States—in this case using explosives hidden inside parcel packages addressed to fictitious people in Chicago associated with Jewish synagogues.

Size, Financing, and Capabilities. According to the U.S. State Department, "AQAP's funding primarily comes from robberies and kidnap for ransom operations and to a lesser degree from donations from like-minded supporters."

Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates. The leader of AQAP has the closest ties to the original leadership of Al Qaeda as it existed in Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban. In 2013, the current leader of Al Qaeda's global network, Ayman al Zawahiri, reportedly promoted Nasir al Wuhayshi to what U.S. officials have described as the new "general manager" of the AQ global terror network, making him the second most important man in the organization.¹¹² Multiple news services revealed that U.S. intelligence services intercepted a phone call in late July 2013 between Zawahiri and Wuhayshi, in which (as mentioned above) the former urged the latter to carry out large scale terrorist attacks against the United States.

AQAP operates both within the Arabian Peninsula and internationally. Some analysts also suggest that, with the encouragement of Al Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the group is expanding its ties with Al Shabaab in Somalia, though such ties, to the extent they exist, may be more material than operational; Yemeni and Somali officials claim that they are providing each other with arms and manpower to help counter both organizations.¹¹³ Many observers believe that for the time being, AQAP will refrain from formally switching its allegiance from Al Qaeda to the Islamic State; however, AQAP propagandists have touted IS gains in Iraq and encouraged their followers to join the Islamic State in battle.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ "Yemen president says country in open war against al Qaeda," *Reuters*, May 15, 2014.

¹¹² "Qaeda Leader's Edict to Yemen Affiliate Is Said to Prompt Alert," *New York Times*, August 5, 2013.

¹¹³ "Somalis fleeing to Yemen prompt new worries in fight against al-Qaeda," *Washington Post*, January 12, 2010.

¹¹⁴ "Yemeni Qaeda leader hails Islamic State's gains in Iraq," *Reuters*, August 13, 2014; OSC Report TRR2014081250227073.

Nusra Front

Overview. A Salafi-jihadist militia, Jabhat al Nusra li Ahl al Sham (the “Support Front for the People of Syria,” known as Jabhat al Nusra or the Nusra Front) emerged in Syria in late 2011 and claimed responsibility for a series of high profile suicide bombing attacks against government security forces as well as summary executions of captured Asad regime soldiers.

Leadership. Nusra Front’s leader is known by his nom de guerre, Abu Muhammad al Jawlani, a name suggesting family origin in the Golan Heights. Jawlani is thought to have fought against Coalition forces in Iraq before returning to Syria after the start of the uprising in 2011 to establish an Al Qaeda franchise in the country. Initially backed by current Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the two leaders split when Baghdadi sought to absorb the Nusra Front under his command in April 2013.

Objectives. The group’s ideology, messaging, and tactics mirror those of Al Qaeda affiliates in other regional conflict zones. Nusra Front members engage in organized relief work and service provision efforts to gain favor with civilians, and the group has cooperated with other secular and Islamist groups and engaged in conflict with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, now known as the Islamic State). The prospect for clashes between the Nusra Front and its past partners remains, as the Front’s own uncompromising views on the long-term implementation of Islamic religious law may create rifts with Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and religious minorities in Syria.

Areas of Operations. Independent analysts and social media suggest that Nusra Front operatives are active across Syria. In northern and eastern Syria, the group’s clashes with the Islamic State have weakened Nusra’s hold on some former areas, while Nusra’s cooperative operations with other Syrian opposition elements appear to continue. In southern Syria, the Nusra Front remains engaged in campaigns to oust Asad forces from Dara’a province as well as areas of the Golan Heights adjacent to Israel.

Attacks against U.S. interests. The Nusra Front has not directly attacked the United States. However, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper in early 2014 stated that the group “does have aspirations for attacks on the homeland.”¹¹⁵ In September 2014, U.S. military forces launched strikes against the Syria-based “Khorasan Group,” described by former CIA Deputy Director Michael Morrell as the “external operations arm” of the Nusra Front.¹¹⁶ According to Rear Admiral John Kirby, the strikes “were undertaken to disrupt imminent attack plotting against the United States and western targets.”¹¹⁷

Figure A-4. Nusra Front



Source: National Counterterrorism Center.

¹¹⁵ Testimony of DNI James Clapper before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2014.

¹¹⁶ Michael Morrell, former CIA Deputy Director, “CBS This Morning,” September 18, 2014.

¹¹⁷ Department of Defense Press Briefing on Operations in Syria, September 23, 2014.

Size, Financing, and Capabilities. Unofficial estimates suggest that the Nusra Front may have as many as 6,000 fighters operating across Syria.

Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates. Nusra Front leaders have sided with Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri in the rift between Zawahiri and Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. In September 2014, the Associated Press reported that unnamed U.S. officials had described attempts by “Khorasan Group” members to collaborate with Al Qaeda-affiliated bomb makers in Yemen and Syria-based Western foreign fighters to place explosives aboard commercial aircraft.¹¹⁸ Attorney General Eric Holder acknowledged that enhanced aviation security measures imposed earlier this year were a response to “Khorasan Group” activities.

The Islamic State (IS, formerly known as ISIL or ISIS)

Overview. The Islamic State is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that has expanded its control over areas of northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria since 2013, threatening the security of both countries. Its forerunner is Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQ-I), which was formed by militant leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to combat the U.S. military presence in Iraq. In 2013, the group adopted the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) name as it expanded its operations into the Syria conflict. The group’s brutal tactics and clashes with other anti-Asad groups in Syria contributed to the February 3, 2014, Al Qaeda leadership statement disavowing any connection with ISIL. In June 2014 the group declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate and changed its name to the Islamic State.

Figure A-5. The Islamic State



Source: Open Source Center.

Leadership. The leader of the Islamic State is Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al Badri al Samarra’i, who operates under the name Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. He is also known as Abu Du’a. An Iraqi national who rose through the ranks of AQ-I, Baghdadi reportedly was detained by U.S. forces in Iraq from 2005 to 2009.

Objectives. U.S. officials have noted that the Islamic State’s goal is to “establish an Islamic caliphate through armed conflict with governments it considers apostate—including Syria, Iraq, and the United States.”¹¹⁹

Areas of Operation. The Islamic State operates in Syria’s northeast, controlling large areas of Raqqah, Hasakah, and Dayr az Zawr provinces. The group also has a presence in northern Aleppo province. Within Iraq, the primary area of IS strength is the overwhelmingly Sunni-inhabited Anbar Province, although the group also operate in Nineveh and Diyala provinces.

¹¹⁸ “Al Qaeda’s Syrian cell alarms U.S.,” *Associated Press*, September 13, 2014.

¹¹⁹ Remarks by Matthew G. Olsen, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, at the Brookings Institution, September 3, 2014.

Attacks Against U.S. Interests. In September 2014, National Counterterrorism Center Director Matthew Olsen stated that the Islamic State poses an “immediate and direct threat” to American personnel in Iraq. IS militants in August beheaded two American journalists captured in Syria. Olsen also stated that “we have no credible information that ISIL is planning to attack the U.S.,” but he highlighted potential threats posed by foreign fighters with Western passports. According to Olsen, as many as 12,000 foreign fighters have travelled to Syria, including more than 1,000 Europeans, and more than 100 U.S. citizens.¹²⁰

Size, Financing, and Capabilities. The CIA estimates that the Islamic State can “muster between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters across Iraq and Syria,” according to a reported statement by an agency spokesman.¹²¹ The Islamic State is thought to be largely self-financing, relying on oil sales and criminal and extortion networks. The group has seized a number of oil fields in Syria and Iraq, and members reportedly sell heavy and light crude oil from these fields to local merchants or traders who smuggle the oil across the border or in some cases sell it back to the Syrian government.¹²² In both Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State derives revenue by imposing taxes on local populations and demanding a percentage of the funds involved in humanitarian and commercial operations in areas under its control, including farms and local businesses.¹²³ In addition, it has looted some bank branches, and demanded protection money from Christians and other minorities who wish to remain on land controlled by the Islamic State. The group also gains funds by collecting ransoms in exchange for releasing hostages, particularly from European countries. The Islamic State takes in as much as one million dollars per day from illicit oil sales, smuggling, and ransom payments, according to one senior intelligence official.¹²⁴

Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates. Al Qaeda leader Ayman Zawahiri severed ties with the group in February 2014. Since then, IS leaders have stated their view that their group “is not and has never been an offshoot of Al Qaeda”¹²⁵ and that, given that they view themselves as a state and a sovereign political entity, they have given leaders of the Al Qaeda organization deference rather than pledges of obedience. Some media reports suggest possible competition between the Islamic State and Al Qaeda for prominence and support.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Olsen.

¹²¹ “CIA: Islamic State group has up to 31,500 fighters,” *Associated Press*, September 11, 2014.

¹²² “Islamic State economy runs on extortion, oil piracy in Syria, Iraq,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 2014.

¹²³ “Sunni fighters gain as they battle 2 governments, and other rebels,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

¹²⁴ Remarks by Matthew G. Olsen, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, at the Brookings Institution, September 3, 2014.

¹²⁵ See for example, “The Islamic State vs. Al Qaeda,” *Foreign Policy*, September 2, 2014.

Boko Haram and Ansaru

Overview. Boko Haram, which emerged over a decade ago as a small Sunni Islamic sect advocating a strict interpretation and implementation of Islamic law for Nigeria, has grown since 2010 into one of the world's deadliest terrorist groups. Calling itself *Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna Li-da'wa wa-al Jihad* (roughly translated from Arabic as "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"), the group is more popularly known as Boko Haram (often translated as "Western education is forbidden"), a nickname given by local Hausa-speaking communities to describe the group's view that Western education and culture have been corrupting influences that are *haram* ("forbidden").¹²⁶

Figure A-6. Boko Haram



Source: Open Source Center.

Boko Haram currently appears to pose a threat primarily to local stability in Nigeria and to state and international targets, including Western citizens, in the region.¹²⁷ Civilians in the impoverished, predominately Muslim northeast have borne the brunt of the violence. The group conducted its first lethal attack against Western interests on August 26, 2011, with the deadly bombing of the United Nations building in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. There has been a dramatic increase in attacks in 2014, including multiple bombings in Abuja and the abduction of almost 300 girls from a school in the northeast town of Chibok. In mid-2014 the group began an effort to seize territory in the northeast Nigerian state of Borno.

A splinter faction, Ansaru (aka *Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis-Sudan*, or Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa), emerged in 2012. It was publicly critical of Boko Haram's killing of Muslim civilians and appeared focused on government and foreign targets. Several kidnappings attributed to the group resulted in the killing of foreign hostages. Ansaru has claimed no recent attacks, and the extent to which it currently operates independently from or cooperates with Boko Haram is unclear.

Leadership. Abubakar Shekau is Boko Haram's most visible leader. He succeeded the group's original leader, Mohammed Yusuf, who was killed in police custody after a July 2009 security crackdown.

Objectives. Boko Haram's leaders have publicly called for an uprising against secular authority and a war against Christianity, and purportedly seek to establish an Islamic caliphate in Nigeria. To elicit recruits and sympathizers, the group draws on a narrative of resentment and vengeance against state abuses, and its attacks appear aimed at undermining the government's control over the northern part of the country.

¹²⁶ For more information, see CRS Report R43558, *Nigeria's Boko Haram: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard.

¹²⁷ Testimony of General David Rodriguez, Senate Armed Services Committee, *Proposed Fiscal 2015 Defense Authorization for U.S. Central Command and U.S. Africa Command*, March 6, 2014.

Areas of Operation. Boko Haram attacks have been primarily concentrated in northeast Nigeria, but the group has claimed responsibility for attacks across north and central Nigeria. Several attacks in 2014, however, have reportedly extended as far south as Lagos. Security forces from neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger have increasingly clashed with the group as it has crossed Nigeria's borders into northern Cameroon and the Lake Chad Basin area. The group has conducted kidnapping operations targeting European citizens in northern Cameroon since early 2013.

Attacks against U.S. interests. In public statements issued in July 2010, Boko Haram threatened to attack Western interests in Nigeria and expressed solidarity with Al Qaeda.¹²⁸ The group has made subsequent threats against the United States. To date, neither Boko Haram nor Ansaru have conducted a successful attack against an American target.

Size, Financing, and Capabilities. The State Department estimates Boko Haram's membership to range from the hundreds to a few thousand. The group appears to fund its operations largely through criminal activity, including bank robberies, kidnappings, assassinations for hire, trafficking, and various types of extortion.

Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates. The Obama Administration does not currently consider Boko Haram to be affiliated with Al Qaeda's central leadership, despite periodic rhetorical pledges of solidarity and support for Al Qaeda and its affiliates from Shekau.¹²⁹ Shekau has also expressed support for Islamic State leader Baghdadi, although such statements do not appear, to date, to indicate allegiance or practical affiliation. Reports suggest possible communications, funding, training, and weapons links between Boko Haram, Ansaru, AQIM, AQAP, and Al Shabaab.¹³⁰

Al Murabitoun¹³¹

Overview. Al Murabitoun was formed in 2013 through the merger of two AQIM splinter factions: the Al Mulathamun Battalion (the Masked Ones, also known as the Battalion of Those Who Sign in Blood) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA or MUJAO after its French acronym). These groups have carried out attacks in Algeria and the Sahel region of West Africa. The State Department has described Al Murabitoun as "the greatest near-term threat to U.S. and international interests in the Sahel," citing its "stated intent to attack Westerners and proven ability to

Figure A-7. Al Murabitoun leader Mokhtar bel Mokhtar



Source: Reuters.

¹²⁸ See, e.g., "Nigeria: Islamic Leader Warns United States," AFP, July 10, 2010.

¹²⁹ State Department, Daily Press Briefings, May 19 and 20, 2014.

¹³⁰ See the listing for Abubakar Shekau under the State Department's Rewards for Justice program.

¹³¹ Drawn from State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013* and "Rewards for Justice" profiles; Department of Treasury documents; U.N. Al Qaeda sanctions committee analysis; and news and non-governmental organization reports.

organize complex attacks.”

Leadership. Mokhtar bel Mokhtar, an Algerian national who was previously a Sahel-based commander for AQIM, founded Al Murabitoun after publicly splitting from AQIM in 2012. Founding leaders of MUJWA, which was created in 2011 by AQIM Sahel-based figures who expressed an intention to focus on West Africa, include Hamad el Khairy and Ahmed el Tilemsi.

Objectives. Bel Mokhtar has announced an intention to fight against Western interests, notably France.

Areas of Operation.

- **Algeria.** Bel Mokhtar claimed responsibility for a January 2013 attack near the town of In Amenas, in southeastern Algeria, that involved seizing control of a natural gas facility. Over 800 people were taken hostage, and 39 civilians were killed, including three U.S. citizens. The four-day siege ended with an Algerian military assault against the compound. MUJWA’s first known attack was the kidnapping of three humanitarian workers from the Western Sahara refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria, in 2011.
- **Niger.** Before the merger of Al Mulathamun and MUJWA, the two groups in May 2013 claimed joint responsibility for twin suicide bombings in northern Niger against a Niger military base and a French uranium mine. At least 20 people, including the attackers, were killed.
- **Mali.** MUJWA asserted territorial control over parts of northern Mali in 2012, in coordination with AQIM and a third Islamist extremist group. MUJWA and Al Murabitoun members have been implicated in attacks against French forces in Mali.

Attacks against U.S. interests. As mentioned above, three U.S. citizens were killed in the In Amenas hostage-seizure attack in southeastern Algeria in January 2013; seven more escaped during the attack.

Size, Financing, and Capabilities. The U.S. government has not released a detailed unclassified assessment of the group’s size and capabilities. Mokhtar bel Mokhtar and other leaders in the group have long been associated with kidnap-for-ransom, smuggling, and other criminal fundraising activities. Al Murabitoun may also receive funding and other support from other extremist groups.

Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates. Al Murabitoun is a splinter faction of AQIM, an Al Qaeda “affiliate.” In April 2014, Mokhtar bel Mokhtar swore allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri in the context of the split between Al Zawahiri and the Islamic State.

Ansar al Sharia - Libya

Overview. Formed in 2012, the Ansar al Sharia organizations in eastern Libya are made up of armed Sunni Islamists that support the imposition of Islamic law.

Leadership. Mohammed al Zahawi is the publicly identified leader of Ansar al Sharia in Benghazi (AAS-B). According to the State Department, former Guantanamo Bay detainee Sufian bin Qumu leads Ansar al Sharia in Darnah (AAS-D).

Objectives. In a 2013 interview, a spokesman for AAS-B denied links to non-Libyan groups and said, “the group wants to establish a state that adopts the sharia revealed on Prophet Muhammad rather than the man-made laws that govern civilian states.”¹³² Ansar al Sharia groups in Libya conduct military training, security patrols, outreach and education efforts, and public works projects in support of their objectives.

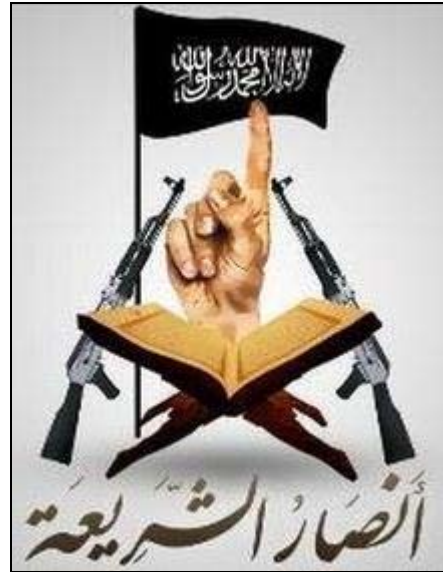
Areas of Operation. Libyan media and Ansar al Sharia social media accounts suggest that the organization’s current operations extend to Benghazi, areas of eastern Libya, and Sirte. The group also has publicized efforts to deliver relief supplies in northern Syria and other countries.

Attacks against U.S. Interests. According to the State Department, the groups “have been involved in terrorist attacks against civilian targets, frequent assassinations, and attempted assassinations of security officials and political actors in eastern Libya, and the September 11, 2012, attacks against the U.S. Special Mission and Annex in Benghazi, Libya. Members of both organizations continue to pose a threat to U.S. interests in Libya.”

Size, Financing, and Capabilities. The U.S. government has not released a detailed unclassified assessment of the group’s size and capabilities. Publicly available information suggests the group’s membership may be in the high hundreds or low thousands of individuals, some of whom possess truck-mounted anti-aircraft guns, rocket-propelled grenades, military-style uniforms, and assault rifles. Some images suggest the group possesses man-portable air defense missiles (MANPADs).

Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates. The group has few to no established ties to Al Qaeda’s leadership, but some Ansar al-Sharia members have ties to affiliate group AQIM.

Figure A-8. Ansar al Sharia - Benghazi



Source: Open Source Center.

¹³² Al Battar Media Establishment, “Truth of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya,” December 2013.

Ansar al Sharia – Tunisia¹³³

Overview. Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia (AAS-T) was founded in 2011 by a former transnational jihadist who had been active in Afghanistan. AAS-T initially operated openly in Tunisia and appeared to be focusing on preaching and social works, while also reportedly facilitating flows of Tunisian combatants to Syria. Since 2012, the group has been implicated in several violent attacks within Tunisia. AAS-T shares a name with several other violent extremist groups in the Middle East and North Africa, but the extent of ties among these groups is uncertain.

Leadership. Saifallah Ben Hassine, aka Abou Iyadh, founded and appears to lead AAS-T.

Objectives. Seemingly, the establishment of an Islamic state in Tunisia.

Areas of Operation. Attacks attributed by U.S. and Tunisian officials to AAS-T have all taken place within Tunisia—including assassinations of Tunisian political figures, attacks against Tunisian security forces, and attempted suicide bombings of tourist destinations. Recent non-government reports suggest that AAS-T’s leadership may have moved to Libya since 2013.

Attacks against U.S. interests. According to the State Department, AAS-T was “involved” in an attack against the U.S. Embassy and American school in Tunis on September 14, 2012. No Americans were killed.

Size, Financing, and Capabilities. The U.S. government has not released a detailed unclassified assessment of the group’s size and capabilities.

Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates. AAS-T has not publicly sworn allegiance to the Al Qaeda organization, but the State Department characterizes the group as “ideologically aligned with al-Qa’ida and tied to its affiliates, including AQIM.” Both AAS-T’s spokesman and its leader have reportedly released messages expressing support for ISIL—now the Islamic State—in 2014.

Figure A-9. Ansar al Sharia - Tunisia



Source: Open Source Center.

¹³³ Profile drawn from State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*; congressional testimony by Obama Administration officials; Department of Treasury documents and statements; and news and non-governmental organization reports, including analysis by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Aaron Y. Zelin, and Andrew Lebovich.

Ansar Bayt al Maqdis (ABM)¹³⁴

Overview. ABM formed in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula following the collapse of former president Hosni Mubarak's rule in 2011. It primarily conducts attacks against the Egyptian government, but has also apparently killed Israelis in cross-border attacks, along with foreign tourists. U.S. government sources have not described the group as a part of Al Qaeda or an associated force, possibly due to the group's focus on Egyptian and Israeli targets.

Leadership. In May 2014, Egyptian security officials claimed to have killed the emir of ABM, Shadi el Menai. The group, however, refuted the claim, saying that el Menai was not killed and that he was also not the emir.¹³⁵ The scarcity of open source information on ABM makes assessments of its leadership difficult.

Objectives. According to its public rhetoric, ABM apparently aims to establish an Islamic caliphate and implement sharia law. The group has targeted Egypt's economy by attacking gas pipelines and the tourism industry.

Areas of Operation. ABM primarily operates in the Sinai Peninsula, but has conducted attacks in Cairo and over the border in Israel.

- **Sinai.** ABM's most prominent attacks in the peninsula include a suicide bombing targeting the South Sinai Security Directorate in October 2013, downing an Egyptian helicopter with a shoulder-fired missile in January 2014, and a tour bus bombing in February 2014.
- **Israel.** ABM has allegedly carried out or been involved in a number of cross-border attacks since August 2011. In August 2012, ABM reportedly attacked the southern Israeli city of Eilat with rockets.
- **Cairo.** ABM tried unsuccessfully to assassinate the Egyptian Interior Minister in September 2013.

Attacks against U.S. interests: ABM to date has not attacked U.S. personnel or facilities. After the June offensive made by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, now known as the

Figure A-10. Ansar Bayt al Maqdis



Source: Open Source Center.

¹³⁴ Prepared by Damian Mencini, CRS Research Associate.

¹³⁵ Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar Jerusalem denies death of shady figure, mocks Egyptian officials," *Long War Journal*, May 25, 2014.

Islamic State), however, ABM issued a warning that if the United States sends forces to repel ISIL, “the response will be harsh and we will respond strongly” to American citizens in Egypt.¹³⁶

Size, Financing, and Capabilities. There is little public information on ABM’s financing. Observers speculate that ABM leaders use existing smuggling networks in the Sinai for financing.¹³⁷

Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates.

To date, ABM is not considered an Al Qaeda affiliate; however, there has reportedly been communication with Al Qaeda leadership. Al Zawahiri praised ABM’s attacks on Sinai gas pipelines in August 2011.¹³⁸ Additionally, ABM’s propaganda arm often embeds clips of Al Qaeda leaders in their videos.¹³⁹ It is unclear to what extent ABM is connected to other Al Qaeda affiliates or associated forces.

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¹³⁶ OSC Report TRR2014061870605335, June 18, 2014. In addition to U.S. civilians residing in Egypt, there are approximately 700 military personnel assigned to the U.S. contingent of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) serving in the Sinai Peninsula.

¹³⁷ Khalil al-Anani, “Resurgence of Militant Islamists in Egypt,” Middle East Institute, February 14, 2014.

¹³⁸ Testimony of Thomas Joscelyn in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Homeland Security, *Al Qaeda’s Expansion in Egypt: Implications for U.S. Homeland Security*, February 11, 2014.

¹³⁹ Ibid.