

## **Towards Global Jihadism: Al-Qaeda's Strategic, Ideological and Structural Adaptations since 9/11**

**by Bill Braniff and Assaf Moghadam**

### ***Abstract***

*In recent years, Al-Qaeda has suffered a number of setbacks, but has also successfully spawned an expansionist global jihadist movement that will survive the death of Osama bin Laden. This article describes how the multifaceted threat posed by global jihadism has evolved over the last decade. It first recounts some of the more salient examples of Al-Qaeda's post-9/11 strategic, ideological, and structural adaptations, and then offers a balance sheet of Al-Qaeda's contemporary strengths and weaknesses. Al-Qaeda continues to enable the violence of others, orient that violence towards the United States and its allies in a distributed game of attrition warfare, and foster a dichotomous "us versus them" narrative between the Muslim world and the rest of the international community. Despite this overarching consistency, Al-Qaeda shepherds a different phenomenon than it did ten years ago. The aggregation of the movement's strategic, ideological, and structural adaptations has fundamentally changed the nature of the jihadist threat to the West. This evolved threat is not inherently more dangerous, as counterterrorism efforts today focus on and disrupt capability earlier and more consistently than prior to September 2001. This multifaceted global jihad will, however, continue to produce greater numbers of attacks in more locations, from a more diverse cadre of individuals spanning a wider ideological spectrum.*

### ***Introduction***

Approaching the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, there is a growing sense among counterterrorism analysts from the policy community and academia that Al-Qaeda has substantially weakened in the last decade and is destined to lose the battle against its enemies, and in particular the United States.[1] Indeed, signs that Al-Qaeda is flagging are ample, and include its loss of Osama bin Laden and important operational leaders; defeat or near defeat of various Al-Qaeda franchises outside of Pakistan; a large number of ideological challenges leveled against the group by some of its former allies; and the series of protests that shook several Middle Eastern and North African states beginning in early 2011. Because the revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and other countries were mostly nonviolent, they provided a striking counterexample to Al-Qaeda's emphasis on violent regime change in the Middle East.

These organizational setbacks are significant, but must be viewed in the context of Al-Qaeda's success in spawning an expansionist global jihadist movement.[2] Ten years into the fight against

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Al-Qaeda, that movement's overarching narrative continues to attract followers from a multitude of countries. All the while, the interplay of Al-Qaeda Core (AQC) with its affiliated groups, associated groups, and inspired adherents provides an increasing number of pathways to violence.[3] A number of successful and unsuccessful plots in the past decade, and especially the last two years, serve as a stark reminder that the global jihad remains devoted to striking its enemies, often with ingenuity. The examples listed below span the breadth of the movement; taken together, these representative plots allude to the tactical, geographic, and organizational variability of the violence emanating from the global jihad.

### *Al-Qaeda*

The August 2006 plot to blow up transatlantic airliners using liquid explosives—an attack most likely timed to coincide with the fifth anniversary of 9/11—served as a striking example of Al-Qaeda's ongoing attempts to inflict significant pain on the United States five years after 9/11. Its interdiction may have forced Al-Qaeda's external operations branch to be more risk averse, but not to desist. In November of 2009, this branch trained three separate cell leaders, all from separate Western nations, on bomb-making techniques. After training them, AQC redeployed them to the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway, where the operatives led respective terrorist cells in a geographically distributed complex suicide attack—an adaptation of Al-Qaeda's trademark complex attack. The successive deaths of Al-Qaeda's primary external operations planners at the time, Saleh al-Somali and Rashid Rauf, did not prevent the plots from progressing, albeit unsuccessfully.[4]

### *Affiliated Organizations*

On 27 August 2009, Abdullah Hassan Talea Asiri, a Saudi national and member of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), attempted to assassinate Assistant Interior Minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, using a Pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN)-based explosive device hidden in his underwear.[5] On Christmas Day 2009, AQAP-trained Nigerian citizen Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab used the same compound when he attempted to detonate explosives hidden in his underwear on Northwest Airlines flight 253. A third variation of the AQAP attack placed PETN within printer cartridges shipped in cargo planes intended to detonate over the continental United States in a plot discovered in late 2010.

### *Associated Organizations*

On 30 December 2009, a Saudi national named Humam Khalil al-Balawi wore a bomb vest into a CIA outpost in Khost, Afghanistan, killing himself, 7 CIA employees and one Jordanian intelligence officer. Balawi, a formerly imprisoned Al-Qaeda devotee and an infamous jihadist blogger known by the pen name Abu Dujana al-Khorasani, had been recruited as an informer for the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate (GID), but played a sophisticated double game on

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behalf of the *Tehriki Taliban Pakistan* (TTP). In a second TTP plot in May 2010, a Pakistani-American citizen, Faisal Shahzad, demonstrated effective operational security and planning but poor bomb-making skills when he targeted New York's Times Square with a crude vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED).

#### *Adherents*

In November of 2009, Nidal Malik Hasan, a U.S. Army Officer with only tangential personal ties to a radical cleric and no known organizational affiliation to Al-Qaeda, conducted a firearms attack at a deployment center on Fort Hood, killing thirteen individuals and wounding over thirty others. Al-Qaeda and its Yemen-based affiliate both endorsed the action, but neither entity claimed the alleged assailant as a group member. In 2010 in Portland, Oregon, Mohamed Osman Mohamud, a naturalized Somali-American citizen attempted to detonate a VBIED at a Christmas tree lighting ceremony. In March of 2011, authorities in the United States arrested Khalid al-Dawsari, a Saudi Arabian student who, acting alone, procured explosive materials for use against targets in the United States.

This anecdotal survey of plots illuminates the contours of a multi-faceted threat fostered by, but not unique to, the Al-Qaeda organization. To describe how this multifaceted threat has evolved over the last decade, this paper will first recount some of the more salient examples of Al-Qaeda's post-9/11 strategic, ideological, and structural adaptations. It will then offer a balance sheet of Al-Qaeda's contemporary strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, the aggregation of Al-Qaeda's adaptations since 9/11 has brought about an evolutionary change in the landscape of anti-Western Islamist militancy, ushering in an era of global jihadism beyond Al-Qaeda.

#### ***Al-Qaeda Post-9/11: Strategic, Ideological and Structural Evolution***

In the years following the 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda adapted—by necessity as well as design—to a new reality in which the United States and its allies were determined to defeat the group militarily.

#### *Strategic Evolution after 9/11: Changes in Emphasis*

Al-Qaeda's strategic adaptations have been numerous, but are frequently a matter of degree rather than type. For that reason, these adaptations tell a story of both organizational continuity as well as organizational change.

First, Al-Qaeda increased its media production in the years following 9/11 to compensate for the loss of its training camp infrastructure and its corresponding centrality among jihadist groups. This increase also reflected its maturation as a terrorist organization seeking to capitalize on its newly-found brand recognition.[6] Spurred on by the thoughts and actions of fellow travelers

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such as Abu Musab al-Suri and Younis Tsouli (aka Irhabi007), AQC embraced the agenda-setting power of the internet,[7] hence Ayman al-Zawahiri's assertion that at least half of the overall battle against the Crusader-Zionist foe takes place in the media.[8] A look at the number of official Al-Qaeda releases demonstrates the steadily growing output of media productions on the part of the group, from six in 2002 to 11 in 2003, 13 in 2004, 16 in 2005, 58 in 2006, and peaking in 2007 with 97 releases. The number of media releases dropped to 49 releases in 2008 and picked up slightly to reach 79 releases in 2009, but seemed to drop again in 2010.[9] After 2003, Al-Qaeda proved particularly skillful at exploiting widespread negative sentiment about the American invasion and occupation of Iraq.[10] It would seize upon the Ethiopian occupation of Mogadishu in a similar way, urging the erstwhile Islamist militia turned jihadist group *al-Shabaab* to "fight on" as "champions of Somalia." [11]

The second element of Al-Qaeda's strategic evolution after 9/11 was its determination to exploit perceived weaknesses of the West. Al-Qaeda and its scions have increasingly monitored, identified, and exploited gaps in Western defenses by reading Western literature and downloading materials from Western websites. This new jihadi tactic was exemplified by a new genre of jihadi publications termed "jihadi strategic studies"—writings that draw on Western secular-rationalist sources, identify and analyze weaknesses of both parties, consider political, economic, and cultural factors in the conflict, and recommend realistic strategies.[12]

*Inspire* magazine, an English language jihadist magazine produced by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), illustrates this trend. The first edition of *Inspire* featured a "Message to the American People and Muslims in the West" by Anwar al-Awlaki, a dual U.S. and Yemeni citizen—an article that points to a future of religious intolerance for Muslims in the United States. Al-Awlaki contextualizes this prediction with examples of racism from American history.[13] In follow-on editions, *Inspire* amplified examples of Islamophobia in the West, such as proposed Qur'an burnings and protests over the establishment of mosques, to underline al-Awlaki's argument and reify Al-Qaeda's narrative of a war against Islam.

Third, since 9/11 Al-Qaeda has become more political in terms of its communiqués as well as the timing and targeting of its attacks. The group has attempted to create a rift between the United States and its allies, conducting attacks against Spanish, British, German, and other forces to undermine popular support for the war efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other theaters. Osama bin Laden's offer of a truce to European countries in April 2004 served a similar goal, as he withheld that offer to the United States. Further, the group began exploiting the Western political calendar, as was most clearly evident in the timing of the 11 March 2004 attacks in Madrid, which were carried out just prior to the Spanish presidential elections. Peter Nesser and Brynjar Lia assess a plot disrupted in Oslo, Norway, in July 2010 as another indicator of Al-Qaeda's interest in attacking "peripheral" Western nations allied with the United States and Israel.[14]

A fourth strategic adaptation in the post-9/11 period is Al-Qaeda's emphasis on economic jihad, foremost by targeting oil facilities in Middle Eastern and Gulf states. Prior to the 9/11 attacks,

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bin Laden acknowledged the strategic importance of the energy sector, as is evident in his 1996 declaration of war, where he called upon the mujahideen to “protect this (oil) wealth and [do] not ... include it in the battle as it is a great Islamic wealth and a large economical power essential for the soon to be established Islamic state.”[15] The shift in Al-Qaeda’s strategy to emphasize these targets was complete by the end of 2004, when in December bin Laden declared the “bleed-until-bankruptcy” strategy. He called the purchase by Western countries of oil at then-market prices the “greatest theft in history” and concluded that there was now “a rare and golden opportunity to make America bleed in Iraq, both economically and in terms of human loss and morale... Focus your operations on it [oil production] especially in Iraq and the Gulf area, since this [lack of oil] will cause them to die off [on their own].”[16] Within a year, an Al-Qaeda cell attempted to hit a key energy facility in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, and in February 2006 Al-Qaeda’s Saudi affiliate was able to breach security at the Abqaiq processing facility, the world’s largest crude processing plant. Although the attack was not able to interrupt production, it foreshadowed Al-Qaeda’s growing focus on strikes at the economic assets of its enemies.

In a recent example, the November 2010 Special Issue of *Inspire* celebrated the economic rationale of Al-Qaeda’s attrition strategy. Demonstrating the centrality of economic jihad, the magazine’s cover-art superimposed “\$4200” in large font over the blurred image of a United Parcel Service jet, referring to the low price tag of its plots targeting the cargo airline industry. It also alluded to a quote by al-Awlaki, who contrasted the low cost of “Operation Hemorrhage” with the high cost that the attacks were expected to exact from the West due to stepped up security expenses.[17]

#### *Ideological Dilution: From Elitist Organization to Catch-All Movement*

Al-Qaeda has endeavored to widen the target audience of its recruitment and propaganda campaign. Whereas before 9/11, Al-Qaeda made exclusive appeals to Muslims, it gradually adopted more populist rhetoric following 9/11 in order to appeal to a wider audience, including non-Muslims. In an essay published in February 2005 titled “The Freeing of Humanity and Homelands Under the Banner of the Quran,” Ayman al-Zawahiri, for the first time, attempted to appeal to anti-globalization and environmental activists. An article from the first edition of *Inspire* magazine attributed to Osama bin Laden echoes this approach, placing the blame for global warming squarely on American shoulders.[18]

Some of the populist propaganda emanating from Al-Qaeda is intended to increase anti-Americanism among the camp of the ‘infidel’ proper, tearing at the social fabric of the United States along racial lines. Examples include Ayman al-Zawahiri’s co-opting of Malcolm X as a Muslim martyr who died fighting against racial injustice; al-Zawahiri’s use of the term “house-slaves” to discredit the success of prominent African-American politicians; and Abu Dujana al-Khorasani’s appeal to various minority communities in the United States to fight against their oppressors.[19] Al-Qaeda has also made appeals to Muslim and African American members of

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the military to turn their weapons against their own government, foreshadowing such incidents as the Fort Hood shooting of November 2009.[20]

Al-Qaeda has also increased its efforts to frame local grievances in accordance with its global narrative outside of the United States. While not a new characteristic of Al-Qaeda propaganda, increased media production amplifies its attempts to aggregate disparate Islamist conflicts since 2001. Al-Qaeda has attempted to harmonize its propaganda with the grievance narratives associated with local and regional jihadist movements in Yemen, Somalia, the Caucasus, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, India, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. While its ability to globalize these disparate conflicts has been limited, isolated successes across a spectrum of theaters has increased the number of ideological pathways to participation in the global jihad.[21]

### *Structural Adaptation: Towards Multipolarity*

The evolution from organization to movement in the decade since 9/11 can be explained by three structural adaptations more so than from the strategic and ideological changes witnessed over the same time period. As an organization, Al-Qaeda has changed in three significant ways: it has formally affiliated with geographically dispersed groups; it has informally partnered with geographically co-located groups; and it has fostered a virtual safe-haven with few barriers to entry.

Al-Qaeda's mergers with militant groups, including *Jama'at Tawhid wal Jihad* in Iraq, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria, *al-Shabaab* in Somalia, and the reconstitution of AQAP, have all resulted in a fundamental structural shift. Rather than an organization with cells spread in scores of countries, Al-Qaeda in 2011 is better understood as a multi-polar organization with a central hub in North Waziristan and a small number of autonomous regional nodes. By offering their organizational fealty to Al-Qaeda, these organizations extend Al-Qaeda's ideological and operational influence in their respective regions, while also allowing Al-Qaeda to engage in networking, propagandizing, and resource mobilization in active conflict zones.[22] These nodes create resilience and dynamism in the movement, amplify the world's perception of Al-Qaeda, and even provide a degree of redundancy should Al-Qaeda suffer a devastating blow in Pakistan.

The most consequential implication of Al-Qaeda's structural transition into a multi-polar entity lies in the resulting locations, targets, and tactics of terrorist violence. Thus, the most likely theaters for current and future attacks against local and Western targets are those in proximity to the main territorial hubs of Al-Qaeda Core and its affiliates, such as Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and their neighbors.[23] It is not a coincidence that Al-Qaeda tactics such as suicide bombings have been introduced precisely in these regions, where jihadist cells, including Al-Qaeda affiliates, have sprung up. Algeria, Somalia, and Yemen, for example, have seen prolonged periods of localized, brutal violence, but radical Islamist groups in these

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countries traditionally shunned the use of suicide bombings against Western targets until Al-Qaeda solidified its affiliations in these areas.[24] Besides the adoption of suicide attacks, the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) offers additional evidence of knowledge transfer to these regional nodes.

Although patterns in attack locations, targets, and tactics can be observed in relation to Al-Qaeda affiliates, the establishment of regional nodes introduces increased complexity into the demographics and travel patterns of the terrorists themselves. Perhaps unsurprisingly, tens of members of the Somali diaspora from Minnesota, Canada, Sweden, and Great Britain have reportedly joined *al-Shabaab* in Somalia, but so have many non-ethnic Somalis with no personal connections to Somalia.[25] While one may have expected a Nigerian jihadist to join the movement through a militia in West Africa or Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a wealthy Nigerian named Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab studying in England sought training in Yemen in order to attack the United States.

Al-Qaeda's merger with the Algerian GSPC serves as an example of what Al-Qaeda stands to gain from regional mergers. This merger enabled Al-Qaeda to leverage AQIM's existing reach into Europe where AQIM enjoys well established connections, as well as into the Sahel, where ungoverned spaces provide opportunities for fundraising and training. Al-Qaeda intends to use affiliates such as AQIM as force multipliers, as was evident from an intercepted message in which Ayman al-Zawahiri asked AQIM leader Droukdel to help exact revenge against Denmark following the Danish cartoon controversy.[26]

Al-Qaeda seeks to build regional alliances where it believes them to be beneficial, and rejects them when the risks are excessive. Thus, the group did not hesitate to reject an offer from the Lebanese jihadist group *Fatah al-Islam* —likely a result of Al-Qaeda's calculation that the embattled group's chances of survival looked rather dim. Similarly, Al-Qaeda does not seem to have taken seriously overtures by Salafi-Jihadist factions in the Gaza Strip such as *Jaesh al-Islam*. Aware of the animosity Hamas harbors for these jihadist groups and its willingness to use violence to obviate competing groups or rogue behavior, Al-Qaeda was careful not to ally itself with entities whose existence might be endangered. Al-Qaeda is keenly aware of perceptions of strategic competence, and therefore would like to bet on winning horses only.[27]

Al-Qaeda has always maintained associations short of formal affiliation with militant organizations, primarily as a result of geographic co-location in training environments and conflict zones. While this tendency has not changed over the last decade, what has changed is the intensity of intelligence collection and military pressure on Al-Qaeda itself. As a result, Al-Qaeda has utilized these associations more aggressively in recent years, facilitating the reorientation of jihadist violence against Western interests.

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Al-Qaeda attempts to reorient violence against the West by superimposing a transnational explanatory framework on local grievances. The extent to which it has been successful in instilling a global jihadist ideology into locally oriented groups is reflected in the growing involvement of such groups in attacks against Western targets. While there are many other examples, Al-Qaeda's relationship with *Tehriki-Taliban Pakistan* is perhaps the most illustrative. [28] In addition to the above mentioned attacks on the CIA outpost in Khost, Afghanistan, and in Times Square, New York, Pakistani citizens trained by TTP have also been involved in a sophisticated plot to target the Barcelona metro with multiple suicide bombers.[29]

In addition to operational convergence, regional affiliates and associates have also embraced the same types of information operations for which Al-Qaeda has become famous. As a result, *al-Sahab* media is now only one of many organizations producing propaganda. The proliferation of highly differentiated content found on dynamic jihadist websites, the empowering nature of user-generated content, and links between jihadist activity on-line and jihadist activity in the real world has created a third structural shift in the global jihad. Independent jihadist pundits like Abu Dujana al-Khorasani can articulate a new narrative, cultivate a new demographic of consumers, and move seamlessly from the e-Jihad to the battlefield by building trusted relationships on-line that translate into mobilization networks. Further, when an iconic jihadist blogger makes this transition, he is celebrated by jihadist media organs and on the virtual forums he left behind, becoming a new role model and paving a new pathway to participation in the global jihad.

### *An Al-Qaeda Scorecard*

Despite much talk in recent years suggesting Al-Qaeda's imminent demise, Al-Qaeda capitalizes on a number of core strengths that will ensure its relevance at least in the foreseeable future. The first, and most obvious, strength is that after regrouping along the Afghan-Pakistan border, Al-Qaeda has been able to reestablish a limited safe haven in an active conflict zone. This allows Al-Qaeda to link up to other like-minded groups either directly involved in the conflict or living parasitically off of the war economies of that conflict. These associated organizations can then share training resources, fundraising and mobilization networks, and opportunities to propagandize. Al-Qaeda can facilitate violence locally, enable jihadist attacks abroad, and shape propaganda as consultants to violent jihad.[30]

The second of these strengths is that Al-Qaeda's foundational ideological assumption remains convincing to politicized demographics; the United States is, in their perception, waging a war on Islam as evidenced by its occupation of Muslim countries. As long as U.S. military is present in Arab and Muslim countries—a political reality beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, given current events in Yemen, Libya, and Somalia—Al-Qaeda's propaganda will resonate.

A third, and related, advantage is that Al-Qaeda's Salafi-Jihadist ideology has been subsumed in a more inclusive global jihadist ideology.[31] Adopting the elitist tenets of Salafi-Jihadism has

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been a potential barrier to entry in the past, and ideologically contested components of Al-Qaeda's Salafi-Jihadism left it vulnerable on theological grounds. Global jihadism, in contrast, is populist and malleable. The only requirement is to identify with the basic world view presented through various lenses by various components of the movement: the Muslim world, or one's portion of it, is in decline as a result of an anti-Islamic conspiracy, and only jihad (understood solely in militant terms) can redeem it. Recognizing the value of inclusivity, Al-Qaeda has subordinated itself to the broader violent movement. Al-Qaeda now endorses lone-wolf jihadism conducted by those who may lack Salafi credentials;[32] its closest affiliate, AQAP, endorses anti-regime violence by ideologically distant organizations;[33] and Al-Qaeda-inspired political organizations like Hizb ut-Tahrir America endorse jihadism while making little pretense of piety. [34]

The Internet provides Al-Qaeda its fourth core advantage. Legally constrained and uncomfortable in the propaganda realm, the United States and its allies have largely ceded the virtual arena as a platform in the war of ideas.[35] Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, on the other hand, have built a geographically distributed and resilient communications architecture that they have saturated with highly differentiated propaganda. In the tribal belt, for example, DVDs, movies, and other media produced by local branches of companies such as *As-Sahab*, *Ummat Studios*, and *Jundullah* CD Center feature jihadist propaganda in Urdu, Pashto, Arabic, English, and other languages. *Al Fajr* media center distributes copies of such videos in German, Italian, French, and Turkish on-line, where web forums make them available to a broader community. Members of those forums sub-title, translate, expound upon, and further disseminate these materials on social media sites, availing new consumers of jihadist propaganda. In September 2006, jihadism scholar Reuven Paz declared, "global jihad has clearly won the battle over the internet. As a means of indoctrination, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates dominate this medium, while the West and the Muslim world have so far failed to devise... a serious 'counter-Jihadi' response." As we approach the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Paz' assessment of the digitally-mediated war of ideas rings as true today as it did in 2006.

Offsetting many of Al-Qaeda's advantages, however, are several signs that the group has been significantly weakened in recent days and years. Most recently, the American raid of Osama bin Laden's safehouse in Abbottabad, Pakistan, ended the life of the organization's emir and the most important unifying symbol of global jihadism. This decapitation strike will not sound Al-Qaeda's death knell outright, but the symbolic void left by bin Laden's death may lead to the fracturing of a geographically distributed and ideologically fraught AQC. Furthermore, intelligence collected during the raid may amplify an existing trend for Al-Qaeda – the death or capture of key operational figures. Examples include the capture Abu Faraj al-Libi in May 2005 and the killing of others, such as Hamza Rabia, who died in November 2005; Abu Laith al-Libi (January 2008); Abu Sulayman al-Jazairi (May 2008); Abu Khabab al-Masri (July 2008); Rashid Rauf (November 2008);[36] Saleh al-Somali (December 2009); and Saeed al-Masri (May 2010).

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Accompanying the loss of Al-Qaeda senior leaders has been the defeat, near defeat, or stagnation of a number of Al-Qaeda's local affiliates. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, prior to its current reincarnation in Yemen, was decimated by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,[37] while Al-Qaeda in Iraq suffered a strategic defeat at the hands of the Sunni Awakening and "the Surge." At its most lethal in 2007, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) failed to destabilize Algiers, and its initial calls to conduct attacks in neighboring countries did not materialize in significant numbers.[38] In the Sahel, where AQIM is currently most active, Moktar Belmoktar's *katiba* engages in kidnap for ransom and counterfeiting while also engaging in a turf war with the committed AQIM jihadist Abdel Hamid Abou Zaid.[39] *Al-Shabaab*'s popularity in Somalia saw its high-water mark during the 2007-2008 Ethiopian occupation, but now struggles to retain nationalist Islamists among its ranks as it battles the African Union troops in Mogadishu and the *al Jamma wal Sunna* Sufi militia in Central and Southern Somalia. Tribal rivalries and competing interests further hamstring the group, such that its relative position as the strongest group in Somalia does not mean that Somalia is or will be what Afghanistan and Pakistan have been for Al-Qaeda.

Exacerbating Al-Qaeda's problems in recent years are a number of underlying weaknesses and long-term challenges.[40] The first is structural. While mergers can afford Al-Qaeda the benefits described above, they are not without risk. Principal-agent problems can dilute or undermine Al-Qaeda's brand. The clearest example of an Al-Qaeda affiliate 'going rogue' was that of Al-Qaeda in Iraq under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Although Al-Qaeda needed to take credit for violence waged against American troops if it was to remain relevant, internecine violence fomented by al-Zarqawi alienated erstwhile supporters from the Muslim world and provided the impetus for Sunni tribes to mobilize against AQI. The result was not only a strategic loss for AQI, but a significant black-eye for Al-Qaeda Core.[41] This and similar problems are inherent in Al-Qaeda's structure as a decentralized organization.

Competition from state and non-state entities poses another long-term challenge. Iran's ongoing defiance of the West, and especially the United States, undermines Al-Qaeda's credibility in claiming the status of the Muslim world's leading anti-American force. Iranian foreign policy "successes" such as its determined pursuit of a nuclear weapon, its pursuit of regional hegemony, and its hostile attitude to Israel are problematic for Al-Qaeda because it reminds Al-Qaeda's current and potential supporters of the mismatch between what the group preaches and what it does. It underscores Al-Qaeda's failure to attack Israel and act against Iran despite the jihadist movement's extremist rhetoric vis-à-vis both nations.

Al-Qaeda also perceives popular Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizballah as a threat. The Brotherhood provides an Islamist alternative with a record of performance legitimacy on the Arab street. With regard to the latter, Hizballah's ability to stand up to Israel in the 2006 war has presented the Shia militant group as the Muslim world's only movement capable of fighting the Jewish state. Similar to the case of Iran, the political and

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military success of Hizballah undermines Al-Qaeda's ability to claim a leadership role for the Islamic community at large.

More recently, non-violent protests beginning with the Jasmine Revolution highlight another weakness. For decades, jihadists have argued that violence is necessary to overthrow authoritarian, apostate regimes. The recent wave of protests across the Muslim world undermines the assertion that violence is necessary, as several have succeeded where Al-Qaeda and its brethren have repeatedly failed. While significant, this set-back is conditional and predicated upon the successful establishment of legitimate government in the wake of the Arab Spring.

The recantations and condemnations by individuals who were part of Al-Qaeda's foundational history, meanwhile, have presented Al-Qaeda with what is perhaps its most significant challenge. [42] Al-Qaeda has been plagued by a series of recantations and defections by formerly venerated jihadists including Abdul Qadir bin Abdul Aziz, aka Dr. Fadl, and the Saudi cleric Salman al-Awdah. These more recent recantations follow previous condemnations of isolated acts of extreme jihadist violence by theologians highly respected in the jihadist community, including Abu Basir al-Tartusi and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who have rejected the usefulness of the London bombings and AQI's systematic targeting of Shia civilians, respectively.[43]

While the downplaying of its elitist, Salafi rhetoric has softened the blow of these recantations to some extent, Al-Qaeda has been put in an untenable position with respect to one issue. Al-Qaeda has been forced to defend itself against charges that its actions lead to the death of countless innocent Muslims. Whether Al-Qaeda uses allegations of apostasy to justify these deaths ideologically; whether it argues pragmatically that the ends justify the means; or whether Al-Qaeda genuinely tries to minimize Muslim fatalities is irrelevant. Declining opinion polls in the Muslim world reflect the indisputable fact that Al-Qaeda has failed to redeem Islam, but has succeeded in killing innocent Muslims in large numbers. Despite its many adaptations, this is Al-Qaeda's major weakness, and it remains an enduring weakness of the global jihad that the West should continue to expose.[44]

### ***Conclusion***

Al-Qaeda continues to enable the violence of others, orient that violence towards the United States and its allies in a distributed game of attrition warfare, and foster a dichotomous "us versus them" narrative between the Muslim world and the rest of the international community. Despite this overarching consistency, Al-Qaeda shepherds a different phenomenon than it did ten years ago. The organization has adapted to changing environmental pressures at the strategic, ideological, and structural levels, and the aggregation of these adaptations has fundamentally changed the nature of the jihadist threat to the West. This evolved threat is not inherently more dangerous, as counterterrorism efforts today focus on and disrupt capability earlier and more consistently than prior to September 2001. This multifaceted global jihad will, however, continue

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to attempt greater numbers of attacks in more locations, from a more diverse cadre of individuals spanning a wider ideological spectrum.

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## Notes

[1] See, for example, Kristen Chick, "CIA Director says Al-Qaeda on the Run as a Leader Killed in US Drone Strike," *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 March 2010; and Peter Bergen, "Bin Laden's Lonely Crusade," *Vanity Fair*, January 2011.

[2] For a similar argument, see Leah Farrall, "How al Qaeda Works," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011. While acknowledging that Al-Qaeda continues to pose a threat today, the present authors would not go as far as Farrall in arguing that "al Qaeda is stronger today than when it carried out 9/11." See L. Farrall, "How al Qaeda Works." The global jihadist movement is defined here as a transnational movement of like-minded jihadists led by Al-Qaeda. It includes affiliated and associated individuals, networks, and groups. The term "affiliated" denotes groups that have formal ties to Al-Qaeda, and have often adopted the Al-Qaeda name, e.g., Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The term "associated" refers to entities with more informal ties to Al-Qaeda, i.e., those that are influenced by Al-Qaeda's guiding ideology but that have not sworn fealty (*baya'a*) to bin Laden. It also includes 'adherents,' i.e., individuals who are inspired by the world view propagated by Al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and/or associates. The authors recognize that these divisions are not perfect, that some groups associated with Al-Qaeda have not fully adopted Al-Qaeda's ideology, and that still other groups fall into a gray area between associates and affiliates. However, for descriptive purposes in this article, that division shall suffice.

[3] Although universal data is difficult to gather, in the United States itself, there has been a marked increase in the number of individuals radicalized toward jihadist violence. See, for example, Brian Michael Jenkins, "Would-be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States since September 11, 2001," *RAND Occasional Paper* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2010).

[4] Al-Qaeda's trademark attack is the complex suicide terrorist attack in which multiple bombers strike multiple targets simultaneously, thereby magnifying the psychological effect of the attack. In a heightened security environment, the authors see the centrally planned but operationally and geographically distributed plots as an adaptation of this trademark attack intended to diversify risk across a portfolio of plots, thereby increasing the likelihood of at least partial tactical success while maintaining the psychology impact of a complex plot. See Raffaello Pantucci, "Manchester, New York, and Oslo: Three Centrally Directed Al-Qa'ida Plots," *CTC Sentinel* 3.8 (August 2010); and Petter Nesser and Brynjar Lia, "Lessons Learned from the July 2010 Norwegian Terrorist Plot," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 3, Issue 8 (August 2010).

[5] Early reports suggested that the bomber had hidden the explosive device in his rectal cavity, but subsequent Saudi investigations discovered that the bomb had been hidden in the attacker's underwear. See Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, "Assessing the Terrorist Threat," *Bipartisan Policy Center*, 10 September 2011, p. 9.

[6] See Vahid Brown, "Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in Al-Qa'ida 1989-2006" (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, September 2007).

[7] For a concise explanation of Abu Musab al-Suri's advocacy for a sophisticated media campaign, to include decentralized Incitement and Media Brigades best embodied by the actions of Younis Tsouli with respect to Iraq, see Hanna Rogan, "Al-Qaeda's Online Media Strategies:

From Abu Reuter to Irhabi 007,” Norwegian Defense Research Establishment, Report No.2007/02729, 28-29; and Rafael Pantucci, “Operation Praline: The Realization of Al-Suri’s Nizam, la Tanzim,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 2, Issue 12 (2008). On Abu Musab al-Suri, see also Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). For a good discussion of Younis Tsouli, see Yassin Musharbash, *Die Neue Al Qaida: Innenansichten eines lernenden Terrornetzwerkes* (Cologne, Germany: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2006).

[8] “Letter from Al-Zawahiri to Al-Zarqawi.” Available online at GlobalSecurity.org, [http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter\\_9jul2005.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm), last accessed 20 April 2011.

[9] For figures until 2009, see Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, “The Almanac of Al-Qaeda,” *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2010, available online at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/04/26/the\\_almanac\\_of\\_al\\_qaeda](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/04/26/the_almanac_of_al_qaeda), last accessed 20 April 2011. A report released in September 2010, quoting the IntelCenter, stated that “in 2010 Zawahiri has so far released the fewest tapes in seven years.” See P. Bergen and B. Hoffman, “Assessing the Terrorist Threat,” op. cit., p. 21.

[10] While this easy propaganda victory evidenced Al-Qaeda’s opportunism, Iraq presented a problem for Al-Qaeda as well; the organization did not have members on the ground in Iraq who could violently resist the American presence. Al-Qaeda would address this issue not through a change in strategy but a change in organizational structure, as discussed later in this paper.

[11] “Fight on Champions of Somalia” is a meme used frequently in *Al-Sahab’s* propaganda to demonstrate support for *al-Shabaab*, which offered it organizational *baya’a* [oath of allegiance] to Al-Qaeda in March of 2009.

[12] Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaida Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 27, Issue 5, (September-October 2004). On jihadi strategic studies, see also Mark E. Stout, Jessica M. Huckabey, and John R. Schindler, *Terrorist Perspectives Project: Strategic and Operational Views of Al Qaida and Associated Movements* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008); and Dima Adamsky, “Jihadi Operational Art: The Coming Wave of Jihadi Strategic Studies,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 33, Issue 1 (January 2010).

[13] Anwar al-Awlaki, “Shaykh Anwar’s Message to the American People and Muslims in the West,” *Inspire*, Issue 1 (Summer 2010). This is a reprint of the speech published as an audio file. It was released originally on 10 March 2010, and again in July 2010.

[14] Petter Nesser and Brynjar Lia, “Lessons Learned from the July 2010 Norwegian Terrorist Plot”, op. cit.

[15] Bin Laden’s Fatwa, August 1996. Available at the “Online News Hour” website, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa\\_1996.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html); last accessed 20 April 2011.

[16] Quoted in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “Large-scale Arrests in Saudi Arabia Illustrate Threat to the Oil Supply,” *Long War Journal*, 24 March 2010.

[17] *Inspire: Special Edition* (November 2010). In his “Message to the American People” from March 2010, and re-released by the Global Islamic Media Front in July of 2010, al-Awlaki states: “But imperial hubris is leading America to its fate: a war of attrition, a continuous hemorrhage that would end with the fall and splintering of the United States of America.” The plots alluded to by AQIM are the placement of explosives on UPS and FEDEX cargo planes, as well as the downing of a UPS cargo plane that had taken off in Dubai on 3 September 2010. To date, only the failed printer cartridge plot involving the UPS flight to Chicago has been confirmed by the U.S. intelligence community.

[18] Usamah bin Ladin, “The Way to Save the Earth,” *Inspire*, Issue 1.

[19] Benjamin Haas and Daniel McGrory, “Al-Qa’ida Seeking to Recruit African-American Muslims,” *CTC Sentinel* 1.8 (July 2008). Abu Dujana al-Khorosani was an elite pen on *al-Hesbah* and an independent blogger before conducting the December 2009 suicide attack at Forward Operating Base Chapman in Khost, Afghanistan.

[20] From a speech by Ayman al-Zawahiri broadcast on 5 May 2007 and translated by the IntelCenter. Excerpts published in Michael Scheuer, “Latest al-Zawahiri Tape Targets American Society,” *Terrorism Focus* 4.13 (May 8 2007).

[21] For a detailed argument of Al-Qaeda’s inability to aggregate disparate Islamist conflicts despite their efforts to do so, see Vahid Brown, “Al-Qa’ida Central and Local Affiliates”, in Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman (eds.), *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qa’ida and its Periphery* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010), pp. 87-91.

[22] V. Brown, “Al-Qa’ida Central and Local Affiliates,” op. cit., pp. 77-80.

[23] Examples include the proliferation of suicide attacks of attacks against Western and UN targets in Pakistan, the February 2008 attack against the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania carried out by militants trained in AQIM camps, the July 2008 attacks against the Danish embassy in Pakistan, the September 2008 attacks on the U.S. embassy in Yemen, and the September 2008 coordinated suicide attacks in Somaliland and Puntland that included an attack on the local compound of the United Nations Development Program.

[24] Assaf Moghadam, “Shifting Trends in Suicide Attacks,” *CTC Sentinel* 2.1 (January 2009); Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al-Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); and Yoram Schweitzer, “Al-Qaeda and Suicide Terrorism: Vision and Reality,” *Military and Strategic Affairs* 2.2 (October 2010). See also Jean-Pierre Filiu, “The Local and Global Jihad of Al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghrib,” *Middle East Journal* 63.2, (Spring 2009), 213-226; and Lianne Kennedy-Boudali, “Al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb: Evaluating the Results of the al-Qa’ida Merger, Occasional Paper (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, September 2009).

[25] The phenomenon of Somalis returning from the diaspora to join *al-Shabaab* is not surprising due to the group’s positioning as a resistance movement with respect to the Ethiopian occupation from January 2007 to January 2009. Most famously in the case of non-Somalis joining al-Shabaab, consider Omar Hamami, an American from Daphne, Alabama, born of a Syrian father and Southern Baptist mother, who went on to be featured in English language *al-Shabaab* propaganda. For a biography of Hamami, see Andrea Elliot, “The Jihadist Next Door,” *New York Times Magazine*, 27 January 2010.

[26] Souad Mekhennet, et al., “A Threat Renewed: Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline From Al-Qaeda,” *New York Times*, 1 July 2008.

[27] On Al-Qaeda’s perceptions of strategic competence, see James J. F. Forest, “Exploiting the Fears of Al-Qa’ida’s Leadership,” *CTC Sentinel*, 2. 2 (February 2009).

[28] For example, the Islamic Jihad Union provided training to a German cell of jihadists known as the Sauerland bombers, who plotted to attack numerous targets in Germany before they were apprehended in September 2007.

[29] “Spain Becoming Breeding Ground for Jihadism – Experts,” *BBC*, 4 January 2011.

[30] Alex Gallo, “Understanding Al Qa’ida’s Business Model,” *CTC Sentinel* 4.1 (January 2011).

[31] The authors are indebted to Jarret Brachman for this observation.

[32] Adam Gadahn, “A Call to Arms,” *Al-Sahab*, May 7 2010.

[33] Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, “Developing Policy Options for the AQAP Threat in Yemen,” *CTC Sentinel* 3.11 (November 2010).

[34] Authors' interview with Madeleine Gruen, September 2010.

[35] While the internet provides Al-Qaeda with an advantage in the war of ideas, the counterterrorism community is conducting continually more effective disruption operations online. Successes include sting operations in which putative jihadists were first identified online. This was the case in Dallas, Texas in 2009, the shutting down of virtual facilitation networks such as *al-Tibyan*, and even clandestine commandeering of jihadist websites and materials. See *U.S.A. v. Hosam Moher Husein Smadi*, Case number 3-09 MJ 286, Warrant for arrest, 24 September 2009; and Steve Swann, "Aabid Khan and his Global Jihad," *BBC*, 18 August 2008. Available online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/7549447.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7549447.stm); last accessed 20 April 2011; Ellen Nakashima, "Dismantling of Saudi-CIA Web Site Illustrates Need for Clearer Cyberwar Policies," *Washington Post*, 19 March 2010, A1.

[36] Rashid Rauf's death is contested, but most open sources indicate that he was killed in a Predator drone strike on 22 November 2008 in Pakistan.

[37] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Failure of Jihad in Saudi Arabia," *CTC Occasional Paper* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 25 February 2010).

[38] Upon affiliating with Al-Qaeda, GSPC veteran Abdel Malik Droukhal initiated a campaign of vehicle-borne IED attacks against Western and Algerian targets including the Algerian president, parliament, prime minister, and constitutional court, as well as the United Nations. He also encouraged AQIM to conduct attacks in Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, and Mauritania, but activities in these countries have been limited, with the exception of Mauritania.

[39] J.-P. Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib."

[40] For a discussion of Al-Qaeda's internal problems, see Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman (eds.), *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures* (London: Routledge, 2011).

[41] Brian Fishman, "Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned From Inside Al-Qa'ida in Iraq" (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 16 March 2009). For more on Al-Qaeda's principal-agent problems, see Jacob N. Shapiro, "Theoretical Framework: The Challenges of Organizing Terrorism," in Joseph Felter, Jeff Bramlett, Bill Perkins, Jarrett Brachman, Brian Fishman, James Forest, Lianne Kennedy, Jacob N. Shapiro, and Tom Stocking, "Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities" (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, February 2006.).

[42] For a dissenting view, see Nelly Lahoud, "Jihadi Recantations and their Significance: The Case of Dr. Fadl," in Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman (eds.), *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures* (London: Routledge, 2011).

[43] Figures that are more marginal within the jihadist movement have also distanced themselves from Al-Qaeda's violent tactics. Top Deobandi institutions such as the *Dar ul-Ulum Deoband* have issued fatwas condemning terrorism, while former members of the radical *Hizb ut-Tehreek* have formed Quilliam, an institution designed to voice opposition to terrorist violence.

[44] Scott Helfstein, Nassir Abdullah, and Muhammad al-Obaidi, "Deadly Vanguard: A Study of al-Qa'ida's Violence Against Muslims," *CTC Occasional Paper* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, December 2009); and Brian Fishman and Assaf Moghadam, "Do Jihadi and Islamist Divisions Matter? Implications for Policy and Strategy," in A. Moghadam and B. Fishman (eds.), "Self-Inflicted Wounds."

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