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Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade

Irreversible Decline
or Imminent Victory?

Brian Michael Jenkins



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Preface

During 2011, Brian Michael Jenkins was asked to testify about the status of al Qaeda before Congress on several occasions and to brief members of Congress, NATO ambassadors and planners, federal judges, and senior intelligence and law enforcement officials. This paper summarizes those briefings. It focuses on the recurring questions of whether America has won the operational battle but lost the ideological contest; whether homegrown terrorism is a growing threat; whether maintaining American troops in Afghanistan is essential; whether the United States should declare on its own an end to the war on al Qaeda.

The assessment presented in this paper should be of particular interest to policymakers and law enforcement officials who are concerned with the threat of international terrorism and with maintaining national security.

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Summary

In the minds of most Americans, al Qaeda descended from the heavens in Wagnerian-opera fashion, on September 11, 2001, putting the organization today at the beginning of its second decade. But al Qaeda was formally established in Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1988. It claims connection with assaults on American forces in Somalia and Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s, declared war on the United States in 1996, and launched its terrorist campaign in earnest in 1998. By 2001, the struggle was already in its second decade.

Whether al Qaeda is in its third decade or third century matters little to its leaders, who see the current conflict as the continuation of centuries of armed struggle between believers and infidels, and who expect it to transcend their lifetimes.

This is unnerving to Americans, who seek precision in dating their wars. The American Revolutionary War began when the Minutemen opened fire on advancing British troops on April 19, 1775. The Civil War began when Confederate forces began shelling Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. World War II began with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Americans seek equal precision in ending conflict.

The almost continuous bloodshed between white settlers and Native Americans on America's frontier does not lend itself to this kind of bracketing. There were identifiable campaigns, varying levels of violence, but the unequal conflict continued for centuries. Without implying any insulting comparison, it was, in fact, America's only experience with continuous warfare.

Given that wars must have precise beginnings and endings, Americans want to know precisely where they are in the contest with al Qaeda. Who is winning? What's the score? When will what has become America's officially longest war be over?

Ten years after 9/11, there is still remarkable lack of consensus among analysts' assessments of al Qaeda's current condition. Almost every issue is debated: Whether America has won the operational battle but lost the ideological contest; whether homegrown terrorism is a growing threat; whether the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq is dangerous; whether maintaining American troops in Afghanistan is essential; whether the United States ought to declare on its own an end to the war on al Qaeda. Part of the debate is driven by political agendas, but the arguments derive from the fact that al Qaeda is many things at once and must be viewed in all of its various dimensions.

This essay examines a number of these issues in light of recent developments—the death of Osama bin Laden, the Arab Spring, the American withdrawal from Iraq. In each case, it drives toward a bottom line. In the final analysis, it is a personal view.

Is Al Qaeda on the Ropes or Still a Serious Threat?

While al Qaeda, especially its central leadership, has been pummeled, and its capabilities to mount large-scale attacks have been reduced, claims of its imminent defeat are hyperbole. Al Qaeda is more decentralized, more dependent on its affiliates, its allies, and its ability to radicalize and recruit distant recruits to carry out attacks on its behalf. Its peripheral commands remain strong. Its allies have bought into its ideology of global terrorism. Its communications network continues to function. It is resilient and opportunistic.

How Has Bin Laden's Death Affected the Organization?

It was a serious blow that weakens the movement. Although not essential to al Qaeda's ongoing terrorist operations, bin Laden provided inspiration, brought in money, provided organizational advice, and imposed a unanimity of focus on the organization. No successor can speak with his authority.

What Is the Effect of the Arab Spring?

Al Qaeda's goals of waging unending warfare on the West and restoring the caliphate did not motivate the protestors, who instead demanded greater political freedom and economic opportunity. Nonetheless, the continuing turmoil in the region gives al Qaeda some immediate tactical opportunities, while its leaders have positioned it to exploit the disappointment and disillusion that inevitably will come.

How Much of a Threat Do Homegrown Terrorists Pose?

Despite a significant change in strategy to one embracing individual jihad and do-it-yourself terrorism, and an intense campaign to sell it online, the turnout thus far is tiny. America's would-be jihadist warriors are few, for the most part of limited determination, and, fortunately, not very competent. American Muslims have overwhelmingly rejected al Qaeda's ideology, while intelligence efforts have uncovered and foiled almost every domestic terrorist plot.

My overall conclusion is that al Qaeda is in decline, although not finished. Its campaign of terrorism provoked no global uprising, while its slaughter of far more Muslims than infidels further reduced its potential constituency. The elimination of its initial sanctuary in Afghanistan, the dispersal of its training camps, the decimation of its leadership have degraded its operational capabilities. The most important factor, however, has been the tremendous improvement in counterterrorist intelligence at the national level, combined with unprecedented cooperation at the international level.

Why Do Al Qaeda's Leaders Think Victory Is Imminent?

Al Qaeda's ideologues see the situation not simply from the other side of the contest, but in completely different terms from its Western foes. In their view, war is perpetual—this conflict began centuries ago and will last beyond their lives. Fighting is mandatory—a religious obligation. Participation in the struggle will demonstrate their commitment, save them from corruption, make them worthy of God. With God on their side, ultimate victory is guaranteed, as long as they continue to fight.

They have survived the infidels' mightiest blows. They have checked what they imagine to be the West's determination to destroy Islam. America has suffered defeat after defeat: 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the loss of America's puppet governments to the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring. Americans are overextended, weary, and in economic crisis—God's punishment for their materialism. Only continued small blows are needed to panic America's citizens, further weaken their resolve. Al Qaeda's victory is imminent.

What Will Happen in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan is not essential to al Qaeda, which has field commands in Yemen, Iraq, and North Africa and allies in Somalia and Pakistan. Al Qaeda has few fighters in Afghanistan and does most of its training in Pakistan, proving that it can function without a presence in Afghanistan. But al Qaeda's leaders attribute great importance to Afghanistan. Al Qaeda would benefit from a Taliban victory. Even if a victorious Taliban prevented al Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a launch pad for terrorist operations, a Taliban victory in Afghanistan would guarantee al Qaeda's survival.

The degree to which America's determination to destroy al Qaeda depends on being in Afghanistan is a topic of debate. Regardless of what happens, America's counterterrorist operations will continue, but its difficulties will greatly increase. Maintaining 100,000 American troops in Afghanistan is not sustainable. The security burden must be shifted to local Afghan forces, but are they up to the task? Some seek a solution in political negotiations with the Taliban, but interest on the other side remains uncertain. With an American withdrawal in progress, albeit gradual, the Taliban can afford to wait. They might see negotiations as merely a parallel path to hasten the withdrawal of foreign forces. Withdrawal entails unavoidable risks. It will not immediately reverse al Qaeda's decline, and it could benefit al Qaeda in the long run.

How Will We Know When to Stop?

Every war must end, or so we would like to think. Terrorist campaigns end in victory by the terrorists, their suppression by the authorities, or some form of political negotiations. None of these seems likely in the current contest with al Qaeda. It is easier to see how the conflict could persist for decades. This has persuaded some to argue for unilaterally declaring an end to the "war" against a severely weakened terrorist foe. It would not end all U.S. counterterrorist efforts, but it would alter perceptions at home and signal a reduction in the military component of the effort abroad, while preventing the expansion of a military role in domestic security. At the same time, such a declaration would raise questions about the status of the enemy

combatants who remain in U.S. custody and the use of lethal force against enemy commanders and militants abroad.

What Americans may really be seeking is an end to fear—the official termination of terror. This cannot be delivered by counterterrorist operations. It is a mission of all Americans and their leaders.

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Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade: Irreversible Decline or Imminent Victory?

This paper presents an assessment of America's continuing campaign to defeat al Qaeda and other groups that constitute the jihadist galaxy.¹ The subject itself is a moving target. Far-reaching developments have occurred since the beginning of 2011, the implications of which are not yet clear. Nor will the action stop to permit more than a snapshot of the changing political landscape. There is considerable debate about where America and its principal foes stand at the moment and numerous scenarios that can be projected for the future—none, however, with great confidence. In the final analysis, this is a personal view.

Is Al Qaeda on the Ropes or Still a Serious Threat?

Ten years after 9/11, there is a remarkable lack of consensus among analysts' assessments of al Qaeda's current condition. Officials in Washington say that al Qaeda is "on the ropes," the United States is "within reach of strategically defeating al Qaeda," that al Qaeda's core could be degraded to a mere "propaganda arm" within 18 to 24 months.² These are bold claims. While agreeing that al Qaeda is weaker than it was in 2001, others warn that it still poses a serious terrorist threat.³

Those who argue that al Qaeda remains a serious threat—some asserting that it is perhaps more dangerous now than it was on 9/11—base their assessments on several factors. Al Qaeda's periphery remains strong, even though its center has been hollowed. The West has lost the ideological battle. Al Qaeda's allies increasingly embrace its ideology of global struggle. Where there were once organizational boundaries, there is now fluidity among the jihadist groups. Al Qaeda continues to radicalize and recruit homegrown terrorists.

¹ The assessment expands upon briefings that were presented to federal judges meeting in Elkhorn, Montana, August 28, 2011; at the Manhattan Institute's Tenth Anniversary Conference on Terrorism, held in New York, September 7, 2011; to the World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh, September 14, 2011; to NATO ambassadors meeting in Brussels on September 23, 2011; to members of Congress at the Aspen Institute's Conference on Policy Changes in the Muslim World in Barcelona, Spain, on September 27, 2011; to the RAND Center for Global Risk and Security Advisory Board in Santa Monica, Calif., on October 24, 2011; and at meetings of various senior law enforcement officials during September and October, 2011.

² "U.S. Counterterrorism Chief [John Brennan]: Al Qaeda Now on the Ropes," 2011; "[CIA Director Leon] Panetta Says Defeat of Al Qaeda Is 'Within Reach,'" 2011; "Al Qaeda Core Can Be Reduced to Mere Propaganda Arm in 2 Yrs: US," quoting Michael Vickers, Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, 2011.

³ For example, the views expressed in Byman, 2011; Gartenstein-Ross, 2011; Riedel, 2011. See also "Statement by the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency David H. Petraeus to Congress on the Terrorist Threat Ten Years After 9/11," 2011.

Some analysts credit al Qaeda's boast that by continuing its terrorist campaign even with low-level attacks, it will eventually exhaust an already economically weakened United States as it did the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Others point to al Qaeda's resilience. They contend that while al Qaeda may currently be in decline, American withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan will open the way for its resurgence.

Some believe that the Arab Spring will create new space for al Qaeda—if not right away, eventually, as inevitable disillusion sets in. Some fear that the United States, while embracing the region's new-found freedom, will be unable to resist promoting secular rule, defending Christians, championing women's equality and other Western imports, thereby alienating inherently conservative societies.

Some of these differences among assessments derive mainly from the fact that al Qaeda is many things at once and must therefore be viewed in all of its various dimensions. It is a global terrorist enterprise, the center of a universe of like-minded fanatics, an ideology of violent jihad, an autonomous online network. It is a virtual army. Increasingly, it is a conveyer of individual discontents.

For ten years, the United States has pounded on al Qaeda's operational capabilities, which clearly have been reduced. The organization's Taliban protectors were toppled in Afghanistan. Its easily accessible training camps, at one time the destination for jihadist volunteers worldwide, have been dispersed. Al Qaeda attacks in Indonesia, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey between 2002 and 2006 prompted those governments to dismantle local terrorist networks.

The architects of 9/11 have been captured or killed. Al Qaeda's founder and titular leader is dead. Its remaining leadership has been decimated. The group's wanton slaughter of Muslims has alienated much of its potential constituency. Cooperation among security services and law enforcement organizations worldwide has made its operating environment increasingly hostile. Al Qaeda has not been able to carry out a significant terrorist operation in the West since 2005, although it is still capable of mounting plausible, worrisome threats.

Pushing plausibility, some still worry about al Qaeda's nuclear ambitions. Only three years ago, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) described al Qaeda as "the agency's number one nuclear concern."⁴ It is true that al Qaeda has had nuclear ambitions. While still in Sudan in the 1990s, al Qaeda operatives reportedly attempted unsuccessfully to acquire nuclear material. Osama bin Laden assigned responsibility for managing al Qaeda's efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction to Ayman al-Zawahiri in 1998 and discussed the issue with renegade Pakistani scientists just before 9/11. Documents left behind by fleeing jihadists in Afghanistan showed continued interest in nuclear weapons but offered no evidence of capability. In fact, the notes and crude drawings indicated a lack of critical design knowledge.⁵ Further unsuccessful attempts were made to acquire fissile material, and al Qaeda was the victim of at least one scam.

Lack of capability did not preclude al Qaeda's leaders from suggesting that al Qaeda already had or could obtain nuclear weapons, fueling intense Internet fantasies by online jihadists, while causing alarm among Western analysts who, after 9/11, could dismiss no terrorist

⁴ CIA Director Michael Hayden, "Remarks Before the Los Angeles World Affairs Council," September 18, 2008, cited in Hayden, 2008.

⁵ Albright, 2002.

scenario as too far-fetched. Al Qaeda ascended to the status of the world's first terrorist nuclear power without a shred of physical evidence that it had a nuclear weapon.⁶

Even if al Qaeda is not believed to be capable of acquiring and detonating a nuclear bomb, concern remains that it might be nearing a workable dirty-bomb capability. Some worry that it could launch a biological attack. This is a more plausible threat, only because the threshold for mounting a small-scale biological attack is much lower than that for acquiring or fabricating a nuclear weapon. Ricin (a toxin made from castor beans) and botulinum toxin appear in several of al Qaeda's post-9/11 terrorist plots. The group also reportedly experimented with anthrax bacteria. Al Qaeda's chemical and biological weapons programs were set back when Abu Khabab al-Masri, the group's chief scientist and master bomb-maker, was killed in Pakistan by a drone strike in 2008.

The heaviest blows have fallen on al Qaeda's central core in Pakistan. As a result, its regional affiliates in Iraq, North Africa, and especially Yemen, the base of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), currently pose the greatest threat. A handful of al Qaeda leaders who play a supporting role are also still holed up in Iran. Al Qaeda survives best where it can attach itself to deeply rooted local movements, which it then proceeds to radicalize. Over time, some of al Qaeda's partners become affiliates, adopting al Qaeda's ideology, incorporating its tactics, eventually assuming the al Qaeda brand name.

Al Qaeda's allies in South Asia—the Pakistan Taliban, Lashkar-e-Toiba, and others—have increasingly adopted its vision of a broader war against the West, although not in its entirety. A weakened but still lethal al Qaeda in Iraq continues its campaign of terror aimed at Iraqi government officials, Sunni tribal leaders who have turned against it, and members of the Shia community, in an effort to provoke a sectarian civil war between the country's Sunni and Shia communities as the remaining American forces are withdrawn. One of the West's greatest concerns is that these experienced, technically savvy veterans of al Qaeda's terrorist campaign in Iraq will slip into the West, elevating the domestic terrorist threat.

Several of the recent terrorist attempts on the West were launched or inspired by AQAP, which also has forged a close relationship with al Shabaab, an Islamist insurgency in Somalia. In recent years, American officials indicated that some surviving members of al Qaeda's core have relocated to Somalia and Yemen. There also have been reports indicating that some of al Qaeda's leaders in Yemen have moved to Somalia.⁷ These reports confirm a degree of connectivity and mobility among jihadists in the three countries. Further west, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has sought to expand its area of influence in Africa, in particular, the Maghreb and Sahel regions, with camps and occasional forays into Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Chad, and Niger. Finally, Boko Haram, a radical Islamist group in northern Nigeria, is probably also receiving instruction and indoctrination from al Qaeda elements.

There is no evidence indicating that al Qaeda's determination to continue its campaign has diminished. The state of its determination would be hard to discern anyway. Terrorist membership is neither formal nor fixed; it is always transient. We have no way to measure decisions not to join al Qaeda or desertions from al Qaeda, let alone gauge the morale of individual followers or know their ongoing calibrations and recalibrations.

⁶ Jenkins, 2008.

⁷ Schmitt and Sanger, 2009; Darem, 2011; Osman, 2010.

Al Qaeda today is far more decentralized than it was ten years ago and far more dependent on its autonomous field commands, its affiliates, its allies, and its ability to inspire home-grown terrorists. It has moved from centrally directed and supported strategic terrorist strikes, which culminated in the 9/11 attacks, toward individual jihadism and do-it-yourself terrorism. This has created a more diffuse terrorist threat—less-destructive but still dangerous terrorist plots that often are harder to detect.

The effort is supported by extensive online communications aimed at inspiring and instructing would-be jihadist warriors, which itself is a decentralized project. Official websites carry messages from Ayman al-Zawahiri and other al Qaeda commanders and spokesmen, increasingly in local languages. These are augmented by communications from a second tier of jihadist theorists and commentators. A third tier of websites embellishes these messages and provides opportunities for widespread discussion. These are the forums in which followers endlessly fantasize about terrorist scenarios, exhort one another to action, threaten their foes, and boast of what they intend to do. Most of it remains talk.

How Has Bin Laden's Death Affected the Organization?

Osama bin Laden's death by no means spells the end of al Qaeda's terrorist campaign, but it does have a profound effect on the future of the jihadist enterprise. His terrorist triumphs behind him, no longer striding through the mountains among adoring acolytes or riding his Arabian steed across the sands, bin Laden spent his last days watching himself on video, filling his journal with terrorist schemes—a pathetic figure awaiting the inevitable in Abbotabad.

Although Osama bin Laden was no longer intimately involved in directing specific terrorist operations by the time he was killed by American forces in May 2011, he continued to provide strategic guidance as well as organizational and operational-level advice. His inglorious death weakens the movement. Bin Laden never claimed to be a successor to the Prophet, as leaders of some previous jihads had done, but the narrative of his personal life transcended the movement's ideology and inspired admiration beyond the movement's own orbit. He was al Qaeda's face and its most powerful communicator. His death was a psychological blow, especially to the adherents who had interpreted his ability to survive America's intensive manhunt as a sign of divine protection.

It was a further blow to the organization's already depleted core leadership, which has continued to suffer losses. In a culture where fealty remains personal, those who swore loyalty to Osama bin Laden may consider themselves less bound to his successor. The Taliban and other allies that provided protection on the basis of family connections, tribal code, or personal relationships are free to recalibrate al Qaeda's value to them.

Osama bin Laden was also al Qaeda's main link to its financial sources. It is not certain that wealthy supporters in the Gulf will continue to contribute to al Qaeda with bin Laden gone.

Although bin Laden was undisputed as al Qaeda's supremo, his decisions were not without internal challenge. He managed, however, to impose a unanimity of focus on an inherently fractious movement—that, perhaps, was his greatest contribution. No successor will speak with bin Laden's moral authority. Ayman al-Zawahiri reportedly is seen by jihadists as rigid and doctrinaire, someone who seems better suited to the role of political commissar than

knight commander, and Zawahiri is viewed as an Egyptian, while bin Laden, although a Saudi, had ascended beyond national identification.

Zawahiri's elevation means that bin Laden's strategy of concentrating al Qaeda's central effort on attacking the United States will continue. All of his recent communications support that interpretation. But not all of the group's adherents will necessarily agree. In al Qaeda's warrior subculture, a leader assures his command through heroic achievements. Thus far, Zawahiri can bask in the glory of only 9/11 and the promise of imminent victories.

Bin Laden was gunned down by infidels, a death that demands revenge. Pressure is on al Qaeda to demonstrate to its foes—and more importantly, to its followers—that his death does not end al Qaeda's campaign. However, al Qaeda operates at capacity; it has no surge capability. Promises of retribution flooded the Internet, but despite the bellicose chest-thumping, there was no mass rush to martyrdom, not a single attack in the West. Any post mortem or future attack that would have occurred anyway may be labeled retaliation, but the passage of time without a spectacular response underscores al Qaeda's operational weakness.

What Is the Effect of the Arab Spring?

As in all long contests, surprises are inevitable. The street protests that sparked uprisings across North Africa and continue in the Middle East are changing the political landscape, but it is not yet clear how these events will affect either al Qaeda or U.S. counterterrorist efforts. Any assessment can be only provisional.

The political upheaval that began in Tunisia and Egypt is unfinished business. Political and sectarian violence has flared up again in Egypt. Rebel forces have only recently toppled the Qaddafi regime in Libya, and fighting has flared between the multitude of local militias that defeated Qaddafi's forces. The future of Yemen, where President Ali Abdullah Saleh has agreed to relinquish power, remains unclear. Protests continue in Syria. Although many analysts see the Bashar al-Assad government as ultimately doomed, the regime gives no indication of yielding political power. Nor is it clear what would happen in Syria if the Assad regime fell. One possibility is *de facto* partition, with an Alawite stronghold in the west, an autonomous Kurdish zone, Syrian Sunnis possibly joining with Iraqi Sunnis against Iranian-backed Alawites and Shias—in other words, the erasure of arbitrary national borders drawn in the sand nearly a century ago. The government of Iraq confronts a continued terrorist campaign, and Sunnis and Shias remain divided. Sectarian tensions and political protests continue in Bahrain.

Even where governments have fallen, their successors are likely to face a variety of security challenges—riots, sectarian violence, continuing tribal conflict, sabotage by supporters of the old regimes, attacks by terrorists exploiting the chaos. It is difficult to foresee how things will turn out. The region will remain turbulent for many years.

The political protests have demonstrated al Qaeda's lack of popular appeal. Demonstrators called for an end to political oppression and corruption; they demanded greater political freedom and economic opportunity. None echoed al Qaeda's calls for violent jihad against the West or the restoration of a seventh-century caliphate. Al Qaeda's leaders could do little more than preach from the sidelines. Nonetheless, the continuing turmoil has offered al Qaeda some immediate opportunities.

The turmoil in Egypt has been accompanied by an erosion of government authority in the Sinai, giving greater freedom of action to gangs of smugglers and radicalized Bedouin

tribesmen who were already suspected of involvement in previous al Qaeda attacks. Egypt has recently deployed troops in the area to restore order. In Libya, jihadists, some previously linked to al Qaeda, have gained influence and combat experience during the campaign against Qaddafi's forces, and there are concerns about the disappearance of weapons from the dictator's arsenals. Some reportedly have gone to AQIM.

In Yemen, AQAP and like-minded jihadists have exploited the chaotic situation to gain control of several towns, creating a new jihadist front that will attract international recruits. With Saudi and U.S. assistance, Yemen's army has pushed back, recovering some lost territory, but the situation in the country remains fluid. Al Qaeda's terrorist movement in Iraq could spread west into Syria.

Like everyone else, al Qaeda has scrambled to correctly interpret fast-moving events, adjusting its messaging to address the new circumstances. It has firmly aligned itself with the uprisings while interpreting events in the context of its own struggle. The suggestion that the popular protest proved al Qaeda's irrelevancy rankles al Qaeda. It has asserted that its terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, paved the way for the popular rebellion ten years later. The downfalls of despised enemies and godless tyrants like Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Qaddafi, and Ali Saleh, according to al Qaeda, represent not just popular victories but continuing defeats of America, which, in al Qaeda-speak, depended on these corrupt lackeys to suppress Islam. Who, then, has won? Ignoring the absence of any manifest pro-jihadist sentiments during the protests, al Qaeda has congratulated itself and the protestors on their success, urging them now to reject secularism and demand the imposition of Sharia as the source of all law.

The uprisings have produced high expectations of political and economic progress, but the transition from authoritarian regimes with narrow to nonexistent citizen participation to functioning democracies will be long and difficult, and it may not take place. Inevitably, there will be disappointment and disillusion. Al Qaeda already has positioned itself to exploit any future frustrations, warning that America will try to undermine the will of the people and impose secular regimes. And if, in the long run, nascent democracies are crushed and authoritarian governments return to power, terrorists will find new reservoirs of recruits.

These developments will affect American policy—and specifically, America's counterterrorist efforts. Al Qaeda is not wrong on this point. Although the United States clearly welcomes the spread of freedom, people in the region still associate this country with support for the fallen regimes, which were America's principal allies in counterterrorist efforts. American cooperation with the security forces of embattled regimes like that in Yemen continues, as evidenced by the killing of al Qaeda leader Anwar al-Awlaki. It will be a major challenge for the United States to preserve the cooperation of the local security services in efforts to combat terrorism without being seen as an accomplice of oppression.

The Arab Spring has opened the political space for movements of all stripes—Islamists, nationalists, communists, and others—to compete, but the United States tends to focus its concern exclusively on the Islamist parties, fearing that they are less compatible with democracy and may possibly open the way for Islamist extremism. Without allowing America's own commitment to democracy to cause it to ignore developments that run counter to U.S. interests, the United States will have to become more discerning in its assessment of the multiplying Islamist movements. Not all Islamists are al Qaeda's allies, even though al Qaeda may pretend that they are.

In dealing with the new governments in the region, the United States also must realize that counterterrorism is not likely to be at the top of their agendas. Maintaining political

stability, drafting new constitutions, holding elections, improving the economy, and creating jobs are more likely to occupy their immediate attention. Al Qaeda terrorists may be seen by them as a distant danger. Counterterrorism, therefore, cannot be the exclusive framework for American foreign policy or the sole currency of American discourse.

How Much of a Threat Do Homegrown Terrorists Pose?

Al Qaeda and its allies have increased their efforts to inspire and recruit homegrown terrorists. Much of this effort takes place online, where the number of jihadist websites has dramatically increased. American-born spokesmen, including Adam Gadahn, who communicates for al Qaeda central, and Omar Hammami, who speaks for Somalia's al-Shabaab, appeal to would-be warriors in America, urging them to take up arms. Until his death, Anwar al-Awlaki communicated for AQAP. *Inspire*, an online magazine originally edited by Samir Khan, a young Saudi who was raised in America and then affiliated with AQAP, offers inspirational articles about jihadist warriors, accounts of adventures in jihad, and instruction in weapons-handling and bomb-making. Khan was killed by a U.S. missile strike in Yemen at the same time Anwar al-Awlaki was killed.

Thus far, the increased number of "retail outlets" and American salesmen has produced only a tiny turnout. Al-Awlaki, al Qaeda's most skillful communicator, inspired several terrorist plots, including Major Nidal Hasan's deadly assault on his fellow soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas, and Omar Hammami persuaded a few Americans to try to join him in Somalia. Overall, however, while the websites are well attended, al Qaeda's virtual army has remained virtual.

Between 9/11 and the end of 2010, 176 persons were arrested in the United States for providing material support to jihadist groups, attempting to join jihadist fronts abroad, or plotting terrorist attacks in the United States. This is a very small fraction of an American Muslim community estimated to number approximately 3 million, several thousand of whom serve honorably in the U.S. armed forces.⁸

The evidence indicates that America's Muslims have rejected al Qaeda's exhortations. The exceptions, for the most part, are individuals or tiny conspiracies of two or three. There is no army of sleepers, no terrorist underground. Joining jihad is a purely personal decision made without community support. Indeed, a number of the investigations that have led to arrests reportedly began with tips from the community.

Arrests of homegrown terrorists show an uptick in 2009 and 2010, but this is primarily the result of increased recruiting in the Somali diaspora and the FBI's increased use of sting operations. Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia provoked strong sentiments among America's Somalis, who regard Ethiopians as their historical enemies. Fund-raising and recruiting began soon after, which U.S. authorities became aware of when American Somalis turned up in Somalia. This discovery led to a nationwide effort involving federal agents and local police working with cooperative Somali communities to prevent further recruiting.

Fortunately, few of America's jihadists have proved to be very dedicated or competent. They are not determined, cunning "lone wolves"; they are skittish stray dogs. Most of the 32 jihadist terrorist plots uncovered since 9/11 were immature expressions of intentions. Only ten

⁸ Jenkins, 2011. For other recent perspectives on this issue see Bjelopera, 2011; Brooks, 2011; "Homegrown Jihad in the USA," 2011; Kurzman, 2011.

had what could be described as an operational plan, and of these, six were FBI stings. Perhaps the most serious interrupted plot was Najibullah Zazi's plan to carry out suicide bombings in New York's subways. Outside of the stings, only three plots led to attempted attacks. One was Faisal Shazad's failed bombing in Times Square. Only two resulted in fatalities: Carlos Bledsoe's shooting at an Army Recruiting Center in Arkansas and Nidal Hasan's attack at Fort Hood. "Active shooters" like Hasan are currently considered the most worrisome threat.

By comparison, the United States saw an average of 50 to 60 terrorist bombings per year in the 1970s and a greater number of fatalities. The passage of ten years since 9/11 without a major terrorist attack on an American target abroad or at home is unprecedented since the 1960s.

It would seem, then, that multiple factors have contributed to al Qaeda's decline. Always a tiny army, al Qaeda never became a mass movement. Its spectacular terrorist attacks won some applause but failed to inspire a global Intifada. Anti-Americanism and anger at U.S. policies in the Arab world did not translate into support for al Qaeda. Its brutal terrorist campaign and especially its killing of fellow Muslims further alienated any potential constituency. Its financial support declined. To the protestors who launched the Arab spring, al Qaeda was yesterday's headline.

Having lost their sanctuary, al Qaeda's leaders have been kept on the run since 2001. It is too easy ten years after 9/11 to criticize the American invasion of Afghanistan as an overreaction. In the immediate shadow of 9/11, no one knew how many more 9/11s were on the way. We know now that al Qaeda had no further terrorist projects on the launchpad, but it is safe to assume that, left unmolested, al Qaeda would have pursued the schemes it contemplated as long as it had the capacity to do so.

The increasingly accurate U.S. drone strikes are dramatic and attract the attention of the news media, but that tends to obscure the less visible but more significant role of intelligence. Despite the distractions of Iraq and a major reorganization of the national intelligence structure, American intelligence effectively used the vast resources made available after 9/11 to gain the measure of its terrorist adversary, prevent new attacks on American targets, and take the battle to al Qaeda and its affiliated networks. Under pressure of new terrorist attacks and numerous plots, foreign intelligence services made parallel efforts to increase the quantity and improve the quality of their intelligence, while, as noted above, liaison and cooperation among intelligence services, including some that were traditionally hostile to the United States, were redefined and raised to new levels.

Domestic intelligence has also improved. Barriers to the flow of intelligence across federal agencies have been significantly reduced, although not eliminated entirely. While intelligence about homegrown terrorist threats often flows upward, the flow of information downward from federal agencies to state and local consumers has increased. However, the United States still does not have a national domestic-intelligence-collection plan. Domestic intelligence collection is always a delicate undertaking in a democracy, and it is politically treacherous given Americans' traditional hostility to anything that smacks of domestic spying. Nonetheless, owing to a remarkable transformation within the FBI and the increased efforts of local law enforcement, authorities have been able to uncover and disrupt almost every homegrown jihadist plot. As a consequence of these developments, al Qaeda appears to be on a descending trajectory.

So Why Does Al Qaeda Think Victory Is Imminent?

Al Qaeda does not share America's assessment of its diminishing power, not simply because it sees the battlefield from the opposite side, but because its worldview, views of the struggle, and concepts of war are completely different from our own. Al Qaeda sees itself engaged in an existential struggle with Western infidels determined to destroy Islam.

In contrast to Americans, who see warfare as a finite undertaking, al Qaeda's leaders see war as a perpetual condition—for them, this conflict began centuries ago and will continue until Judgment Day. There are no timetables.

Al Qaeda urges its followers to see beyond their local conflicts and focus on Islam's single greatest enemy—the United States. In its flattened view of history, al Qaeda makes little distinction between the Crusaders of the 11th century, the Mongol armies of the 13th century, the British and French colonial powers of the 19th century, and America today. America is merely the current banner carrier of continuous infidel hostility toward Islam.

Al Qaeda's leaders acknowledge the tremendous military disparity between al Qaeda's forces and those of the Western world. In Ayman al-Zawahiri's view, if al Qaeda restricts itself to the weapons and methods forced on it by the West, Muslims will remain slaves. Therefore, Zawahiri says, it must invent new methods that do not occur to the West, like "using a plane as a mighty weapon," which on 9/11 gave al Qaeda its victories in "the blessed battles of Washington, New York, and Pennsylvania."⁹

Al Qaeda believes that its superior spiritual commitment eventually will defeat America's superior military technology. Jihadists fight for God, while Americans fight without belief. God decides the outcome of battles. Being on God's side guarantees victory. What al Qaeda's leaders must do is align themselves with God's will.

To al Qaeda, strategy is a matter of revelation and reinterpretation as events unfold. Strategy does not envision a sequence of military operations leading to victory. Operations *are* the strategy. Terrorist attacks need not be connected to one another. Each attack awakens the Muslim community, spreads al Qaeda's message, builds an army of believers, brings new recruits. It is a jihadist's duty to demonstrate his conviction, his commitment, by fighting to defend Islam, making him worthy of God. Al Qaeda's jihad is process-oriented, not progress-oriented. Participation provides its own rewards. Death in God's cause brings paradise. Bin Laden's own death counts as an achievement.

Al Qaeda rejects the artificial boundaries that divide Islam, generally referring to its fighting fronts only by geographical expressions such as the Arabian Peninsula or the Islamic Maghreb. The Umma, or Islamic community, is one.

Unity is vital to al Qaeda. Division is the source of Muslim weakness. In al Qaeda's view, the West has pursued a strategy aimed at dividing Islam into states and shards of states that are incapable of mounting a unified resistance to the West and that can be more easily controlled and conquered.¹⁰

⁹ Al-Zawahiri, 2011a.

¹⁰ Al-Zawahiri outlined this insidious Western plot in a series of messages delivered in 2011: The British divided the people of the Nile into Egypt and Sudan, he wrote, then divided Sudan into northern and southern halves, ensuring that southern

With this mindset, how would al Qaeda assess its current situation? The organization has survived the infidels' mightiest blows. Moreover, al Qaeda has checked the West's presumed plans to occupy the Middle East and destroy Islam. Exposed to the world as an aggressor, the United States now finds itself engaged in costly military efforts that ultimately will fail.

In the past decade, according to al Qaeda's tenth-anniversary message, America has suffered four "striking blows." The first was the 9/11 attacks. The second was America's defeat in Iraq, where Americans are withdrawing. The third is America's failed campaign in Afghanistan. The United States has lost its allies in that contest. The governments of Britain, France, and Germany have already announced their departure. Americans are weary of the war. Like the Soviet invaders, the American invaders, too, will leave in defeat. The fourth blow, according to al Qaeda, is the Arab peoples' revolution against America's agents.

This, al Qaeda asserts, is the global Muslim uprising that its terrorist campaign was supposed to have inspired but didn't. Al Qaeda claims now, however, that 9/11 did light the fuse, although the popular explosion occurred ten years later. It now remains only for the people to demand the imposition of Sharia. America thought that "the Arab region had been stable under its control through a group of cooperative rulers," al Qaeda's leader pointed out, "but the blessed mighty Arab uprising . . . came to flip America's calculations upside down."¹¹

Meanwhile, according to al Qaeda's assessment, its communications have increased and improved, enabling it to build a worldwide army of believers. Recruiting continues. New fronts have been opened in Yemen, Algeria, Somalia, and West Africa. The United States lives in fear of jihadists on its own soil and pours billions of dollars into security. God has punished America's materialism with financial crisis, increasing pressure on it to retreat and retrench. Only small blows are needed to provoke overreaction and cause America to bankrupt itself with futile military efforts and costly security measures that will not succeed.

This theme was taken up by Osama bin Laden in his last communication before his death. Sounding more like a Weatherman of the 1960s than the emir of the mujahideen, bin Laden reminded Americans that "your president has also warned you about the tyranny of the capitalism of the big corporations, which . . . continue controlling your main branches of authority." These corporations are instigators and "traders of war," the primary cause of the American financial crisis.¹²

Al Qaeda is patient and steadfast, bin Laden warned, and can continue its "war of hemorrhaging" America until Americans themselves free themselves from the "tyranny of capitalism" and "influential lobbies in Washington" and end their unjust and unsuccessful war.¹³ If all this

Sudan would be the preserve of Christian missionaries. In Southwest Asia, the British drew a line separating the people of Afghanistan from those of Pakistan.

Following World War I, France and Great Britain divided the heart of the Middle East into French and British zones, then further carved up the French sector into Syria and Lebanon, while the British divided their portion into Iraq and Jordan, establishing the Jewish state of Israel to further divide and weaken Arabs.

This strategy of division continues with the independence of South Sudan in 2011, but, Zawahiri argues, it will not stop there, as Westerners and their Zionist allies now conspire to back secessionists in Sudan's Nuba Mountains in the south and Darfur in the west. American invaders have brought about the deconstruction of Iraq into Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish zones. Egypt's Islamic unity will be eroded by Christian Copts, whose aggression the West supports. Syria, too, faces dismemberment.

¹¹ Al-Zawahiri, 2011b.

¹² Osama bin Laden's message is included in al-Zawahiri, 2011b.

¹³ Osama bin Laden's message is included in al-Zawahiri, 2011b.

sounds rather contemporary, it is in fact a restatement of strategy contained in the sword verses of the Koran, which instruct the warriors of Islam to beleaguer the enemy, lie in wait for him, make his life untenable.

For foreign foes to echo the arguments of domestic protest is hardly a new propaganda ploy. Those on both America's right and left view the war in Afghanistan as a long, costly, and possibly futile engagement. Many Americans have criticized the country's overblown reaction to the terrorist threat. Critics of contemporary capitalism have multiplied since the economic crisis.

Al Qaeda's assessment is in part propaganda aimed primarily at the home front. Jihadists may accept that the conflict will transcend their lifetimes; they may even seek martyrdom in the cause; but they could be disillusioned by any thought that the effort was hopeless. Just as al Qaeda must align itself with its reading of God's will, it must reassure its followers that they are on the right path. Al Qaeda's communications must underscore the travails of the infidels, which are visible to all and confirm that the jihadists' victory is imminent. Al Qaeda takes credit for intentions as if they were achievements.

In part, the assessment is a reflection of belief. Al Qaeda claims credit for preventing aggression it imagined would have occurred were it not for its own campaign. Broader developments—the economic crisis, the Arab uprisings—are seen as a consequence of God's will and al Qaeda's actions, with no distinctions between the two. In their own minds, jihadists are demonstrating their conviction, their worthiness before God.

But al Qaeda's leaders, while fanatics, are not delusional. Their assessment is, in part, an accurate portrayal of the situation. Al Qaeda did create an atmosphere of fear. America's counterterrorist efforts have been extremely costly. The United States is in economic difficulty. There is opposition to the war. American troops are being withdrawn. The conflict will go on.

What Will Happen in Afghanistan?

An assessment of al Qaeda's future trajectory cannot omit a discussion of the situation in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda is the reason the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Preventing al Qaeda from reestablishing itself was offered as the principal reason for increasing the number of American forces deployed there. In his December 2009 speech announcing the buildup, President Obama mentioned al Qaeda 21 times. (The Taliban were mentioned 11 times.¹⁴) Defeating al Qaeda is also offered as the principal reason the United States must continue its military commitment to Afghanistan.¹⁵ Certainly, the American public sees al Qaeda as the primary reason for sustaining a costly military effort. The United States does have other security interests in the region, but these have not been amply articulated or agreed upon, nor, absent al Qaeda, would these other interests necessarily justify the current military effort.

Afghanistan is not essential to al Qaeda. There are few al Qaeda fighters there. Their camps are temporary, although their presence is growing, particularly in the eastern part of the country. Nevertheless, al Qaeda's leaders attribute great importance to Afghanistan. It was the war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan that provided al Qaeda's initial *raison d'être*. It is

¹⁴ The White House, 2009.

¹⁵ See, for example, Kagan and Kagan, 2011.

still the organization's best hope for the establishment of a true Islamic government under the Taliban, to whom its members have sworn loyalty.

Mujahideen from all over the world first assembled in Afghanistan to fight the Soviet invaders. This was the field of battle where, according to al Qaeda legend, the jihadists defeated the Soviet superpower and brought down the Soviet Union itself. It is where the United States, al Qaeda believes, will ultimately meet the same fate.¹⁶

It was from Afghanistan that al Qaeda launched its most successful terrorist attacks against the West. Al Qaeda's leaders include in this list the bombing of the American embassies in Africa, the attack on the USS *Cole*, the 9/11 attacks, and the 2002 bombings in Bali, Indonesia, and Djerba, Tunisia.¹⁷ (Some analysts might question the degree of al Qaeda's direct involvement in the Djerba and Bali attacks.) Fewer terrorist plots since 9/11 have been planned and controlled by al Qaeda's central command, although the successful London bombings in 2005 and the near-miss transatlantic plot in 2006 were both run by al Qaeda's central core. U.S. intelligence assessments have now also identified a link between the successful Madrid bombings in 2004 and al Qaeda control.

The perpetrators of the post-9/11 attacks trained in Pakistan, not Afghanistan, proving that al Qaeda central could still launch terrorist operations even after being chased out of Afghanistan, but with less success, owing to al Qaeda's loss of talent and a less permissive operating environment.

As is the case with al Qaeda itself, there is considerable debate about the current situation in Afghanistan, progress in defeating the Taliban, the pace of American withdrawal, the capabilities of the Afghan forces to take over security responsibilities, the degree to which Afghanistan is critical to al Qaeda's terrorist campaign or to America's counterterrorist campaign, and the level of protection and assistance the Taliban would offer al Qaeda if the insurgents expanded their control or even took over the government.

The U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan has been labeled America's longest war, now extending beyond its tenth year. American forces have been continuously engaged in Afghanistan since autumn 2001. That this would be a long conflict was predictable and predicted. In another way, however, U.S. efforts in Afghanistan can be seen as two wars. The first was the 2001 invasion to topple the Taliban and scatter al Qaeda. American forces remained in country, but from late 2002 on, priority and resources were given to the war in Iraq. Meanwhile, the Taliban reorganized, recovered, and renewed the insurgency. It was not until late in the decade, after conditions improved in Iraq, that the United States was able to redeploy its forces and initiate the current large-scale counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan.

During the past two years, the increased U.S. and NATO effort has undeniably made gains, pushing the Taliban back in the southern part of the country, but these gains are judged to be fragile. The Afghan National Army has fought courageously alongside American forces, but whether the National Army and National Police will be able to defend Afghanistan as foreign defenders withdraw remains an open question. At present, skepticism coexists with great hope for the future. The establishment of government institutions at the local level remains feeble, and government corruption continues to be a problem from top to bottom.

¹⁶ Roggio, 2009, quoting Abdullah Sa'id, commander of the Lashkar al Zil, or "Shadow Army."

¹⁷ Roggio, 2009.

Troop withdrawals, once begun, are rarely reversed. An improving situation argues for accelerating the withdrawal, but so does a deteriorating situation. A second surge would be a hard political sell. And despite promises of continuing aid, a declining U.S. military commitment tends to reduce political commitment—and funding. Because Afghanistan was deemed important, 100,000 American troops are there. But Afghanistan is important *because* 100,000 American troops are there. Its importance relative to other issues may decline with the draw-down of forces.

It makes sense for the insurgents to simply wait. With a commitment by the United States to have all of its troops out by 2014 and some NATO forces already withdrawing, it seems unrealistic to expect that the insurgents, some of whom have been fighting for the better part of two decades, would feel pressured to compromise their objectives. Anyway, no one speaks for all of the insurgents.

There have been tentative contacts with Taliban leaders, but one should be cautious about putting too much hope in these talks. The Taliban are likely to see political negotiations not as an alternative to armed struggle but simply as a parallel path to the departure of foreign troops and the insurgents' eventual return to power. In turn, the United States should view talks as a possible way of taking significant elements of the Taliban off the battlefield. For that to work, the United States must convince at least some Taliban leaders that the United States has a viable alternative to its current costly strategy or total withdrawal.

The United States could alter the perceptions and calculations of its foes (and others in the region, including Pakistan) by reconfiguring its forces, replacing costly combat brigades with smaller units embedded in the Afghan National Forces, and by deploying more Special Forces teams to create local self-defense forces, perhaps even creating a vehicle to recruit former Taliban. It could exchange firepower for sustainability. This is now done on a limited basis. It needs to become the main thrust of U.S. strategy, but there are objections to the creation of local forces. They are seen as unreliable. There are fears that they would be infiltrated by the Taliban or that they foster warlordism. They are seen as contrary to the objective of building national institutions. They are unloved by most professional military officials. However, history suggests that insurgencies are often defeated with the help of local forces recruited from the same population pool as the insurgents. Realistically, it is late in the game to make major changes. Getting out of Afghanistan has greater political momentum than figuring out new ways to stay there.

It is equally doubtful that the Taliban can be persuaded through negotiations to abandon al Qaeda in return for political concessions. There are occasional reports of tension between the Afghans and the Arabs, but the Taliban and al Qaeda have had a long and close relationship. In the years since 9/11, al Qaeda has provided the Taliban with terrorist expertise gained during the insurgency in Iraq, while at least some of the Taliban have been radicalized by al Qaeda's ideology. There appears to be closer cooperation now among various jihadist movements—the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e-Toiba, and al Qaeda—including the creation of a joint force. Nonetheless, al Qaeda's own repetitions of the Taliban's refusal to negotiate and reminders of its own loyalty to Mullah Omar and of the fact that Mullah Omar did not break with al Qaeda before the American invasion and therefore would not do so now may betray some concerns.

A victorious Taliban might offer al Qaeda asylum, although it could not guarantee immunity from continued American air strikes and special operations. For this reason, al Qaeda is not likely to be able to establish the large, accessible training camps it had in Afghanistan

before 9/11. Training and preparation for terrorist attacks will remain furtive. Al Qaeda's terrorist strikes abroad might even be constrained by a tacit understanding with the Taliban not to again provoke foreign intervention.

America's counterterrorist campaign against al Qaeda will continue, whatever happens in Afghanistan, but Predator strikes and special operations in the area depend to a degree on a military presence in the country to obtain accurate intelligence and provide logistical support. President Obama made this argument himself in his 2009 speech.¹⁸ American withdrawal, therefore, will result in some loss of capability, increasing American dependence on Pakistan—an already difficult ally—and on more-distant installations in the Middle East. The threat of al Qaeda terrorism may at least marginally increase. The improvements in cooperation among the world's intelligence services and in counterterrorist operations by local police, achieved over the past ten years, will become the first line of defense in thwarting future terrorist attacks.

While America's military presence in Afghanistan and its covert operations in Pakistan have not endeared America to most Pakistanis, neither will the American withdrawal from Afghanistan foster friendship between Pakistan and the United States. America's need to move large quantities of military supplies through Pakistan will be reduced, but so will the justification for extensive American financial assistance to Pakistan. Domestic budget constraints will argue for its reduction.

Pakistan's expectations of eventual American retreat from Afghanistan and abandonment of Pakistan as an ally would confirm a historic pattern of unhappy relations. To protect its own interests, Pakistan will support its assets in Afghanistan, the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. Their activities will in turn hamper the residual efforts of the United States to create viable national institutions. The current tense alliance between the United States and Pakistan could be replaced by a proxy war between the two countries in Afghanistan. Domestically, Pakistan will continue to face problems of economic development and political radicalization.

The withdrawal of foreign forces will also have a significant economic effect on Afghanistan. It has been estimated that cuts in U.S. military spending in Afghanistan could reduce the country's gross domestic product (GDP) by between 12 and 40 percent in 2014. This could trigger an economic crisis.¹⁹

What eventually will happen, then, is not clear. Ideally, the Afghan government will survive the economic crisis; the country will elect a new government as it is scheduled to do in 2014 and will hold its own militarily, although probably not to the nation's frontiers. The Taliban and the Haqqani Network will expand their area of influence, probably with assistance from Pakistan, while Afghan opponents of the Taliban and Pashtun domination will prepare their own defenses. The civil war will escalate, and in a worst-case scenario, Afghanistan will descend into chaos—a giant Somalia in the heart of Asia.

Al Qaeda would benefit from Taliban success. It is already claiming victory. It would have at least a more congenial host, if not a new launching pad for terrorist attacks. It would be able to gather recruits for new theaters of operations in areas beyond Taliban control, in

¹⁸ The White House, 2009.

¹⁹ Personal discussion with Anthony Cordesman, September 27, 2011.

Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and elsewhere in Central Asia—what al Qaeda grandiosely refers to as the Khorasan.²⁰

This is a grim assessment that seems to argue against American withdrawal from Afghanistan, certainly any accelerated withdrawal or imposition of arbitrary timetables. That is not the case. The current deployment of forces is politically unsustainable, and this must be part of the assessment. Building Afghan national institutions capable of securing the country by themselves will take decades—far longer than the American people are willing to support the deployment of 100,000 American troops in the country. Either the United States will develop a less costly military strategy to contain the Taliban for a longer time or it will accept the risks associated with withdrawal. Negotiations with the Taliban offer little hope of diminishing the conflict in the absence of a sustainable alternative that denies the Taliban achieving its goals through continued fighting.

The increased risk right now is marginal. Without being in Afghanistan, al Qaeda can still launch attacks from Pakistan and Yemen. But it has had less success, because of better Western intelligence and improvements in law enforcement. These improvements can be preserved, for the most part. Overall, al Qaeda has been weakened. A measured American withdrawal will not suddenly reverse al Qaeda's fortunes.

How Will We Know When to Stop?

Every war must end, or so we would like to think. There has been some solid scholarship of late on how terrorist campaigns end—by military defeat, by successful suppression resulting from effective intelligence and law enforcement, by negotiation and ultimate assimilation into the political process, by surrender, or with victory for the terrorists.²¹ There are historical examples of each type of outcome.

In terms of the global terrorist enterprise inspired by al Qaeda, some of the possible outcomes can be discarded. No one expects the campaign to end in the movement's formal surrender. Given al Qaeda's view of a struggle that began centuries ago and will continue until Judgment Day, al Qaeda is not likely to ever admit defeat. Nor is there any single individual or council that can speak for the entire movement. Al Qaeda is a brand name, a label loosely applied to a universe of jihadists whose various causes precede and will survive al Qaeda proper.

In the past, terrorist groups have been destroyed—Germany's Red Brigades, America's Weather Underground, Italy's Red Brigades, to name a few. But a dispersed global terrorist enterprise like al Qaeda, with fronts from North Africa to South Asia and jihadist cells in scores of countries, will be difficult to uproot entirely.

Eliminating al Qaeda's leaders is an effective way of disrupting al Qaeda's command and control and of reducing its operational capabilities, but by itself, decapitation will not end the terrorist campaign.

²⁰ Khorasan refers to three provinces of Iran, but Khorasan or Greater Khorasan also includes parts of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. It was a major political zone under the early Muslim Caliphate. Jihadists consider the Khorasan to be the area where they will inflict their first defeat against their infidel foes in the Muslim version of Armageddon. It thus has spiritual and symbolic importance to al Qaeda, whose leaders see it now as the organization's central front.

²¹ See, for example, Cronin, 2009; Connable and Libicki, 2010.

Some terrorist campaigns have ended in political negotiations, but this seems unlikely to happen with al Qaeda. Local insurgents with definable political goals may be willing to lay down their arms in return for political recognition and participation, but al Qaeda's ambitions allow little compromise, and to be realistic, what American administration could parlay with the group responsible for 9/11?

Very few terrorist organizations achieve their stated strategic goals, and neither will al Qaeda. Al Qaeda has achieved some tactical successes—it has killed thousands, its terrorist campaign has attracted attention to its cause, it has created a global movement, it has caused widespread alarm, it has obliged governments to divert significant resources to protect against its attacks—but it will not win.

Rather than looking at how most terrorist campaigns end, it may be more instructive to look at the terrorist campaigns or insurgencies using terrorist tactics that persist. Colombia's insurgency has lasted for nearly half a century. Decades of terrorism have not resolved the Palestinian issue—Hezbollah was formed nearly 30 years ago. Leaders of Spain's ETA announced only in October 2011 that they would lay down their arms, possibly ending a terrorist campaign that has lasted 43 years. Peru's Shining Path, which has become active again, has been in the field for more than 30 years.

Those campaigns that go on for several decades share common attributes, including sizable constituencies, strong support from ethnic or religious communities, geographic sanctuaries in remote parts of the country or in adjoining states, and adequate financing, often connected with criminal activities. Over the years, some terrorist groups have created their own subcultures.

Al Qaeda has embedded itself in movements that have a local base and has attracted a large following on the Internet, which is a new element. It has effectively presented its campaign as part of a broader religious struggle. It has access to several sanctuaries, and although its finances have been squeezed, it continues to function. It was created at the end of the 1980s, and it launched its terrorist campaign in the mid-1990s. It has proved resilient under pressure. It is opportunistic. If its trajectory matches that of the other tenacious terrorist movements, its campaign could go on for another 15 to 20 years, perhaps longer. Al Qaeda will fail, but its terrorist campaign will continue.

The movement will adapt to new circumstances. It may draw new strength from a Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan, or increasing radicalization in Pakistan, or possibly new Islamist footholds in the Middle East. But it also could fragment into a number of individual al Qaedas pursuing more-local agendas. Some of these may be individually defeated. Al Qaeda may fade, only to be replaced by other terrorist jihads. Or its terrorist army may become increasingly virtual militancy shared on the Internet and capable of inspiring only an occasional terrorist conspiracy. This would be close to the mere "propaganda arm" mentioned at the beginning of this paper. In order to survive, some of its parts may become criminal enterprises, living off drug-trafficking, engaging in extortion, ransom and protection rackets, kidnappings, piracy. Al Qaeda may remain lethal but become increasingly irrelevant, confined to circulating its screeds from the edge, a reservoir of inchoate anger, a conveyor of individual discontents, which is its most likely fate.

Al Qaeda's life expectancy will not be significantly reduced by piling on additional resources to destroy it. Large-scale military efforts may only provoke the kind of reactions that give al Qaeda new life. Accepting the likelihood of a lengthy struggle means conserving

resources for the long haul. Firepower is less important than staying power. Continuing the campaign against al Qaeda and the jihadist enterprise inspired by its ideology may be necessary, but it must therefore be sustainable.

Sustainable is a malleable term. The war against al Qaeda has been costly, although al Qaeda's boast that it will bankrupt America cannot be taken seriously. The United States has borne heavier burdens in past wars, both in lives and in treasure as a percentage of the country's GDP. America can, if it chooses, sustain even its current level of commitment indefinitely.

Is ending the war, then, merely a matter of choice? Some analysts (including me) have argued from the beginning that the pursuit of al Qaeda must be unrelenting. There is no statute of limitations on hunting down those associated with the 9/11 attacks, no relaxation of efforts to destroy an enterprise that remains committed to continuing its terrorist campaign against America. It is a requirement of justice, a matter of security, and a lesson to others who would contemplate such terrorist campaigns in the future. Terrorists are not a monolith, nor are the more reckless easily separated from the more prudent, but there is evidence of strategic debate even among al Qaeda's own commanders. Others will watch what happens to al Qaeda. A relentless pursuit need not mean one that exhausts the pursuers or becomes counterproductive to the achievement of broader security goals.

An al Qaeda that is kept dispersed, its leaders lying low, its terrorist operational capabilities limited, its appeal blunted, the participation of its followers diminished, could be viewed as a victory of sorts, but it would not satisfy Americans' urge for more-formal closure. Unable to chart progress, uncertain of the score, Americans characteristically seek to impose an end to a conflict. Ten years have passed without another significant terrorist attack on the United States. Osama bin Laden is dead. Some suggest that America can unilaterally declare an end to its war on terror now. But what exactly does this mean?

The term "war on terror" has already been dropped, although the counterterrorist effort has not been fundamentally altered. Few argue that efforts to pursue al Qaeda, including, if necessary, the use of military force, should cease entirely, but formally declaring the war over could alter the legal framework. If the United States were not at war, what would be the legal basis for the continued killing of al Qaeda's leaders?

Some believe that declaring an end to the war would alter perceptions at home and abroad, signaling at least a reduction of the military component of the effort abroad, while preventing expansion of the military's role in domestic security. Others see the end of the war exclusively in terms of withdrawing American forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, the most costly components of the counterterrorist campaign, which, they argue, the United States can ill afford. American forces are already leaving Iraq, and the force in Afghanistan is scheduled to be substantially reduced. American efforts could then be concentrated on homeland security, but a totally defensive strategy could increase the risk of a terrorist attack, might be no less costly, and could encourage the imposition of security measures that seriously curtail civil liberties.

What many Americans may really be seeking is an end to fear, the return to an *antebellum* sense of security when, even during times of war, there was a distinction between the front line and the home front, between soldier and civilian; when before boarding an airplane one did not have to take off one's shoes and belt, empty one's pockets, and stand before a body scanner with hands raised. What the American public wants is the official termination of terror.

That will not occur. Counterterrorist operations can reduce the terrorists' operational capabilities, not guarantee tranquility or end apprehension. Not yielding to terror is a mission

of all citizens. Americans will have to learn to live with the continuing threat posed by a tenacious terrorist enterprise whose leaders remain determined to attack the United States. That requires perpetual vigilance without succumbing to imagined fears. And it means resisting the gradual growth of an oppressive security state.

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