

Rebuilding the Base

How Al-Qaida Could Resurge

Seth G. Jones

CT-479

Testimony presented before the House Homeland Security Committee, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence on July 13, 2017.



For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT479.html

Testimonies

RAND testimonies record testimony presented or submitted by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies.

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

© Copyright 2017 RAND Corporation

RAND® is a registered trademark.

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited. Permission is given to duplicate this document for personal use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please visit www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.html.

*Rebuilding the Base:
How Al-Qaida Could Resurge*

Testimony of Seth G. Jones¹
The RAND Corporation²

Before the Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence
United States House of Representatives

July 13, 2017

Thank you Chairman King, Ranking Member Rice, and distinguished members of the subcommittee for inviting me to testify today. While the U.S. public and news media has focused on the fight against the Islamic State, it is worth re-examining the state of al-Qaida (or “the base” in Arabic) and its threat to the U.S. homeland. After all, it was al-Qaida that conducted the 9/11 attacks and nearly pulled off several attacks in the United States, including those led by Najibullah Zazi in September 2009 and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab in December 2009.

Assessments of al-Qaida vary considerably. Georgetown University professor Bruce Hoffman argues that al-Qaida has quietly preserved its strength, expanded its footprint in countries like Syria and Yemen, and positioned itself to take advantage of the potential collapse of the Islamic State.³ Similarly, former Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agent Ali Soufan contends that al-Qaida “has transformed itself from a close-knit terrorist outfit with a handful of struggling affiliates into a vast network of insurgent groups spread from Southeast Asia to northwest Africa.”⁴ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies concludes that al-Qaida has “emerged stronger by pursuing a strategy of deliberate yet low-key growth.”⁵ Others disagree. Georgetown University professor Daniel Byman maintains that al-

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author’s alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

² The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

³ Bruce Hoffman, “Al Qaeda: Quietly and Patiently Rebuilding,” *The Cipher Brief*, December 30, 2016.

⁴ Ali Soufan, “The Resurgent Threat of al Qaeda,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2017.

⁵ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, “How Al-Qaeda Survived the Islamic State Challenge,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, March 1, 2017.

Qaida has been in decline because of limited popular support, effective counterterrorism efforts by the United States and other countries, and al-Qaida's killing of Muslim civilians.⁶ My RAND colleague Brian Jenkins argues that al-Qaida and other groups have failed to conduct or inspire many attacks in the U.S. homeland, partly because their extreme interpretation of Islam has not gained traction among America's Muslims.⁷

Instead of predicting whether al-Qaida will strengthen or weaken over the next several years—an exercise that is more guesswork than science—my testimony will take a slightly different approach. I argue that the ability of al-Qaida or another Salafi-jihadist group to resurge will likely be a result of several factors: the group's ability to take advantage of a possible second wave of the Arab Spring; the rise of a charismatic leader; the withdrawal of U.S. or other Western forces from key counterterrorism battlefields; U.S. or other Western actions that fuel a perception that the West is oppressing Muslims; and the ability of al-Qaida or others to co-opt extremists in the wake of an Islamic State collapse.

I have divided this testimony into two main sections. The first examines al-Qaida's historical waves of activity, which highlight how al-Qaida has reshaped its network in the past after suffering setbacks. The second section explores how al-Qaida might rebound in the future.

Al-Qaida's Waves and Reverses

Since al-Qaida's establishment in 1988, there have been four primary "waves" of al-Qaida activity (surges in terrorist violence), along with "reverse waves" (decreases in terrorist activity).⁸ The first wave began in the 1990s and peaked in 2001 with the September 11 attacks. It was followed by a reversal, as al-Qaida leaders and operatives were captured or killed in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States, and across the globe. A second wave began to build in 2003 after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and was characterized by spectacular attacks across Iraq and in Casablanca, Madrid, London, and elsewhere. But it was followed by a reverse wave; by 2006, al-Qaida in Iraq had been severely weakened, British and American intelligence agencies had foiled several plots, and U.S. drone strikes had killed senior al-Qaida operatives in Pakistan. A third wave surged from 2007 to 2009 following the rise of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, and was followed by a reverse wave with the 2011 death of Osama bin Laden and the deaths of other senior leaders. Finally, the Arab Spring helped create the conditions for a fourth wave of activity, as al-Qaida affiliates established a foothold or expanded their presence in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Most of the al-Qaida attacks in the fourth wave occurred in "near enemy" countries like Iraq, Syria, and Somalia, not in the West.

⁶ Daniel Byman, "Judging Al Qaeda's Record, Part I: Is the Organization in Decline?" *Lawfare*, June 27, 2017. Also see Daniel Byman, "Judging Al Qaeda's Record, Part II: Why Has Al Qaeda Declined?" *Lawfare*, June 28, 2017.

⁷ Brian Michael Jenkins, "Why Aren't There More Terrorist Attacks Like the One in London?" *Fortune*, June 7, 2017.

⁸ On terrorism waves, see David C. Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism," in Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes, eds., *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*, Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2004, p. 47; Seth G. Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of Al Qaeda since 9/11*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2012.

First Wave

The first wave started in the late 1980s, as bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and other leaders established al-Qaida during the anti-Soviet jihad. In August 1988, a group of foreign fighters, who had trekked to the region to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, gathered in Peshawar, Pakistan, to form a new organization. Called al-Qaida al-Askariya (“the military base”), the group included an advisory council and membership requirements for those interested in joining.⁹ By the early 1990s, Afghanistan had deteriorated into a civil war following the departure of Soviet forces and the end of U.S. support to the Afghan mujahideen. Some fighters dispersed to countries like Bosnia, Algeria, Sudan, and Egypt, where they attempted to transform domestic conflict into armed jihad, as bin Laden and other al-Qaida leaders had urged them to do.¹⁰

Al-Qaida leaders aimed to overthrow regimes in the Middle East (the near enemy, or *al-Adou al-Qareeb*) to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate. They also aimed to fight the United States and its allies (the far enemy, or *al-Adou al-Baeed*) who supported these regimes.¹¹ For al-Qaida, the United States was the most significant far enemy. In February 1998, bin Laden, Zawahiri, and others published a fatwa to kill Americans.¹² Following a decade of preparation and organization, al-Qaida launched its first wave of violence against the United States in the late 1990s. On August 7, 1998, al-Qaida perpetrated simultaneous attacks against the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Al-Qaida operatives then bombed the USS *Cole* on October 12, 2000, while it was refueling in Yemen. The attack killed 17 U.S. soldiers and injured 39 others. On September 11, 2001, al-Qaida pulled off its most audacious terrorist attack, as 19 operatives hijacked four airplanes in the United States and killed nearly 3,000 people and wounded thousands more.

In response, U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) forces took aim at al-Qaida and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which had provided sanctuary to bin Laden and other al-Qaida leaders.¹³ It was a remarkably effective campaign. Approximately 100 CIA officers, 350

⁹ Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaida's Leader*, New York: Free Press, 2006; Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qa'ida and the Road to 9/11*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, p. 133. Also see the “Tareekh Osama” (“Osama’s history”) document presented in *United States of America v. Enaam M. Arnaout*, United States District Court, Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division.

¹⁰ Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Winter 2010/2011, pp. 53–94.

¹¹ On the establishment of a caliphate see, for example, Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Ummah Will Pass*, translated and published by the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, May 23, 2006.

¹² The text is the second fatwa originally published on February 23, 1998, to declare a holy war, or jihad, against the West and Israel. It was signed by bin Laden; Zawahiri, then-head of al-Jihad; Rifai Taha, leader of the Islamic Group; Sheikh Mir Hamzah, secretary of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema of Pakistan; and Fazlul Rehman, leader of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh.

¹³ On the overthrow of the Taliban regime, see Gary Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2005; Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002; Gary Berntsen and Ralph Pezzullo, *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al Qa'ida*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2005; and Bob Woodward, *Bush At War*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002.

special operations forces, and 15,000 Afghans—running as many as 100 combat sorties per day—defeated a 50,000 to 60,000–man Taliban army as well as several thousand al-Qaida fighters.¹⁴ Al-Qaida was severely weakened. The U.S. seized over 20 terrorist training camps, killed thousands of enemy fighters, and forced hundreds of al-Qaida members and thousands of Taliban to flee across the border into Pakistan or Iran. By December 2001, three months after the attacks, al-Qaida was in disarray. A quarter of bin Laden’s top commanders had been killed or captured.¹⁵ Al-Qaida’s first wave was on the wane.

Second Wave

In 2003, the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent insurgency gave al-Qaida new life. America’s invasion galvanized al-Qaida sympathizers and helped launch the second wave of terrorism. One of al-Qaida’s strongest allies in Iraq was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was born in 1966 in Zarqa, Jordan. On October 17, 2004, Zarqawi released a statement using the online Arabic magazine *Mu’askar al-Battar*, swearing allegiance to bin Laden. Zarqawi advocated the subjugation of Shia Muslims and creation of a worldwide caliphate governed by sharia (Islamic law).¹⁶ By this time, Zarqawi’s organization, which he renamed al-Qaida in Iraq, had roughly 15 brigades operating under its banner, including two “martyr” brigades dedicated to suicide operations.

Al-Qaida’s second wave of terrorism was now underway. In May 2003, a group with ties to al-Qaida killed 45 people in Casablanca during a series of suicide bombings. The same week, al-Qaida operatives were involved in multiple attacks in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, killing 34 people and wounding 60 others. In August, a suicide car bomb detonated in front of a Marriott hotel in Jakarta, Indonesia, killing 13 and wounding 149 others. In November, there were multiple attacks in Istanbul, which killed over 40 people and wounded more than 750. Then came the Madrid attacks. On March 11, 2004, North African terrorists carried 13 improvised explosive devices concealed in blue sports bags into the Alcalá station in Madrid, Spain. The attack left 191 dead and 1,755 injured, up to that point the largest number of casualties from an attack in continental Europe since World War II. The operatives were not members of al-Qaida, but they were inspired by its ideology and activities. In addition, some of the Madrid attackers had connections to al-Qaida operatives, such as Hamza Rabi’a, al-Qaida’s head of operations in Europe and North America.¹⁷

The following year, al-Qaida struck London. On July 7, four suicide bombers trained by al-Qaida operatives conducted attacks in central London. Three were on London’s subway system,

¹⁴ Berntsen and Pezzullo, 2005.

¹⁵ George Tenet with Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA*, New York: HarperCollins, 2007, p. 187.

¹⁶ Letter from Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi to al-Qaida leaders, circa January 2004. Released by the Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point.

¹⁷ Fernando Reinares, “The Madrid Bombings and Global Jihadism,” *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 2, April–May 2010, pp. 83–104; “Islamist Website Confirms Death of Key Player in Spanish Train Bombing,” *El Pais*, May 8, 2010.

the Underground, and one was on the number 30 double-decker bus traveling east from Marble Arch. Roughly 56 people were killed, including the four suicide bombers, and over 700 were injured. The ringleader, Mohammad Sidique Khan, had trained in al-Qaida–affiliated camps in Pakistan.¹⁸

Much like during the first wave, however, the tide eventually began to turn. Zarqawi’s brutality in Iraq was too much even for some al-Qaida leaders. Members of the U.S. Army’s 1st Brigade of the 1st Armored Division, Marines from the I and II Marine Expeditionary Force, CIA operatives, U.S. Special Operations Forces, and a host of agencies provided intelligence, firepower, and—ultimately—trust in local Iraqis to stand up for themselves. The widespread Sunni Arab Iraqi revolt against al-Qaida in Iraq became known as the Sunni Arab Awakening, or *sahwah* in Arabic. The Awakening, which highlighted the end of al-Qaida’s second wave, resulted from a complex range of factors like egregious al-Qaida abuses of the Sunni population, tribal infighting, criminal disputes, U.S. engagement, elite payoffs, and the surge of U.S. military forces.¹⁹ Sunni Arabs joined anti–al-Qaida militia groups and helped identify al-Qaida leaders for targeting. The results of the Awakening were clear: al-Qaida lost control and support of the Sunni population in Iraq.

Third Wave

But al-Qaida eventually mounted a third wave of terrorism after establishing a new front in Yemen, aided by a charismatic Yemeni-American operative named Anwar al-Awlaki. In January 2009, al-Qaida publicly announced that Saudi and Yemeni operatives had unified under the banner of a single group in Yemen, which they named al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.²⁰ Awlaki settled in the Shabwah Governorate of Yemen and ran his global jihadi enterprise.²¹ He developed a blog (www.anwar-alawlaki.com), which was later shut down. He also improved his Facebook and MySpace pages and posted on YouTube and other social media forums to spread his jihadi message. “The Internet has become a great medium for spreading the call of Jihad and following the news of the mujahideen,” Awlaki wrote.²²

¹⁸ Intelligence and Security Committee, *Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, Cm 6785, London: The Stationery Office, 2006; Intelligence and Security Committee, *Could 7/7 Have Been Prevented? Review of the Intelligence on the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, Cm 7617, London: The Stationery Office, May 2009; House of Commons, *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005*, HC 1087, London: The Stationery Office, May 2006.

¹⁹ For better insight into the Awakening, see Niel Smith and Sean MacFarland, “Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point,” *Military Review*, 2008, pp. 65–76; Timothy S. McWilliams and Curtis P. Wheeler, eds., *Al-Anbar Awakening Volume I: American Perspectives, U.S. Marines and Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004–2009*, Quantico, Va.: Marine Corps University Press, 2009; and Gary W. Montgomery and Timothy S. McWilliams, eds., *Al-Anbar Awakening Volume II: Iraqi Perspectives From Insurgency to Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004–2009*, Quantico, Va.: Marine Corps University Press, 2009.

²⁰ Video by Al Malahim Media Foundation, al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, January 2009.

²¹ New York Police Department, *Special Analysis: Anwar al-Awlaki*, New York: New York Police Department, Counterterrorism Bureau, December 2009.

²² Anwar al-Awlaki, “44 Ways to Support Jihad,” February 2009.

By 2009, al-Qaida—with operatives inspired by individuals like Awlaki—was plotting attacks in the United States. In June 2009, Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, who had changed his name from Carlos Bledsoe, opened fire with a semiautomatic rifle on a military recruiting center in Little Rock, Arkansas, killing one soldier and wounding another. He had listened to Awlaki’s sermons and spent time in Yemen.²³ On November 5, 2009, a U.S. Army major, Nidal Malik Hasan, gunned down 13 people and wounded 43 others at Fort Hood, Texas. Hasan had first met Awlaki in 2001 at the Dar al-Hijrah mosque in Falls Church, Virginia, where Awlaki was the imam. Hasan and Awlaki exchanged at least 18 emails that discussed the afterlife, the appropriate time for violent jihad, and how to transfer funds abroad without being noticed by law enforcement.²⁴

Al-Qaida then attempted to strike again. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who was born in Nigeria, met with Awlaki several times and attended a training camp in the Shabwah region of Yemen. On December 24, 2009, Abdulmutallab boarded Northwest Airlines Flight 253 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, which was scheduled to arrive in Detroit, Michigan, on December 25. The flight carried 279 passengers and 11 crew members. Abdulmutallab wore a bomb in his underwear. The bomb ignited, injuring Abdulmutallab and two other passengers, but the main charge failed to go off and the airplane landed safely.²⁵ It was a close call. But al-Qaida was undeterred. That same year, Najibullah Zazi, a U.S. citizen from New York, met with senior al-Qaida operatives in Pakistan. Zazi agreed to execute one of al-Qaida’s boldest plots since September 11, 2001: a suicide attack on the New York City subway modeled, in part, on the successful 2005 attack in London. The plot involved two other Americans: Adis Medunjanin and Zarein Ahmedzay. Zazi conducted training at al-Qaida camps in Pakistan.²⁶ Thanks to British and U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies, Zazi’s plot was thwarted. The FBI arrested Zazi on September 19, 2009. On January 10, 2010, the FBI arrested Adis Medunjanin and Zarein Ahmedzay.²⁷

By late 2010, however, the third wave began to decline because of persistent U.S. action across the globe. U.S. strikes killed a number of al-Qaida allied leaders: external operations chief Saleh al-Somali in Pakistan in December 2009, general manager Shaykh Sa’id al-Masri in Pakistan in May 2010, senior al-Qaida operations officer Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Najdi in Pakistan in September 2010, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir in Iraq in April 2010, and Awlaki in Yemen in September 2011. The pace of U.S. drone strikes increased under the Obama administration

²³ Tommy Hudson, “Arrest of Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad,” officer’s report, June 1, 2009; Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Arrest of Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammed*, Little Rock, Arkansas: Federal Bureau of Investigation, June 2, 2009.

²⁴ New York Police Department, *Special Analysis: Anwar al-Awlaki*, New York: New York Police Department, Counterterrorism Bureau, Terrorism Threat Analysis Group, 2009.

²⁵ United States of America v. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, United States District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, Criminal Complaint, December 26, 2009.

²⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, *Zarein Ahmedzay Pleads Guilty to Terror Violations in Connection with Al-Qaeda New York Subway Plot*, Washington: U.S. Department of Justice, April 23, 2010.

²⁷ United States of America v. Ferid Imam, et al., United States District Court, Eastern District of New York, Case 1:10-cr-00019-RJD, Document 53, Superseding Indictment, July 7, 2010.

and involved multiple U.S. intelligence agencies that recruited human assets, intercepted electronic communications, and analyzed satellite and other imagery. In May 2011, U.S. military and intelligence operatives killed bin Laden, and Zawahiri took up his role as leader.

Fourth Wave

Around 2012, a fourth wave started as al-Qaida took advantage of the Arab uprisings and escalating wars in Syria, Yemen, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Al-Qaida also found itself in competition with the Islamic State. Zawahiri remained al-Qaida's leader, flanked by general manager Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi and senior manager Abu Muhammad al-Masri. In addition, a small number of al-Qaida leaders remained in nearby Iran with ties to the leadership, including Saif al-Adel and Abu Muhammad al-Masri. But the core leadership had limited legitimacy and influence over al-Qaida's affiliates in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Most of al-Qaida's power had trickled down to its affiliates.

In Syria, Jabhat al-Nusrah remained a key component of the insurgency against the Syrian regime. In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusrah publicly announced a split with al-Qaida, although in practice, Jabhat al-Nusrah leaders, including Mohammed al-Jawlani, remained in close contact with al-Qaida. In January 2017, Jabhat al-Nusrah merged with elements of Ahrar al-Sham and other jihadist groups to form Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, but the group continued to effectively function as al-Qaida's Syria branch.²⁸ Al-Qaida leaders urged Jabhat al-Nusrah and other groups to conduct a guerrilla campaign against the Syrian regime and establish sharia law in areas they controlled.²⁹ From its base in Syria, al-Qaida plotted external attacks against Western targets, though it failed to conduct an attack in the West.

As civil war raged in Yemen, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula tried to expand its foothold in the Abyan, Marib, and Shabwah Governorates. In April 2017, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula emir Qasim al-Raymi outlined his strategy of fighting the Houthis and building broad and deep support among Sunni groups and tribes in Yemen:

And by the grace of Allah, we fight [alongside] all Muslims in Yemen, together with different Islamic groups. We fought with the Salafs without exception. We fought with the Muslim Brotherhood and also our brothers from the sons of tribes. We fought together with the public in Aden and elsewhere. We participate with the Muslims in every battle.³⁰

In September 2014, Zawahiri announced the creation of regional affiliate al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, taking advantage of sanctuaries in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.³¹ As Zawahiri argued, "A new branch of al-Qaida was established and is Qaida al-Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent, seeking to raise the flag of jihad, return the Islamic rule, and empowering

²⁸ See, for example, U.S. Department of State, "Rewards for Justice: Reward Offer for Information on al-Nusrah Front Leader Muhammad al-Jawlani," May 10, 2017.

²⁹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Sham Will Submit to None Except Allah," As-Sahab Media Foundation April 2017. The transcript and translation are courtesy of the SITE Intelligence Group.

³⁰ Thomas Joscelyn, "AQAP Leader Discusses Complex War in Yemen," *Long War Journal*, May 2, 2017.

³¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, audio message, September 2014.

the sharia of Allah across the Indian subcontinent.”³² The group was led by Asim Umar, an Indian and former member of Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami, a Pakistan-based terrorist group with branches across the Indian subcontinent. Umar was flanked by Abu Zar, his first deputy. In October 2015, U.S. and Afghan forces targeted a large training camp in Kandahar Province, killing over one hundred operatives linked to al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent.³³

By 2017, al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent boasted several hundred members and had cells in Afghanistan’s Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul, Paktika, Ghazni, and Nuristan Provinces. Al-Qaida’s presence in Afghanistan was almost certainly larger and more expansive than five or even ten years before.³⁴ This expansion may have been due partly to Taliban advances in Afghanistan and al-Qaida’s relationship with operatives from the Taliban and other groups, such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Lashkar-e Jhangvi. Al-Qaida operatives in Bangladesh were particularly active, conducting a range of attacks. In addition, al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent conducted a steady propaganda campaign from its media arm, As-Sahab. However, the group conducted few attacks in Afghanistan or Pakistan and was largely irrelevant in the Taliban-led insurgency.

How Al-Qaida Might Return

Despite al-Qaida’s persistence, it has struggled to be relevant. It remains a loose, overlapping, and fluid series of networks across multiple regions. Zawahiri has been a controversial leader, who lacks bin Laden’s charisma and ability to inspire foot soldiers. As Zawahiri emphasized in his “General Guidelines for Jihad,” published in 2013, al-Qa’ida’s “military work firstly targets the head of (international) disbelief, America and its ally Israel, and secondly its local allies that rule our countries.” He explained that the “purpose of targeting America is to exhaust her and bleed her to death” by, in part, baiting the United States to overreact so that it suffered substantial human and financial losses.³⁵ But al-Qaida has conducted few successful attacks in the West over the past several years. One exception was in France. Said and Chérif Kouachi, who trained in Yemen with al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, were involved in the January 2015 attack against the French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. The attack killed 12 people and injured 11 others. Most of al-Qaida’s violence has been directed at near-enemy targets in countries like Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. In addition, al-Qaida has failed to inspire many attacks overseas, unlike the Islamic State.

It is unclear whether al-Qaida will be able to establish a fifth wave that might include an increase in territorial control, recruits, and global attacks. Several factors may impact the rise—or decline—of al-Qaida over the next several years. Most of these factors are outside of al-

³² Bill Roggio, “Al Qaeda Opens Branch in the ‘Indian Subcontinent,’” *Long War Journal*, September 3, 2014.

³³ Dan Lamothe, “‘Probably the Largest’ Al-Qaeda Training Camp Ever Destroyed in Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, October 30, 2015.

³⁴ See Richard Esposito, Matthew Cole, and Brian Ross, “President Obama’s Secret: Only 100 al Qaeda Now in Afghanistan,” *ABC News*, December 2, 2009.

³⁵ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “General Guidelines for Jihad,” Al-Sahab Media Establishment, 2013.

Qaida's control, though much would depend on how al-Qaida or other Salafi-jihadist groups responded to them.

First, the withdrawal of U.S. or other Western military forces—particularly special operations forces, air power, or smaller numbers of conventional military forces that train, advise, and assist foreign partners—from jihadist battlefields might contribute to a resurgence by al-Qaida or other Salafi-jihadist groups. Examples include the withdrawal of U.S. or other Western forces from Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, or Libya. U.S. actions in these countries, however limited, have served as a check against al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations. The U.S. and Soviet exit from Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s contributed to the country's further deterioration and the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaida. The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 contributed to a resurgence of al-Qaida, the rise of the Islamic State, and the spread of extremist ideology across the region. Other American disengagements, such as Lebanon in 1984 and Somalia in 1994, contributed to further war after American forces withdrew.

Second, another round of the Arab Spring or the collapse of one or more governments in the Arab world might allow al-Qaida or other Salafi-jihadist groups to strengthen. Instability in some countries (such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, or Egypt) or continuing war in others (such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, or Somalia) could provide al-Qaida or other jihadist groups with key sanctuaries. Among the most significant reasons for al-Qaida's fourth wave was a weakening of governance during the Arab Spring. According to World Bank data, levels of political stability across the Middle East and North Africa dropped by 8 percentage points from 2010 to 2015, government effectiveness by 5 percentage points, regulatory control by 4 percentage points, rule of law by 4 percentage points, and control of corruption by 4 percentage points. Levels were low across South Asian countries like Afghanistan as well. Governance was virtually nonexistent in countries that saw a rise in al-Qaida and other Salafi-jihadist activity.³⁶

Third, events that highlight the oppression of Muslims by Western governments could increase the possibility of a resurgence by al-Qaida or other Salafi-jihadist groups. In 2004, the U.S. television show *60 Minutes II* broke a story involving abuse and humiliation of Iraqi inmates by a group of U.S. soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison. The uncensored Abu Ghraib photographs appeared on jihadist websites and were used for recruitment purposes. A similar situation could be used by Salafi-jihadist groups for propaganda. In addition, the United States or other Western countries could over-react to a terrorist attack on their soil and implement domestic policies that broadly target Muslims and create a "war against Islam." Such a development—which occurred during World War II, when the United States relocated approximately 120,000 Japanese, many of whom were American citizens, to internment camps—could increase radicalization and recruitment for al-Qaida and other groups.

Fourth, the rise of a charismatic al-Qaida leader might help al-Qaida revitalize. Bin Laden was an inspirational leader, as was Awlaki. Fluent in English and adept at giving eloquent talks on Islam, Awlaki's stirring lectures earned him a growing cadre of followers and inspired numerous individuals to plot terrorist attacks. His lectures were available on the Internet, and his

³⁶ World Bank, Worldwide Governance Indicators Data Set, accessed May 11, 2017.

CDs were sold in Islamic bookstores around the world. Awlaki operated his own blog and was active on several social networking sites. Other al-Qaida leaders, such as Zawahiri, have been far less charismatic. But this could change. In 2016, al-Qaida leaders began to promote one of bin Laden's sons, Hamza, in their propaganda. In May 2017, al-Qaida labeled Hamza bin Laden a "shaykh," suggesting that they might be considering him for leadership. While it is unclear whether Hamza bin Laden will emerge as a charismatic leader, such a development could help increase global support for the movement.

Fifth, large-scale deployment of U.S. or other Western military conventional forces to key Islamic battlefields, however unlikely, could increase the possibility of a resurgence by al-Qaida or other Salafi-jihadist groups. The U.S. deployment of conventional forces to fight terrorists overseas has generally failed to stabilize countries and has often been counterproductive.³⁷ In Iraq, for instance, the U.S. conventional presence contributed to radicalization. Large numbers of U.S. forces in Muslim countries tend to facilitate terrorist recruitment. Many of the extremists involved in U.S. homeland plots after September 11, 2001—such as José Padilla, Nidal Hassan, Najibullah Zazi, and Faisal Shahzad—were motivated, in part, by the deployment of large numbers of U.S. combat troops in Muslim countries and by a conviction, however erroneous, that Muslims were the helpless victims of the United States.³⁸ At the moment, it is unlikely that the current administration or the U.S. population would support the large-scale deployment of military forces to fight terrorism. But some Americans might rethink this possibility after a major terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

Sixth, the collapse of the Islamic State—particularly its core so-called caliphate area of Iraq and Syria—and the death of charismatic leaders like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi might allow al-Qaida or other groups to rejuvenate. The further weakening or collapse of the Islamic State could also increase the possibility of a merger between fighters loyal to both al-Qaida and the Islamic State under one umbrella—or even to the emergence of a new group.³⁹

Conclusion

Over the course of its existence, al-Qaida has faced numerous challenges. One has been a failure to hold territory where the group or its allies could impose their extreme interpretation of Islamic law. Al-Qaida leaders developed a close relationship with Mullah Omar's Taliban in the 1990s and established a sanctuary in Afghanistan, only to lose it by late 2001 after the 9/11 attacks. Al-Qaida affiliates in Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Algeria, and Mali also consistently failed to hold territory because of poor leadership, incompetent governance, limited local support, excessive violence, internal tensions, and other factors. Another problem has been a lack of overall Muslim support. In a brusque letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2005, Zawahiri

³⁷ Barry R. Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 1, January/February 2013, pp. 116–128.

³⁸ Seth G. Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of Al Qaeda Since 9/11*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2012.

³⁹ On the merger of al-Qaida and the Islamic State see Bruce Hoffman, "The Coming ISIS–al Qaeda Merger," *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2016; and Soufan, 2017.

remarked that “we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds” of Muslims.⁴⁰ Yet bin Laden, Zawahiri, and other al-Qaida leaders consistently failed to translate this recognition into practice. Public opinion polls show that Muslim views of al-Qaida are consistently negative. “Strong majorities in most countries have unfavorable opinions of the group, founded by Osama bin Laden more than a quarter century ago,” concluded one poll conducted in 14 Muslim countries.⁴¹ Al-Qaida’s lack of popular support has been a chronic problem.

Al-Qaida is a different organization today than it was even a decade ago. It is less centralized, less focused on external operations (at least for the moment), and less popular. But the Islamic extremism that al-Qaida represents will not go away soon. The ideology will likely survive in some form. Conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia are likely to continue, with support from some terrorist networks in the West. Al-Qaida’s leaders do not control the circumstances that lead to its waves of resurgence, but rather position the al-Qaida enterprise to take advantage of these circumstances. It is unclear whether al-Qaida or other Salafi-jihadists will be able to rebound in the future. And even if there is a resurgence, it could be led by al-Qaida, the Islamic State, a new organization, or a mix of Salafi-jihadist groups. Such a revival will likely hinge on a group’s ability to take advantage of opportunities like the withdrawal of small numbers of U.S. or other Western forces from key battlefields; a second wave of the Arab Spring; a rising perception of U.S. or other Western oppression of Muslims; the rise of a charismatic leader; a large-scale conventional deployment of U.S. or other Western forces; or the collapse of the Islamic State.

⁴⁰ Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, July 9, 2005.

⁴¹ Pew Research Center, “Concerns about Islamic Extremism on the Rise in the Middle East,” July 1, 2014.