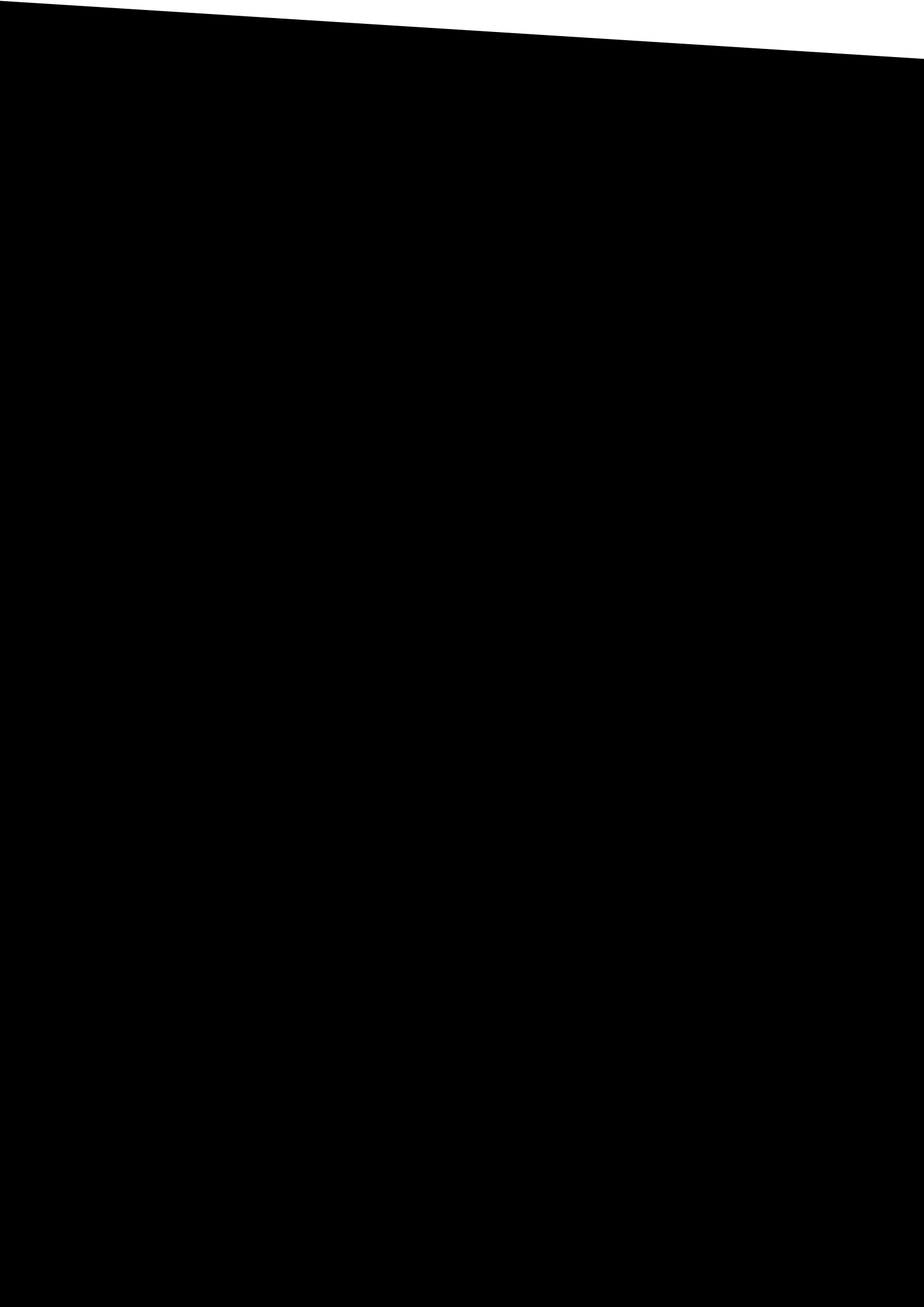


AL-QAEDA'S GLOBAL FOOTPRINT

An Assessment of al-Qaeda's Strength Today

Robin Simcox





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This paper is written in the author's personal capacity and the views expressed are his alone.

About the Author

Robin Simcox is a Research Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society, where he studies al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda inspired terrorism.

Simcox has testified in front of the House of Representative Homeland Security Committee, and briefed the White House, National Counterterrorism Center, British Parliament, US Special Operations Command and the European Parliament. He has written terrorism analysis for the Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, Washington Times, The Atlantic and New Republic, among others. He also regularly appears on the media for the likes of the BBC, Sky News, Fox News and al-Jazeera.

Simcox has an MSc in U.S. Foreign Policy from the Institute for the Study of Americas, University of London, and a BA in History (International) from the University of Leeds, which included a year at the University of Newcastle, Australia.

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Executive summary

Al-Qaeda remains the pre-eminent terrorist security threat to the West, and mitigating the threat posed by the group a high priority for the British government.

However, there is currently insufficient questioning of what being part of al-Qaeda today constitutes and how much relevance being 'al-Qaeda linked' (a favourite phrase of both politicians and the media) actually has. A tendency to conflate al-Qaeda militancy with that of Salafi-jihadism more broadly has bestowed al-Qaeda with a potency that it does not actually hold. Links to al-Qaeda within the chaotic structures of Salafi-jihadi militant movements may, at times, be extremely significant; but, equally, at times they may not.

This lack of a precise definition over which groups should actually be considered part of al-Qaeda makes formulating a coherent response problematic. This report focuses on al-Qaeda's core; its official regional franchises; its established networks; and its developing networks.

Without doubt, the number of official al-Qaeda groups operating today has expanded since 9/11. Al-Qaeda's core leadership (aka al-Qaeda Central) in Pakistan has helped facilitate the creation of several regional franchises, in Yemen, Iraq, Somalia, Syria and the Sahel.

These regional franchises have significant levels of autonomy; focus primarily on local issues (perhaps unsurprisingly, considering that they usually have a primarily local membership); and do not rely exclusively on al-Qaeda Central for finance and manpower. These franchises have been of tremendous use to al-Qaeda, allowing them a geographic reach that they arguably did not possess prior to 9/11.

In addition to al-Qaeda Central, two of its regional networks have been involved in attempted attacks in the West – al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen and its network in Iran – while a Sahel

precursor group has also attempted attacks and trained individuals who have planned to do so.

Franchises in Syria, Somalia and Iraq have lacked the capacity to attempt attacks against the Western homeland so far (although some have been successful in attacking more accessible Western targets based locally). While not all of these groups necessarily pose an operational threat outside their own borders at present, there is no guarantee that this will remain the case. For example, foreign fighters returning from jihad in Syria are a clear concern for the future, and the al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq is currently stronger than it has been at any time since 2008.

The largest number of al-Qaeda fighters currently appears to be based in Syria, followed by Somalia. Pakistan, where al-Qaeda's core is based, has a smaller amount of fighters, although the group has been integrated into a broader insurgency there.

However, a group's capacity does not depend solely on its size. The al-Qaeda franchise in Yemen does not have the largest amount of manpower, but has shown itself to be the most likely of being able to carry out a 9/11 style terrorist 'spectacular'.

Several other countries contain varying levels of an al-Qaeda presence, with an established network in Iran and developing networks in Libya, the Sinai Peninsula, Nigeria and Tunisia that could eventually pose severe security threats to the West. The ungoverned spaces of southern Libya may prove to be a particular concern in the future, a fear heightened by the attack on the U.S. Embassy there in September 2012 that led to the death of Ambassador Christopher Stevens.

Furthermore, assessing al-Qaeda's military strength only goes part of the way to being able to understand the scale of the overall threat. Its ideology has been disseminated far and wide since 9/11. Therefore, the group's reach extends far beyond its leadership, and the danger provided by the group's message is a legacy that will endure throughout Western Europe and the United States for the foreseeable future.

Introduction

The status of the group *Qa'idat al-Jihad* (more commonly known as al-Qaeda, or AQ) as the pre-eminent terrorist security threat to the West was once again brought into focus in August 2013. In response to intercepted communications between Ayman al-Zawahiri, AQ's *emir*, and Nasir al-Wahayshi, the head of al-Qaeda in Yemen, the American government shutdown its embassies across the Middle East and North Africa and issued a global travel warning to its citizens. Al-Zawahiri and al-Wahayshi were believed to be discussing a large plot against Western targets and government infrastructure in Yemen.

A response to AQ and AQ-inspired terrorism is a high priority for the British government. On 18 January 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron stated that 'we face a large and existential terrorist threat from a group of extremists based in different parts of the world who want to do the biggest possible amount of damage to our interests and way of life'.¹ The Prime Minister expanded on this three days later, contrasting the reduction of threats emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan with: the growth of AQ franchises in Somalia and Yemen; 'Islamist-inspired terrorism' in Nigeria; and security issues posed by events in Libya and Mali. He described this as 'the work that our generation faces'.²

All of these countries contain varying levels of AQ presence; yet, to what extent does each group pose a threat to the West? Which ones are the most credible security threats outside their own borders?

This paper studies the state of AQ today, by analysing its core in Afghanistan and Pakistan (AfPak); the Middle East and African groups that are regarded as AQ franchises; and nations with a significant AQ presence or network. It analyses these groups' membership, their key

leaders, where they are based geographically, and whether they have attempted attacks upon the Western homeland. It then attempts to project which strands of AQ will be the most dangerous in the future.

Assumptions

(1) While there is a level of opacity as to AQ's exact operating structure, in the pre-9/11 period, AQ was a hierarchical group that operated broadly with Osama bin Laden as *emir*, and with a *shura* council immediately below him. There was also a military committee; financial committee; and a *fatwa* committee, as well as a media arm.³ Muslims from around the world could receive basic military training from the group, and then be given the option of transfer to various jihadist conflict zones around the world. A select few would be given extra training and utilised for specialised, high-impact terrorist operations.

British journalist and AQ specialist Jason Burke explains the group's strategy in these years as that of

a venture capitalist firm, sponsoring projects submitted by a variety of groups or individuals, in the hope that they would be profitable. Together these links [...] allow us to speak of a loose "network of networks" [...] within the broad movement of Islamic militancy that had some connections to the "al-Qaeda hardcore".⁴

(2) The military response to 9/11 decimated not only AQ's Afghan safe haven and killed some of its key leaders, it also led to a decentralisation of the entire organisation. The development of franchise AQ groups emerging across the Middle East and Africa is evidence of this. However, the fluid nature of the group's membership and the dispersal of its presence mean that this paper cannot cover all countries which have some kind of AQ activity.

1. House of Commons – Hansard, *U.K. Parliament*, 18 January 2013, available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm130118/debtext/130118-0001.htm>.

2. House of Commons – Hansard, *U.K. Parliament*, 21 January 2013, available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm130121/debtext/130121-0001.htm>.

3. 'United States of America v. Usama Bin Laden et al.', United States District Court, Southern District of New York (6 February 2001), available at: http://www.911myths.com/images/0/0f/Jamal_al-Fadl.pdf.

4. Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, (London: Penguin, 2003), p.13.

(3) AQ's success in disseminating its ideology after 9/11 has led to a greater emphasis on inspiring acts of terrorism (particularly in the West), as opposed to providing operational oversight. This has partly been out of necessity rather than choice, as AQ's capacity to strike the West has diminished (despite several attempts, AQ has not carried out a successful attack in the West since the London bombings in July 2005). Locally, however, AQ and its franchises still carry out a variety of lethal bombing campaigns and insurgency campaigns.

What is AQ?

Most agree that AQ is an international terrorist network. Yet, there is currently insufficient questioning of what being part of AQ today constitutes, and how much relevance being 'al-Qaeda linked' (a phrase constantly used by both politicians and the media) actually has. For example, by failing to explore the extent of the connections, there can be a tendency to conflate AQ militancy with that of Salafi-jihadism more broadly; AQ has subsequently been bestowed with a potency that it does not actually hold. Links to AQ within the chaotic structures of Salafi-jihadi militant movements may, at times, be extremely significant; but, equally, at times they may not.

The question of 'what is al-Qaeda' was posed by terrorism researchers J.M. Berger and Clint Watts, in July 2011.⁵ Their study surveyed 112 individuals, including academics and government representatives, on whether the following criteria could be defined as 'al-Qaeda'. The percentage responding 'yes' are as follows:

- Muslim extremists who have sworn *bayat* to Osama bin Laden or the current *emir* of the AQ organisation: **87%**.
- Formally branded AQ franchises: **85%**.
- Extremists who take orders from AQ's *emir* or his appointed deputies, but may or may not have sworn *bayat*: **84%**.
- Extremists who are significantly financed at the direction of AQ's *emir* or his deputies: **72%**.
- Organisations whose leaders have publicly expressed loyalty to AQ or its *emir*: **61%**.
- Nominally independent extremist networks that provide significant services, such as training camps or money laundering, which are used in AQ operations: **50%**.
- Ideologues who explicitly justify or defend AQ ideology and tactics, without having strong operational ties to the organisation: **28%**.
- People who take part in the broad social movement inspired by AQ, but who may not have direct or operational links to terrorist leaders: **22%**.
- Extremists based in the AfPak region: **16%**.

5. 'What is Al Qaeda, Part 1', *Intelwire*, 9 July 2011, available at: <http://news.intelwire.com/2011/07/what-is-al-qaeda-part-1.html>. Similar questions were asked by journalist Max Fisher in: 'The Al-Qaeda Myth', *The Atlantic*, 9 September 2011, available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/09/the-al-qaeda-myth/244857/>; as well as in: 'Who counts as al-Qaeda?', *Washington Post*, 16 October 2012, available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2012/10/16/who-counts-as-al-qaeda/>; and: 'Is the Algeria hostage crisis really al-Qaeda?', *Washington Post*, 17 January 2013, available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/01/17/is-the-algeria-hostage-crisis-really-al-qaeda/>.

In terms of which specific groups should be considered a part of AQ, the 'yes' results are as follows:⁶

- Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan: **96%**.
- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP): **95%**.
- Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI): **93%**.
- Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): **82%**.
- Al-Shabaab: **58%.***
- Haqqani Network: **54%**.
- Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP): **51%**.
- Afghan Taliban: **50%**.
- Lashkar-e-Taiba: **48%**.
- Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG): **32%**.
- Revolution Muslim: **27%**.

**Note: this survey was taken before al-Shabaab was formally integrated into the AQ structure in February 2012.*

It is clear that outside the formal franchises, there is significant disagreement as to what constitutes being a part of AQ and how close ties have to be in order to be described as such. The only categories for which there would appear to be a broad consensus for classifying as AQ are:

- Muslim extremists who have sworn *bayat* to Osama bin Laden or the current *emir* of the AQ organisation;
- Formally branded AQ franchises;
- Extremists who take orders from AQ's *emir* or his appointed deputies, but may or may not have sworn *bayat*;
- Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan;
- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP);
- Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI); and
- Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

This lack of a precise definition over which groups should actually be considered part of AQ makes formulating a coherent response problematic. This difficulty was amplified by reports from August 2013 that AQ's senior leaders participated in a conference call (that the U.S. discovered via intercept) alongside groups not regarded as official AQ franchises – for example, in Nigeria, the Sinai Peninsula and Uzbekistan.⁷

This study breaks countries with an AQ presence into four broad categories of activity: the group's core, its formal franchises, its established networks, and its developing networks.

6. 'What is Al Qaeda, Part 2', *Intelwire*, 15 July 2011, available at: <http://news.intelwire.com/2011/07/what-is-al-qaeda-part-2.html>.

7. 'Al Qaeda Conference Call Intercepted by U.S. Officials Sparked Alert', *The Daily Beast*, 7 August 2013, available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/08/07/al-qaeda-conference-call-intercepted-by-u-s-officials-sparked-alerts.html>

AQ and its franchises⁸

At-a-glance summary

FIELDS	AfPak	Yemen	Iraq	Syria	Somalia	The Sahel	Iran
Approx. membership	300	1,000	800-2,500	6-10,000	4-8,000	300-1,000	100s
Location	North, South Waziristan; Kunar; Faryab; Logar	Sana'a; Marib; Hadramout; Dhamar; Ibb; al-Baitha; Lahij; Abyan; Shabwa	Primarily northwest Iraq	Aleppo; Latakia; Idlib; al-Qusayr; Raqqa; Deir al-Zor; Homs; Daraa; Damascus	Mogadishu; Hudur; Buloburde; Bulo Marer; Puntland	Northern Mali; Southern Libya; Mauritania; Algeria	Zahedan
Key leaders	Ayman al-Zawahiri; Farouq al-Qahtani; Saif al-Adel; Adam Gadahn; Adnan el-Shukrijumah; Ustad Ahmed Farooq	Nasir al-Wahayshi; Qasim al-Raymi; Ibrahim al-Asiri; Ibrahim al-Rubaish	Abu Du'a	Abu Mohammad al-Golani; Maysar Ali Musa Abdallah al-Juburi; Anas Hasan Khattab; Iyad Toubasi; Mustafa Abdul Latif	Mukhtar Robow; Ahmed Abdi Godane; Ali Mohamed Rage; Fuad Qalaf; Ibrahim Haji Jama Mead	Abdelmalek Droukdel; Djamel Okacha	Yasin al-Suri; Muhsin al-Fadhli
Attacks against the Western homeland	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes

AfPak

While AQ remains strong in Afghanistan and Pakistan (AfPak), conditions are clearly not as welcoming as they once were. In Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden was formerly sheltered by the Taliban, and AQ could openly train and recruit – the consequences of which were the 1998 Embassy bombings, the 2000 USS *Cole* bombing, and 9/11. Now the U.S. is at war with the group there. Meanwhile, in Pakistan, AQ is now not only subject to regular U.S. drone strikes, it also has a government that is (at least, nominally) hostile towards it.

The way in which AQ operates in AfPak is best understood by studying the region as a whole, rather than two separate countries.

After 9/11, AQ moved to integrate itself into a broader AfPak insurgency that provides shelter and operational support – essentially outsourcing its operational capabilities to local partners.⁹ Whereas once AQ's leadership roles were dominated by Arabs, the group has now taken on a more localised component and has been integrated into a broader regional militancy.

AQ fighters have been integrated within insurgencies such as the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin and

8. Steve Coll, author of *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, questions whether the term 'franchise' is an invitation to unnecessarily perpetuate a state of war. He says that '[a] franchise is a business that typically operates under strict rules laid down by a parent corporation; to apply that label to Al Qaeda's derivative groups today is false. If Al Qaeda is not coherent enough to justify a formal state of war, the war should end; if the Administration wishes to argue that some derivative groups justify emergency measures, it should identify that enemy accurately. [...] Yet the empirical case for a worldwide state of war against a corporeal thing called Al Qaeda looks increasingly threadbare. A war against a name is a war in name only.' See: Steve Coll, 'Name Calling', *The New Yorker*, 4 March 2013, available at: http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2013/03/04/130304taco_talk_coll.

9. Gohar Abbas, 'The New Face of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan', *ISN ETH – Zurich*, 13 December 2012, available at: <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=156054>.

the Taliban (senior fighter Qari Zia Rahman operates as a dual AQ and Taliban commander in both Afghanistan and Pakistan).¹⁰ However, AQ's primary partner is the Haqqani network, the Afghan and Pakistani insurgent group that is backed by elements of the Pakistani security services.¹¹ The Haqqani network fought against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, and has had links to AQ from at least the beginning of the 1990s. It was the network which helped AQ to establish a safe haven in the tribal areas of Pakistan, following the organisation's expulsion from Afghanistan post-9/11.¹²

AQ's activities – along with those of the Islamic Jihad Union, a splinter from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a group bin Laden helped fund and whose leaders have held senior positions within AQ –¹³ have become increasingly integrated with the Haqqanis. A senior Haqqani leader stated that there 'is no distinction between us [and al-Qaeda]... we are all one.'¹⁴

Also relevant is Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) – the umbrella group formed in December 2007 – which pools resources and manpower, and is comprised of militants or splinter groups from a variety of Pashtun Pakistani groups.¹⁵ John Brennan, the current Director of the C.I.A., said that TTP and AQ 'train together, they plan together, they plot together. They are

almost indistinguishable.'¹⁶ Daniel Benjamin, the former State Department's ambassador-at-large for counterterrorism, described AQ and TTP's relationship as 'symbiotic', with AQ relying on TTP for 'safe haven in the Pashtun areas along the Afghan-Pakistani border', and TTP taking ideological inspiration from AQ.¹⁷

Another group with which AQ has clear operational ties is Harakat-ul Jihad al-Islami (HUJI – a.k.a. the 313 Brigade), which has been linked to a series of terrorist attacks (including suicide bombings) inside Pakistan and India. HUJI, designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in August 2010,¹⁸ has been described by one analyst as AQ's 'military arm' in Pakistan:¹⁹ the group's fighters have trained in AQ camps; its (now deceased) leader, Ilyas Kashmiri, provided operational support to AQ; and its website featured a banner proclaiming itself to be 'Al Qaida Brigade 313'.²⁰ The former head of HUJI was Ustad Ahmed Farooq, now AQ's Pakistani spokesman.²¹

As a result, identifying which of the litany of attacks that take place in AfPak were specifically carried out by AQ, as opposed to other AfPak insurgent groups, is not easy and not necessarily the best way to measure the group's potency. Even attacks for which AQ has claimed responsibility – such as the suicide attack in Khost, in August 2008, against the Forward Operating Base that hosts Coalition

10. See: 'The Taliban in Their Own Words', *Newsweek*, 25 September 2009, available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2009/09/25/the-taliban-in-their-own-words.html>. See also: 'ISAF kills "several" al Qaeda-linked fighters in Kunar raid', *Long War Journal*, 31 December 2012, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/12/isaf_kills_several_a.php.

11. 'The Haqqani Network: A Strategic Threat', Institute for the Study of War (2012), available at: http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Haqqani_StrategicThreatweb_29MAR_0.pdf.

12. Ibid.

13. 'QE.I.10.01. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan', Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, *United Nations*, available at: <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE01001E.shtml>.

14. 'The Haqqani Nexus and the Evolution of al-Qaida', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (July 2011), available at: http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/CTC-Haqqani-Report_Rassler-Brown-Final_Web.pdf.

15. Ayesha Siddiqi, 'Pakistan's Counterterrorism Strategy: Separating Friends from Enemies', *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2011), available at: <http://csis.org/files/publication/twq11wintersiddiqi.pdf>.

16. 'Pakistani Taliban behind Times Square bombing attempt, White House says', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 May 2010, available at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/10/nation/la-na-ny-bomb-20100510>. While he does not doubt the overall closeness of the two groups, this interpretation has been disputed by al-Qaeda researcher Kevin Jackson, who cites a December 2010 letter sent to TTP *emir* Hakimullah Mahsud Hak from two high-ranking AQ members, Abu Yahya al-Libi and Atiyah Abdul Rahman. They warn Mahsud not to try and poach AQ members in order to strengthen TTP's ranks, seemingly showing that there is not a shared membership and operational command. See: 'GUEST POST: The Pledge of Allegiance and its Implications', *Jihadology*, 27 July 2012, available at: <http://jihadology.net/2012/07/27/guest-post-the-pledge-of-allegiance-and-its-implications/>.

17. 'U.S. Adds Legal Pressure on Pakistani Taliban', *New York Times*, 1 September 2010, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/02/world/asia/02talib.html?_r=0.

18. 'Designations of Harakat-ul Jihad Islami (HUJI) and its Leader Mohammad Ilyas Kashmiri', *United States Department of State*, 6 August 2010, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/08/145779.htm>.

19. 'Al Qaeda Brigade 313 website goes online', *Long War Journal*, 2 August 2010, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/08/al_qaeda_brigade_313_website_goes_online.php.

20. 'Al Qaeda Brigade 313 website goes online', *Long War Journal*, 2 August 2010.

21. 'The New Face of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan', *ISN ETH – Zurich*, 13 December 2012.

troops – had participation from the Haqqanis.²² AQ and Haqqani fighters have also been killed alongside each other by U.S. drones.²³ Therefore, assessing the strength of AQ itself in AfPak cannot be easily disaggregated from assessing the strength of local militant groups – which remains considerable.

1. How many members does it have?

Membership of groups such as AQ is always hard to quantify exactly, due to the fluidity of such networks. By late 1999, the C.I.A.'s Counterterrorism Center believed that AQ's formal membership could be in the hundreds;²⁴ a document discovered at bin Laden's Abbottabad compound put it (as of August 2002) at 170.²⁵ However, U.S. counterterrorism policy has led to the death or detention of many of AQ's former leaders since 9/11, and, with that document now over a decade old, it only provides limited insight.

The U.S. government (USG) assessed, in June 2010, that the number of AQ leaders and fighters based in Pakistan was over 300;²⁶ in April 2012, that was revised to 'several hundred'.²⁷ However, this figure is disputed by Audrey Keith Cronin's assertion that AQ's core numbers in Pakistan are now 'roughly 50-100'.²⁸

In September 2012, Matt Olsen – the Director of the USG's National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) – declared that 'al-Qaeda's core is a shadow of its former self and the overall threat from al-Qaeda in Pakistan

is diminished'.²⁹ The reduction in terrorist plots against the West, and emanating from Pakistan, would lend credence to this analysis: AQ has had no success on this front since the bombings against the London transport network in July 2005.

However, the '300' number cited by the USG is around double that from bin Laden's 2002 document. This would suggest that – in terms of numbers – rather than being 'a shadow of its former self', AQ's core has actually grown.³⁰

This problem is even more apparent in Afghanistan, where the common perception is that AQ's presence is small. Mike McConnell, the former U.S. Director of National Intelligence, reportedly claimed that there were 200 AQ fighters there in the summer of 2008.³¹ In June 2010, then-C.I.A. Director Leon Panetta put the numbers at '50 to 100, maybe less',³² and, in April 2011, General David Petraeus said that the AQ presence was at 'less than 100 or so'.³³

However, as Bill Roggio at the *Long War Journal* has noted, an April 2011 press release from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) stated that 'coalition forces have killed more than 25 al-Qaida leaders and fighters' in the previous month.³⁴ In September 2011, another ISAF press release stated that the

22. 'Al Qaeda claims responsibility for CIA attack', *CNN*, 7 January 2010, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/01/07/afghanistan.cia.al.queada/index.html>.

23. 'The Haqqani Nexus and the Evolution of al-Qaida', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (July 2011).

24. Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, (London, U.K.: Penguin Group, 2004), p. 474.

25. 'Secret Osama bin Laden files reveal al Qaeda membership', *Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 2012, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/9243503/Secret-Osama-bin-Laden-files-reveal-al-Qaeda-membership.html>.

26. 'New Estimate of Strength of Al Qaeda Is Offered', *New York Times*, 30 June 2010, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/01/world/asia/01queada.html>.

27. 'Brennan on bin Laden raid, and "dangerous" Yemen', *CNN*, 20 April 2012, available at: <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/04/20/brennan-on-bin-laden-raid-and-dangerous-yemen/>.

28. Audrey Keith Cronin, 'Why Drones Fail', *Foreign Affairs*, (July/August 2013), p. 45.

29. 'CNN Fact Check: Is al Qaeda's core decimated or is group growing?', *CNN*, 23 October 2012, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/22/politics/fact-check-al-queada>.

30. Debate continues as to the extent that AQ's strength can be effectively measured by its membership. For example, see 'Shadowy Figure: Al Qaeda's Size Is Hard to Measure', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 September 2011, available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903285704576560593124523206.html>. Furthermore, as Bruce Hoffman and Peter Bergen have written, AQ has always been a relatively small group acting 'as an ideological and military vanguard seeking to influence and train other jihadist groups'. In this regard, there is not a significant change today from when AQ was at the peak of its strength before 9/11. This contradiction highlights the inherent problems of measuring the threat of the group solely by counting its fighters.

31. As quoted by Steve Hadley, former National Security Adviser to President Bush. See: 'Steve Hadley at FP: "I should have asked that question"; John Allen: No boots on the ground for 20 years; "Who is Alex Trebek?" The QDR is not a "new start"; Mike Mount, out; and a little more.', *Foreign Policy*, 14 March 2013, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/14/steve_hadley_at_fp_i_should_have_asked_that_question_john_allen_no_boots_on_the_?wp_login_redirect=0.

32. 'CIA: At most, 50-100 Al Qaeda in Afghanistan', *ABC News*, 27 June 2010, available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2010/06/cia-at-most-50100-al-queada-in-afghanistan/>.

33. 'Petraeus says al-Qaeda not on rise in Afghanistan', *USA Today*, 9 April 2011, available at: http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/afghanistan/2011-04-09-petraeus-afghanistan_N.htm.

34. 'ISAF Confirms Number 2 Insurgent Killed in Coalition Airstrike', ISAF Joint Command – Afghanistan, *ISAF*, 26 April 2011, available at: <http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/isaf-confirms-number-2-insurgent-killed-in-coalition-airstrike.html>.

total number of al-Qaeda insurgents captured or killed in that year had risen to over forty.³⁵

Yet, despite these claims and a string of counterterrorism successes, the official number of AQ fighters in Afghanistan has stayed static. In April 2012, Brennan stated his belief that there were 100 AQ members in Afghanistan.³⁶ In October 2012, General Ghulam Sakhi Roogh Lawanay, chief of police in Logar, estimated the group's numbers to be between 100 and 150.³⁷ Nine months later, Major-General Joseph Osterman, the deputy operations chief of Afghanistan's N.A.T.O.-led force, put this figure at less than 100.³⁸

The numbers remain consistent – between 50 and 150 – no matter how many AQ individuals ISAF is explicitly stating it is taking off the battlefield. This suggests that either the USG has poor intelligence on AQ's capabilities and presence in Afghanistan, or that the ISAF definition of what constitutes an AQ member is significantly looser than the USG's, or that AQ is able to replenish its ranks in Afghanistan with considerable ease.

2. Where is it based?

In Pakistan, AQ operatives are based in the tribal areas, particularly the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). U.S. drone activity has been focused primarily on North Waziristan; areas such as Miramshah, which contains a strong Haqqani presence; and South Waziristan, especially in villages such as Babar Ghar and Shin Warsak.

In Afghanistan, Kunar – a mountainous eastern province near Pakistan – remains a stronghold for insurgencies, including AQ. Bin Laden initially fled to Kunar in late 2001 (after the collapse of the Taliban), and,

shortly before his death, considered relocating al-Qaeda Central (AQC) there as a result of the effectiveness of U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan.³⁹ Afghan officials have also stated that there is an AQ presence in Faryab, northwest Afghanistan, and Logar, just south of Kabul.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Kunduz, in the north, contains a significant IMU presence.⁴¹

3. Who are its senior leaders?

Certain senior members of AQ are still likely based in Afghanistan – for example, its Afghan *emir*, Farouq al-Qahtani, who is believed to be operating in the mountainous Nuristan region in eastern Afghanistan.⁴²

However, most of AQ's senior leadership (AQSL) likely resides in the tribal areas of Pakistan, particularly in FATA (although the discovery of bin Laden in Abbottabad raises the possibility that they are in a more urban area than sometimes assumed).

Michael Vickers, the U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, claimed in September 2011 that there were 'perhaps four' key AQ leaders in left in Pakistan.⁴³

This number would certainly include the current AQ *emir*, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is likely based in FATA. Previously the head of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, al-Zawahiri merged his organisation with bin Laden's in 1998. Despite his lack of charisma and his divisive reputation in jihadist circles, al-Zawahiri's long-time association with bin Laden, and his previous position within the AQ structure, made him the obvious choice for bin Laden's successor.

Also likely to be in FATA is Saif al-Adel, a

35. 'ISAF Joint Command Morning Operational Update Sept 3, 2011', ISAF Joint Command – Afghanistan, ISAF, 3 September 2011, available at: <http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/isaf-joint-command-morning-operational-update-sept-3-2011.html>.

36. 'Brennan on bin Laden raid, and "dangerous" Yemen', CNN, 20 April 2012.

37. 'Al Qaeda in Afghanistan is attempting a comeback', Fox News, 21 October 2012, available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2012/10/21/al-qaeda-in-afghanistan-is-attempting-comeback/>.

38. 'U.S. General says al Qaeda just surviving in Afghanistan', Reuters, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/26/us-afghanistan-qaeda-idUSBRE96P09M20130726?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>.

39. 'Should we still fear al Qaeda?', CNN, 6 February 2013, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/02/03/opinion/bergen-al-qaeda-deadly/index.html>.

40. 'Al Qaeda in Afghanistan is attempting a comeback', Fox News, 21 October 2012.

41. 'ISAF kills "several" al Qaeda-linked fighters in Kunar raid', Long War Journal, 31 December 2012.

42. Ibid.

43. 'Soldier, Thinker, Hunter, Spy: Drawing a Bead on Al Qaeda', New York Times, 3 September 2011, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/04/world/04vickers.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

bin Laden lieutenant and senior member of AQ's military committee, who formerly gave advanced commando courses at AQ training camps in Afghanistan.⁴⁴ After fleeing Afghanistan in December 2001, al-Adel was initially placed under house arrest in Iran. However, as of October 2010, he is thought to have been released and to have re-connected with militants in the North-West Frontier Province.⁴⁵

Adam Gadahn, an American-born member of AQ, is also likely based in Pakistan. Gadahn, a convert, was raised in California and has appeared in a variety of AQ videos, warning of imminent attacks against the U.S.⁴⁶

Another former U.S. resident, Adnan el-Shukrijumah, is thought to be based in north Pakistan. El-Shukrijumah, a former resident of Florida, is AQ's operations chief for North America,⁴⁷ and helped organise the September 2009 plot to conduct suicide attacks on subway trains in New York City.⁴⁸

He was likely assisted in this by the operational leader of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Matiur Rehman. LeJ have integrated with AQ and the Taliban in the tribal areas of Pakistan, and Rehman has worked with AQ in the past. He helped plan the 'liquid bomb' plot of 2006, which aspired to blow up transatlantic flights between North America and the U.K., and is tied to the murder of *Wall Street Journal*

reporter Daniel Pearl.⁴⁹ Rehman is also on the United Nation's Sanctions list of individuals associated with AQ, and the U.S. Treasury Department's list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists.⁵⁰

Rehman's alignment with a variety of groups – of which AQ is only one component – is a useful insight into the overlapping insurgencies in the AfPak region.

4. Is there a precedent for trying to attack the Western homeland?

Yes. AQC – including individuals who were members of AQ at the time of the 9/11 attacks – is based in Pakistan. AQC has also carried out a variety of other attacks on Western targets (including the 1998 bombing of embassies in East Africa, and the bombing of the USS *Cole* Naval Destroyer in Yemen in 2000).

The group has also provided bomb-making instruction, or direct ideological inspiration, to a host of individuals who had connected with the group in Pakistan and then attempted to commit attacks in the West. Their plots include:

- The 'shoe bomb' plot of 2001, in which Richard Reid and Saajid Badat were instructed to detonate devices, hidden in their shoes, whilst in mid-flight. Reid's bomb malfunctioned, while Badat backed out of the plan shortly before he was due to fly.
- The 'dirty bomb' cell of 2004 (led by Dhiren Barot), which aspired to attack U.S. and U.K. targets and was convicted in Britain in 2006.

44. *The 9/11 Commission Report: The Full Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, (W.W. Norton & Co, 2004), p. 157.

45. 'Saif al-Adel Back in Waziristan: A Top Terrorist Returns to Al-Qaida Fold', *Der Spiegel*, 25 October 2010, available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/saif-al-adel-back-in-waziristan-a-top-terrorist-returns-to-al-qaida-fold-a-725181.html>. Al-Adel was once thought to have been one of the senior AQ figures who, in July 2001, voiced his opposition to the major attacks against the U.S. that bin Laden had said were in motion (referring to the 'planes operation' which occurred on 9/11). See: *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p.251. However, in a 2005 interview, he spoke of how the purpose of the attacks 'was to prompt [the U.S.] to come out of its hole... The first reaction was the invasion of Afghanistan...'. Al-Adel described the invasion of Afghanistan as, 'What we had wished for.' See: 'Taking Stock of the Forever War', *New York Times*, 11 September 2005, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/11/magazine/11OSAMA.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0. See also: Peter Bergen, *Manhunt: From 9/11 to Abbottabad – The Ten-Year Search for Osama Bin Laden*, (Crown, 2012), p. 58.

46. 'Adam Gadahn Fast Facts', *CNN*, 23 March 2013, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/23/us/adam-gadahn-fast-facts>.

47. 'Al Qaeda's #3 misidentified again', *Long War Journal*, 5 October 2010, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/10/al_qaedas_3_misident.php#ixzz2PJYFUNG2.

48. 'Charges Unsealed Against Five Alleged Members of Al-Qaeda Plot to Attack the United States and United Kingdom', *United States Department of Justice*, 7 July 2010, available at: <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2010/July/10-nsd-781.html>.

49. 'Hunt for LeJ's Matiur Rehman intensifies', *The News*, 19 March 2013, available at: <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-166179-Hunt-for-LeJs-Matiur-Rehman-intensifies>.

50. See: 'Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Mati Ur-Rehman to its Sanctions List', United Nations Security Council Department of Public Information, *United Nations*, 22 August 2011, available at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10366.doc.htm>. See also: 'Alphabetical Listing of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons', *United States Department of the Treasury*, available at: <http://www.treasury.gov/ofac/downloads/sdnlist.txt>.

- The 'fertiliser bomb' plot of 2004, in which U.K.-based jihadists aspired to attack U.S. and U.K. targets. The operatives were all convicted in Britain in 2007.
- The 7/7 bombings on the London transport system, in 2005, which killed 52 individuals.
- The transatlantic airline 'liquid bomb' of 2006, for which U.K.-based operatives were jailed for aiming to blow up multiple transatlantic flights from the U.K. heading to the U.S. and Canada.
- The disrupted 2009 plot to blow up shopping malls in Manchester city centre in the U.K.
- The thwarted attempt, in 2009, by Najibullah Zazi; Zarein Ahmedzay; and Adis Medunjanin to detonate suicide bombs on the New York City Subway.

Yemen

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) creation was announced in January 2009, following a merger between AQ's Yemeni and Saudi branches. Regarded as the AQ group most operationally capable of striking within the West, it is described by USG representatives as AQ's most 'operationally active' franchise.⁵¹

AQAP regards itself as an alternative government to that in Sana'a. Therefore, it has attempted to gain, and then control, territory within Yemen. Between March 2011 and June 2012, it controlled towns in the provinces of Abyan and Shabwa in southern Yemen, subsequently declaring them Islamic 'emirates'. In doing so, AQAP introduced themselves to locals in Yemen as members of Ansar al-Sharia (AAS – which essentially

operates as AQAP's insurgent arm).⁵²

Mohammed al-Bashar, the Yemeni Embassy's official spokesman in Washington, D.C., has described AAS as 'AQAP's attempt to empower local jihadi-linked actors with ties to AQAP, and rebrand the movement under a global positive banner'.⁵³ The USG described AAS, which it designated as an FTO in October 2011, as 'simply AQAP's effort to rebrand itself, with the aim of manipulating people to join AQAP's terrorist cause'.⁵⁴ While AQAP and AAS broadly operate as one and the same, Ambassador Barbara Bodine, the former U.S.

After a June 2012 government offensive removed AQAP control from its southern 'emirates', the group focused more on insurgent 'hit and run' tactics: it regularly assassinates Yemeni security and military officials.

Ambassador to Yemen, has suggested that if key AQAP leaders were eliminated, AAS would still exist; moreover, even if AAS was eliminated, it may not destroy AQAP.⁵⁵

After a June 2012 government offensive removed AQAP control from its southern 'emirates', the group focused more on insurgent 'hit and run' tactics: it regularly assassinates Yemeni security and military officials. However, by mid-2013, AQAP had

52. 'Online Question and Answer Session with Abu Zubayr Adel al-Abah, Shari'a Official for al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula', International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (18 April 2012), available at: http://www.islamopediaonline.org/sites/default/files/abdu_zubayr_english.pdf.

53. Mohammed al-Bashar, Yemen Embassy Spokesman, Interview by the Author, Washington, D.C., 3 July 2012.

54. 'Terrorist Designations of Ansar al-Sharia as an Alias for Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula', *United States Department of State*, 4 October 2012, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/10/198659.htm>.

55. 'How Al Qaeda Grew in Yemen', *PBS*, 29 May 2012, available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/al-qaeda-in-yemen/understanding-yemens-al-qaeda-threat/#hb>.

51. 'U.S. official: Al Qaeda in Yemen bigger threat than in Pakistan', *CNN*, 18 December 2010, available at: http://edition.cnn.com/2010/US/12/17/al.qaeda.yemen/index.html?_s=PM:US. See also: 'Brennan on bin Laden raid, and "dangerous" Yemen', *CNN*, 20 April 2012.

again begun to control territory: this time, in Hadramout, eastern Yemen. Again, the Yemeni government was forced to dispatch its military in an attempt to expel AQAP.

In August 2013, AQAP was linked with a plot to attack Western ambassadors, foreign embassies and Yemeni infrastructure (including potential attacks on liquid gas stations and a plan to take over two ports in southern Yemen). The U.S. closed twenty two of its embassies across the Middle East and North Africa in response, and issued a global travel alert telling its citizens to be aware of the continued potential for AQ terrorist attacks.

1. How many members does it have?

While there is no definitive answer as to the size of AQAP's membership, estimates in the 2009-2011 period – from academics, the Yemeni government itself and other government officials – had generally been in the low to mid-hundreds.⁵⁶ However, by April 2012, Brennan had placed the number at over one thousand.⁵⁷

2. Where is it based?

AQAP has operated in various remote parts of Yemen located to the east of Sana'a, particularly the governorates of al-Jawf; al-Bayda; Aden; Marib; Hadramout; Shabwa; and Abyan.

However, following their partial expulsion from Abyan and Shabwa, in June 2012, the group has also redistributed more of its fighters throughout other parts of the country – primarily Sana'a, Marib, Dhamar, Ibb, Baitha, and Lahij; as well as Hadramout

(which remains an established stronghold for the group).

3. Who are its senior leaders?

Significant amounts of AQAP's leadership were connected to AQ prior to 9/11.

The head of both AQAP and AAS is a Yemeni, Nasir al-Wahayshi (a former secretary to Osama bin Laden), who was instrumental in overseeing the formation of AQAP. Al-Wahayshi had connected with AQ whilst in Afghanistan in 1998, and had fought with them at Tora Bora in late 2001. While escaping in the aftermath of that battle, al-Wahayshi was detained in Iran between late 2001 and 2003. He was then extradited to Yemen, where he was jailed until a 2006 prison break.⁵⁸ In 2013, al-Wahayshi was promoted to the role of 'general manager' within all of AQ, a sign of his increasing influence.⁵⁹

Like al-Wahayshi, Qasim al-Raymi (AQAP's military chief) is another Yemeni veteran of AQ's 1990s Afghan training camps. He too escaped during the 2006 Yemeni prison break.⁶⁰

Until recently, AQAP's deputy *emir* was Said al-Shehri, a Saudi who was formerly detained at Guantánamo Bay. A veteran of the Afghan jihad, al-Shehri previously acted as a facilitator for jihadists, and had been incorrectly reported as killed on several occasions (most recently in January 2013). However, in July 2013, AQAP confirmed his death in a U.S. drone strike.

The group's most notorious bomb-maker is the Saudi, Ibrahim al-Asiri, who constructed the bomb that AQAP recruit Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab had concealed in his underwear and unsuccessfully attempted to detonate on a flight headed to Detroit, Michigan, on 25 December 2009. The group's

56. See: James Spencer, 'A False Dawn for Yemen's Militants', *Foreign Affairs*, 8 June 2011, available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67883/james-spencer/a-false-dawn-for-yemens-militants?cid=soc-tumblr-snapshots-a-false-dawn-for-yemens-militants-060811>. See also: 'Gregory Johnsen on Yemen and AQAP', *Lawfare Blog*, 16 November 2012, available at: <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2012/11/gregory-johnsen-on-yemen-and-aqap/>. See also: 'Yemen: The Next Front Line Against al Qaeda', *CBS News*, 30 October 2010, available at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/10/30/earlyshow/saturday/main7006282.shtml>. See also: 'Pas plus de 500 membres d'al-Qaïda au Yémen', *Le Figaro*, 6 January 2010, available at: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2010/01/06/01003-20100106ARTFIG00424-pas-plus-de-500-membres-d-al-qaida-au-yemen-.php>. See also: 'Yemen Steps Back From Terror-Plot Claims, Highlighting U.S.'s Challenge', *Wall Street Journal*, 7 August 2012, available at: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1001424127887323838204578654070290876106.html?mod=ITP_pageone_2

57. 'Brennan on bin Laden raid, and "dangerous" Yemen', *CNN*, 20 April 2012.

58. Gregory Johnsen, 'A Profile of AQAP's Upper Echelon', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 24 July 2012, available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-profile-of-aqaps-upper-echelon>.

59. 'Al Qaeda Yemen Branch Plan Prompted U.S. Terror Alert', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 August 2013, available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323838204579001153325427902.html>

60. Johnsen, 'A Profile of AQAP's Upper Echelon', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 24 July 2012.

mufli, Ibrahim al-Rubaish, is also a former Saudi Guantánamo Bay detainee and veteran of AQ's Afghan training camps.⁶¹

4. Is there a precedent for trying to attack the Western homeland?

Yes. Of all the AQ franchises outside the core in Pakistan, AQAP has been the most active in attempting to attack targets in the West.

- On 25 December 2009, Abdulmutallab attempted – but failed – to detonate a bomb concealed in his underwear, whilst on a flight from Amsterdam heading to the U.S.
- On 29 October 2010, AQAP bombs were discovered in U.S.-bound cargo planes, during stopovers in the United Arab Emirates and the U.K.
- In April 2012, the C.I.A. thwarted an AQAP plan to use another underwear bomb on a flight headed to the U.S., after a Saudi agent had infiltrated the group.

The ideologue partly responsible for this focus on the West was Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born AQAP cleric. Either his direct instructions or his sermons have inspired a host of individuals to attack targets within the West. These individuals have included:

- Major Nidal Hasan, a U.S.-born army Major who was charged with the murders of thirteen people at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas, following a 5 November 2009 attack. Hasan and al-Awlaki were in e-mail contact.
- Rajib Karim, a British Bangladeshi who was in e-mail contact with al-Awlaki in January and February 2010. Karim worked for British Airways and discussed with al-Awlaki how his access to aviation information could

facilitate a terrorist attack.

- Faisal Shahzad, the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP)-trained individual who planted a bomb in New York's Times Square on 1 May 2010. Shahzad had been inspired by al-Awlaki's rhetoric.
- Roshonara Choudhry, who was convicted for attempting to murder Labour MP Stephen Timms at his constituency surgery in London on 14 May 2010. Choudhry had listened to al-Awlaki's lectures online.

Al-Awlaki was killed in a U.S. drone strike in al-Jawf, on 30 September 2011. However, the dissemination of his rhetoric – partially through AQAP's English-language magazine, *Inspire* – means that his exhorting of Muslims to attack the Western homeland continues to pose a danger.⁶²

Iraq

AQ's activities in Iraq have been under the banner of three separate organisations: al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI – now known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL).

AQ's first *emir* in Iraq was the Jordanian, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (who had taken his al-Tawhid wal-Jihad army from Afghanistan into Iraq, following the initial post-9/11 U.S. airstrikes against Afghanistan). Al-Zarqawi's influence and strength within the Iraqi insurgency grew, and he formally pledged allegiance to bin Laden in October 2004, subsequently renaming his organisation AQI (al-Zarqawi would be killed in a U.S. airstrike in June 2006).

On 15 January 2006, AQI established the MSC, an umbrella group that contained additional Sunni insurgent groups: Jaish al-Taifa al-Mansoura, al-Ahwal Brigades,

61. 'Ibrahim Sulayman Muhammad Arbaysh', Department of Defense – Joint Task Force Guantanamo, *New York Times*, 30 November 2005, available at: <http://projects.nytimes.com/guantanamo/detainees/192-ibrahim-sulayman-muhammad-arbaysh/documents/11>.

62. The most exhaustive work done on al-Awlaki is by Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens. For example, see: 'As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad', International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (2011), available at: <http://icr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1315827595ICSRPaperAsAmericanAsApplePieHowAnwarAlawakiBecameTheFaceofWesternJihad.pdf>.

The group has been able to use desert caves and hills along the Syrian border in Anbar as a retreat, and utilises the Euphrates River (which passes through both Iraq and Syria) to move recruits; money; and weaponry between the two countries.

Islamic Jihad Brigades, Army of al-Sunnah Wal Jama'a, al-Ghuraba Brigades, and Saraya Ansar al-Tawhid. The MSC was al-Zarqawi's attempt to control independent groups joining his movement, and to establish greater co-ordination between jihadist networks operating within in Iraq.⁶³ On 16 October 2006, with AQ unable to harness significant local support, it integrated the MSC into a newly rebranded ISI.⁶⁴

This group – essentially the MSC, plus Kataeb Ansar al-Tawheed wal-Sunnah and some tribal chiefs – immediately called for the establishment of a Sunni Islamic state (two additional groups – Saraya Fursan al-Tawhid and Saraya Millat al-Ibrahim – would join in November 2006).⁶⁵ This state would include the provinces of Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Mosul, and Salahuddin; parts of Wasit; and areas in Babel and Baghdad.⁶⁶

While the ISI has not been formally disavowed by AQC, relations between the two have

been strained in the past. For example, a letter discovered at bin Laden's Abbottabad compound – thought to be written by Adam Gadahn – outlined not only that contact between AQC and the ISI was minimal, but that the ISI had not co-ordinated with AQC before declaring its Islamic state in Iraq, saying that the ISI's 'improvised decision has caused a split in the Mujahidin ranks and their supporters inside and outside Iraq'. Gadahn recommended that AQ 'declare the cutoff [sic] of its organizational ties with [the ISI]. The relations between al-Qa'ida organization and [the ISI] have been practically cut off for a number of years.'⁶⁷

While Gadahn's advice was not followed, this exchange highlights the divisiveness which the ISI has caused in the past.

1. How many members does it have?

The estimates as to the amount of AQ fighters in Iraq vary significantly. Some analysts formerly placed the number at 15,000, a number significantly reduced by the capture of 8,800 and death of 2,400 by early 2008.⁶⁸

However, Mike McConnell, former Director of National Intelligence, reportedly assessed there to still be 15,000 members in the

63. Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The End Game: The Inside Struggle for Iraq from George W. Bush to Barack Obama*, (London, U.K.: Atlantic Books, 2012), p.192. See also: 'Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fs Bilad al-Rafidayn', Parliament of Australia, available at: https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&ret=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0CEIQFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.aph.gov.au%2FParliamentary_Business%2FCommittees%2FHouse_of_Representatives_Committees%3Furl%3Dpjcis%2Ftqjbr%2Ftqjbr.pdf&ei=BV51UfH7DMqw0AWB7IGgCg&usq=AFQjCNHQTP_SkVducu8V-RXQ4nAcyRCVpw&sig2=mx0ChbgFVV4XwWmyUmtS1w&bvm=bv.45512109.d.d2k. See also: Mahan Abedin, 'Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq: Fact or Fiction?', *The Jamestown Foundation*, 28 March 2006, available at: http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=717.

64. M.J. Kirdar, 'Al Qaeda in Iraq', Centre for Strategic & International Studies (June 2011), available at: http://csis.org/files/publication/110614_Kirdar_AlQaedaIraq_Web.pdf.

65. 'Mujahideen Shura Council', *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism*, available at: http://www.start.umd.edu/start/data_collections/tops/terrorist_organization_profile.asp?id=4575. See also: 'The Islamic State of Iraq Announces the Joining of Two Muhahideen Groups to its Ranks', *Kavkaz Center*, 1 December 2006, available at: <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2006/12/01/6632.shtml>.

66. 'Call for Sunni state in Iraq', *Financial Times*, 15 October 2006, available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/e239159e-5c6a-11db-9e7e-0000779e2340.html#axzz2RCzwK6fZ>.

67. Letter – Adam Gadahn to unknown recipient, *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (January 2011), available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/SOCOM-2012-0000004-Trans.pdf>.

68. Kirdar, 'Al Qaeda in Iraq', Centre for Strategic and International Studies (June 2011).

summer of 2008.⁶⁹ Then, in November 2011, Major-General Jeffrey Buchanan, the Director of Strategic Effects for United States Forces in Iraq, put the number of individuals within AQ's Iraq network as between 800 and 1,000.⁷⁰ By October 2012, this number had been reported elsewhere as 2,500.⁷¹

2. Where is it based?

The ISIL tends to operate in the desert and valley areas of northwest Iraq, where there is a high concentration of Sunni Arabs. The group has been able to use desert caves and hills along the Syrian border in Anbar as a retreat, and utilises the Euphrates River (which passes through both Iraq and Syria) to move recruits; money; and weaponry between the two countries.⁷² It has also recently strengthened its hold in Mosul, northern Iraq.⁷³

3. Who are its senior leaders?

Since April 2010, the *emir* of the ISI has been Abu Du'a (a.k.a. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Qurashi), the first Iraqi to head the group.⁷⁴ Abu Du'a previously oversaw religious courts in al-Qaim, an Anbar town, in western Iraq. These courts judged whether local citizens had supported the Iraqi government and coalition troops. Abu Du'a also kidnapped and executed individuals (sometimes even entire families); recruited fighters (mainly from Saudi Arabia); and funnelled fighters from Syria into local,

terrorist cells.⁷⁵

When Abu Du'a's accession was announced, it was also revealed that the ISI's deputy *emir* was to be the Moroccan Abu Abdallah al-Qurayshi, and its war minister al-Nasr Lidin Allah Abu Sulayman.⁷⁶ As of September 2009, its Minister of Shariah Commissions is Abdul-Wahab al-Mashhadani; its Minister of Public Affairs is Muhammad al-Dulaimi; its Minister for Prisoners' and Martyrs' Affairs is Hassan al-Juburi; its Minister for Security is Abdel-Razzak al-Shimmeri; its Minister for Health is Abdullah al-Qaissi; its Minister of Information is Ahmad al-Ta'i; its Minister for Oil is Usamah al-Lheibi; and its Minister of Finance is Yunis al-Hamdani.⁷⁷

4. Is there a precedent for trying to attack the Western homeland?

Technically not. A failed car bomb attack in London's West End and an attempted suicide attack on Glasgow airport a day later in June 2007 had potential ties to AQI, as telephone numbers of the group's members were found on the mobile phones of the bombers – Bilal Abdulla and Kafeel Ahmed.⁷⁸ Furthermore, Abdulla also left a letter to the 'Soldiers of the Islamic States of Iraq', with whom he is believed to have joined up whilst in Iraq in 2006.

However, this was assessed to be a reference to another group, the Islamic Army in Iraq, rather than the ISI itself.⁷⁹ Furthermore, an American counterterrorism official described

69. As quoted by Steve Hadley. See: 'Steve Hadley at FP: "I should have asked that question"; John Allen: No boots on the ground for 20 years; "Who is Alex Trebek?" The QDR is not a "new start."; Mike Mount, out; and a little more.', *Foreign Policy*, 14 March 2013.

70. 'Leaving Iraq, U.S. Fears New Surge of Qaeda Terror', *New York Times*, 5 November 2011, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/06/world/middleeast/leaving-iraq-us-fears-new-surge-of-qaeda-terror.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all&_r=2&pagewanted=all&_r=2.

71. 'Al-Qaeda making comeback in Iraq, officials say', *USA Today*, 9 October 2012, available at: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/10/09/al-qaeda-iraq/1623297/>.

72. 'Syria spillover, al Qaeda strain Iraq security', *Chicago Tribune*, 5 March 2013, available at: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-03-05/news/sns-rt-us-iraq-syriabre9240st-20130305_1_sunni-discontent-shi-ite-sunni-iraq-s-shi-ite.

73. 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq gathering strength in northern stronghold of Mosul', *Daily Star Lebanon*, 21 June 2013, available at: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Jun-21/221072-al-qaeda-in-iraq-gathering-strength-in-northern-stronghold-of-mosul.aspx#axzz2X7xdEKKJ>.

74. 'QI.A.299.11. Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai', Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, *United Nations*, available at: <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQI29911E.shtml>.

75. 'Al Qaeda Facilitator Likely Dead in Coalition Air Strike', *United States Department of Defense*, 26 October 2005, available at: <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=17963>.

76. Omar Ashour, 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq: Eliminating Leaders Will Not Necessarily Cut Lifelines', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 30 June 2010, available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/06/30/al-qaeda-in-iraq-eliminating-leaders-will-not-necessarily-cut-lifelines/6b1p>.

77. Evan Kohlmann, 'Al-Qaida Declares New "Cabinet Roster" for its "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI)', *Counterterrorism Blog*, 21 September 2009, available at: http://counterterrorismblog.org/2009/09/al-qaeda-declares_new_cabinet.php. Yunis al-Hamdani recently delivered a sermon denouncing the Nouri al-Maliki government. See: 'Preacher of Fallujah Fri-prayers holds Maliki responsibility of mass execution', *National Iraqi News Agency*, 5 April 2013, available at: http://www.ninanews.com/english/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=GHDMLM.

78. 'British Inquiry of Failed Plots Points to Iraq's Qaeda Group', *New York Times*, 14 December 2007, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/14/world/europe/14london.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&_r=1.

79. 'Sunni Muslim groups in Iraq', *Guardian*, 17 December 2008, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/dec/17/glasgow-airport-trial-uk-security.1>.

the attacks as only 'related' to AQI, as opposed to being directed by it.

In September 2007, the group did offer \$100,000 to anyone who murdered Lars Vilks – a Swedish cartoonist who had drawn insulting pictures of Islam's Prophet, Mohammed – and \$50,000 for killing the editor of the publication that printed them.⁸⁰ While there were no operational ties to the ISI, an American female convert, Colleen LaRose, would eventually be convicted of charges relating to a plot to murder Vilks.

In June 2013, five ISIL members seeking to manufacture chemical weapons were arrested in Baghdad, and part of their plan was thought to have involved smuggling some of these weapons to the U.S.; Canada; and Europe. However, no organised, operational plot to attack targets seemingly yet existed.⁸¹

Syria

AQ's presence in Syria comes via the al-Nusra Front (ANF – a.k.a. Jabhat al-Nusra). It is one of the most effective fighting forces operating against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. The group is primarily Syrian, yet interspersed with foreign fighters – including those from the West.

In the summer of 2011,⁸² Abu Du'a instructed Abu Mohammad al-Golani, a member of Islamic State of Iraq [ISI] and ANF's eventual *emir*, to set up an AQ group in Syria. This group, the ANF, was partially funded by the ISI, and the U.S. State Department designated the group as an alias of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in December 2012.⁸³ A month later, AQ officially announced its affiliation with ANF. AQ's senior leadership was previously

not explicit in championing its ties to the ANF, likely because of the potential this has for further dividing the opposition movement in Syria.

In April 2013, Abu Du'a announced that the ANF was 'merely an extension and part of the Islamic State of Iraq'. He went on to claim that the ISI would now be known as the 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant'.⁸⁴ The ANF's *emir*, Abu Mohammad al-Golani, stated that his group had not been consulted on this announcement, and still intended to operate under the ANF banner. However, al-Golani did also pledge his loyalty to al-Zawahiri.⁸⁵

The ISIL was annulled in June 2013 by al-Zawahiri, who instructed the ISI to focus on Iraq, and the ANF on Syria.⁸⁶ Abu Du'a seemingly rejected al-Zawahiri's instructions, claiming that the 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant remains'.⁸⁷ At present, ANF acts independently, or alongside the ISI, depending upon what part of Syria it is operating in.⁸⁸

In addition, the ANF has seized oil fields in eastern Syria – which has allowed them to pay its fighters, and subsequently recruit in greater numbers. It has established basic administration and provision of services in areas that it controls.

1. How many members does it have?

The ANF is estimated to have between 6 and 10,000 fighters.⁸⁹

80. 'Al-Qaeda Offers Reward for Cartoonist's Death', *ABC News*, 15 September 2007, available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=3607577&page=1#Ud6XBPIOTS4>.

81. 'Iraq breaks up al Qaeda chemical weapons cell', *Long War Journal*, 1 June 2013, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/iraq_breaks_up_al_qa.php.

82. Aaron Zelin, 'Al-Qaeda Announces an Islamic State in Syria', *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 9 April 2013, available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-announces-an-islamic-state-in-syria>.

83. 'Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusra Front as an Alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq', *United States Department of State*, 11 December 2012, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/12/2011759.htm>.

84. 'Iraqi al-Qaeda and Syrian group "merge"', *Al-Jazeera*, 9 April 2013, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/04/201349194856244589.html>.

85. 'Syrian jihadists pledge fealty to al-Qaeda', *Financial Times*, 10 April 2013, available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/13a6316c-a1fa-11e2-8971-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2VGb1TwUU>.

86. 'Sheikh Aymenn al-Zawahiri annuls Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham', Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, 9 June 2013, available at: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2013/06/sheikh-aymenn-al-zawahiri-annuls-islamic-state>.

87. 'Qaeda in Iraq rejects Zawahiri ruling on Nusra', *AFP*, 15 June 2013, available at: <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gg-bj5nK-QNdWEdESx-cfYHTZE-Q?docId=CNG.b90bcb5e82e2611ef8804ac656bb40df741>.

88. Aaron Zelin and Clint Watts conversation, *Twitter*, 5 August 2013, available at: <https://twitter.com/azelin/status/364457153077452800>

89. For example, see: 'The hard men on both sides prevail', *The Economist*, 18 May 2013, available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21578057-more-decent-rebel-groups-are-being-squeezed-between-regimes-forces-and>. See also: 'Syrian rebel's desecration of dead soldier condemned', *USA Today*, 16 May 2013, available at: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/05/15/syria-rebel/2161099/>.

2. Where is it based?

The nature of the conflict in Syria makes this prone to change. However, the ANF has a presence in areas such as Aleppo, Latakia, and Idlib in the northwest; al-Qusayr in the west; Raqqa and Deir al-Zor in the northeast; Homs, in central Syria; Daraa in the southwest; and the capital, Damascus.

3. Who are its senior leaders?

Little is known about Abu Mohammad al-Golani – though one report suggests that he is a Syrian in his 40s.⁹⁰ He is likely to have been a member of the ISI before being dispatched to Syria.

In December 2012, the U.S. Treasury designated two senior ANF figures – Maysar Ali Musa Abdallah al-Juburi and Anas Hasan Khattab – as global terrorists, for acting on behalf of AQ's Iraq branch.⁹¹ Other key leaders within the ANF include two Jordanians: Iyad Toubasi (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's brother-in-law) and Mustafa Abdul Latif, the first military commander of the southern region.⁹²

4. Is there a precedent for trying to attack the Western homeland?

No. The emphasis at present is almost entirely on overthrowing Assad. However, this will not necessarily remain the case. For example, in May 2013, Belgian Security Services intercepted a call from an extremist based in Syria, who was discussing a potential attack on the Brussels Palace of Justice with a contact in Belgium.⁹³

90. 'Insight: Syria's Nusra Front eclipsed by Iraq-based al Qaeda', *Reuters*, 17 May 2013, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/17/us-syria-crisis-nusra-idUSBRE94G0FY20130517>.

91. 'Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime', *United States Department of the Treasury*, 11 December 2012, available at: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/tg1797.aspx>.

92. 'Jordan's Salafists Provide Lifeline to Syrian Opposition', *Al-Monitor*, 22 April 2013, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/04/jordan-salafists-jabhat-al-nusra.html#ixzz2VRAadrN4>.

93. "'Vlaamse moslim extremist plant vanuit Syrië aanslag in België'", *NRC.nl*, 18 May 2013, available at: <http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2013/05/18/vlaamse-moslimextremist-plant-vanuit-syrie-aanslag-in-belgie/>.

Somalia

Al-Shabaab was formerly part of the youth and military wing of the Islamic Courts Union, a group of *sharia* courts which united (most likely in 2006) under one banner.

Following the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia (in December 2006), al-Shabaab emerged as its own insurgency movement, and, by 2008, had gained control of much of the south. In 2009 and 2010, it consolidated this control, and began to make inroads into central Somalia, gaining jurisdiction over much of Mogadishu. The group dispatched mobile courts – run by armed youngsters – to forcibly recruit members, and also paid recruits better and more regularly than most government authorities could.

The formalisation of al-Shabaab's links with AQ was a lengthy process. In a video released in September 2009, Ahmed Abdi Godane (al-Shabaab's *emir*) referred to Osama bin Laden as 'our sheikh and emir', stating that the group awaited his guidance 'in this advanced stage of jihad'.⁹⁴ In February 2010, al-Shabaab again pledged 'to join the international jihad of al Qaeda'.⁹⁵

However, these pledges of allegiance went unheeded by AQ itself. While there were links between al-Shabaab and AQ, bin Laden saw formalising them as being of limited use. He regarded al-Shabaab as being poor rulers and administrators of *sharia* law, and feared that a formal alliance would stop foreign investment and aid coming into Somalia.⁹⁶

Furthermore, bin Laden's most trusted ally in Somalia was not Godane, but Fazul Mohammed. It was Mohammed, a veteran jihadist fighter, who was believed to have been

94. 'Al-Shabab Pledges Loyalty to Bin Laden', *Voice of America*, 2 November 2009, available at: <http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-2009-09-22-voa31-68758447/358845.html>.

95. 'Somali rebels unite, profess loyalty to al Qaeda', *Reuters*, 1 February 2010, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/02/01/us-somalia-conflict-idUSTRE6102Q720100201>.

96. Bin Laden letter to Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, SOCOM-2012-0000010, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (26 April 2011), available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/SOCOM-2012-0000010-Trans.pdf>.

the head of AQ's network in East Africa.⁹⁷

However, bin Laden and Mohammed were killed within just over a month of each other, removing two key obstacles to unification.⁹⁸ In February 2012, al-Shabaab officially became AQ's East African franchise.

Less than a month later, al-Shabaab announced its merger with the Galgala militia in Puntland, which also swore loyalty to al-Zawahiri.

1. How many members does it have?

Al-Shabaab has between 4 and 8,000 members.⁹⁹

2. Where is it based?

In August 2011, al-Shabaab was forced to withdraw from Mogadishu, and in September 2012 was also expelled from Kismayo, a strategic port town. However, it still controls territory in southern Somalia, including towns such as Buloburde; Bulo Marer; and Hudur (near the border with Ethiopia), and is generally strong in the lower Shebelle region.

Outside of its southern strongholds, al-Shabaab has begun to relocate some fighters into Puntland (the semi-autonomous northern region of Somalia), particularly the mountainous Galgala region. It has also been known to recruit in the Kenyan border town of Mwingi.

3. Who are its senior leaders?

There is a consistent tension between the wing of al-Shabaab which prefers to focus on more nationalist, Somali-specific local issues, and the

wing concerned with global jihad. The local wing is associated with Hassan Dahir Aweys (who actually recently fled al-Shabaab, and was placed in government custody) and the deputy *emir*, Mukhtar Robow. The global wing is led by Godane. Also on the group's *shura* council is Fuad Qalaf (commonly known as Shongole); Ibrahim Haji Jama Mead; and the group's spokesman, Ali Mohamed Rage.¹⁰⁰

While these divisions can be prone to over-exaggeration,¹⁰¹ there does likely exist a split between the weight that should be given to local, rather than international, issues.¹⁰²

4. Is there a precedent for trying to attack the Western homeland?

No. In September 2010, Jonathan Evans (then-head of MI5) spoke of his concern that it was 'only a matter of time before we see terrorism on our streets inspired by those who are today fighting alongside al-Shabaab'.¹⁰³ Similarly, NCTC Director Olsen has described al-Shabaab's 'foreign fighter cadre as a potential threat to the United States', highlighting its public calls for 'transnational attacks'.¹⁰⁴

However, while there have been many individuals in the U.S. and the U.K. who have joined al-Shabaab (some of whom have carried out suicide attacks in Somalia; others have returned to the West and subsequently been convicted), no actual operational plots targeting the West have materialised.

An attempt to murder the Danish cartoonist, Kurt Westergaard, was carried out by Mohamed Geele, a Somali with links to al-

97. 'Al Qaeda names Fazul Mohammed East African commander', *Long War Journal*, 11 November 2009, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/11/al_qaeda_names_fazul.php.

98. For an excellent discussion of the dynamics at play here, see: Nelly Lahoud, 'The Merger of Al-Shabab and Qa'idat al-Jihad', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 16 February 2012, available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-merger-of-al-shabab-and-qaidat-al-jihad>.

99. For example, see: 'Militants Defecting to Somali Side After Losses', *Associated Press*, 15 June 2012, available at: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/militants-defecting-somali-side-after-losses>. See also: 'Somali rebels unite, profess loyalty to al Qaeda', *Reuters*, 1 February 2010.

100. For an overview of al-Shabaab's leadership, see: 'Al Shabaab Leadership Profiles', *Critical Threats*, available at: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/somalia/al-shabaab-leadership/>.

101. An interesting dissection of this has been written by Stig Hansen. See: 'Somalia: Rumours Of Al-Shabaab's Death Are Greatly Exaggerated', *African Arguments*, 25 April 2013, available at: <http://africanarguments.org/2013/04/25/somalia-rumours-of-al-shabaab%E2%80%99s-death-are-greatly-exaggerated-%E2%80%93-by-stig-hansen/>.

102. For example, see: 'Somalia: Al Shabaab Dispute Turns Violent, Factions Emerge', *All Africa*, 21 June 2013, available at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201306220100.html>.

103. 'MI5 chief warns of terror threat from Britons trained in Somalia', *Guardian*, 17 September 2010, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/sep/17/mi5-chief-somalia-terror-threat>.

104. 'NCTC director: "We remain at war with al Qaeda"', *Long War Journal*, 27 July 2012, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/07/nctc_director_we_rem.php#ixzz2VXsHu9S6.

Shabaab.¹⁰⁵ However, this is not thought to be a centrally directed al-Shabaab plot.

Similarly, Michael Adebolajo – who killed a British soldier in London in May 2013 – had travelled abroad in 2010, in an attempt to connect with the group. He was, though, unsuccessful in doing so, and was arrested in Kenya.

When AQ's East African interests were primarily represented by Fazul Mohammed, however, aspirational planning was in place. Documents discovered on Mohammed's body at his time of death included references to 'International Operations' targeting the U.K. Mohammed proposed attacking either the Ritz or Dorchester hotels in London; the private school, Eton; as well as Jewish areas in London. The operatives for this mission were to be trained in Somalia for two months beforehand.¹⁰⁶

The Sahel

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operates throughout the Sahel region running across North Africa. The Sahel covers Algeria; Burkina Faso; Eritrea; Chad; Mali; Mauritania; Niger; Nigeria; Senegal; and Sudan, though AQIM is particularly strong in Mali and Algeria. The group's ambitions also extends to Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia.¹⁰⁷

AQIM is the latest manifestation of previously established Algerian terrorist groups spawned from the civil war there in the 1990s.

Fearing that the Islamist Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) would win power (after it won the first round of elections in December 1991), the Algerian government cancelled the second

round. The Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the armed wing of the FIS, launched a series of attacks against the government, in response.

The GIA executed those even loosely suspected of working with the state, and aimed to implement *sharia* law, establishing control in parts of rural Algeria.¹⁰⁸ In 1993, it was approached by an emissary of bin Laden's, who offered financing and logistical help to the group in return for its integration into the AQ network. The offer was rejected.¹⁰⁹

While the GIA was not unpopular to begin with, its terrorist campaigns alienated the population, and, by the late 1990s, an offshoot organisation had been formed: the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), a group that soon became more influential than the GIA. The GSPC criticised the GIA's indiscriminate violence, and instead vowed to focus on security and military targets.

However, despite attracting significant levels of defectors from the GIA, the GSPC was weakened by a combination of the Algerian government's counterterrorism operations and a broad amnesty program. In a bid to retain its relevance, the GSPC subsequently began to align itself with AQ's global jihad, with Ayman al-Zawahiri acknowledging their integration into the AQ network in a video released in September 2006. Four months later, it changed its name to AQIM.¹¹⁰

The group carries out military activities, including suicide bombings, and replenishes its resources via drug smuggling and the kidnap and ransom of Westerners and Kabyles.

AQIM's ties to AQSL remain unclear. The two have certainly been in communication; yet, how often – and how cordial relations

105. See: 'Denmark sentences cartoonist attacker to 9 years', *Reuters*, 4 February 2011, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/04/idINIndia-54664020110204>. See also: 'Somali charged over attack on Danish cartoonist', *BBC News*, 2 January 2010, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8437652.stm>.

106. 'Star Exclusive: Documents found on body of Al Qaeda's African leader detail chilling plans for kidnapping, attacks', *Toronto Star*, 11 July 2012, available at: http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2012/07/11/star_exclusive_documents_found_on_body_of_al_qaedas_african_leader_detail_chilling_plans_for_kidnapping_attacks.html.

107. 'Foreign Travel Advice: Libya – Sahel Region', *GOV.uk*, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/libya/sahel-region>.

108. An excellent overview of the GIA–GSPC–AQIM nexus is provided by Lianne Kennedy Boudali in 'The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (April 2007), available at: http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Kennedy_GSPC_041207_update.pdf.

109. Jason Burke, 'Algeria crisis: if al-Qaida is linked to refinery attack, the chain is very long', *Guardian*, 18 January 2013, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/18/algeria-crisis-al-qaida-aqim>.

110. Boudali 'The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad', *Combating Terrorism Center* (April 2007).

are – is unknown.¹¹¹

Other Islamist groups also operate in the Sahel, at least semi-autonomously of AQIM, such as Ansar al-Din (AAD) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). AAD has received financing from AQ in the past,¹¹² while the MUJAO is an AQIM splinter group.¹¹³

Another group that operates in the region is Moktar Belmokhtar's Signed-in-Blood Battalion. Belmokhtar has long-established ties to global jihadist causes, was formerly one of AQIM's top two commanders in northern Mali, and previously headed the southern zone of AQIM's Katibat El Moulathamoune.

On 16 January, the Signed-in-Blood Battalion took over an Algerian gas plant near In Amenas, in the Sahara desert, holding nearly 800 workers hostage. During the struggle with Algerian troops, to reclaim control of the facility, the terrorists killed thirty-nine hostages (including five Britons and one U.K. resident). Belmokhtar had apparently split from AQIM just a month earlier, due to disagreements with its leadership and a desire to be in closer contact with AQC.¹¹⁴ However, he still claimed the In Amenas attack in AQ's name.¹¹⁵

AAD, the MUJAO, and Belmokhtar operate with a degree of autonomy from AQIM, and are therefore a step removed from AQC control (even before taking into account the significant geographical difference between South Asia and North Africa). However, membership and loyalties are fluid, and these groups have shown a willingness to work together when operationally preferable. This

appears to be especially the case with MUJAO and the Signed-in-Blood Battalion, who announced they were merging in August 2013 to form a new group, Al-Murabitoun.

1. How many members does it have?

AQIM has between 300 and 1,000 members.¹¹⁶

2. Where is it based?

Prior to the French military invasion in January 2013, AAD; AQIM; and the MUJAO controlled approximately 300,000 square miles of northern Mali, including the towns of Gao and Timbuktu. Following their expulsion from these towns by the French and the Economic Community of West African States, AQIM primarily operates throughout North Africa's Sahara and Sahel regions (especially the ungoverned, mountainous regions of northern Mali; Algeria; and parts of southern Libya). However, there is also a residual presence in Mauritania, and potential presence in parts of Morocco; Niger; and Tunisia.

3. Who are its senior leaders?

The group's *emir* is Abdelmalek Droukdel, an Algerian who was head of the GSPC and an explosives expert for the GIA.¹¹⁷ One of the group's senior commanders is the Algerian Djamel Okacha, a militant who joined AQIM in 2004 and who subsequently replaced Abdelhamid Abou Zeid (a senior commander

111. Daved Gartenstein-Ross extracts the information we can from a limited dataset in: 'Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Al Qaeda's Senior Leadership', *Gunpowder & Lead*, 19 January 2013, available at: <http://gunpowderandlead.org/2013/01/al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb-and-al-qaedas-senior-leadership/>.

112. 'QE.A.135.13. Ansar Eddine', Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, *United Nations*, available at: <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE13513E.shtml>.

113. Andrew Lebovich, 'AQIM and Its Allies in Mali', *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 5 February 2013, available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/aqim-and-its-allies-in-mali>.

114. 'AP Exclusive: Rise Of Al-Qaida Sahara Terrorist', *Associated Press*, 28 May 2013, available at: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ap-exclusive-rise-al-qaeda-saharan-terrorist>.

115. Belmokhtar said that 'We in al Qaeda announce that we carried out the blessed commando operation'. See: 'Belmokhtar claims Algerian raid, slaying of hostages for al Qaeda', *Long War Journal*, 20 January 2013, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/01/belmokhtar_claims_al.php#ixzz2KKRYUqm.

116. See: 'al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb', *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism*, available at: http://www.start.umd.edu/start/data_collections/tops/terrorist_organization_profile.asp?id=3777. See also: Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, 'The Many Faces of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb', Geneva Centre for Security Policy (May 2011), available at: <http://www.gcsp.ch/content/download/5647/51835/download>. See also: Olivier Guitta, 'Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: A Threat for the West', *Defence Against Terrorism Review* (Spring 2010), Vol. 3, No. 1, available at: <http://www.coedat.nato.int/publications/datr5/DATR-5.pdf>. See also: Fernando Reinares, 'AQIM's existing –and disrupted– plans in –and from– the Sahel', Real Instituto Elcano, 16 April 2013, available at: http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_eng/Content?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/commentary-reinares-aqim-sahel-france-jihadism.

117. 'Q.I.D.232.07. Abdelmalek Droukdel', Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, *United Nations*, available at: <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQI23207E.shtml>.

killed in March 2013).¹¹⁸

4. Is there a precedent for trying to attack the Western homeland?

Yes. AQIM's precursor groups, and those inspired by them, have attempted attacks. For example, the GIA were behind the attempt to bomb Los Angeles Airport as part of the 'Millennium bomb' plot, while Menad Benchellali was one of twenty people convicted in France for planning terror attacks in Paris. Benchellali had attended AQ training camps, and had been trying to harness ricin (which was also discovered in a railway station in Lyon in 2003).¹¹⁹

AQIM rhetoric continues to threaten the West: Droukdel announced in 2008 that they would 'not hesitate in targeting [the U.S.] whenever we can and wherever it is on this planet'.¹²⁰ Despite this, the group has tended to inspire militants, rather than take a hands-on operational role.

A note on developing Sahel/Sahara networks

Libya

Libya has a long history of producing jihadist fighters, some of whom have aligned

118. 'New leader named for Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: TV', *Reuters*, 24 March 2013, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/24/us-algeria-qaeda-okacha-idUSBRE92N0C020130324>.

119. See: "'Chemist' whips up ricin; where is it now?'. *Seattle Times*, 11 May 2004, available at: <http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=20040511&slug=ricin11>. See also: 'France Says Ricin Traces Found in Paris Railway', *New York Times*, 20 March 2003, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/20/international/worldspecial/20WIRE-RUMS.html>.

120. 'An Interview With Abdelmalek Droukdel', *New York Times*, 1 July 2008, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdel.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

themselves with AQ. For example, while the leadership of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG – founded after the end of the mujahideen's war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union), was largely critical of AQ's agenda, certain members were known to have joined the group.¹²¹

Talk of AQ operating in Libya was heightened when, on 11 September 2012, the U.S. consulate in Benghazi was attacked by militants armed with mortars; rocket-propelled grenades; and assault rifles. Four Americans, including U.S. ambassador Christopher Stevens, were killed. These killings are often described as AQ 'linked' or 'affiliated', including by parts of the USG.¹²²

Responsibility for the attack remains disputed. Some within the USG believe that it was committed by groups which include the Salafist Ansar al-Sharia¹²³ and AQIM.¹²⁴ Other U.S. law-enforcement officials have suggested that members of AQAP also participated.¹²⁵ A Libyan intelligence official has stated that it was planned by a committee which included Libyan and Egyptian jihadists and AQIM. The same source claimed that Ansar al-Sharia was not involved in the attack, but that the Omar Mukhtar; Abu Salem Martyrs; and Rafala Sahati brigades were (supplemented by three Algerian members of AQIM).¹²⁶ Therefore, while AQ's precise involvement is unclear, the group almost certainly played some role.

Post-Gaddafi, AQSL is thought to be attempting to build a fresh network in Libya,

121. In 2009, members of the LIFG *shura* council negotiated an end to their conflict with the Libyan regime, although former members – such as Abdul Hakim Belhaj – joined the anti-Gaddafi insurgency in 2011.

122. For example, see: 'Interim Progress Report for the Members of the House Republican Conference on the Events Surrounding the September 11, 2012 Terrorist Attacks in Benghazi, Libya', United States House of Representatives (23 April 2013), available at: <http://www.speaker.gov/sites/speaker.house.gov/files/documents/libya-progress-report.pdf>.

123. There are two Ansar al-Sharias in Libya: one in Benghazi, and one in Derna. The USG reference is likely to be to the former, who initially stated their involvement in the Benghazi attacks, before denying them. See: Aaron Zelin, 'Know Your Ansar al-Sharia', *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2012, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/21/know_your_ansar_al_sharia.

124. Interim Progress Report for the Members of the House Republican Conference on the Events Surrounding the September 11, 2012 Terrorist Attacks in Benghazi, Libya', United States House of Representatives (23 April 2013).

125. 'Sources: 3 al Qaeda operatives took part in Benghazi attack', *CNN*, 4 May 2013, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/05/02/world/africa/us-libya-benghazi-suspects>.

126. 'Al Qaeda Headquarters in Libya', *The Daily Beast*, 6 May 2013, available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/05/06/the-al-qaeda-headquarters-in-libya.html>.

instructing its supporters there to gather weapons and run training camps, with the ultimate aim of controlling territory and establishing an Islamic emirate.¹²⁷ This has been partially successful, with AQIM now believed to be running training camps in Libya.¹²⁸ Some estimates place the number of AQ fighters in Libya between 200 and 300.¹²⁹

Following the 2013 French intervention in Mali, terrorist elements have moved from northern Mali into lawless areas of the southern Libyan desert and the mountainous regions between Tunisia and Algeria. These elements include AQIM members, who have been involved in skirmishes with the Tunisian army on the Tunisian-Algerian border,¹³⁰ and are thought to be attempting to work with other Islamist groups (including the Abu Salem Martyrs Brigade and Ansar al-Sharia).¹³¹ However, there are thought to be approximately 1,700 armed militant groups operating in Libya, inspired – by varying degrees – by Islamism; largely decentralised; and with significant fluidity between groups. As a result, the precise nature of the relationships between militant groups remains unclear.

AQ's security concerns will likely lead to the organisation not openly proclaiming with which groups it is aligned until it has established a more cohesive network. It is, therefore, unsurprising that no single group in Libya has yet to be identified as the main AQ affiliate; nor is it surprising that its operations there are not as advanced as in other countries.

The instability in Libya has the potential to spill over into countries. For example, in May 2013, the MUJAO and members of the Signed-in-Blood Battalion launched suicide attacks against a military camp and French-

Post-Gaddafi, AQSL is thought to be attempting to build a fresh network in Libya, instructing its supporters there to gather weapons and run training camps, with the ultimate aim of controlling territory and establishing an Islamic emirate.

run uranium mine in Niger, killing twenty.¹³² The President of Niger believed that the attack originated from southern Libya.¹³³

Nigeria

The two most notorious Islamist groups operating in Nigeria are Boko Haram and Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Ansarul).

Ansarul is thought to be a Boko Haram splinter group that formed in January 2012, immediately after a Boko Haram attack killed 180 people in Kano. It was this group that kidnapped and killed a British and an Italian hostage in northern Nigeria, under the banner of 'al Qaida in the Land Beyond the Sahel', leading to its proscription by the British government.¹³⁴

However, there is no evidence that al-Zawahiri has given his blessing to Ansarul as being an official franchise, and AQ's main

127. 'Al-Qaeda in Libya: A Profile', Library of Congress (August 2012), available at: <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/aq-libya-loc.pdf>.

128. 'Al Qaeda Headquarters in Libya', *The Daily Beast*, 6 May 2013.

129. 'Et si la Libye devenait le nouveau sanctuaire d'al-Qaïda', *Slate Afrique*, 2 January 2012, available at: <http://www.slateafrique.com/80173/libye-nouvelle-base-al-qaïda>.

130. 'Al Qaeda's widening North African jihad confounds foes', *Reuters*, 9 August 2013, available at: <http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/08/09/security-qaeda-maghreb-idINL6N0G630B20130809>

131. 'Al-Qaeda "intensifying efforts to establish new base in Libya"', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 December 2012, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/9717206/Al-Qaeda-intensifying-efforts-to-establish-new-base-in-Libya.html>.

132. 'MUJAO suicide bombers hit uranium mine, barracks in Niger', *Long War Journal*, 23 May 2013, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/05/mujao_suicide_bomber.php. See also: 'Belmokhtar's unit participated in Niger suicide attacks', *Long War Journal*, 24 May 2013, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/05/belmokhtars_unit_par.php.

133. 'Libya: Al-Qaeda Swaps Mali for Libya', *All Africa*, 7 June 2013, available at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201306101407.html?viewall=1>.

134. 'Nigeria's militant Islamists adopting a disturbing change of tactics', *Guardian*, 8 March 2012, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/08/nigerian-hostage-killings-boko-haram>.

connections to Nigeria seemingly come via Boko Haram. This group – created in 2002 – aims to create an Islamic state, and primarily targets Christians; Nigerian security forces; banks; military facilities; and other clerics for attack. However, in 2011, it displayed a more international focus, by bombing the United Nations building in Abuja, killing twenty-six.

The USG believes there to be ‘communications, training, and weapons links’ between Boko Haram, AQIM, al-Shabaab, and AQAP.¹³⁵

Boko Haram is also believed to have been in contact with – and potentially received training from – al-Shabaab.¹³⁶ However, AQ’s ties to Boko Haram appear to be primarily via AQIM, who have helped finance Boko Haram in the past.¹³⁷ Members of the Nigerian group travelled in large numbers to receive training from AQIM in northern Mali,¹³⁸ and, according to General Carter Ham (speaking as the U.S. military’s commander of operations in Africa), have a ‘stated intent [...] to coordinate and synchronize their efforts’.¹³⁹ By 2012, he said, this had resulted in ‘likely sharing funds, training and explosive materials’.¹⁴⁰

The group also has connections to AQ offshoots: AAD-controlled Timbuktu hosted hundreds of members of Boko Haram, with particularly large numbers arriving in April 2012; here, they trained alongside AAD

in arms and explosives.¹⁴¹ They are also thought to have trained with – and assisted in operations alongside – the MUJAO in Gao,¹⁴² as well as provided assistance to the MUJAO; AQIM; and AAD in Kano.¹⁴³

Sinai Peninsula

Following an August 2011 attack on a police station in the Sinai, a pamphlet and video were produced containing a ‘Statement from Al Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula.’ Following the operation against the police station, a U.S. official commented that there is ‘no longer any doubt that AQ had some kind of potent presence in the peninsula.’¹⁴⁴

Then, in December 2011, a group calling itself ‘Ansar al-Jihad in Sinai’ announced its existence on a jihadist forum.¹⁴⁵ The group swore allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri a month later, asking him to ‘throw us wherever you wish.... We will never quit or surrender until the last drop of our blood [is spilled] in the Cause of Allah and until Islam rules by the help of Allah the Almighty.’¹⁴⁶

Furthermore, a representative from a group calling itself al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula was allegedly present during a summer 2013 ‘conference call’ with other senior AQ leaders.¹⁴⁷

135. ‘Wanted Information leading to the location of Abubakar Shekau Up to \$7 Million Reward’, *Rewards for Justice*, available at: <http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/index.cfm?page=shekau&language=english>.

136. See: ‘Boko Haram got al Qaeda bomb training, Niger says’, *Reuters*, 25 January 2012, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/25/ozatp-sahara-bokoharam-qaeda-idAFJ0E8000K20120125>. See also: ‘Nigeria’s Boko Haram: Al-Qaeda’s New Friend in Africa?’, *Time*, 31 August 2011, available at: <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0.8816.2091137.00.html>.

137. ‘Al-Qa’ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)’, *National Counterterrorism Center*, available at: <http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/aqim.html>. See also: ‘CNN Fact Check: Is al Qaeda’s core decimated or is group growing?’, *CNN*, 23 October 2012.

138. See: ‘American Commander Details Al Qaeda’s Strength in Mali’, *New York Times*, 3 December 2012, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/04/world/africa/top-american-commander-in-africa-warns-of-al-qaeda-influence-in-mali.html?_r=0. See also: ‘Timbuktu: al-Qaeda’s terrorist training academy in the Mali desert’, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 2013, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/mali/9860822/Timbuktu-al-Qaedas-terrorist-training-academy-in-the-Mali-desert.html>.

139. ‘Nigeria’s Boko Haram: Al-Qaeda’s New Friend in Africa?’, *Time*, 31 August 2011.

140. ‘Africa’s Islamist militants “co-ordinate efforts”’, *BBC News*, 26 June 2012, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18592789>.

141. ‘Timbuktu Training Site Shows Terrorists’ Reach’, *Wall Street Journal*, 1 February 2013, available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323926104578278030474477210.html>.

142. Jacob Zenn, ‘Boko Haram’s International Connections’, *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 14 January 2013, available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-harams-international-connections>.

143. Ibid.

144. ‘Al Qaeda linked to Israeli bus ambush’, *The Washington Times*, 22 August 2011, available at: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/aug/22/al-qaeda-linked-to-israeli-bus-ambush/?page=all>

145. Robin Simcox, ‘Ansar al-Jihad in Sinai’, *The Henry Jackson Society*, 21 December 2011, available at: <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2011/12/21/ansar-al-jihad-in-sinai/>

146. ‘Ansar al Jihad swears allegiance to al Qaeda’s emir’, *Long War Journal*, 24 January 2012, available at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/01/ansar_al_jihad_swear.php

147. ‘Al Qaeda Conference Call Intercepted by U.S. Officials Sparked Alert’, *The Daily Beast*, 7 August 2013

Tunisia

In September 2012, the U.S. Embassy in Tunis was attacked. The man suspected of leading the assault is Seifallah ben Hassine, the head of Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), a group that has ties to AQIM.¹⁴⁸

Ben Hassine has long-standing connections to a variety of senior AQ figures.¹⁴⁹ He also helped to found the Tunisian Combat Group (TCG), an organisation founded in 'coordination' with AQ.¹⁵⁰ One of the spiritual leaders of the TCG was Abu Qatada, a key jihadist cleric under whom ben Hassine had studied when based in London in the 1990s.

Other senior members of AST include Sami Ben Khemais Essid and Mehdi Kammoun, both of whom were also part of the TCG. Essid was identified by the U.S. as being the head of AQ in Italy, and was connected to a potential plot against the American Embassy in Rome. Kammoun was also identified as being a part of the GSPC.

Both men were arrested in April 2001 and convicted in Italy for their links to terrorism. Essid was convicted of organising a terrorist cell linked to AQ, and Kammoun for conspiring to traffic arms; explosives; and chemical weapons, as well as for document forgery and facilitating illegal immigration.

Kammoun was deported to Tunisia in July 2005, with Essid following in June 2008. However, they were either freed or escaped jail following the Arab Spring uprisings.¹⁵¹

Ongoing operational links between AST and

148. 'Al Qaeda's widening North African jihad confounds foes', *Reuters*, 9 August 2013

149. Thomas Joscelyn at the *Long War Journal* provides an exhaustive overview of members of Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's (AST) links to al-Qaeda. For example, see: 'Al Qaeda ally orchestrated assault on US Embassy in Tunisia', *Long War Journal*, 2 October 2012, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/al_qaeda_ally_orches.php. See also: 'From al Qaeda in Italy to Ansar al Sharia Tunisia', *Long War Journal*, 21 November 2012, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/from_al_qaeda_in_ita.php.

150. 'QE.T.90.02. Tunisian Combatant Group', Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, *United Nations*, available at: <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE09002E.shtml>.

151. 'From al Qaeda in Italy to Ansar al Sharia Tunisia', *Long War Journal*, 21 November 2012.

AQ are not yet proven. However, the long-standing and pre-existing connections between senior members of AST and AQ make the potential for future collaboration clear.

AQ presence: Established networks

Iran

It is sometimes assumed that the Sunni-Shia divide precludes AQ-Iranian co-operation; indeed, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri have both been vociferously critical of the Iranian regime. However, Iran and AQ have shared enemies in the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia. There is evidence that, to a limited extent, they have worked in tandem.

Prior to 9/11, Iran facilitated AQ members' travel in and out of Afghanistan. Senior AQ leaders close to bin Laden then fled there after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, being placed under a form of house arrest by early 2002.

AQ and Iran now operate under an agreement arranged by AQ facilitator Yasin al-Suri, in which Iran gives AQ permission to operate and travel with impunity within its territory; in return, AQ cannot recruit or conduct operations in Iran, and must keep them apprised of their activities. Failure to do so leads to a risk of renewed detention.¹⁵²

The U.S. Treasury regards Iran as a 'critical transit point' used by AQ, relating to its activities in AfPak; these include moving money, facilitators, and operatives from

152. 'Treasury Further Exposes Iran-Based Al-Qa'ida Network', *United States Department of the Treasury*, 18 October 2012, available at: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1741.aspx>.

the Middle East to South Asia.¹⁵³ This AQ Iranian network also sends funds and fighters to Syria.¹⁵⁴

Iran's intelligence branch, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security, has also provided support to AQ, by providing operatives with documents; I.D. cards; and passports, and by helping to finance and provide weapons to AQ's Iraqi branch.¹⁵⁵ This is particularly unusual, considering that AQ group the

Iran's intelligence branch, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security, has also provided support to AQ, by providing operatives with documents; I.D. cards; and passports, and by helping to finance and provide weapons to AQ's Iraqi branch.

Islamic State of Iraq regularly kills Shias, and explicitly targets government installations in Iraq (as it perceives their government as being Iranian controlled).¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, in Syria, Iran is supporting Assad at a time when AQ are attempting to overthrow him.

Therefore, there is a very clear contradiction at the centre of Iranian–AQ relations, with limited co-operation conflicting with competing geopolitical aims.

153. 'Treasury Targets Key Al-Qa'ida Funding and Support Network Using Iran as a Critical Transit Point', *United States Department of the Treasury*, 28 July 2011, available at: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1261.aspx>.

154. 'Treasury Further Exposes Iran-Based Al-Qa'ida Network', *United States Department of the Treasury*, 18 October 2012.

155. 'Treasury Designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for Human Rights Abuses and Support for Terrorism', *United States Department of the Treasury*, 16 February 2012, available at: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1424.aspx>.

156. Robin Simcox, 'From Rhetoric to Target: The Islamic State of Iraq', *Henry Jackson Society*, 3 July 2012, available at: <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2012/07/03/from-rhetoric-to-target-the-islamic-state-of-iraq/>.

1. How many AQ operatives are there in Iran?

In 2005, Iran claimed that it had detained over 1,000 AQ operatives since 9/11, deporting approximately 500;¹⁵⁷ therefore, the number is likely to be in the hundreds. However, Iran has refused to divulge which operatives are still in its detention.¹⁵⁸

2. Whereabouts in Iran are the AQ operatives based?

It is believed that a network of AQ 'low-to middle-level' fixers exists in Zahedan, an eastern Iranian city close to the AfPak borders.¹⁵⁹ However, operatives are likely dispersed more widely than just one city.

3. Who are AQ's senior leaders in Iran?

There are several AQ operatives at the core of the Iranian network. The key figure, until recently, was Yasin al-Suri (AQ's representative in Iran, and a facilitator who transported money and recruits from the Middle East into Pakistan and Afghanistan, via Iran). However, he was placed under 'protective custody' in October 2012, being replaced by Muhsin al-Fadhli, a Kuwaiti who has served as a key AQ operative – particularly in regard to providing financial and logistical support to fighters.¹⁶⁰

Other key components of the Iranian network include Umid Muhammadi, a facilitator who has helped plan AQ attacks inside Iraq; Salim al-Kuwari and 'Ali Hasan 'Ali al-'Ajmi, financial and logistical facilitators; and Abdallah al-

157. See: 'Iran announces al-Qaeda arrests', *BBC News*, 16 July 2005, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4689151.stm. See also: 'Iran Confirms It's Holding Top Al Qaeda Operatives', *Fox News*, 23 July 2003, available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2003/07/23/iran-confirms-it-holding-top-al-qaeda-operatives/print>.

158. 'Chapter 3: State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview – Iran', *United States Department of State*, 30 May 2013, available at: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/r/r1/crt/2012/209985.htm>.

159. See: 'Analysis: Iran's unlikely al Qaeda ties: fluid, murky and deteriorating', *Reuters*, 24 April 2013, available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/04/24/us-iran-alqaeda-idUSBRE93N18720130424>. See also: 'Canada train plot suspect traveled to Iran: U.S. officials', *Reuters*, 25 April 2013, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/25/us-arrests-iran-idUSBRE93O1D320130425>.

160. 'Report: New leader of al Qaeda network in Iran named', *Long War Journal*, 15 February 2012, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/02/report_new_leader_of.php.

Khawar, who provides material support to AQ in Iran.¹⁶¹ Another member of this network, Aiyah Abdul Rahman (the link between AQC and its regional franchises), was killed by the U.S., in North Waziristan, in August 2011.

However, of these, only al-Suri is based in Iran. Two other senior members of AQ, formerly based in Iran, have since left the country: Saif al-Adel and Abu Hafis al-Mauritani (the latter was transferred to Mauritania in 2012).

4. Is there a precedent for trying to attack the Western homeland?

Yes. In April 2013, Canadian officials revealed that they had stopped an AQ plot to derail a passenger train travelling between New York and Toronto. This plot is thought to have received 'direction and guidance' from 'elements' of AQ based in Iran.¹⁶²

AQ facilitators in Iran were also crucial in a thwarted AQC plot to launch a 'Mumbai-style' attack on European cities in 2010. Iran was used as a hub, by the operatives, to travel to and from northern Pakistan. When the plot was disrupted, some of the plot's operatives were based in Iran.¹⁶³

Chechnya

AQ's main presence in Chechnya comes via Emarat Kavkaz, listed by the U.N. in July 2011 as being an al-Qaeda associated group.

Emarat Kavkaz operates in the North Caucasus. Its formation began in 2004 but was not announced by its leader, Doku Umarov, until October 2007. During this announcement, Umarov declared the creation of an Islamic emirate in the Caucasus region but also stressed the need for a broader, global jihad:

I do not think there is any need to draw the borders of the Caucasus Emirate. That is firstly because the Caucasus is a war zone occupied by infidels and apostates and our next task is to make the Caucasus a purely Islamic area by instituting sharia in the land and driving out the infidels. Secondly, once the infidels have been driven out, we must take back all lands that were historically Muslim, and those borders lie beyond the borders of the Caucasus.¹⁶⁴

On 23 June 2010, Umarov was designated as a global terrorist by the U.S. State Department.¹⁶⁵ Umarov claimed credit for both the Nevsky train bombing, which killed twenty eight; and suicide bombings on the Moscow subway in March 2010, killing forty.

Emarat Kavkaz has connections to the IMU, while Umarov is an associate of AQ. In 2006, Abu Hafis al-Urduni, the AQ leader from Jordan who acted as the group's emissary in Chechnya, claimed that the jihad there was being reorganised to be under Umarov's command.¹⁶⁶ Al-Urduni was killed in Dagestan by the Russian security services in November of that year.

161. 'Treasury Targets Key Al-Qa'ida Funding and Support Network Using Iran as a Critical Transit Point', *United States Department of the Treasury*, 28 July 2011.

162. 'Canada: "Al Qaeda Train Terror Plot" Foiled', *Sky News*, 23 April 2013, available at: <http://news.sky.com/story/1081584/canada-al-qaeda-train-terror-plot-foiled>.

163. Links between Iran and al-Qaeda have been thoroughly highlighted by Thomas Joseclyn. For example, see 'Assessing the Threat to the Homeland from al Qaeda Operations in Iran and Syria', *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 22 May 2013, available at: <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/assessing-the-threat-to-the-homeland-from-al-qaeda-operations-in-iran-and-s/>.

164. 'QE.E.131.11. Emarat Kavkaz', Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, *United Nations*, available at: <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE13111E.shtml>.

165. 'Designation of Caucasus Emirates Leader Doku Umarov', *United States Department of State*, 23 June 2010, available at: <http://www.state.gov/jct/rls/other/des/143564.htm>.

166. 'Doku Umarov declares Islamic Caucasus Emirate', *Long War Journal*, 26 November 2007, available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/11/doku_umarov_declares.php

Conclusion

The areas referred to in this report outline where AQ presence is at its strongest; yet, the extent of AQ's overall capacity remains debated.

With policy-makers and the media referring to groups who may only have the absolute loosest of ties to AQ as 'AQ-linked', the perception can be created that the organisation is more omniscient than, in reality, it actually is. On this level, the threat from specifically AQ is prone to over-exaggeration.

Nevertheless, the number of official AQ groups operating today has expanded exponentially since 9/11, and, in terms of its structure; personnel; and capacity, AQ is vastly different to the group which committed those attacks.

Regional franchises have taken on particular importance as the capacity of AQC has seemingly diminished. While AQC *diktats* and central strategic guidance remain significant to these franchises, there is little capacity for AQC to co-ordinate the centrally day-to-day running of these groups.

Therefore, franchises have significant levels of autonomy; focus primarily on local issues (perhaps unsurprisingly, considering that they usually have a primarily local membership); and do not rely only on AQC for finance and manpower (although may rely on al-Zawahiri's approval for larger plots).¹⁶⁷ Funding for these groups partially comes from kidnapping Westerners, especially those from European countries known to pay ransoms. Overall, these franchises have been of tremendous use to AQ, allowing them a geographic impact that they did not possess prior to 9/11.¹⁶⁸

In terms of the risk of further attacks on

the Western homeland, franchises in Syria, Somalia and Iraq have lacked the capacity to attempt such attacks yet (although some of these groups have been successful in attacking more accessible Western targets based locally).

However, there should be no complacency

Aggressive U.S.-led counterterrorism operations have prevented further AQ attacks comparable to 9/11; yet, the organisation – along with the other insurgent groups with whom they align themselves – remains lethal and ambitious to strike Western targets.

about this. For example, foreign fighters returning from jihad in Syria are a clear concern for the future. While the Islamic State of Iraq has not attacked the West in the past, the increased capacity of the group means that it should not be dismissed in the future. AQAP, meanwhile, remains the group most capable of striking again. The events of August 2013 – a supposed AQAP-led plot that led to mass closures of U.S. Embassies across the Middle East and North Africa, as well as several European embassies in Sana'a – underlined this.

Aggressive U.S.-led counterterrorism operations have prevented further AQ attacks comparable to 9/11; yet, the organisation –

167. An analysis also shared by U.S. intelligence officials. See: 'Although splintered, al-Qaeda finds new life in unstable areas', *Washington Post*, 2 February 2013, available at: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-02/world/36698995_1_al-qaeda-qaeda-cia-drone-strikes/2.

168. Leah Farrall, 'How al Qaeda Works', *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2011), available at: http://www.cas.unt.edu/phil/documents/HOW_AL_QAEDA_WORKS.pdf.

along with the other insurgent groups with whom they align themselves – remains lethal and ambitious to strike Western targets.

Furthermore, assessing the military strength of the group today – in terms of its membership and level of successful attacks – only goes part of the way to being able to understand the scale of the overall threat.

While AQ may only operate in a finite number of countries, its ideology has been disseminated far and wide since 9/11. The dangers provided by the group's message, as opposed to the actual group itself, is a legacy that will endure throughout Western Europe and the United States long after this generation of AQ's leaders have been eliminated.





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The Henry Jackson Society

8th Floor, Parker Tower, 43-49 Parker Street, London, WC2B 5PS

Tel: 020 7340 4520

www.henryjacksonsociety.org

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