



National Security Program

Homeland Security Project



Jihadist Terrorism: **A Threat Assessment**

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Executive Summary

Today the United States faces a different terrorist threat than it did on 9/11 or even three years ago when the Bipartisan Policy Center's Homeland Security Project last published its threat assessment.

Al-Qaeda's core in Pakistan exerts less control over its affiliated groups and the CIA's campaign of drone strikes in Pakistan has decimated the group's leadership. Al-Qaeda affiliates in Yemen and Somalia have also suffered significant losses as a result of U.S. and allied countries' counterterrorism operations over the past three years. As a result, many counterterrorism officials believe the chances of a large-scale, catastrophic terrorist attack by al-Qaeda or an al-Qaeda-affiliated or -inspired organization occurring in the United States are small.

At the same time, however, al-Qaeda and allied groups today are situated in more places than on September 11, 2001. They maintain a presence in some 16 different theatres of operation—compared with half as many as recently as five years ago. Although some of these operational environments are less amenable than others (South Asia, Southeast Asia), a few have been the sites of revival and resuscitation (Iraq and North Africa) or of expansion (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Syria).

In recent years, the threat from al-Qaeda and these allied groups has been confined to attacks on U.S. diplomatic facilities and Western economic interests abroad, as shown by the incident in Benghazi, Libya, on the 11th anniversary of 9/11 and by the attack on the In Amenas gas facility in Algeria earlier this year. However, no al-Qaeda threat has ever remained completely localized, and it has always assumed some regional or even international dimension, as underlined most recently by the threat emanating from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula that led to the unprecedented closure of 22 U.S. diplomatic facilities in 17 countries in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia in July.

At home, the threat from jihadist violence has shifted away from plots directly connected to foreign groups to plots by individuals who are merely inspired by them. Though the potential for these individuals to conduct mass-casualty attacks is limited, the Boston Marathon bombings in April served as a reminder that the United States still faces a terrorism threat from disaffected individuals influenced by al-Qaeda's ideology. It demonstrated that even though core al-Qaeda may be in decline, "al-Qaeda-ism," the movement's ideology, continues to resonate and attract new adherents.

Finally, the Middle East is experiencing a level of instability unknown in recent years. The civil war in Syria may provide al-Qaeda with a chance to regroup, train, and plan operations, much as the U.S. invasion of Iraq revitalized the network and gave it new relevance. Returning foreign fighters from the war Syria may destabilize the region, or they might try to conduct attacks in the West. Sunni-Shia tensions are rising across the region, and the military overthrow of the Morsi government in Egypt may increase support among some disillusioned Islamists for al-Qaeda's ideological rejection of democracy. Any of these factors might raise the level of threat from groups aligned with al-Qaeda.

A dozen years ago the enemy was clear and plainly in sight. It was a large terrorist organization, situated mostly in one geographic location, and led by an identifiable leader. Today, the borders between domestic and international terrorism have blurred, and the United States' adversaries are not only organizations, but also individuals. The United States therefore needs to develop defenses against a more amorphous, diffuse threat posed by radicalized individuals while continuing to destroy and disrupt al-Qaeda and its associated groups, and the ideology that fuels and sustains them.

It is too soon to predict the long-term threat posed by al-Qaeda and allied groups as the movement is undergoing a transition that may end up proving to be its last gasp; but the right set of circumstances in the unstable Middle East could also revive the network.

Recommendations

I. For the Legislative Branch

1. Congress should overhaul its oversight committees on national security. The responsibilities of the different committees should be clearly defined and—to the extent possible—not overlap.
2. Congress should hold a series of public hearings on where the United States stand in its counterterrorism strategy 12 years after the 9/11 attacks.
3. Congress should use the withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan at the end of 2014 as an opportunity to review the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF).
4. Congress should put the CIA drone program on a more sound legal footing.
5. Congress should create an independent investigative body—similar to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB)—to investigate terrorist attacks in the United States, explain how the attackers evaded law enforcement, and identify the lessons to be learned.

II. For the Administration

1. The administration should repatriate some of the prisoners still being held at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility and should continue to use civilian courts to try terrorists.
2. The administration should create an Assistant Secretary for Countering Violent Extremism at the Department of Homeland Security.
3. The government should incorporate lessons learned from the Boston bombings into its current emergency-response plan to ensure a more measured reaction to tragic but small-scale terrorist attacks.
4. The U.S. government should make a concerted effort to track the flow of arms into Syria and urge U.S. allies to keep these weapons out of the hands of jihadist fighters to the extent possible. The United States should also keep careful track of the foreign fighters who have joined jihadist groups fighting in Syria.
5. The United States should maintain a military presence in Afghanistan after the NATO combat mission ends in December 2014.
6. The government should release additional Osama bin Laden documents captured at his Abbottabad compound.



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Chapter 1: Overall Assessment

In the 37 months between August 1998 and September 2001, al-Qaeda launched a significant attack on the United States three times: first simultaneously bombing U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, then bombing the USS *Cole* in October 2000 while it was anchored off the coast of Yemen, and finally attacking the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

Since then, al-Qaeda is zero for 12 in the United States. It has been 12 years since 9/11 and there have been no major attacks on American targets. To be sure, the United States has suffered some tragic terrorist attacks—including the shootings by Major Nidal Malik Hasan at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009; the attack on U.S. government facilities in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012; and the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013—but these do not represent a strategic attack by al-Qaeda or an affiliated group. They are tragedies but not catastrophes.

However, the fact that al-Qaeda and allied organizations have continued to attempt significant attacks in the United States, such as the 2009 plot to stage simultaneous suicide attacks on the New York City subway and the 2010 attempt by an individual linked to the Pakistani Taliban, a close al-Qaeda ally, to bomb Times Square, suggests that regardless of how weakened the core organization is, it remains determined to marshal what few resources it has, or to enlist its associates in its stead, to continue to try to attack the United States.

Since 2002, al-Qaeda has embraced a strategy that transformed it into a decentralized, networked, transnational movement, rather than the single monolithic entity it was on the eve of 9/11. This strategy was undoubtedly the result of necessity; U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the wake of the 9/11 attacks largely obliterated al-Qaeda as an organization. But it has allowed al-Qaeda to persist, and it now poses a threat that is more amorphous and difficult to pinpoint than it was in the early 2000s.^{1,2}

Core al-Qaeda has been decimated by drone strikes and arrests in Pakistan, but continues to find some sanctuary in the country's ungoverned tribal regions, and is potentially ready to move back into Afghanistan, should that country experience significant instability after NATO combat troops withdraw at the end of 2014.

CIA drone strikes have killed 33 al-Qaeda leaders or senior operatives in Pakistan since 2008.³ As a result, there are only around four al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan today. The group's overall leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has proved to be more capable than some analysts initially thought, officially bringing Somalia's al-Shabaab group and Syria's Jabhat al-Nusra organization into al-Qaeda's fold. Zawahiri also had no problem transferring already existing al-Qaeda affiliates' allegiances from Osama bin Laden to himself. In the three months following bin Laden's death in May 2011, the leaders of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) all pledged their allegiance to Zawahiri as their new overall commander.^{4,5,6}

Bin Laden thus created a network that, despite more than a decade of withering onslaught, continues to demonstrate its ability to:

- preserve a compelling brand and message that still finds an audience and adherents in disparate parts of the globe, however modest that audience may be;
- pursue a strategy that continues to inform the movement's operations and activities.

Al-Qaeda's strategy today consists of two elements: increasingly encouraging "lone wolf" attacks in the West, and trying to take advantage of the recent revolutions and social upheaval in those Arab, North African, and West African countries where the network continues to operate.

This strategy is far cry from al-Qaeda's pre-9/11 strategy of inflicting massive well-organized attacks on the United States that were designed to push the U.S. out of the Muslim world. That strategy failed completely. After 9/11, the United States became more involved in the Muslim world than at any time in its history, occupying not only Afghanistan but also Iraq for many years; conducting multiple military operations in Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia, and the Philippines; and ramping up massive U.S. bases in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar. September 11, in fact, resembled Pearl Harbor. Just as the Japanese scored a tremendous tactical victory on December 7, 1941, they also set in motion a chain of events that led to the eventual collapse of imperial Japan. So, too, the 9/11 attacks set in motion a chain of events that would lead to the destruction of much of al-Qaeda and, eventually, the death of its leader. Al-Qaeda ("the base" in Arabic) lost the best base it ever had in the pre 9/11-Afghanistan, a country where it once had free rein to train many thousands of fighters. Since then, the group has never been able to find a safe haven remotely as congenial for training its fighters.

The Boston Marathon bombings illustrate the threat posed by al-Qaeda-inspired individuals who radicalize in the online world and act as "lone wolves." Although difficult to detect, these individuals are unlikely to be capable of perpetrating anything on the scale of 9/11. Whether the Boston bombings are something of an outlier or a harbinger of things to come remains unclear. These "lone wolves" also demonstrate the difficulty of detecting would-be terrorists when plotters have few, if any, connections to known terrorist groups, are generally not known to have previously engaged in criminal activity—and when the type of information stove-piping and lack of inter-agency and federal-state-local coordination identified by the 9/11 Commission report still persists.

It is also not clear that the United States is any better at identifying the radicalization process or halting that process

before individuals can be recruited and dispatched abroad for further indoctrination and training than it was in 2008, when groups of Somali American men from Minneapolis began traveling to Somalia to join al-Shabaab. And the fact that no federal agency "owns" the counter-radicalization portfolio means that if no one is directly responsible, few effective or coordinated actions are likely to be achieved.

The unrest that swept the Arab world in the wake of the Arab Spring provided extremist groups with more room to operate and injected large amounts of arms into the region.* Taking advantage of these circumstances, Al-Qaeda affiliates subsequently gained significant footholds in Libya, Mali, Syria, and Yemen. Prison breaks across the region, including two major prison breaks in Pakistan and Iraq during July 2013, have also enabled al-Qaeda-associated groups to regenerate some of their strength.⁷ However, to date, jihadist violence in the Middle East has focused on domestic targets. And in countries such as Mali and Yemen, jihadist militants have overplayed their hands and have suffered real reverses in the past year or so. (We use the term "jihadist" in this paper because that is how these militants describe themselves).

The attacks on U.S. government facilities in Benghazi, Libya, in September 2012 and on the BP oil facility at In Amenas, Algeria, at the beginning of this year represent the current state of jihadist anti-Western capabilities abroad. The extent to which a shift to "far enemy" targets in the West might occur—as al-Qaeda shifted its focus during the late-1990s—will depend on the outcome of the Syrian civil war and the fortunes of al-Qaeda's affiliate there, Jabhat al-Nusra; the trajectory of al-Qaeda-aligned groups in other countries in the Middle East and Africa; and the impact of

*Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups currently have 16 different areas of operation around the world: Afghanistan, Algeria, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. In 2008, the movement was active in just eight of those areas: Afghanistan, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Somalia.

It is too soon to predict the long-term threat posed by al-Qaeda and allied groups as the movement is undergoing a transition that may end up proving to be its last gasp; but the right set of circumstances in the unstable Middle East could also revive the network.

the military overthrow of the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government led by Mohammed Morsi in Egypt on the Islamist movement in general.

In the midst of al-Qaeda's expulsion from, and defeat in, Afghanistan almost 12 years ago, when many believed it was on the brink of annihilation, Zawahiri charted a way forward for the movement. His treatise, published in the London-based Arabic-language newspaper *Al Sharq Al Aswat* in December 2001, and titled *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, explained how "small groups could frighten the Americans" and their allies. It described how the "jihad movement must patiently build its structure until it is well established. It must pool enough resources and supporters and devise enough plans to fight the battle at the time and arena that it chooses."⁸

That game plan remains in play because the al-Qaeda brand remains compelling, even if only to a relatively small number of militants in North Africa and the Middle East. The attraction of terrorism throughout history is that through dramatic acts of violence, even a handful of persons can have a disproportionate impact on a nation's sense of security and stability and, as Americans saw on 9/11, can perhaps dare to change the course of history.

However, encoded in the DNA of apocalyptic jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates are the seeds of their own long-term destruction: their victims are often Muslim civilians; they don't offer any real political or economic ideas to solve the problems of much of the Muslim world (but rather offer the prospect of Taliban-style regimes from Morocco to Indonesia); they don't implement practical local programs to make people's lives better (although recent developments in Syria suggest that the movement has deliberately changed its strategy in this respect); they keep expanding their list of enemies, including any Muslim who doesn't precisely share their worldview; and they seem incapable of becoming politically successful movements, because their ideology prevents them from making the real-world compromises that would allow them to engage in genuine politics.

These weaknesses are an impediment to al-Qaeda becoming any kind of political movement, but not continuing as a terrorist organization. Indeed, al-Qaeda would not be the first terrorist group to persist in spite of its many weaknesses. The Baader-Meinhof gang was able to inflict much harm on Germany for many years during the 1970s and 1980s even though it was consistently killing civilians and had virtually no public support.

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Chapter 2: The Threat at Home

Trends in “Homegrown” Radicalization

Since 2010, the threat of homegrown jihadist extremism has changed. The total number of extremists who have been indicted has declined from 33 in 2010 to six to date in 2013, domestic terrorist incidents are relatively rare, and the character of the perpetrators has shifted from a mix of plots conducted by groups of extremists or individuals to those entirely conducted by individuals or pairs. Extremists plotting attacks against the United States have shown little, if any, connection to foreign groups, and the network of Somali American men who organized to join al-Shabaab from 2007 forward has been largely dismantled.

The shift to plotting by individuals and pairs who lack ties to foreign groups poses a distinct type of threat—plots and attacks that are more difficult to detect but are also likely to be of a smaller scale. Because of the measures now in place to prevent the acquisition of precursor chemicals and materials suitable for making conventional explosives, homegrown extremists have also struggled to produce effective bombs.

They are also constrained by other systemic checks, including the use of informants by law enforcement and the cooperation of Muslim Americans during investigations. The Boston Marathon bombings, however, demonstrate the potential for these checks to fail when plotters have few, if any connections, to known terrorist groups. Also, should homegrown extremists elect to use firearms instead of bombs in attacks, this could pose a new kind of threat.

As long as al-Qaeda and affiliated entities are denied safe havens in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia to train militants for operations in the West, the United States will continue to face largely ineffectual homegrown extremists. But foreign militant groups continue to draw supporters and fighters from the United States who might be persuaded at some point to return to the U.S. to launch

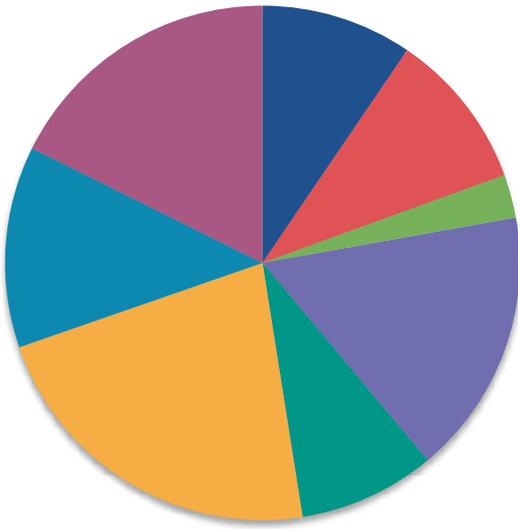
future attacks. And the ease with which two American citizens, Najibullah Zazi and Faisal Shahzad, were diverted from their original intentions to fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan and trained to carry out attacks in New York City in 2009 and 2010 cannot be ignored.

New groups, in particular Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and several Uzbek militant groups, have emerged as the recent recipients of various kinds of support from a small number of U.S.-based militants. Militants from European countries have not used the Visa Waiver Program (which allows Europeans to enter the United States without a visa) to conduct an attack, but this possibility remains a perennial possibility, particularly given the growing number of Europeans traveling to join the rebels in Syria.

There is no single ethnic profile for homegrown jihadist extremists. This underscores the challenges that U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies face in effectively identifying threats. According to a count by the New America Foundation, of the 221 homegrown extremists who have been indicted or convicted since 9/11 or who have been killed by U.S. law enforcement or in an overseas conflict, 22 percent are of Middle Eastern or North African descent, 18 percent are of South Asian descent, 17 percent are of East African descent, 10 percent are African American, 10 percent are Caucasian, 9 percent are of Hispanic or Caribbean descent, and 3 percent are of Central Asian or Caucus descent. A further 13 percent are of a mixed or unknown descent. The one identity they almost all share is that they are male. Only eight women have been indicted for a jihadist terrorist crime since 9/11.

(The New America Foundation dataset of homegrown jihadist extremists seeks to include all American citizens and residents indicted or convicted for crimes who were inspired by or associated with al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups, as well as those citizens and residents who were killed before they could be indicted but have been widely

Homegrown Jihadist Ethnicity 2001-2013



- African-American
- Caucasian
- Central Asian / Caucasus Descent
- East African
- Hispanic/Caribbean Descent
- Middle East/North African
- Mixed/Other/Unknown
- South Asian

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reported to have worked with or been inspired by al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups. The dataset does not include extremists tied to violent Islamist groups that do not target the United States as part of al-Qaeda's war, for example Hamas and Hezbollah, nor does it include individuals who were acquitted or charged with lesser crimes, for example immigration violations, that cannot be shown to involve some kind of terrorism-related crime. The original dataset was a collaboration between the New America Foundation's National Security Program and Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, and underwent a full review and update by the New America Foundation in 2013.)

The United States also faces a threat from homegrown violent extremists motivated by ideologies other than jihadism. According to data collected by the New America Foundation, since 2001, 29 people have been killed in politically motivated attacks by right-wing extremists in the United States, while 20 have been killed by jihadist militants.⁹ However, the focus of this report is on the threat posed by al-Qaeda and extremists influenced by jihadist ideology.

Number of Plots and Incidents Falling

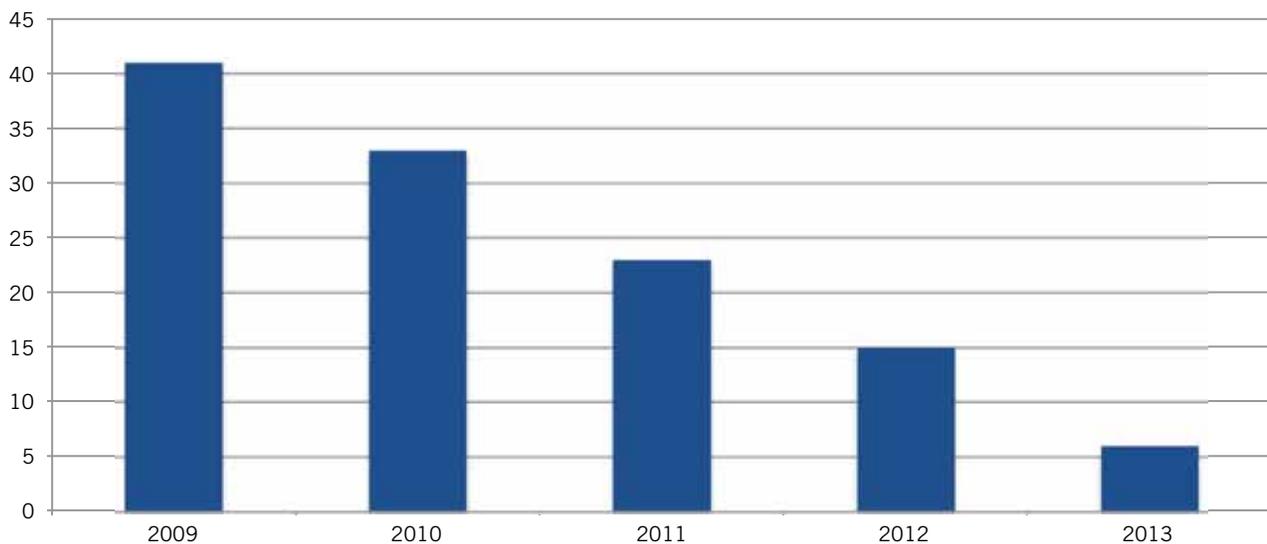
The number of jihadist extremists indicted in the United States has declined over the past few years, according to New America Foundation data. As of July 2013, 44 people were indicted between 2011 and 2013 for connections to jihadist terrorism.

In addition to those indicted, several extremists were killed before an indictment could be handed down. These include four men—Mohamoud Hassan, Jamal Sheikh Bana, Burhan Hassan, and Troy Matthew Kastigar—who traveled to fight in Somalia and died there prior to 2011; Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Yemen in 2011; and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, who was killed in April 2013 during a police chase following the Boston Marathon bombings.

According to the New America Foundation data, the number of individuals indicted for plotting attacks within the United States—as opposed to being indicted for traveling to join a terrorist group or sending money abroad to a terrorist group—also declined from 12 in 2011 to only three in 2013.

Indictments per year, however, are not a perfect measure of the threat. Charges can vary from state to state, depending on decisions regarding about what and who to prosecute. Additionally, the year in which an indictment is handed down is not necessarily the most relevant year in

Indictments of Jihadists



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an extremist's activity. Despite these flaws, the declining numbers of indictments provide reason to believe the overall threat from domestic jihadist extremists may be decreasing.

While the number of terrorism-related indictments fell between 2009 and 2013, the number of terrorist *incidents* has stayed about the same—about one per year—though not all of them have been lethal. In June 2009, Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammed killed a soldier outside a recruiting station in Little Rock, Arkansas. Five months later, Major Nidal Malik Hasan shot and killed 13 people at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas. Faisal Shahzad's 2010 attempt to bomb Times Square was foiled when his bomb did not ignite properly. Since then, individuals have been indicted in relation to two incidents, of which only one, the Boston Marathon bombings, was lethal.

The incidents carried out by homegrown extremists continue to be limited in their lethality, and major operations such as the 9/11 attacks are well beyond the skills of even

the most capable domestic extremists. It is a problem, then, that the response such incidents provoke from the government is often disproportionate to the threat they pose to the public. The Boston Marathon bombings, for example, an undeniably tragic but comparatively modest terrorist incident, closed down not only the Boston suburb where the Tsarnaev brothers were believed to have fled, but the entire Boston metropolitan area and Logan International Airport. The lesson to future adversaries is that even a handful of deaths can elicit a large response.

Additionally, no homegrown jihadist extremist in the United States is known to have acquired or used chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) weapons since the 9/11 attacks. This point bears repeating as there has been considerable overheated commentary on this subject over the past decade: of the 221 individual cases of jihadist extremism since 9/11, not one case involved an allegation of CBRN acquisition, manufacture, or use.

However, the fact that jihadist extremists in the United States have shown no interest in CBRN weapons does not eliminate the need for securing potential sources of chemical, biological, and radiological agents. According to a count by the New America Foundation, since 2001, 13 extremists motivated by right-wing ideologies, one left-wing militant, and two individuals with idiosyncratic motives have deployed, acquired, or tried to acquire chemical, biological, or radiological weapons. For example, William Krar and Judith Bruey, two anti-government extremists, possessed precursor chemicals for hydrogen cyanide gas, which they discussed deploying through a building's ventilation system.¹⁰ They were arrested in 2003.

Reduced Ties to Foreign Groups, Increased Role of Individuals

Since 2010, the threat from homegrown extremists has trended away from association with any kind of organized group. Recent attack plots do not show signs of direction from foreign terrorist organizations, but instead are conducted by persons influenced by the ideology of violent jihad. None of the 21 homegrown extremists known to have been involved in plots against the United States between 2011 and 2013 received training abroad. Of these extremists, only Tamerlan Tsarnaev is known to have had contact with foreign militant operatives, but it remains unclear to what extent this contact played a role in his attack.

This lack of coordination between domestic extremists and overseas groups is likely the result of two factors. First, the ability of terrorist organizations to coordinate with extremists in the United States has been reduced by policing efforts inside the country and counterterrorism operations abroad. Second, Internet use among jihadist extremists enables them to come into contact with extremist communities abroad and be radicalized without face-to-face meetings. Of the 45 homegrown extremists who were indicted, convicted

or killed between 2011 and 2013, 18 are known to have communicated with other extremists over the Internet or posted materials related to their radicalization online.

One factor in the radicalization of homegrown extremists in the United States is Anwar al-Awlaki's propaganda. Because of Awlaki's fluency in English and his talent for mixing religious theory with contemporary issues, he produced propaganda that has resonated powerfully for some. At least 31 homegrown extremists have cited or possessed Awlaki's teachings and propaganda, according to a count by the New America Foundation. Awlaki is known to have directly communicated with four U.S.-based militants including Major Hasan. Even after Awlaki's death in a 2011 U.S. drone strike in Yemen, his influence lives on. Alleged Boston bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was in possession of some of his writings.

In addition to lacking direction from abroad, the 2011 to 2013 attack plots were carried out by individuals and pairs, rather than by groups of militants. Thirteen of the 21 extremists involved in U.S. attack plots acted individually. And only four pairs of plotters were involved in domestic plots: Ahmed Ferhane and Mohamed Mamdouh, who plotted to bomb a Manhattan synagogue in May 2011; Khalid Abdul-Latif and Walli Mujahidh, who planned to attack a Military Entrance Processing Center in Seattle in June 2011; Raez and Shehreyar Qazi, who were arrested in 2012 for a plot to conduct an attack in New York City; and Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the perpetrators of the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombing.

Systemic Checks: Informants, Community Watchfulness, and Reports of Suspicious Activity

The threat from homegrown extremists to the U.S. homeland has been constrained in recent years by a variety of security measures. According to data collected by the

New America Foundation, family members of extremists and members of the wider Muslim American community provided useful information in the investigations of about a third of the homegrown jihadist extremists indicted or killed since 9/11.¹¹ Non-community members provided useful reports of suspicious activity in another 9 percent of homegrown extremist cases, while almost half of all homegrown extremists were monitored by an informant or undercover agent. Only two plots in the past three years escaped all the systemic checks that are now in place: Yonathan Melaku's non-lethal drive-by shooting of military facilities in Northern Virginia in 2011 and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings.

The Boston Marathon Bombers: Lone Wolves?

A key question concerning the Boston Marathon bombings is whether or not the Tsarnaevs are part of the trend in which plots are no longer directed by or connected to a foreign group. In January 2012, Tamerlan Tsarnaev traveled to Dagestan, Russia, and stayed there for six months. According to family members, he spent a month with them in the Dagestani capital, but did not travel to the mountains where rebel groups operate.¹² Following the Boston attack, the Mujahideen of the Caucasus Emirate—the largest Islamist militant group in the country—denied any involvement with or connection to Tsarnaev.¹³ Friends and family have also argued that he became religious well before traveling to Dagestan.¹⁴

Tsarnaev was also not widely accepted by others in Dagestan.¹⁵ He did, however, meet with Makhmud Nidal, a member of a rebel group, and according to an informant, they discussed ways he could aid Nidal's group.¹⁶ Nidal was later killed by Russian police, and the Russian government has alleged that he was also in contact with William Plotnikov, a Canadian citizen who traveled to Dagestan to fight.¹⁷

Another question is how the Tsarnaevs were able to successfully construct their bombs made from pressure cookers. Authorities believe the Tsarnaevs built their bombs in and near Tamerlan's apartment using designs from AQAP's English-language magazine, *Inspire*.¹⁸ Prior to the Boston Marathon bombings, homegrown jihadists in the United States had shown little success at producing explosives. Indeed, Joseph Jeffrey Brice almost killed himself in April 2010 when a homemade bomb he was constructing exploded prematurely. A month later, Faisal Shahzad's car bomb failed to explode in Times Square, even though he had received explosives training in Pakistan. And the same bomb-making instructions used by the Tsarnaevs failed in 2010 when Taimour Abdulwahab, a jihadist extremist in Stockholm, built a pressure cooker bomb that didn't detonate.¹⁹

If the Tsarnaevs built the bombs without guidance from jihadists abroad, it suggests that the difficulties earlier jihadists have had building explosives may have been overcome. On the other hand, the Tsarnaevs' success could just as easily have been a fluke.

A final question is: how were the Tsarnaevs able to avoid tipping off local and federal intelligence and law enforcement agencies, either through contact with an informant or from tips by the community? Russian officials had flagged Tamerlan Tsarnaev as a potential threat in 2011, though whether the quality of their evidence was sufficient to justify actions other than those taken is unclear.²⁰ The FBI opened an investigation into Tamerlan, but closed it when they found no evidence of criminal or terrorist activity.²¹ Boston's Police Commissioner Edward Davis told the House Homeland Security Committee at the first congressional hearing on the bombings, on May 9, 2013, that the Boston Police Department did not receive information regarding the Russian tip.²² In a statement later that same day, the FBI noted that several Boston police officers were part of the squad that investigated Tamerlan

in 2011, and they also had access to the Joint Terrorism Task Force database that included information on him.²³ The statement also acknowledged, though, that the Boston Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) conducted about 1,000 assessments in 2011, making it impossible for every officer to give each case close attention. The lack of a direct mechanism to share terrorism-related information between law enforcement agencies, along with the sheer amount of data that a JTTF in a major city has to sort through, are two issues that should be addressed in light of these attacks.

Additionally, while friends and family have declared their surprise at Tamerlan's violence, he now appears to be a suspect in a grisly 2011 triple murder in Waltham, Massachusetts.²⁴ Tamerlan was also isolated by the local Muslim community after he accused an imam of being a "nonbeliever" for making some kind of comparison between Martin Luther King Jr. and the Prophet Muhammad.²⁵

Looking forward, a concern about the Boston Marathon bombings is whether or not it represents an intelligence failure that could have been avoided through a better implementation of existing policies, or a new trend where "lone wolf" extremism is largely undetectable with the existing systemic checks in place.

U.S. Military Targets are Attractive for Jihadist Terrorists

On November 5, 2009, Major Nidal Malik Hasan opened fire on soldiers getting ready to deploy to Iraq and Afghanistan at the Fort Hood Army base in Killeen, Texas, killing 13 people and wounding many others—a reflection of a trend in which homegrown al-Qaeda-inspired terrorists attack U.S. military targets. For those individuals who buy bin Laden's key claim that the United States is at war with Islam, American soldiers who are fighting wars in Muslim countries make compelling targets. Indeed, according to a count by the New America Foundation, 34 percent of all the

Since 2010, the threat from homegrown extremists has trended away from association with any kind of organized group. Recent attack plots do not show signs of direction from foreign terrorist organizations, but instead are conducted by persons influenced by the ideology of violent jihad.

jihadist extremists who have carried out or plotted attacks inside the United States since 9/11 have targeted the U.S. military.²⁶

In the wake of the attack, the U.S. military tightened restrictions on who was allowed into Fort Hood, posted more armed guards in strategic locations around the base, and implemented the random searching of containers.²⁷ An extensive independent review to find the "lessons from Fort Hood" focused on identifying radicalization within the U.S. armed forces, a phenomenon that poses a particularly grave threat because of soldiers' access to weapons and secure military facilities.²⁸ A congressional review also identified some of the procedural problems that led to the military's failure to prevent the attack.²⁹

Following the review, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates issued a directive ordering the implementation of 47 recommendations to improve "force protection" at military bases in the United States.³⁰ These included giving military personnel better guidance on identifying suspicious or radical behavior by their comrades, establishing better relations between the Pentagon and the FBI's Joint

Terrorism Task Forces, and improving communication mechanisms for sharing real-time crisis information across military commands and installations.

But while establishing methods to identify extremists is a somewhat feasible goal in a regimented, closely monitored system such as the U.S. military, it is not as easy to do in the broader community, particularly when the individuals are “lone wolves” who are not part of a formal terrorist group.

Two attacks on soldiers living in the West in 2013 fit this particular category. On May 22, 2013, two men rammed a car into British soldier Lee Rigby as he was walking down a street in suburban London. They then hacked at him with a meat cleaver and left his body in the road while a bystander filmed one of the attackers. In the video, the attacker claims the slaying was justified as “an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth ... because Muslims are dying daily.”³¹

The following weekend, in what might have been a copycat attack, a young Muslim convert, who investigators believe “acted in the name of his religious ideology,” stabbed a 25-year-old French soldier in a Paris suburb.³² The soldier was likely targeted because French forces have served in Muslim countries, such as Afghanistan and Mali, in recent years. The suspect, identified only as Alexandre D., first came to law enforcement’s attention when he was questioned briefly in 2009, but French intelligence services only reportedly became aware of his increasing radicalization in February of this year.

Although there have been no successful attacks on U.S. military targets since 2009, ten of the 21 jihadist extremists who plotted attacks inside the United States over the past two years were targeting American soldiers or military installations.

The Pentagon’s concerted effort to identify and address the government failures that allowed Major Hasan to carry out

his attack make another insider attack on a U.S. military facility significantly less likely than it was four years ago. That said, American soldiers will remain squarely in the crosshairs of those few individuals in the United States who are motivated by al-Qaeda’s ideology, and the attacks in London and Paris demonstrate the difficulty of combating such a decentralized threat.

Terrorist Support Networks in the United States

An aspect of the homegrown extremist threat that is worrisome is the continued ability of jihadist groups to mobilize networks in the United States that direct funds and personnel abroad. Twenty-four of the 44 people indicted between 2011 and 2013 were charged not because they were involved in plots against the United States, but because they provided “material support” to terrorist groups overseas or attempted to fight overseas with such groups.

A more positive note, however, is that the U.S.-based network that once provided funds and more than 30 recruits to al-Shabaab in Somalia appears to have been dismantled. Since 2011, only four people have been indicted for traveling to or planning to travel to Somalia to fight for al-Shabaab. Ahmed Hussain Mahamud was indicted in June 2011 for funding the group of Somali Americans who traveled from Minnesota to join al-Shabaab in 2009.³³ In December 2011, Kenyan police apprehended Craig Baxam as he tried to make his way to Somalia, while Mohammad Abukhaidr and Randy Wilson were arrested in Georgia in December 2012 before they were able to travel to East Africa and join militant groups there.^{34,35} In none of these more recent cases did an individual successfully reach Somalia.

Additionally, the men who had previously traveled from the United States to join al-Shabaab have not returned to conduct attacks on U.S. soil. Some died fighting in Somalia, while al-Shabaab is believed to have killed one

individual, Burhan Hassan, rather than allow him to return to the United States. Moreover, a robust Somali American community response identified the men who had traveled to Somalia, making their return without arrest difficult.

In the past year or so, however, Syria has emerged as a destination for a handful of American jihadists. Nicole Mansfield from Flint, Michigan, was killed in Syria earlier this year where she may have joined the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra.³⁶ Eric Harroun from Arizona was indicted in 2012 for fighting in Syria with Jabhat al-Nusra; while 18-year-old Abdella Ahmad Tounisi from Chicago was arrested in a sting operation in April 2013 after he posted messages to a website purportedly recruiting people to fight in Syria.^{37,38}

Uzbek militant groups have also made inroads in establishing a U.S. support network. In 2012, for example, Jamshid Muhtorov and Bakhtiyor Jumaev were indicted for attempting to provide material support to the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) after Muhtorov, an Uzbek refugee, established contact with an IJU operative over the Internet.³⁹ Another man, Fazliddin Kurbanov, was indicted in 2013 on charges of explosives possession and providing material support to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).⁴⁰ He is alleged to have provided instruction to unidentified others in bomb-making, and he possessed components for an explosive device, specifically a hollow hand grenade, hobby fuse, aluminum powder, potassium nitrate, and sulfur. In another case, Ulugbek Kodirov, who claimed to be in contact with the IMU, was arrested in July 2011 after attempting to purchase an M-5 rifle from an FBI agent while making threats against President Obama.⁴¹

Also, American citizens and residents continue to be indicted for providing support to militant groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Iraq. Between 2011 and 2013, two men were indicted for providing support to insurgents in Iraq, one was indicted for attempting to provide support to AQAP, and another nine people were indicted for providing or attempting to provide support to the Taliban and similar groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, according to a count by the New America Foundation. Lastly, one individual, Mohammad Hassan Khalid, was indicted in connection with the plot by Colleen LaRose, also known as “Jihad Jane,” and others to assassinate Lars Viks, a Swedish cartoonist, somewhere in Europe.^w

The continued attempts and successes by foreign militant groups to establish support networks in the United States pose a potential future threat, as individuals sending funds to terrorist groups abroad could conceivably be directed to conduct attacks domestically, while American citizens fighting abroad may return to commit terrorism inside the United States. However, caution is required in predicting such future threats. Individuals willing to join jihadists in a warzone abroad are not necessarily willing to conduct terrorist attacks at home. The support for al-Shabaab amongst a relatively small group of Somali Americans did not, for instance, result in a wave of Somalia-related terrorism in the United States. And foreign conflicts are often deadly, reducing the number of potential returnees to the United States.



National Security Program
Homeland Security Project



Chapter 3: The International Threat

1. Al-Qaeda Central

Threat Assessment

Al-Qaeda hasn't conducted a successful attack in the West since the bombings on London's transportation system that killed 52 commuters eight years ago, and it hasn't carried out an attack in the United States for the past twelve years.⁴³ However, al-Qaeda does continue to provide strategic guidance to its affiliates and ideological followers, and remains capable of carrying out small-scale operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The killing of dozens of high-level al-Qaeda militants—foremost among them bin Laden in May 2011—has dealt a serious blow to al-Qaeda's core leadership. Despite concerns that bin Laden's "martyrdom" would provoke a rash of attacks in the West or against Western interests in the Muslim world, none ever materialized. Meanwhile, CIA drone strikes during President Obama's tenure alone have killed 33 of al-Qaeda's leaders in Pakistan, according to a count by the New America Foundation. A month after bin Laden's death, senior al-Qaeda operative Ilyas Kashmiri was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan.⁴⁴ Two months later, another U.S. drone strike killed Atiyah Abdul Rahman, who had become al-Qaeda's deputy after Zawahiri assumed bin Laden's role.⁴⁵ In 2012, seven militants identified in reliable media reports as senior al-Qaeda militants were killed in U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan, including Abu Yahya al-Libi, who had replaced Rahman as al-Qaeda's number two.⁴⁶

As the leaders of al-Qaeda have been forced to focus on survival, their ability to plan and conduct attacks has diminished. Documents recovered at bin Laden's Abbottabad compound show his deep concern about U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal regions. He recognized the devastation the drones were inflicting on his organization, writing a lengthy memo about the issue in October 2010 that advised his men to leave the Pakistani tribal regions

where the drone strikes are overwhelmingly concentrated and to head to a remote part of Afghanistan.⁴⁷ He also suggested that his son Hamza decamp for the prosperous and safe Persian Gulf kingdom of Qatar.⁴⁸ However, the documents additionally indicate that it was not difficult for al-Qaeda fighters to travel from Iran to Pakistan, or between Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁴⁹

We should also note that al-Qaeda is holding one American hostage, Warren Weinstein, a 70-year-old American contractor for USAID, who was kidnapped on August 13, 2011, from his home in Lahore, Pakistan. Pakistani security forces arrested three suspects in the kidnapping less than two weeks after it happened, but little information was released about them.⁵⁰ Four months later, Zawahiri released a video message claiming his group was holding Weinstein, saying, "Just as the Americans detain all whom they suspect of links to al-Qaeda and the Taliban, even remotely, we detained this man who is neck-deep in American aid to Pakistan since the '70s."⁵¹ In May 2012, al-Qaeda released a proof-of-life video featuring Weinstein, who made a plea directly to President Obama: "My life is in your hands, Mr. President. If you accept the demands, I live; if you don't accept the demands, then I die."⁵² Weinstein has not been heard from since.

Control over the al-Qaeda Network

The Abbottabad documents that have been released by the U.S. government reveal telling details of al-Qaeda's inner workings, including its leaders' attempts to assert influence over their affiliates. In a letter dated December 3, 2010, an unidentified al-Qaeda leader scolded the Pakistani Taliban for their indiscriminate attacks against civilians, while a letter bin Laden sent around the same time to the leaders of al-Shabaab advised the East African group not announce its merger with al-Qaeda because it would be bad for fundraising and would attract greater attention from the United States and its allies.^{53,54}

These letters show that al-Qaeda's operational control over its affiliated organizations is limited. The Pakistani Taliban continues to kill large numbers of Pakistani civilians and al-Shabaab formally announced its merger with al-Qaeda after bin Laden had died.⁵⁵ Further, while some affiliates still look to al-Qaeda for notional leadership and guidance, most of them do not appear to have embraced al-Qaeda's traditional focus on attacking the "far enemy," the United States, choosing instead to wage local power struggles.

The government has only released 17 of the thousands of documents that were found at bin Laden's compound, and any conclusions drawn from them at present are, at best, an incomplete picture of al-Qaeda's intentions and capabilities, as well as bin Laden's role in them.

A recent illustration of the fractured nature of the al-Qaeda network was provided during the spring of 2013 when Zawahiri personally intervened to settle a dispute between Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Zawahiri rejected AQI's assertion of control over al-Nusra and declared the Syrian group to be under his direction.⁵⁶

In doing so, Zawahiri was trying to assert control over two of al-Qaeda's most virulent affiliates. AQI had mounted a series of spectacular attacks in Iraq over the past year, demonstrating that it was a force to be reckoned with. According to the Congressional Research Service, there were some dozen days in 2012 in which AQI carried out simultaneous multicity attacks that killed hundreds of Iraqis.⁵⁷ And the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria is widely acknowledged as the most effective fighting force in the war against Bashar al-Assad's regime.

In closing his letter to the two affiliates, Zawahiri appointed a man named Abu Khalid al-Suri to resolve any future disputes that might arise between them. Zawahiri said he made these decisions "after holding consultations with my brothers in Khorosan," an ancient word for the region that

today contains Afghanistan, indicating that Zawahiri is able to communicate with, or perhaps even meet with, al-Qaeda leaders along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.⁵⁸ The mere existence of the Zawahiri memo shows that he is able to communicate with al-Qaeda's affiliates in the Middle East. Because of the now well-documented dangers of using any kind of electronic communication system, Zawahiri, like bin Laden before him, is almost certainly using a courier network to hand-deliver his letters.

However, in June 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of AQI, posted an audio recording online rejecting the order from Zawahiri.⁵⁹ This shows that AQI is willing to go public to dismiss the directives of AQI's leader, something that would have been unimaginable when bin Laden was in charge.

That Zawahiri continues to try to assert his control over al-Qaeda-affiliated groups is not surprising considering that bin Laden did the same thing while he was holed up in the Abbottabad compound. Documents found at the compound show that al-Qaeda's founder was deep in the weeds of key personnel decisions. In a letter to the Yemen-based AQAP, bin Laden was adamant that Awlaki not be made AQAP's new leader.⁶⁰ Awlaki never was promoted.

Future of the Organization

Since 2008, the CIA drone campaign in Pakistan has devastated the bench of al-Qaeda leaders, as this only partial list of operatives killed demonstrates:

- January 29, 2008: Abu Laith al-Libi, al-Qaeda's then-number three
- July 28, 2008: Abu Khabab al-Masri, al-Qaeda's WMD expert
- September 8, 2008: Abu Haris, al-Qaeda's chief in Pakistan
- October 16, 2008: Khalib Habib, a senior member of al-Qaeda

- October 31, 2008: Abu Jihad al-Masri, al-Qaeda's propaganda chief
- November 19, 2008: Abdullah Azzam al-Saudi, a senior member of al-Qaeda
- November 22, 2008: Abu Zubair al-Masri, a senior member of al-Qaeda
- 2009 (exact date unknown): Saad bin Laden, Osama bin Laden's second-eldest son and a leader of al-Qaeda
- January 1, 2009: Osama al-Kini, al-Qaeda's then-chief of operations in Pakistan
- January 1, 2009: Sheikh Ahmed Salim Swedan, al-Kini's lieutenant who also played a role in the 1998 embassy bombings
- December 8, 2009: Saleh al-Somali, al-Qaeda's external operations chief
- May 21, 2010: Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, al-Qaeda's then-number three
- September 26, 2010: Sheikh al-Fateh, an al-Qaeda chief in Afghanistan and Pakistan
- June 3, 2011: Ilyas Kashmiri, a senior al-Qaeda commander in Pakistan
- August 22, 2011: Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, al-Qaeda's then-number two
- September 11, 2011: Abu Hafs al-Shahri, al-Qaeda's then-chief of operations in Pakistan
- February 9, 2012: Badar Mansoor, thought to be al-Qaeda's most senior leader in Pakistan
- June 4, 2012: Abu Yahya al-Libi, al-Qaeda's then-number two
- December 6, 2012: Abdel Rehman al-Hussainan, a senior member of al-Qaeda
- July 2, 2013: Abu Saif al-Jazeri, a senior al-Qaeda operative

In 2011, the Pakistani intelligence service also arrested Younis al-Mauretani, a senior al-Qaeda leader, in Quetta.⁶¹

It is significant that only four notable senior al-Qaeda members are believed to now remain at-large in Pakistan: the emir of the organization, Zawahiri; the Arab American chief of external operations, Adnan Shukrijumah; its chief of internal operations (in Pakistan and Afghanistan), Khalid al-Habib; and longtime senior al-Qaeda commander, Saif al-Adel.

Likely because the bench of al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan has been so decimated Zawahiri recently appointed to the number two position in al-Qaeda the Yemen-based Nasir al-Wuhayshi who is the founder of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and was once bin Laden's personal secretary.

In the past year, Zawahiri has also brought two new official affiliates into the al-Qaeda network: Somalia's militant al-Shabaab group and Syria's Jabhat al-Nusra, which is widely regarded as the most effective force fighting the Assad regime.

Al-Qaeda was founded a quarter century ago in August 1988 in Peshawar, Pakistan. Zawahiri's success or failure as the head of al-Qaeda will be crucial to how the terror network moves forward as it marks its first 25 years of existence. A 2012 Harvard Kennedy School study of 131 terrorist groups that have gone out of business found that they averaged 14 years of existence. Al-Qaeda has already shown an ability to survive well beyond the life of an average terrorist group. The big question is whether Zawahiri can successfully lead the al-Qaeda network so it can thrive in today's chaotic conditions in the Middle East.

Though it has been badly battered, al-Qaeda's demise is neither ordained nor imminent. One can make a reasonable argument that the group has:

- a threatened but still standing sanctuary in Pakistan that has the potential to expand across the border into Afghanistan as the U.S. military and coalition forces continue to withdraw from that country;
- a defined and articulated strategy for the future;
- an overall leader in Zawahiri who, over the past year—despite predictions to the contrary—has been able to keep the movement alive and, as outlined above, forge new alliances;
- that said, core al-Qaeda, the once-global organization, seems to be devolving into just another Pakistan-based jihadi group with no ability to carry out operations outside of Pakistan except in neighboring Afghanistan.

Western Recruitment

Western members of core al-Qaeda are now relatively rare and appear to be limited to two senior operatives who remain at large; Shukrijumah and Adam Gadahn. But al-Qaeda does cooperate closely with the numerous jihadist militant groups active in the “Af-Pak” region; their Western recruitment efforts are covered in later sections of this report. It is often difficult to parse out exactly which Western militants belong to which group.

The last time a Western-based al-Qaeda member was publicly identified was in May 2011, when coalition and Afghan forces captured a “Germany-based Moroccan al-Qaeda foreign fighter facilitator” in southeast Afghanistan. In the same operation, coalition forces discovered passports and identification cards from France, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia on ten killed insurgents. The facilitator told the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) about his travel from Germany and said foreign fighters were “converging” on southern Afghanistan, primarily via Pakistan’s tribal regions, to fight ISAF forces there. At that time, the U.S. military estimated al-Qaeda’s presence in Afghanistan to be no more than 100 fighters at any given

time. Most of those fighters were said to be Arabs and Pakistanis.

At least one American, Jude Kenan Mohammad, has been killed by a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan’s tribal areas; though he was not specifically targeted and it is not publicly known when exactly he was killed.⁶³ And in October 2010, German al-Qaeda operative Ahmed Siddiqui was captured in Afghanistan, where he told his American interrogators about a multicity attack plot that was to be carried out in Europe and that had been personally approved by bin Laden.⁶⁴ In 2007, two American citizens traveled to Pakistan to join al-Qaeda: Bryant Neal Vinas and Najibullah Zazi, the latter of whom also trained at an al-Qaeda camp in Pakistan in 2008.

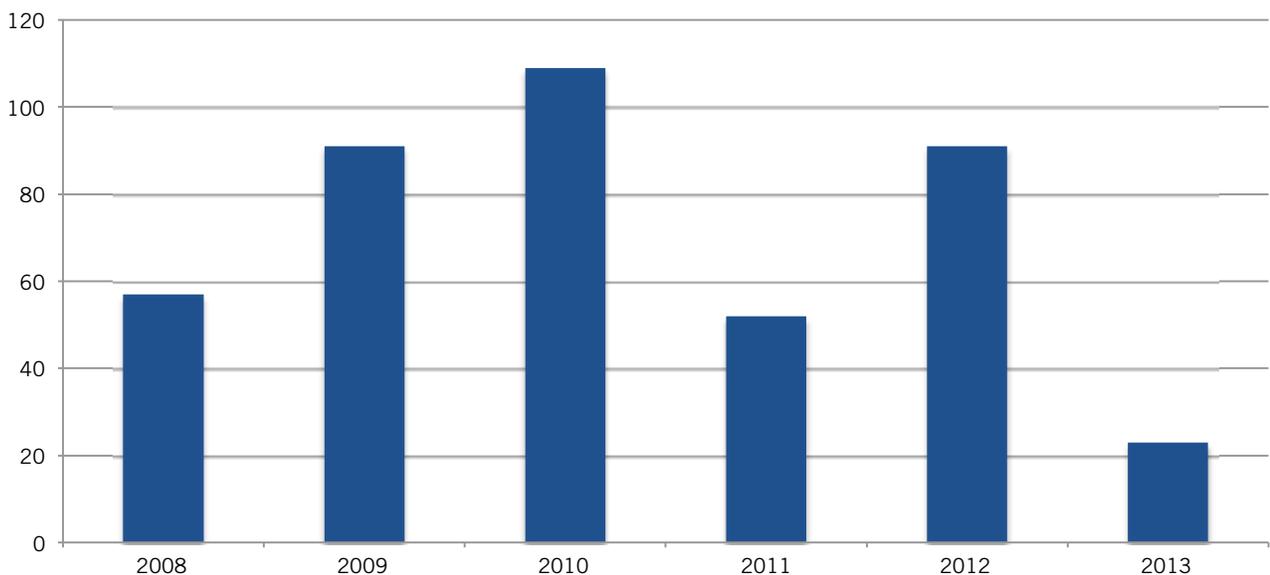
As other battlefields have opened up or expanded across the Muslim world, Western-based jihadists have likely been drawn away from the Af-Pak theater.

Media Activity

As-Sahab, al-Qaeda’s once-prolific media arm, has seen its influence decline in recent years as affiliates create their own propaganda channels and leading al-Qaeda spokesmen are killed or arrested. According to IntelCenter, a company focused on counterterrorism intelligence, of the senior al-Qaeda leaders who used to produce original content for as-Sahab (“the clouds” in Arabic), Zawahiri is the only one left.⁶⁵ Almost all of the second-tier al-Qaeda spokesmen have been killed or arrested, leaving just three other figures—Ahmad Farouq, the Pakistani head of al-Qaeda’s media department; Gadahn, an American-born al-Qaeda spokesman; and Maulana Asam Umar, a militant Pakistani cleric—who can direct al-Qaeda’s message.⁶⁶

The growing influence of Farouq and Umar has also, quite literally, changed the language of al-Qaeda’s messages. In May 2013, for the first time in 13 years, Urdu—the national language of Pakistan—replaced Arabic as the predominant

Al-Qaeda Video Releases



As of August 2013

messaging language for as-Sahab.⁶⁷ English, once a close second to Arabic, has all but disappeared.⁶⁸

The focus of al-Qaeda's videos has also shifted toward Pakistan. Of the 23 videos released by as-Sahab so far in 2013, more than a quarter focus on Pakistan.⁶⁹ India is a close second, with 13 percent of the videos referencing Pakistan's neighbor; while the United States is only mentioned once.⁷⁰ If these two trends are indicative of al-Qaeda's operational focus, they suggest that, over time, the once-global organization may become just another Pakistan-based jihadi group with limited or no ability to operate outside of Pakistan.

As for as-Sahab's releases, the numbers increased steadily between 2002 and 2007, but have fluctuated dramatically since then. In 2008, there were only 57 videos, a significant decrease from the 97 releases in 2007. In 2009 and 2010,

there were 91 and 109 video releases, respectively, but they dropped again in 2011 to 52.⁷¹ While the number of videos increased again in 2012, to 91, there have only been 11 videos thus far in 2013, which could be a further indicator of the growing pressures on core al-Qaeda.

To be sure, as-Sahab is still a sophisticated extremist messaging engine, but much as how CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News compete for viewers in the United States, as-Sahab has to compete with newer media channels produced by AQAP, al Shabaab, the Afghan Taliban, and the Pakistan Taliban.⁷² And it is here that the loss of leaders like bin Laden and Libi may be most keenly felt. With fewer on-camera personalities, it is harder for core al-Qaeda to produce the number of videos it did in the mid-2000s, when it released new audio or video messages an average of every three to four days.⁷³

Zawahiri has been an extremely prolific media figure, releasing some 35 audio and video statements over the past three years according to a count by the New America Foundation, indicating that wherever he is, Zawahiri is living in relative safety and with easy access to an administrator of al-Qaeda's media arm, as-Sahab.

2. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Threat Assessment

Because AQAP remains interested in launching attacks against the West, and its chief bomb-maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, remains at large, senior American counterterrorism and defense officials, including Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, have assessed that al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen poses the greatest immediate threat from a jihadist group to the United States.⁷⁴ In testimony before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in January, Clapper said that while AQAP is under attack in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, "the group continues to adjust its tactics, techniques and procedures for targeting the West."⁷⁵ However, AQAP has not attacked a U.S. target since its October 2010 attempt to plant bombs hidden in printer cartridges on cargo planes destined for the United States. And while the organization gained significant territory in Yemen as it exploited the popular uprising in the country in 2011, it also lost these gains within about a year.

Nonetheless, AQAP presents a lesson of how terrorist groups in the 21st century can become more lethal and shift their focus abroad more quickly than their 20th-century counterparts. It took core al-Qaeda a full decade from its founding to launch its first significant international terrorist attack—the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. By comparison, it took AQAP less than nine months from its emergence out of the remnants of decimated al-Qaeda cells in Saudi Arabia in 2009 to launch

its first transnational attack, the near-miss assassination of the senior Saudi prince responsible for counterterrorism, and less than a year to launch its first attack against the United States, another near-miss, but one that, on Christmas Day 2009, shook American confidence that the terrorist threat to commercial aviation had receded. Had the AQAP suicide terrorist, a young Nigerian man recruited into the group by Awlaki been successful, nearly a decade's worth of successes in the war on al-Qaeda and its allies could have been reversed in a matter of minutes.

AQAP Activities Since 2009

In the last few years, while core al-Qaeda declined in Pakistan, AQAP strengthened in Yemen.⁷⁶ AQAP's core membership grew from approximately 300 members in 2009 to around 1,000 in 2012, as hundreds of tribesmen joined AQAP in the fight against the U.S.-backed Yemeni government.⁷⁷ Then–National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor stated in May 2012 that, "while AQAP has grown in strength ... many of its supporters are tribal militants or part-time supporters who collaborate with AQAP for self-serving, personal interests rather than affinity with al-Qaeda's global ideology. The portion of hard-core, committed AQAP members is relatively small."⁷⁸

In the summer of 2010, AQAP increased its attacks in Yemen, assassinating dozens of Yemeni security officials while simultaneously plotting to place printer cartridges containing explosives on U.S.-bound flights. The packages were intercepted on October 29 while en route to the United States due to a tip from Saudi intelligence.⁷⁹ AQAP also launched *Inspire* magazine in July 2010 and established the Arabic-language al-Madad News Agency in 2011.⁸⁰

In March 2011, when Yemen's then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh sanctioned the killing of Arab Spring-inspired protesters in the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, his allies turned against him and a substantial portion of his army deserted.⁸¹

Soldiers in the south, who hadn't been paid in weeks, abandoned their posts, leaving the area open for AQAP to move in.⁸² Other troops returned to Sana'a to support the government there. The United States was forced to pull some Special Operations Forces out of Yemen, and counterterrorism training there slowed dramatically.⁸³ Fighters from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia are believed to have joined the insurgency, and in the spring of 2011, AQAP gained control of two Yemeni provinces and increased their presence in ten more.⁸⁴

In a sign that AQAP may have learned from some of the mistakes other al-Qaeda affiliates have made in the past, it has provided some services to Yemeni citizens. It has also, on occasion, operated without using the al-Qaeda name, a brand that even bin Laden understood to be deeply tarnished. For instance, AQAP operates under the name "Ansar al-Sharia" when reaching out to Yemeni locals and aims to demonstrate its adherence to Islamic law.⁸⁵ According to Christopher Swift, a Georgetown University researcher who has done field work in Yemen, economic factors, rather than religious extremism, provide AQAP with influence among locals. Insurgents offer local men "the promise of a rifle, a car and a salary of \$400 a month—a veritable fortune in a country where nearly half the population lives on less than \$2 a day."⁸⁶

AQAP has also given towns new wells, water, and food in exchange for the tribal elders' help in recruiting. In areas of the country with the most chaotic security environments, AQAP has used a combination of armed militias to gain control of territory, gifts of money and weapons to prop up local sheikhs, and sharia courts to prosecute criminals and provide some semblance of law and order. "In doing so, the movement exhibits a pragmatic approach that has more in common with the Taliban's operations in Afghanistan than it does with Osama bin Laden's globalized, decentralized jihad," Swift says.⁸⁷

In mid-2011, as the fight between the Yemeni government and armed opposition groups escalated, AQAP moved to seize more territory in southern Yemen, and the Yemeni government launched aggressive counter-assaults.⁸⁸ The United States also resumed its campaign of air and drone strikes, which had been halted the previous year. In February 2012, under pressure from the Obama administration, President Saleh signed an agreement to step down. Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi took over as president and subsequently gave the U.S. drone program unfettered access to targets in Yemen.⁸⁹

With the broad permission granted by Yemen's new president, the United States greatly expanded its drone campaign in 2012 and began to train and equip the Yemeni military to better combat AQAP.⁹⁰ Since 2010, U.S. drone strikes in Yemen have killed at least 31 high-level al-Qaeda operatives, including Awlaki and Samir Khan, the AQAP operative believed to have been the driving force behind *Inspire* magazine.⁹¹

Awlaki's death likely reduced the organization's ability to plan transnational attacks because he was a key operational planner.⁹² The group has not attempted an actual attack on the West since the failed 2010 cartridge-bomb plot. (A 2012 AQAP bombing plot was, in actuality, controlled by Saudi intelligence, which had inserted an informer into the group.)

With his native English-speaking ability, Awlaki was also AQAP's chief recruiter of foreigners, particularly those with Western connections; the group's foreign recruitment has dried up since his death. However, even in death, his voice continues to resonate with militants in the West. The surviving Boston bombing suspect, for example, admitted to watching Awlaki's sermons online, though there is no evidence that the Boston bombers ever communicated with him.⁹³

On July 17, 2013, AQAP confirmed the death of Said al-Shihri, the group's deputy commander, in a video posted to jihadist websites. Shihri, a Saudi and six-year resident of the U.S. detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, had long been reported dead from wounds he received from a drone strike in late 2012. The statement said Shihri had indeed died in a U.S. drone strike and that "lax security measures during his telephone contacts enabled the enemy to identify and kill him," though it did not confirm the date of his death.⁹⁴

Shihri's death is another blow to the organization, which as of mid-2013 is battered, though not defeated. In the past three years, as outlined above, more than 30 al-Qaeda leaders and other senior operatives in Yemen have been killed by U.S. drone strikes, according to a count by the New America Foundation.⁹⁵ AQAP's only remaining leaders appear to be its chief bomb-maker, Asiri; AQAP's leader and founder, Nasser al-Wuhayshi; and the man who delivered Shihri's eulogy, Ibrahim al-Rubaish, another former Guantanamo detainee.

In June 2012, AQAP elements withdrew from their southern Yemen strongholds when Yemeni military forces—with the support of local tribesmen and U.S. airstrikes—regained control of cities and towns in Abyan and Shabwah provinces.⁹⁶ They have since been reduced to carrying out smaller-scale, hit-and-run attacks; nothing close to the massive attack in May 2012, when an AQAP suicide bomber blew himself up at a military parade rehearsal in Sana'a, killing upward of 100 people, mostly soldiers, and injuring more than 200.⁹⁷

Western Recruitment

AQAP has led global online radicalization efforts and has made Western recruitment to its cause a priority in its propaganda. This "lone wolf" strategy is spearheaded by AQAP's al-Malahem Media Foundation. Written in eloquent English and formatted like a U.S. tabloid, al-Malahem's

Inspire magazine incites Western youth to join the jihad and carry out attacks within their own communities. According to the spring 2013 issue of *Inspire*, "Lone-Jihad is impossible to counter and stop, except when basic cooking ingredients and building material become illegal!"⁹⁸

3. Al-Qaeda in Iraq

Threat Assessment

AQI remains very active in Iraq and has played an important role in the civil war in neighboring Syria. It also appears to have learned from its past mistakes of alienating the local Sunni population by imposing Taliban-style rule on the population and is now far more integrated in the Iraqi Sunni population, leveraging the Sunni community's legitimate grievances against an increasingly sectarian central government to obtain safe haven and support.⁹⁹ That said, AQI hasn't attacked an American target outside of Iraq since it launched rockets at a U.S. warship anchored at the Jordanian port city of Aqaba in 2005 and hasn't shown much of an intent or capability to do so since.¹⁰⁰

Activities Since 2011

Since the last American troops left Iraq at the end of 2011, AQI has scaled up its attacks against the Iraqi state and the Shia population. On July 23, 2012, 13 Iraqi cities were rocked by bomb and gun attacks in a massive coordinated assault claimed by AQI leader Baghdadi. More than 100 people were killed, mostly Shia Muslim civilians, a gruesome reminder of the bloody, sectarian nature of AQI's campaign.¹⁰¹ According to the Iraq Body Count project, more than 4,500 people were killed in violence across the country in 2012, which was the first year since 2009 in which civilian casualties have increased.¹⁰²

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shia, has arrested countless Sunni Muslims in Iraq, hardening that minority

group against the government and allowing AQI to put down deeper roots in the population.¹⁰³ In December 2011, Maliki charged Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni, with terrorism and ordered his arrest.¹⁰⁴ Iraq expert Lieutenant Colonel Joel Rayburn wrote in early 2012, “[T]he ongoing political struggle creates more space in which Iraq’s sectarian militants—especially al-Qaeda in Iraq among Sunnis and the old Mahdi Army among the Shia—can operate.”¹⁰⁵ Another Iraq expert, Michael Knights, observed around the same time, “It is clear that Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is now experiencing something of a renaissance in the country.”¹⁰⁶

The group does not appear to have the capability to strike the U.S. homeland, though it continues to show at least nominal interest in doing so. On July 22, 2012, one day before the massive coordinated attacks, Baghdadi issued a statement in honor of the beginning of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, that directly addressed Americans: “You will soon witness how attacks will resound in the heart of your land, because our war with you has now started.”¹⁰⁷ Today, after the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq, the relationship between U.S. intelligence services and Iraqi intelligence services is more limited, making it difficult to understand AQI and its intentions.¹⁰⁸

AQI is also deeply involved in the Syrian civil war. In April 2013, Director of National Intelligence Clapper told the Senate Armed Services Committee that extremist militias are present in 13 of Syria’s 14 provinces, and AQI is believed to have been providing fighters, weapons, training, and supplies to extremist Syrian groups.¹⁰⁹ And hundreds of prisoners, including senior members of al-Qaeda, broke out of Baghdad’s Abu Ghraib prison on July 22, 2013. According to *The Washington Post*, “U.S. officials closely monitoring the jailbreak said the number of escapees was thought to be 500 to 600, including a significant number of al Qaeda operatives.”¹¹⁰

Western Recruitment

AQI primarily recruits from disaffected Sunni youth. In May 2011, two Bowling Green, Kentucky-based Iraqi men—Waad Ramadan Alwan and Mohanad Shareef Hammadi—were arrested for aiding AQI. The two had attempted to send money, machine guns, IED material, and other weapons to their al-Qaeda handlers in Iraq, but were foiled in an FBI sting.¹¹¹ However, Alwan was an insurgent in Iraq prior to his activity in the United States, and both men were Iraqi nationals who had entered the United States in 2009.^{112,113}

A Cautionary Note

The December 2011 withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces from Iraq helped breathe new life into AQI.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the movement’s Iraqi branch also demonstrates the limitations of decapitation as an effective long-term counterterrorism strategy, given that its first three commanders—Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, and Abu Abdullah al-Rashid al-Baghdadi—have all been killed, yet the group is perhaps more threatening and consequential today than it has been at any time since the height of its power in 2006. (That said, AQI does not control territory in Iraq today as it did in seven years ago when it effectively ran Anbar Province; about a third of the land mass of Iraq.)

4. Jabhat al-Nusra

Threat Assessment

A long-term safe haven for Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, in the heart of the Arab world and next door to Israel, could create an organization with the intention and capability to attack the West. It could also be the success al-Qaeda needs to revive itself. For the moment, however, the group, which is widely regarded as the most effective fighting force in Syria, is focused on overthrowing the Assad regime, a project that may take years to achieve. Potential jihadi access to the vast stockpile of chemical weapons

assembled by the Assad regime and scattered across Syria is a potential game-changer though—not only because they could be used there, but because they could be smuggled out of the country as well.

Activities Since 2012

Jabhat al-Nusra, which means the “Victory Front,” is the most effective militant group in Syria and was listed as a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department in December 2012, essentially as a splinter of AQI.¹¹⁵ Barak Barfi, a journalist specializing in militant Arab groups, explains that al-Nusra could develop into a regional menace, saying: “A new al-Qaeda base in the Levant is highly strategic, [and could be] used to destabilize American allies like Jordan and Lebanon, who have historically tottered from one domestic crisis to another. Proximity to Europe and Israel can serve as a launching pad for attacks against both,” though there is confusion about how exactly al-Nusra fits into the larger Al-Qaeda network.¹¹⁶

AQI released a statement in April 2013 announcing the official merger of AQI and al-Nusra, proclaiming that their joint organization would be called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. A leader of al-Nusra later rejected the merger, but pledged the group’s support for Zawahiri.¹¹⁷ On June 9, 2013, Al Jazeera obtained a copy of a letter from Zawahiri annulling the merger.¹¹⁸ But a week later, in an audio recording posted online, AQI rejected Zawahiri’s annulment of the merger, likely adding to the confusion of al-Qaeda cadres.¹¹⁹

Al-Nusra’s military prowess and close ties to al-Qaeda make it a potentially serious threat to U.S. interests in the region, and the group has shown it has the ability to conduct massive suicide bombings.¹²⁰ In November 2012, al-Nusra claimed responsibility for 45 attacks in the provinces of Damascus, Deraa, Hama, and Homs that killed dozens of people, including one suicide bomb that reportedly resulted

in 60 casualties.¹²¹ It was the first insurgent organization in Syria to claim responsibility for attacks that caused civilian casualties.¹²²

Despite these civilian casualties, the group has been able to garner considerable support from Syria’s Sunni population, if only because it is the premier fighting force in the campaign to topple Assad, and because it is involved in providing critical services, such as food, hospitals, and sharia courts to the embattled population.¹²³

Also, for the moment, al-Nusra is not imposing Taliban-style rule on the population as AQI did in Anbar province during the first years of the Iraq War. AQI’s harsh rule precipitated the 2006 Sunni Awakening, in which Iraq’s Sunni tribes rose up against the group. Al-Nusra seems to have learned from this mistake and is operating in a Hezbollah-like manner as a large-scale provider of social services, and with the consent of the population in the areas it controls. This is something of a first for an al-Qaeda affiliate; developing a Mao-like “population-centric” approach to implementing a successful insurgency.

Al-Qaeda Affiliations

Al-Qaeda’s interest in Syria is longstanding. As the Council on Foreign Relations’ Ed Husain points out, “The territory in the Middle East that al-Qaeda covets most is of course Saudi Arabia, but Syria is next on the list.”¹²⁴ Bin Laden often referenced the events following World War I that resulted in the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the end of both Islamic rule of Muslims and the demise of the Caliphate. His videotaped statement on October 7, 2001, in response to the commencement of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, referred specifically to the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which detached the Arab Ottoman provinces from Muslim rule.¹²⁵ And, in one of al-Qaeda’s major addresses before the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, bin Laden cited the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement—the secret understanding between Britain and France that

divided the Levant and surrounding countries into British and French spheres of influence.¹²⁶

So Syria has long been an *idée fixe* for al-Qaeda, and the war there has even more of the characteristics of a perfect jihadi storm than Afghanistan possessed three decades ago: a conflict in the heart of the Arab world with widespread support among Sunni Muslims, the provision of financial assistance from wealthy Gulf supporters, a popular cause that readily attracts foreign volunteers, and a contiguous border with a number of Muslim states that facilitates the movements of fighters into and out of the battle space.

Syria also has several other compelling factors that have figured prominently in the attention al-Qaeda has focused on it:

- It is sacred land referred to in early Muslim scripture and history.
- In the geographical scheme of traditional Ottoman rule, it contains al-Haram al-Sharif—the “Holy Precinct” of Jerusalem, where the Dome of the Rock (from which the Prophet Muhammad is reputed to have ascended to heaven) and the al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam’s third-holiest shrine, are located.
- The enemy are the hated Shia apostate Alawite minority sect whom Ibn Taymiyah—the revered 13th-century Islamic theologian and author of the key jihadi text *The Religious and Moral Doctrine of Jihad*—called upon Sunnis to do battle with.¹²⁷ “For Sunni jihadist fighters,” Husain explains, “the conflict in Syria is religiously underwritten by their most important teacher.”¹²⁸
- Unlike Afghanistan, which was part of the *Ummah* (“community”) but distant from Arab countries, Syria offers al-Qaeda a base in the Arab heartland.
- Assad is the perfect al-Qaeda villain. He is an Alawite and therefore a heretic, he is a secularist and therefore

an apostate, and he is conducting a war without quarter against much of his Sunni population.

Syria is also a particularly agreeable environment for al-Qaeda. During the 2003 to 2009 Sunni insurgency in Iraq, it was a key base for training and supporting foreign fighters, many of whom were Syrian jihadists themselves. Shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the late Zarqawi, the founder and then-leader of AQI, established operations in Syria that contributed enormously to the escalation of violence in Iraq.^{129,130,131}

Some 2,000 to 5,500 foreign fighters are believed to have traveled to Syria since the beginning of the conflict to join the rebels who aim to topple Assad’s regime.¹³² Not all of these individuals have necessarily joined jihadist factions of the rebel forces, but because most foreign fighters are drawn to the conflict impelled by a perceived religious responsibility, it is likely that these groups have drawn the lion’s share of the foreigners. Even at high-end estimates, foreign fighters make up a small portion of the forces arrayed against the Assad regime: no more than 10 percent.¹³³ Nonetheless, their influence is palpable through Syrian rebel organizations such as al-Nusra.

According to the Quilliam Foundation’s Noman Benotman, a former jihadi himself and a founding member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which was once an al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Nusra “is largely influenced by al-Qaeda’s rigid jihadi ideology,” and, while its main enemy is the Syrian government and armed forces, it has been rhetorically hostile to the United States, in addition to promulgating harshly sectarian views that are focused mostly on Syria’s ruling Alawite minority.¹³⁴ Al-Nusra’s emerging role as the spearhead of the most bloody and spectacular opposition attacks is demonstrated by the nearly tenfold escalation of its operations between March and June 2012.¹³⁵

It is in Syria then that al-Qaeda's future—its relevance and perhaps even its longevity—turns.

Western Recruitment

Counts of foreigners and Westerners fighting in Syria rarely provide numbers fighting for the many, diverse rebel groups. However, al-Nusra is the opposition group in Syria that attracts the most foreign fighters.¹³⁶ It is believed that there are about 100 foreign fighters from the United Kingdom alone fighting in Syria.¹³⁷ But a study of 249 foreign-fighter martyrdom videos posted on jihadist websites reveals that just eight of them were for individuals of European origin, representing about 3 percent of the total.¹³⁸

Experts say the number of Americans fighting in Syria is likely less than ten, and only a couple of instances of Americans fighting with al-Nusra have been confirmed.¹³⁹ As outlined above, Eric Harroun, a former American soldier, was charged in 2013 with conspiring to use a rocket-propelled grenade in Syria, and he admitted to fighting with al-Nusra.¹⁴⁰ In May 2013, Nicole Mansfield, an American woman from Michigan, was killed by Syrian government forces, though none of her family members seem to know when she left for Syria or what exactly she was doing there.¹⁴¹

5. Egyptian Jihadist Groups

Threat Assessment

Egyptian terrorist groups currently threaten Egyptian security. These groups have rekindled jihadi violence in the Sinai Peninsula, which has become an increasingly violent region. The Sinai's proximity to Israel and to Western targets in Cairo, as well as its lack of strong government control, makes it a safe haven for terrorist groups.

Activities Since 2011

Since the ouster of longtime Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, Islamist militants have been waging a low-level insurgency in the Sinai. Many of their early attacks focused on the Arab Gas Pipeline, which runs through Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, and has an offshoot into Israel.¹⁴² On August 18, 2011, groups of militants launched a multipronged cross-border attack on Israel from the Sinai, killing six Israeli civilians, a police sniper, and soldier.¹⁴³ In August 2012, a militant attack on the Egyptian army near Egypt's border with Israel and the Gaza Strip triggered a massive crackdown.¹⁴⁴

Al-Qaeda Affiliations

In May 2013, three Sinai-affiliated militants were arrested for their alleged involvement in a plot to detonate car bombs outside the U.S. and French embassies in Cairo. These men reportedly had ties to al-Qaeda operatives outside of Egypt who helped them coordinate and prepare for the attack.¹⁴⁵ Egyptian militant groups that have had contact with al-Qaeda include Tawhid-wal-Jihad, the group responsible for the bombings of three tourist hotels in the Sinai in 2004, and another that calls itself al-Takfir Wal-Hijra.¹⁴⁶

The Egyptian government claimed in August 2012 that the Sinai insurgency comprised 1,600 al-Qaeda-aligned militants, but two months later, the mediator between the Egyptian government and the insurgents, Mohammed Ghazlani, claimed there was no operational relationship between al-Qaeda and the Sinai militants.^{147,148}

6. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its Splinter Groups

Threat Assessment

AQIM and its splinter groups have little ability to target the West, but do pose a threat to Western interests in their areas

of operation. The movement's access to large stockpiles of weapons from Libya, including perhaps MANPADs (man-portable air-defense systems), has the potential to enhance the group's power and enable it to arm terrorist groups elsewhere in the region.

AQIM and its splinter groups remain active in parts of Algeria, where they attacked a British oil facility in early 2013, and northern Mali, where they launched an offensive against the government alongside separatist Tuareg rebels in early 2012. However, AQIM and its splinter groups were pushed out of major Malian cities by a French military intervention earlier this year.

Activities Since 2010

AQIM primarily operates in the northern coastal and southern desert regions of Algeria, and in northern parts of Mali. The group uses traditional insurgency tactics such as ambushes and mortar, rocket, and IED attacks in its areas of operation, but has been unable to carry out attacks in the West.¹⁴⁹

While members of the group have been associated with high-profile attacks, such as the storming of U.S. government facilities in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012, the organization has largely focused on small-scale operations in the Sahel.¹⁵⁰ The greater threat now comes from AQIM splinter groups like Ansar al-Din and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, but even these offshoots appear more interested in acquiring territory and instituting sharia law than attacking the United States or other targets in the West.

In January 2013, the Associated Press discovered a 26-page manual in a building once occupied by AQIM in Timbuktu that could be helpful in using the portable SA-7 surface-to-air missile.¹⁵¹ French forces also reportedly recovered a battery pack and launch tube for such a missile, causing concern that AQIM could be in possession

of the weapon and could use it to target civilians.¹⁵² While most military aircraft now have countermeasures in place for these types of missiles, civilian aircraft usually do not. The SA-7 is not an easy weapon to use, particularly in hot climates like those of North Africa, and requires training to deploy; but if militants were to bring down a civilian airliner, it would have a serious impact on the aviation industry around the world.

Thus far, AQIM has been unable to repeat the success of the high casualty attacks it conducted in 2009, such as the car bomb in August of that year that injured 25 people at a police station in a city just east of Algiers.¹⁵³ The group has been targeted not only by multinational counterterrorism efforts, but by the Algerian government as well.¹⁵⁴ As a result, it has become fairly isolated within the country.¹⁵⁵ That said, the group is "prospering in areas where the state is absent or failing," according to Abdel-Rahim al-Manar Slimi, a professor at Morocco's Mohammed V University.¹⁵⁶ It has taken advantage of the downfall of Moammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya—and the resulting loose arms caches. Gaddafi was believed to have acquired 20,000 MANPADs, but, according to then-Assistant Secretary of State for Political and Military Affairs Andrew Shapiro, as of February 2012, only 5,000 systems had been recovered by the U.S. government.¹⁵⁷

AQIM is also thought to be operating in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—three countries that have suffered military coups in the last five years.¹⁵⁸ Of the three countries, its presence is most strongly felt in Mali where it worked with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad to secure an independent northern stronghold for ethnic Tuaregs in 2012.¹⁵⁹ According to residents of northern Mali, AQIM even brought terrorist trainers from Pakistan to teach recruits guerrilla tactics, arms smuggling, weapon types and uses, and money laundering.¹⁶⁰

However, once militants held the northern cities of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, a group of dissident AQIM members broke ranks and formed the Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa, and began supporting Ansar al-Din, another Islamist militant group.¹⁶¹ Ansar al-Din is notorious for having destroyed several UNESCO World Heritage sites in Timbuktu and enforcing a severe form of sharia law in the city during 2012.¹⁶² After French troops liberated Timbuktu in February 2013, France's President Francis Hollande was greeted with much local fanfare, a sign that Ansar al-Din had alienated the people it hoped to recruit to its cause.¹⁶³

AQIM also received considerable international media coverage in January 2013 when Islamist militants captured a natural gas facility in In Amenas, Algeria. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a former AQIM lieutenant, led the attack on the facility, which ultimately resulted in around 70 deaths.^{164,165} However, while Belmokhtar had ties to AQIM, the fact that his splinter group—known alternately as “The Masked Brigade” and “Those Who Sign with Blood”—captured the facility shows that AQIM is not monolithic and suffers from divisions among cells led by individuals with distinct goals and ambitions.¹⁶⁶

In January 2013, after the Islamist militants had been pushed out of northern Mali by the French military, the Associated Press found a letter from AQIM leader Abdelmalak Droukdel to Ansar al-Din members and AQIM lieutenants in the field.¹⁶⁷ In the letter, written sometime around May 2012, Droukdel criticized almost every major decision the militants had made in Mali, pointing out that declaring an independent territory in northern Mali had been premature and enforcing strict sharia law had turned off the locals.¹⁶⁸ The letter also showed a leader who was not in firm control of his network.¹⁶⁹

Al-Qaeda Affiliations

The leaders of AQIM's predecessor group, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (known by its French initials,

GPSC), pledged allegiance to core al-Qaeda several times throughout the 2000s, but the partnership was not formally recognized until 2006.¹⁷⁰ To become an al-Qaeda affiliate, GPSC expanded its aims and declared its intention to attack Western targets; however, to date, no known attacks or aborted attacks in the West have been directly linked to the group.^{171,172} As the group is widely considered the weakest of the al-Qaeda affiliates—it didn't even merit significant mention in the papers that were found in bin Laden's Abbottabad compound—its alignment with al-Qaeda seems to be an AQIM strategy aimed at retaining the group's relevance and improving its recruitment and training.¹⁷³

AQIM's main appeal today is its wealth, as its focus on kidnappings for ransom has earned it an estimated \$90 million in funds.¹⁷⁴ With those funds, it has supported a number of al-Qaeda fighters and militant groups in the region, including Nigeria's Boko Haram.^{175,176}

Western Recruitment

Individuals linked to AQIM have been arrested in Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The most well-known Western recruits are the two Canadian men who died in the attack earlier this year on the In Amenas gas facility in Algeria: Xristos Katsiroubas and Ali Medlej. A third Canadian, Aaron Yoon, is currently being held in a Mauritanian jail after being convicted of membership in a terrorist group last year. While family members and friends of the three men all say they underwent a radical change in the last few years, no one could explain what had prompted the change.¹⁷⁷

7. Boko Haram

Threat Assessment

Since its creation in 2002, Boko Haram has only attacked international interests once, when it bombed the United Nations office in Abuja, Nigeria, in August 2011. The

group has consistently shown little inclination or capacity for attacking Western targets and is principally interested in putting Nigeria under its version of sharia law.¹⁷⁸ The organization is predominantly focused on withdrawing from a society it sees as corrupt and beyond hope, and has constructed a “state within a state” with its own cabinet and religious police.¹⁷⁹ Like a number of other militant groups, Boko Haram offers welfare handouts, food, and shelter to its followers, and uses the money it steals to pay the widows of slain members.

Activities Since 2010

On Christmas Eve 2010, at least six bombs were detonated near crowded churches and markets, killing dozens of people. Seventeen days later, on New Year’s Eve, ten more people died when a bomb exploded in a popular open-air market.¹⁸⁰ In the summer of 2011, the group detonated its first car bomb outside the national police headquarters in June and attacked the United Nations headquarters in Abuja in August, killing and wounding dozens.¹⁸¹

In January 2012, Boko Haram launched coordinated attacks on the police headquarters and the offices of the Nigeria Immigration Service and the State Security Service in Kano, killing more than 200. The group’s last major attack came in March of that year, when its followers burned down 12 public schools in Maiduguri and forced 10,000 students out of school.¹⁸² (Boko Haram, a derisive name given to the group by locals, means “Western education is forbidden.”)

Since the 2012 attacks, Boko Haram has focused on a broad array of targets, including Christians, Nigerian security and police forces, the media, schools, and politicians, though the attacks are confined to northern Nigeria.¹⁸³

Al-Qaeda Affiliations

According to Guardian correspondent and al-Qaeda expert Jason Burke, who was briefed on a letter that was recovered

in the 2011 raid on bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad and that was not included in the 17 letters seized at the compound that were later publicly released, bin Laden had taken an interest in expanding al-Qaeda’s operations to West Africa as far back as 2003 and was in direct contact with leaders of Boko Haram.^{184,*}

In July 2010, Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram’s leader, released a statement expressing solidarity with al-Qaeda and threatening the United States, but it does not appear al-Qaeda ever formalized the partnership.¹⁸⁵ The group’s main connection to al-Qaeda seems to be the funding it receives from AQIM.¹⁸⁶

8. Al-Shabaab

Threat Assessment

Over the past few years, al-Shabaab has lost substantial territory and influence in Somalia. While it could remain a threat to Western targets, due to the group’s influence among the Somali diaspora population and its formal merger with al-Qaeda in 2012, recent battlefield defeats have forced it to focus internally. It has never conducted a successful attack in the West, and it has not been linked to any mass-casualty attack outside of Somalia since its launched bombings in Kampala, Uganda, in July 2010.¹⁸⁷

Activities Since 2010

Al-Shabaab controlled most of Somalia south of autonomously governed Puntland in 2010, but recent operations by African Union and Kenyan forces have ended its domination of southern Somalia.¹⁸⁸ In 2011, the U.N.-sanctioned African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) partnered with Somali troops to fight al-Shabaab militants,

*The first document released by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point begins with the serial number SOCOM-2012-0000003; both 0000001 and 0000002 have not been published.

and in August of that year, AMISOM and Somali transitional federal government (TFG) forces defeated al-Shabaab forces in Mogadishu, forcing the militants from a stronghold they had controlled since 2009.

Afterward, the militants began employing guerilla tactics in Mogadishu, conducting bombings against AMISOM and TFG military bases.¹⁸⁹ According to the National Counterterrorism Center, “al-Shabaab is responsible for the assassination of Somali peace activists, international aid workers, numerous civil society figures, and journalists.”¹⁹⁰ The National Counterterrorism Center also noted, “The group gained additional notoriety by blocking the delivery of aid from some Western relief agencies during the 2011 famine that killed tens of thousands of Somalis.”¹⁹¹ Somalia expert Ken Menkhaus observes that despite these weaknesses, al-Shabaab will “remain one of the most powerful militias in southern Somalia for some time to come. It continues to possess a network of cells in all of Somalia’s major urban areas and a capacity to engage in acts of terrorism.”¹⁹²

Al-Qaeda Affiliations

Although al-Shabaab has long been regarded as a regional offshoot of al-Qaeda, its leaders only declared their formal ties to the international terror organization in February 2012.¹⁹³ While the group seems to have been interested in an alliance before then, in 2010, bin Laden instructed the group’s leaders to keep their association with al-Qaeda a secret, fearing that openly linking the groups would put al-Shabaab at a disadvantage.¹⁹⁴ By February 2012, however, bin Laden was dead and al-Shabaab had just suffered significant losses in its southern Somali safe haven. Zawahiri, who had petitioned bin Laden to reconsider his views about the proposed merger between Shabaab and al-Qaeda, believed the time was right to announce formal ties between the two groups.¹⁹⁵

As al-Shabaab was then in the midst of its struggle against AMISOM and Kenyan forces, this was likely a move to bolster support from the international extremist community and out-of-area fighters. With al-Shabaab controlling significant—albeit shrinking—swaths of land in southern Somalia, however, its newfound alliance with al-Qaeda’s central leadership and its recognition of Zawahiri’s authority creates a risk of terrorist plots in the West. For instance, in 2010, a militant linked to al-Shabaab traveled to Denmark to kill Kurt Westergaard, a Danish cartoonist who had drawn cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that were deemed offensive by many Muslims.¹⁹⁶ Westergaard only survived the assault because he had installed a safe room in his house.

Western Recruitment

By recruiting English-speaking Muslims and members of the Somali diaspora, al-Shabaab has been able to persuade a number of British and American citizens to die for its cause. In October 2007, for instance, an unnamed British Somali was one of the first Western-based jihadists to kill himself in the name of al-Shabaab when he detonated a suicide vest at an Ethiopian army checkpoint and killed at least 20 soldiers.¹⁹⁷

While there are a number of American citizens fighting for a variety of al-Qaeda-affiliated or -inspired organizations, al-Shabaab seems to boast the most American fighters. According to a 2011 report by the House Committee on Homeland Security, an estimated 40 Americans have joined al-Shabaab in the last few years, at least 24 of them coming from the Somali community in Minnesota.¹⁹⁸

Al-Shabaab has prominently featured these recruits in its propaganda operations, releasing three official videos that starred Abu Mansoor al-Amriki (“the father of Mansoor, the American”), who is actually Omar Hammami, a 25-year-old from Alabama who was raised as a Baptist and converted to

Islam in high school.¹⁹⁹ One of the videos shows Hammami preparing an ambush against Ethiopian forces and features English rap lyrics extolling jihad.

Three of al-Shabaab's American recruits have died in suicide attacks.²⁰⁰ Al-Shabaab has also been able to attract a similar number of members from the Somali Canadian community. The group's online presence has enabled its mobilization of Western sympathizers, particularly in Somali chat rooms, where al-Shabaab militants are able to persuade their ethnic brethren to sympathize, join, or financially support their cause.²⁰¹

9. Ansar al-Sharia in Libya

Threat Assessment

Islamist militant groups are a threat to stability in post-Muammar Gaddafi Libya, but because Ansar al-Sharia ("Supporters of Islamic Law") is more of a label for militants who want to impose sharia law in Libya than a defined organization, they are not as organized as a formal al-Qaeda affiliate. Though Ansar al-Sharia's loose network of Islamist militants have conducted attacks in Libya, it will have to consolidate its power base and establish a central command structure to elevate its posture from a loosely organized movement to a larger threat.²⁰² Its ability to solidify into a more serious threat will depend on how long it takes the Libyan government to provide adequate security for the population.

Activities Since 2011

Ansar al-Sharia was one of many groups that sought to fill the security vacuum in Libya after Gaddafi's regime crumbled in 2011, and its members have tried to win over the population by guarding hospitals and other civilian facilities, doing charity work, and preaching.²⁰³ Its first major appearance occurred in June 2012, when 300 armed men appeared in Benghazi's Tahrir Square and demanded the

introduction of sharia law in Libya.²⁰⁴ They, along with other Salafi groups, have also been blamed for the destruction of Sufi mosques, mausoleums, and shrines.²⁰⁵

Ansar al-Sharia's involvement in the September 11, 2012, attack on U.S. government facilities in Benghazi, Libya, remains the subject of an ongoing federal investigation. The attack, which claimed the lives of four Americans, including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, certainly illustrates the elevated clout of Libyan jihadi groups in the wake of Gaddafi's ouster. Due to their significant influence in Benghazi, reports of affiliated militants at the scene, and the visibility of the group's logo during the attack, it is evident that the Ansar al-Sharia network participated in the attack in some way. However, the group's leaders officially denied any involvement, and a spokesperson for the group said that although some Ansar al-Sharia members participated in the attack, it had not been sanctioned by the top commanders.²⁰⁶ It is likely that localized, loosely affiliated networks were responsible for mobilizing the militants who attacked the consulate.

It also appears that external terrorist groups played a role in the attack, as elements of AQIM and the Egypt-based Muhammad Jamal Network are reported to have teamed up with the Benghazi-based extremists.²⁰⁷ Although he was later released, the only suspect to be arrested in connection to the attacks had ties to both Ansar al-Sharia and AQIM.²⁰⁸

After the assault, locals in Benghazi attacked Ansar al-Sharia's fortified bases and forced the group to scatter.²⁰⁹ While some members were absorbed into other armed groups in Libya, many returned to Benghazi in February 2013 to protect the city's hospital (at the request of hospital staff) and to man checkpoints.²¹⁰ Some Benghazi residents have even welcomed Ansar al-Sharia as protectors due to the lack of security provided by the new government in Tripoli.²¹¹

Al-Qaeda Affiliations

In September 2012, a leader of Ansar al-Sharia, Mohammed Ali al-Zahawi, said that while his brigade was not linked to al-Qaeda, he “approves” of its strategy.²¹²

10. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

Threat Assessment

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is engaged in a regional insurgency and has only attempted two attacks outside of the Af-Pak region, including the ultimately unsuccessful 2010 car bombing in Times Square—its only attempted attack on U.S. soil. Although the TTP also conducted fewer attacks in Pakistan over the past year, it continues to be a significant threat in northwestern Pakistan and to coalition efforts in Afghanistan.²¹³

Activities Since 2010

Over the past three years, the TTP has been responsible for frequent attacks within Pakistan, including many suicide bombings, and has killed hundreds. While many of these attacks have been aimed at police or military installations, the indiscriminate and potent nature of the blasts causes high numbers of civilian casualties. In response to the killing of bin Laden by U.S. Navy SEALs, for example, TTP operatives carried out a massive suicide bombing at a paramilitary police academy in Shabqadar, Pakistan, that killed at least 80 people.²¹⁴ The TTP took credit for a number of other attacks on Pakistani government installations that year, including bombings in Karachi and Peshawar, saying they were also in response to bin Laden’s death.²¹⁵

Prior to the May 2013 Pakistani elections, the TTP made an effort to diffuse its operations across the country’s urban centers in hope of influencing the national vote.²¹⁶ In Karachi, TTP militants carried out a number of attacks;

assassinated Sadiq Zaman Khattak, a secular candidate; and detonated a bomb on Election Day in an attempt to assassinate another politician.²¹⁷

The CIA drone program, which primarily targets Afghan and Pakistani Taliban elements in Waziristan, has killed many of the groups’ leaders, including its founder, Baitullah Mehsud; “mentor of suicide bombers,” Qari Hussain; and deputy commander, Wali-ur Rehman.²¹⁸ Since 2008, drone strikes have killed at least 19 Taliban leaders in Pakistan, according to a count by the New America Foundation.²¹⁹ The physical displacement of TTP cells, due to drone strikes and Pakistani military operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, has led to turf wars that are splintering the already-splintered organization.²²⁰

Al-Qaeda Affiliations

Due to the TTP’s history of cooperation with and geographical proximity to al-Qaeda’s leadership, the two groups maintain relatively close relations. Documents found in bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound show that orders have passed from al-Qaeda leaders to the TTP. Additionally, the TTP may have received technical support from al-Qaeda.²²¹

Western Recruitment

The TTP primarily recruits from the local Pashtun population that lives along the Af-Pak border, though they have also branched out into social media. In December 2012, Facebook shut down a TTP recruiting page that was advertising positions with the group’s new magazine, *Ahyah-e-Khilafat* (or “Sign of the Caliphate”).²²²

There are a few exceptions to the TTP’s recruitment of local Pashtuns, namely that of Pakistani American Faisal Shahzad, the would-be Times Square bomber. And in December 2009, five men from northern Virginia were detained in Pakistan when they attempted to join local militant groups. According to Pakistani prosecutors, they

had contacted several militant organizations about waging jihad and met with a TTP recruiter.²²³

11. Afghan Taliban

Threat Assessment

The Afghan Taliban continue to lead a potent insurgency in Afghanistan, launching persistent attacks against American forces, as well as military, diplomatic, and aid facilities. They remain in control of significant swaths of land in rural Afghanistan and will continue to threaten Afghan stability after the NATO combat mission ends in December 2014. However, they have shown no interest in mounting an attack against the U.S. homeland and, in June 2013, reopened direct negotiations with senior American officials at their new office in Qatar. However, like the previous attempts at negotiation, those talks quickly stalled.

Activities Since 2010

Since the troop surge in late 2009, ISAF's increased presence and frequent operations—especially in the Taliban's safe haven of southern Afghanistan—have decreased the group's freedom of movement. However, the Taliban continue to threaten the country's stability by conducting mass-casualty attacks, exploiting tribal and historical rivalries, and continuing its involvement in the country's opium trade.

In June 2013, the Taliban proved they were still capable of launching large-scale attacks in the heart of Afghanistan's capital city. In the span of three weeks, the Taliban launched three suicide attacks in Kabul: first at Kabul International Airport; then outside the Supreme Court, killing at least 17 civilians; and finally in Kabul's "Green Zone," where the presidential palace, ISAF headquarters, and multiple foreign embassies are located.^{224,225,226}

The Taliban also continue to hold one American prisoner of war. On June 30, 2009, then-23-year-old U.S. Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl went missing during his unit's regular patrol in Paktika province. The Taliban quickly took responsibility for the kidnapping and have released five videos of Bergdahl since then. In September 2012, the Taliban-linked Haqqani Network released a statement affirming Bergdahl's safety, and the International Committee of the Red Cross delivered a letter from Bergdahl to his parents in June 2013.^{227,228} The U.S. government has been in talks with the Taliban about a potential prisoner exchange—releasing a handful of Taliban leaders from Guantanamo Bay in return for Bergdahl—but that deal has not materialized yet.²²⁹

An overall peace deal between the Afghan Taliban, the Afghan government, and the United States before the end of NATO's combat mission in December 2014 is quite unlikely.²³⁰ And the Taliban will continue to pose a military threat long after the majority of American troops have left. U.S. military officials have repeatedly claimed that the Afghan National Army (ANA) will be capable of maintaining security by the end of 2014, but in December 2012, the Pentagon released a report saying that only one of the ANA's 23 brigades was able to operate without air or other military support from its NATO partners.^{231,232} However, less than a year later, as ANA units faced the Taliban's summer offensive alone for the first time, some brigades were holding their own, even in the country's most violent areas.²³³

Al-Qaeda Affiliations

Despite its historical ties to al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban's goals are local, not international. A January 2012 ISAF report titled "The State of Taliban" even notes that some senior Taliban commanders have shown an interest in separating themselves from al-Qaeda were the Taliban's *Quetta Shura* ("leadership council") to pursue the issue.²³⁴

12. The Haqqani Network

Threat Assessment

The Haqqani Network's collaboration with and support for al-Qaeda and the Taliban's *Quetta Shura* make it a continued threat to U.S. interests in the region. While the Haqqanis have never engaged in violence outside of the Af-Pak region, they have attacked NATO and U.N. targets in Afghanistan, as well as high-profile Afghan politicians. Additionally, the group continues to shelter international terrorists and has held Western hostages, such as *New York Times* reporter David Rohde.²³⁵

Activities Since 2011

On September 13, 2011, the Haqqani Network carried out a complex assault on the U.S. Embassy and NATO headquarters in Kabul, killing seven Afghans.²³⁶ Later that month, the Haqqanis were presumed responsible for an attack on a NATO military base in Wardak province that killed four Afghans and injured 77 American troops.²³⁷ In response to this violence, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen publicly asserted that Pakistan's intelligence service, the ISI, was ultimately responsible, stating, "The Haqqani Network ... acts as a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency."²³⁸

The Haqqanis are also presumed to be behind many attacks for which the Afghan Taliban claims credit. Haqqani expert Vahid Brown has explained that the group "has some utility in using the Taliban brand. The Taliban brand kind of represents opposition to foreign intervention in Afghanistan. ... They try to appear as a unified front."²³⁹

Shortly after Mullen's statement, President Obama and the National Security Council adopted a more aggressive policy toward the group and expanded their targeting of the Haqqani's safe haven in North Waziristan.²⁴⁰ According to

the New America Foundation's drone database, 31 drone strikes have targeted the Haqqani Network since Obama took office in 2009, whereas only two Bush-era strikes went after Haqqani targets.²⁴¹ And in August 2012, American officials said a drone strike had killed Badruddin Haqqani, the network's operational commander.²⁴²

Al-Qaeda Affiliations

The Haqqani Network's relationship with other militant groups in the Af-Pak border region is as complex as it is murky. A 2012 report published by the Countering Terrorism Center at West Point defines the Haqqani Network as a "nexus" organization that helps other insurgent and terrorist groups.²⁴³ The Haqqani Network has a history of collaboration with al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and Hizb-e-Islami, the militant group run by Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

13. Lashkar-e-Taiba

Threat Assessment

Although the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) has not conducted a mass-casualty attack outside of the Af-Pak region since its lethal rampage in Mumbai, India, in 2008, it is still a potential threat to regional security and U.S. interests in the area. In 2012, the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel Locklear, stated that "Lashkar-e-Taiba remains one [of], if not the most operationally capable terrorist groups through all of South Asia."²⁴⁴

Activities Since 2010

LeT has primarily targeted Indians and Indian facilities, but it also assists insurgents in Afghanistan. According to LeT expert Stephen Tankel, "Since November 2008, its militant activities in Afghanistan and throughout South Asia have expanded, while its operational integration with the jihadist

nexus in Pakistan has grown.”²⁴⁵ But in 2011, Tankel found that LeT’s role in Afghanistan was also expanding: “Lashkar boasts a stable of explosives experts and its fighters are adept at small-unit tactics, meaning it can make a qualitative contribution to the [Afghan] cause even without substantially increasing its quantitative input.”²⁴⁶ In April 2013, ISAF Joint Command reported that “an Afghan and coalition security force arrested a senior Lashkar-e Taiba leader” in Ghazni province, Afghanistan.²⁴⁷

Because LeT shares its core sentiments—opposition to India and U.S. involvement in Afghanistan—with the Pakistani government and ISI, it operates with few constraints in Pakistan. LeT leader Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, for example, is able to live freely and promote LeT—often receiving protection from the Pakistani police despite the \$10 million bounty on his head from the U.S. government—from his residence in Lahore.²⁴⁸ And LeT continues to draw fighters from all Pakistani social strata, even competing directly with the military for fighters in some areas.²⁴⁹

Al-Qaeda Affiliations

While LeT does not claim official ties to al-Qaeda, there is evidence of communication and cooperation between the two groups. Al-Qaeda operatives have attended LeT training camps and have used LeT safe houses since 9/11.²⁵⁰

Western Recruitment

“Shoe bomber” Richard Reid and Shahzad Tanweer, one of the London subway suicide bombers, are believed to have attended LeT training camps or interacted with LeT militants in the early to mid-2000s.^{251,252} More recently, David Coleman Headley, an American citizen, was instrumental in the 2008 LeT massacre in Mumbai. Headley traveled to Mumbai five times to scope out targets and provided critical reconnaissance to LeT operatives. He also surveyed other potential targets in India and, in 2009, planned to attack a Danish newspaper that had published controversial

cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.²⁵³ In January 2013, following a plea bargain with U.S. federal prosecutors, Headley was sentenced to 35 years in prison.

LeT has the potential to attract additional Western-based extremists. According to Tankel, “One could imagine a scenario in which would-be Western jihadis looking to fight in Afghanistan linked up with a facilitator connected with Lashkar to access a training camp in territory controlled by the Haqqani Network where al-Qaeda convinced them to launch a terrorist attack in a Western country and Lashkar trainers provided some of the instruction.”²⁵⁴ It’s a bit of a convoluted scenario, but it serves to illustrate LeT’s power to connect people to disparate groups with similar ideologies.

14. Uzbek Militant Groups

Threat Assessment

The IJU and IMU continue to pose a threat to U.S. interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but they have showed no interest in or ability to engage in international terrorism since an alleged IJU-linked terrorism cell was broken up in Sauerland, Germany, in 2007.

Activities Since 2010

Established in the late 1990s to overthrow the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan, the IMU moved to bases in Afghanistan in the early 2000s. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the IMU fled to Pakistan, where it has developed close ties with the Pakistani Taliban. The IMU has released videos featuring leaders from both organizations, and the two groups have conducted several joint operations, including the attack that released 400 prisoners from Pakistan’s Bannu Prison in 2012.²⁵⁵ Both groups also rely on Abu Zarr al-Burmi, a militant Pakistani preacher and religious scholar, for rulings on religious law.²⁵⁶

In 2009, the IMU moved its fighters to North Waziristan, bringing it into close contact with the Haqqani Network; the two organizations began to cooperate shortly thereafter. The IMU even helped expand the Haqqani Network's control and ability to operate in Afghanistan, increasing the Uzbek group's role in the insurgency.²⁵⁷ ANA General Zalmay Wesa stated in April 2013 that IMU operatives are the focus of northern-based Afghan Special Forces units and that they have played a key role in spreading explosives knowledge to other insurgents.²⁵⁸

U.S. counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations have broadened their focus on the IMU in the past year, increasing the number of drone strikes and raids against IMU strongholds. U.S. drone strikes have killed two of the group's leaders—Tahir Yuldashev in September 2009 and Abu Usman Adil in August 2012—and at least 38 raids were conducted against IMU operatives in Afghanistan in 2012.²⁵⁹ This targeting has continued in 2013 with ISAF troops conducting 26 raids against IMU forces as of May 8, 2013.²⁶⁰

Following a number of member deaths—52 and 85 in 2010 and 2011, respectively—the U.S. State Department estimated that the IMU had about 200 to 300 members in 2012.^{261,262} Despite its losses, however, the IMU continues to pose a threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan. On May 12, 2013, the IMU conducted a suicide bombing in Quetta that killed ten people and wounded 75 others.²⁶³ Its training of fighters is among the more rigorous of the jihadist groups in the region, and it has a robust media operation.²⁶⁴

While the IMU has drawn support from radicalized Westerners and developed close ties with al-Qaeda-linked militant groups, its website has only addressed jihad in the West in general terms.²⁶⁵ The IJU—which split from the IMU in the early 2000s to pursue a more global vision of violent jihad—has been involved in and claimed responsibility for attempted attacks in Europe. In September 2007, the IJU

released a statement claiming responsibility for a disrupted plot to attack U.S. targets in Germany and threatening similar attacks in the future.²⁶⁶

Western Recruitment

Both the IJU and IMU have specifically targeted their Western recruitment efforts at Germany. In 2009, the IMU released a video subtitled in German showing its leader, Tahir Yuldashev, meeting with Hakimullah Mahsud, the leader of the Pakistani Taliban.²⁶⁷ In August 2010, the IMU's media arm released a video showing German militants in action that included instructions and subtitles in German.²⁶⁸

A number of Germans and other Europeans have trained in IMU camps, and some of these individuals have been involved in plots in Germany.²⁶⁹ In September 2009, Pakistani authorities uncovered an IMU-controlled training camp attended by mostly Germans, as well as a few Swedes.²⁷⁰ Ahmad Siddiqui and Rami Makanesi, German citizens who joined the IMU in Pakistan in March 2009, were caught in mid-2010 in Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively, as they were planning to return to Germany to fund-raise for al-Qaeda. They were allegedly sent by Yunis al-Mauretani, an al-Qaeda operative they had met earlier in the year at an IMU training camp.²⁷¹

The IJU has also been linked to a cell in Sauerland, Germany, that stockpiled explosives for an attack on U.S. targets in Germany and is believed to have developed a network to funnel individuals to militant groups in Pakistan.²⁷² German-born Muslim convert Eric Breininger was allegedly involved in both the 2007 Sauerland plot and in attacks on ISAF forces in Afghanistan.²⁷³

Since 2010, a number of extremists linked to these Uzbek militant groups have been indicted in the United States. Jamshid Muhtorov and Bakhtiyor Jumaev were arrested in 2012 for attempting to provide material support to IJU after Muhtorov, an Uzbek refugee, established contact with

an IJU operative over the Internet.²⁷⁴ Fazliddin Kurbanov, an Uzbek national, was indicted in 2013 on charges of explosives possession and providing material support to the IMU.²⁷⁵ He is also alleged to have provided bomb-making instructions to unnamed others.

15. Jemaah Islamiyah

Threat Assessment

Due to continuing government crackdowns throughout Southeast Asia, the once-virulent threat posed by the al-Qaeda-aligned Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has decreased significantly over the past few years. The weakened group is evolving into a more media-focused organization, distributing propaganda through books, magazines, and social networks to radicalize new members and boost its dwindling ranks.^{276,277}

Activities Since 2010

With the goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia, JI's activities are focused regionally, particularly in Indonesia and the Philippines.²⁷⁸ In recent years, the organization has been involved in just a few small-scale attacks that have primarily targeted moderate Muslim figures promoting religious tolerance and Indonesia's National Narcotics Agency, which combats terrorism.²⁷⁹ JI's weakened network and decimated leadership have caused the group to fracture, with JI members leaving to form their own networks.²⁸⁰ This splitting has blurred the lines between JI and other organizations, and has inspired "lone-wolves," as well as loosely connected jihadists, to initiate some attacks.²⁸¹

According to JI expert Sidney Jones, "Although Jemaah Islamiyah is past its prime, it is not vanquished. Islamist radical groups in Southeast Asia, particularly those in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, have been damaged but they are still dangerous."²⁸² These militant groups are

often interconnected and have shared training camps and weapons experts. JI itself is reportedly linked to other Southeast Asian Islamist groups, such as Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the southern Philippines.²⁸³ Although there are currently no operational links between the two groups, and the Front claims to not have ties to JI, the U.S. and Philippine governments believe the group has helped to train JI insurgents in the past.²⁸⁴

Al-Qaeda Affiliation

Due to its debilitated leadership and fractured network, JI has been largely cut off from al-Qaeda's core.²⁸⁵ While some individual JI operatives have ties to al-Qaeda members, maintaining those connections has reportedly grown difficult.^{286,287} Al-Qaeda's ideology is still influential within JI, but there are no longer any operational or organizational links between the two groups.²⁸⁸ Abu Sayyaf, which formerly had ties to al-Qaeda, has turned from "ideology-based" operations to more financially lucrative ones, such as kidnapping for ransom.²⁸⁹

16. Al-Qaeda's Ambiguous Relations with Iran

The news that Canadian law enforcement arrested two men accused of planning to derail a passenger train in the Toronto area in April 2013 attracted much attention, in part, because the plotters were also charged with "receiving support from al-Qaeda elements in Iran."²⁹⁰ If this allegation is true, it would mark the first time al-Qaeda elements based in Iran have directed some kind of plot in the West. It also underlines the perplexing relationship between the Sunni ultra-fundamentalist al-Qaeda and the Shia-led theocratic state of Iran, which al-Qaeda regards as heretical, but with which they have had some kind of a marriage of convenience for many years. While there is no evidence that al-Qaeda and the Iranian government have ever cooperated on a terrorist attack, al-Qaeda's ties to Iran stretch back more than a decade.

Al-Qaeda's Iranian presence began after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, when some of bin Laden's family members and top lieutenants fled to Tehran and lived under some form of house arrest. This group included Saad bin Laden, one of the al-Qaeda leader's older sons and a former leader in the organization; Saif al-Adel, the Egyptian military commander of al-Qaeda; and Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, bin Laden's son-in-law and spokesman. Saad also helped bin Laden's oldest wife, Khairiah bin Laden, and a number of his father's children move to Iran in 2002. Eventually, bin Laden's sons Ladin, Muhammad, and Uthman, and his daughter Fatima, who is married to Abu Ghaith, also settled in Tehran.^{291,292}

According to Saudi officials, it was al-Qaeda's leaders in Iran who approved a number of terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia that killed scores of Saudis and Westerners in 2003, and targeted the kingdom's oil infrastructure.

In 2008, al-Qaeda kidnapped Heshmatollah Attarzadeh-Niyaki, an Iranian diplomat living in the Pakistani city of Peshawar. According to a Pakistani intelligence official familiar with the deal, al-Qaeda released Niyaki to Iran in 2010 as part of a negotiation that allowed some of bin Laden's family members and al-Qaeda fighters to leave Iran.²⁹³ And in 2011, the U.S. Treasury named six al-Qaeda members living in Iran as "terrorists," who it alleged were sending fighters and money to Syria to fight the Assad regime and were also funding terrorism in Pakistan.²⁹⁴

But recent relations between al-Qaeda and Iran have been tense. In a letter recovered from the Abbottabad compound, bin Laden urged caution when his family members traveled out of Iran "since the Iranians are not to be trusted." He wrote that his family "should be warned about the importance of getting rid of everything they received from Iran like baggage or anything even as small as a needle, as there are eavesdropping chips that have been developed to be so small they can be put inside a medical syringe."²⁹⁵

In March 2013, Abu Ghaith was brought to a Manhattan courtroom to face charges of conspiracy to kill Americans.²⁹⁶ He had left the comparative safety of his longtime refuge in Iran for Turkey only a few weeks earlier. Turkey then deported him to his native Kuwait via Jordan, where he was detained by FBI agents who escorted him to New York.

Abu Ghaith and the two suspects arrested in Canada in early 2013, 30-year-old Chiheb Esseghaier of Montreal and 35-year-old Raed Jaser of Toronto, will continue to be the subjects of much interest from American and Canadian intelligence officials. Those officials will surely be seeking answers to the precise nature of the Iranian government's relationship with al-Qaeda over the past decade.

17. Muslim Public Opinion about Jihadist Groups

With little exception, jihadist groups are not winning the battle for the hearts and minds of local populations. According to the 2012 Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, there is little popular support for any of the militant groups operating in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, TTP, and the Haqqani Network all have favorability ratings of less than 20 percent, and even LeT is just above that at 22 percent favorability. Al-Qaeda and the TTP both have negative ratings of more than 50 percent (55 percent and 52 percent respectively), while the Afghan Taliban (45 percent) and LeT (37 percent) are slightly below that.²⁹⁷

Interestingly, the Pew survey, which covered about 82 percent of the Pakistani population, also found that Pakistanis who pray five times a day are more likely to view extremist groups negatively than those who pray less than five times a day. These religiously observant Pakistanis are between 6 and 14 points more negative in their assessments of extremist groups than those who are less observant.

This negative view of extremism is replicated across the Middle East with countries as diverse as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey citing higher disapproval ratings of al-Qaeda and the Taliban than Pakistan. According to the 2012 Pew survey responses, more than two-thirds of the populations in those Middle Eastern countries view al-Qaeda and the Taliban negatively.²⁹⁸ Lebanon is particularly against al-Qaeda, where the group has a negative rating of 98 percent.

Majorities in these countries also disapprove of attacks against civilians, regardless of whether those attacks are instigated by the military or individual attackers. According to a 2011 Gallup poll that measured public attitudes about attacks against civilians in 131 countries, more than half of the populations across the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia said individual attacks against civilians were never justified.²⁹⁹ Of the percentages that said individual attacks against civilians were sometimes justified, Egypt (2 percent) and Lebanon (5 percent) were at the bottom of the list, while Afghanistan (21 percent) was at the higher end of the regional spectrum. Pakistan (11 percent) was somewhere in the middle. Countries with more developed and stable societies, and stronger governance structures, rejected any kind of violence against civilians.³⁰⁰

However, it is not the “Arab street” or the populace amenable to responding to polling questions that comprise terrorist groups. Instead, their members are often disenfranchised, disillusioned, and marginalized youth, and there is no evidence that the potential pool of young “hot heads” to which the core’s message has always been directed will necessarily dissipate or constrict in light of the Arab Spring. In fact, it may actually grow as impatience over the slow pace of democratization and economic reform takes hold, and many who took to the streets find themselves excluded from or deprived of the political and economic benefits that the upheavals in their countries promised. The “losers” of the Arab Spring may thus provide a new reservoir of recruits for al-Qaeda in the near future—especially in those countries across North Africa and the Middle East with large populations below the age of 20. The recent events in Egypt, in particular, may yet attract the disillusioned and the disenchanting to the ranks of al-Qaeda or one of its local affiliates.



National Security Program
Homeland Security Project



Chapter 4: Assessing the U.S. Government Response to al-Qaeda and its Allies

As detailed above, al-Qaeda has weakened considerably over the past few years, while U.S. defenses have been strengthened. Just consider the following changes since the 9/11 attacks:

- On 9/11, there were 16 people on the “no fly” list.³⁰¹ Now there are more than 20,000.³⁰²
- In 2001, there were 32 Joint Terrorism Task Force “fusion centers” where multiple law enforcement agencies work together to chase down leads to build terrorism cases.³⁰³ Now there are 103.³⁰⁴
- A decade ago, the Department of Homeland Security, National Counterterrorism Center, Transportation Security Administration, U.S. Northern Command, and U.S. Cyber Command didn’t exist. All of these new institutions currently make it much harder for terrorists to operate in the United States.
- Before 9/11, Special Operations Forces were rarely deployed against al-Qaeda and allied groups.³⁰⁵ Now they perform nearly a dozen operations every day in Afghanistan, as well as missions in other countries such as Yemen and Somalia.^{306,307,308}
- At the beginning of the 21st century, the American public didn’t comprehend the threat posed by jihadist terrorists, but that changed dramatically after 9/11. In December 2001, it was passengers who disabled Richard Reid, “the shoe bomber.”³⁰⁹ Similarly, it was fellow passengers who tackled Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the “underwear bomber,” eight years later.³¹⁰ And the following year, it was a street vendor who spotted the bomb-laden SUV Faisal Shahzad had parked in Times Square.³¹¹
- Before 9/11, the CIA and the FBI barely communicated about their respective investigations of terrorist groups. Now they work together quite closely.
- The U.S. intelligence budget grew dramatically after 9/11, giving the government large resources with which

to improve its counterterrorism capabilities. In 2010, the United States spent more than \$80 billion on intelligence collection and other covert activities, a total more than three times what it spent in 1998.³¹²

CIA Drone Campaign

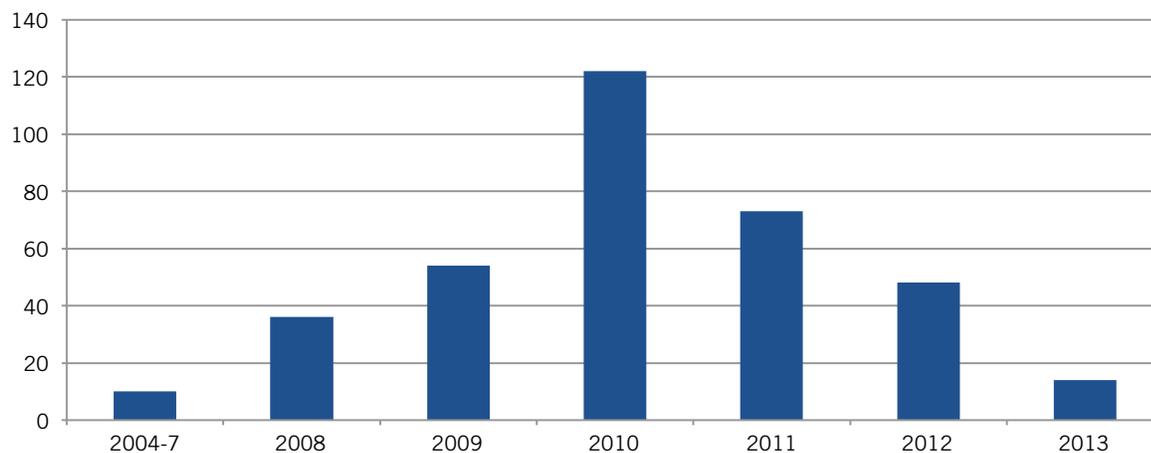
According to data gathered by the New America Foundation, the CIA drone campaign in Pakistan killed some 2,000 to 3,400 people between 2004 and late-July 2013.³¹³ Of those killed, 55 individuals were identified in reliable news reports as militant leaders, representing only 2 percent of the total. This trend has become particularly marked under President Obama, as the drone program morphed from a decapitation strategy aimed primarily at al-Qaeda’s top leaders to a counterinsurgency air force that largely targeted Taliban foot soldiers. According to an analysis by the New America Foundation, under President George W. Bush, one-third of the drone strikes appeared to target militant leaders, but under President Obama, that proportion has fallen to 13 percent.³¹⁴

President Obama also rapidly scaled up the pace of the drone campaign, reaching a peak of 122 strikes in 2010—roughly one every three days. But in 2011, the number of strikes in Pakistan’s tribal regions fell by 40 percent, to 73. In 2012, drone strikes in Pakistan decreased by another 34 percent, to 48 strikes.

In Yemen, U.S. drone strikes spiked dramatically in 2012, from 11 to 47. Between 600 and 900 people have died in U.S. air and drone strikes in Yemen between 2002 and early August 2013. Reliable news outlets have identified 33 of those individuals as militant leaders, about 4 percent of the total.³¹⁵

The CIA drone campaign has been critical to disrupting al-Qaeda activity in both Pakistan’s tribal regions and Yemen. In addition to killing key militant leaders involved in plots

Number of U.S. Drone Strikes in Pakistan



As of August 13, 2013

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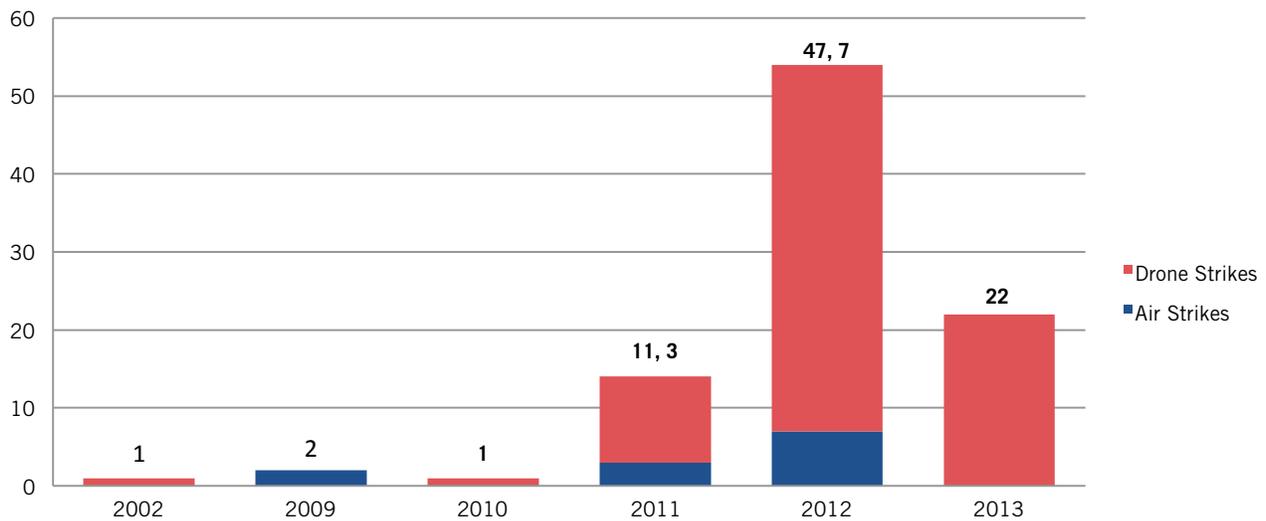
against the West, drone strikes in North Waziristan forced militants to abandon satellite phones and avoid gathering in large groups, which made planning and training for large-scale attacks difficult. Militants also reported having to sleep outside under trees, because their compounds were being targeted so frequently.³¹⁶

As outlined above, bin Laden recognized the devastation the drones were inflicting on his organization and advised his men to leave their base in Pakistan's tribal regions, where the drone strikes are overwhelmingly concentrated, for a remote part of Afghanistan. Similarly, in Yemen, militants have reportedly been forced to reduce the length of time spent in training camps, and government forces supported by the U.S. drone strikes were able to push al-Qaeda fighters out of major southern cities in 2012.

However, the drone program has also intensified anti-American sentiments in Pakistan and created an open sore in the countries' bilateral relationship. The killing of

Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen, in a September 2011 drone strike also sparked increased public debate about the legality of the program in the United States. The level of public scrutiny surrounding the program today makes it impossible for the strikes to continue with the same frequency and secrecy in which they operated over the past several years. And in May 2013, during a major counterterrorism speech, President Obama made it clear that he intends to restrict the program going forward. As of this writing, drone strikes have occurred in Pakistan every 14 days on average in 2013, which is their lowest rate since 2007, when just four such strikes were conducted. In Yemen, drone strikes were occurring every ten days on average as of this writing—substantially fewer strikes than were seen in 2012—though an uptick has occurred recently. There were eight drone strikes in Yemen during the first 12 days of August, and for the first time ever, the annual number of strikes in Yemen has passed the number in Pakistan.

U.S. Air and Drone Strikes in Yemen



As of August 13, 2013

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NSA Surveillance

Earlier this year, it was revealed that the National Security Agency (NSA) has been collecting phone-records metadata from Americans for many years and that it had secured the right to access overseas Internet traffic and content from every U.S. Internet service.³¹⁷ This sparked a debate between those who saw an overly expansive government fishing expedition that infringed Americans' privacy and those who pointed out that the NSA programs were carefully managed to protect the rights of American citizens. Beyond the privacy issues that the NSA programs raise: How successful have these programs been in interrupting terrorist plots? So far the evidence on the public record suggests that the programs have been of far less utility than recent U.S. government claims about their ability to disrupt terrorist plots.

Sometime in late 2007, Basaaly Saeed Moalin, a cabdriver living in San Diego, began a series of phone conversations with Aden Hashi Ayrow, one of the leaders of al-Shabaab. He had no idea the NSA was listening in. In one of those phone calls, Ayrow urged Moalin to send money to al-Shabaab, telling him that he urgently needed several thousand dollars. At one point, Ayrow told Moalin that it was "time to finance the jihad" and at another: "You are running late with the stuff. Send some and something will happen."^{318,319}

Over several months in 2008, Moalin transferred thousands of dollars to al-Shabaab. He even told Ayrow that he could use his house in Mogadishu, and "after you bury your stuff deep in the ground, you would, then, plant the trees on top."³²⁰ U.S. prosecutors later asserted that Moalin was offering his house to al-Shabaab as a place to hide weapons, and earlier this year, he was convicted of

conspiracy to provide material support to al-Shabaab and of money laundering for the terrorist organization.³²¹ However, there is nothing on the public record to suggest he was planning an attack in the United States.

Another terrorist financier detected by NSA surveillance was Khalid Ouazzani, a Moroccan native and naturalized American living in Kansas City, Missouri. Sometime in 2008, Ouazzani swore an oath of allegiance to al-Qaeda and sent around \$23,000 to the group before he was arrested two years later.³²² In June 2013, at a hearing for the House Select Committee on Intelligence on the NSA surveillance programs, FBI Deputy Director Sean Joyce testified that Ouazzani also had some kind of a “nascent” plan to attack the New York Stock Exchange. Ouazzani’s attorney denied that claim and court documents in his case do not mention any such plan.³²³

At the same hearing, Joyce and other top government officials pointed to these two cases as examples of the kinds of terrorist conspiracies NSA surveillance has disrupted in recent years, but they gave no new public information to substantiate a claim made by General Keith Alexander, NSA’s director, a week earlier that “dozens of terrorist events” had been averted both in the United States and abroad.³²⁴ Alexander said he would provide members of the House Intelligence Committee with additional information about the some 50 other terrorist plots that had been averted as a result of NSA surveillance, but this would be behind closed doors as the details of these plots remain classified. Speaking at Black Hat, an information-security conference, a month later, General Alexander provided more specific numbers, saying that NSA surveillance had prevented 54 terrorist-related activities worldwide, including 13 terrorist activities within the United States.³²⁵

The public record suggests that few of these plots involved attacks within the United States, because traditional law enforcement methods have overwhelmingly played the most

significant role in foiling terrorist attacks. According to a survey by the New America Foundation, jihadist extremists based in the United States have mounted 47 plots to conduct attacks within the United States since 2001.³²⁶ Of those plots, nine involved an actual terrorist act that was not prevented by any type of government action, such as the 2009 shooting spree at Fort Hood, Texas. Of the remaining 38 plots, the public record shows that at least 33 were uncovered by using standard policing practices such as informants, undercover officers, and tips to law enforcement.

At the House Intelligence Committee hearing, the FBI’s Sean Joyce also pointed to the 2009 plots by Najibullah Zazi as well as David Coleman Headley’s plan to attack a Danish newspaper as attacks that were also disrupted by NSA monitoring. As Joyce explained, the plot by Zazi to attack the New York subway system around the eighth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks was “the first core al-Qaeda plot since 9/11” that was directed from Pakistan inside the United States.³²⁷

There is no doubt that it was a serious plot, but if it was the only such plot on U.S. soil that the government averted as a result of the NSA’s surveillance monitoring, the public will have to decide whether it justifies the large-scale government surveillance programs—no matter how carefully they are run.

Countering Violent Extremism at Home

In August 2011, in response to growing concerns about homegrown violent extremism, the White House released a national strategy to counter violent extremism titled “Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States.”³²⁸ In it, the government emphasized three areas for priority action: federal engagement with local communities, increased law enforcement and

government expertise in countering violent extremism, and the promotion of American ideals as a counter to al-Qaeda's ideology. Yet two years later, it remains unclear to what extent America's institutional response to and understanding of radicalization has improved. A thorough examination of the 2011 strategy's implementation is necessary, but that task is beyond the scope of this report. Instead, what is presented below is a summary of some early findings and comments on this implementation.

Strategic Implementation

An initial examination suggests a mixed record in the implementation of the strategy. During a 2013 event on online radicalization at the New America Foundation, Mohamed Elibiary, a member of the Homeland Security Advisory Council, said that progress has been made, but that the countering violent extremism (CVE) initiative has been limited in its execution at the agency level.³²⁹ Rabia Chaudry, a fellow at the New America Foundation, noted that knowledge regarding the prevention of radicalization tended to remain among policymakers and not reach local communities. Haris Tarin, the director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, voiced a similar belief that issues regarding radicalization are not a dinner table topic for Muslim families who, like most other Americans, are focused on more immediate economic issues.

In 2012, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) used participant surveys and interviews with officials to assess how well the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department Homeland Security (DHS) were defining and communicating their CVE objectives. The GAO found that "DHS has identified CVE-related training topics but DOJ has not, making it difficult for DOJ to demonstrate how it is meeting its CVE responsibilities."³³⁰

The GAO also reviewed 8,424 feedback forms that DHS and DOJ had collected and retained from the more than

“al-Qaeda and allied groups today are situated in more places than on September 11, 2001. They maintain a presence in some 16 different theatres of operation—compared with half as many as recently as five years ago.”

28,000 state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement officials, prison officials, and community members who had participated in the different training courses. Of those surveys, the oversight agency found that the majority of participants viewed the trainings favorably. According to the GAO's findings, trainees felt that the courses were among the most challenging they had taken, the instructors were knowledgeable, and the materials helped them better understand various extremist groups.³³¹

However, the assessment noted that many sub-agencies lacked effective methods of evaluating CVE trainings, particularly within the Department of Justice. For example, neither the FBI nor the U.S. Attorneys' Offices (USAOs) required feedback on presentations relating to CVE, and only four of 21 FBI field offices and 15 of 39 USAOs chose to ask for feedback.³³² According to the USAO Executive Office, many of these presentations are given in a particular geographic location and focus on a particular threat for that area, so feedback may not be as widely applicable as it is for a curriculum-based CVE training course.

In addition to questioning the implementation of the existing strategy, some analysts have criticized the models upon which the strategy is based. Will McCants, a research scientist with CNA Analysis, and Clint Watts, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, have argued that the strategy's model of community policing and a whole

of government approach may be an overreaction to a problem best resolved through decentralized traditional law enforcement.³³³ They have suggested that promoting a focus on vulnerable communities in an environment where homegrown extremism has largely taken the form of alienated lone individuals may waste funds, establish a relationship between Muslim communities and the government overly defined in terms of policing, and provide extremism a coolness factor similar to the one generated by the DARE campaign's anti-drug efforts.³³⁴

In fairness, the CVE field is in its infancy and the administration's strategy is only two years old. Further study, evaluation, and development of core concepts are necessary, though two issues require substantial attention as the field develops.

The first issue concerns the risk of overemphasizing the security role of law enforcement officials at the expense of their cooperation with local communities. In 2011, as the national strategy was being formulated, the Bipartisan Policy

Center released a report on CVE in the United States. The report noted that, while it is important to maintain a bridge between counter-radicalization efforts and police functions, there must be a separation or counter-radicalization can itself become a grievance, perhaps even alienating the communities needed for an effective counter-radicalization policy.³³⁵

The second key issue is the role the Internet plays in radicalization. In 2012, the Bipartisan Policy Center published a report titled "Countering Online Radicalization in America" that provides a more detailed examination of the Internet's role in radicalization and potential policy responses.³³⁶ However, one of the important points raised in the report is that though the administration's 2011 strategy identified the role of the Internet in online radicalization and called for the development of a separate strategy focused this concern, that strategy remains to be completed.



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Chapter 5: Future Wild Cards for al-Qaeda and its Allies

Although the ability of al-Qaeda and its sympathizers to conduct large-scale attacks inside the United States and against U.S. interests has declined since our last report three years ago, there are several wild cards that could create an environment that allows al-Qaeda and allied groups to resuscitate themselves.

1. Unrest in Egypt and the Fate of Democratic Islamism

On June 30, 2013, millions of protesters took to the streets of Cairo and demanded that President Mohammed Morsi resign. A few days later, the Egyptian military removed Morsi from power.³³⁷ Following the initial euphoria of the Arab Spring, many saw the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood (of which Morsi is a leader) and other Islamist parties willing to engage in the democratic process as a repudiation of al-Qaeda's anti-democratic message of violence. With the removal of a democratically elected Islamist government by a Western-backed military, and the Army's mid-August killings of hundreds of Islamist protestors however, some may view the jihadists' rejection of the democratic process as vindicated.

Shadi Hamid, the director of research at the Brookings Institution's Doha Center, warns, "The Brotherhood's fall will have profound implications for the future of political Islam, reverberating across the region in potentially dangerous ways."³³⁸ One only has to recall the Algerian military coup in 1991—which started as an attempt to prevent the possibility of an elected Islamist government taking power and which plunged the country into a decade of civil war that killed 100,000 Algerians—to recognize the truth of that statement.

2. Prison Breaks

Another wild card is the capability al-Qaeda affiliates and allied groups have shown to launch successful prison breaks. In July 2013, 250 prisoners, most of whom were

militants, were freed by the Pakistani Taliban in an attack led by a commander who had been freed in a massive prison break the year before.³³⁹ Just a few days earlier, hundreds of prisoners, including senior al-Qaeda figures, were freed in a prison break in Iraq.³⁴⁰ In fact, in July 2012, AQI's Baghdadi announced the "Breaking the Walls" campaign, a yearlong effort to release his group's prisoners.³⁴¹ The attack on Abu Ghraib appears to be the culmination of those efforts.

The strategy of initiating prison breaks has a long history among al-Qaeda-associated groups, beginning with the Yemeni jailbreak in 2006 that led to the emergence of AQAP. During that breakout, 23 inmates escaped through a 460-foot tunnel into a nearby mosque; two of the escapees went on to become the leader and deputy leader of the al-Qaeda affiliate.³⁴² In 2008 and 2011, the Afghan Taliban led attacks on the Sarposa prison in Kandahar province that freed an astounding 1,700 prisoners.³⁴³ Many prisons in the Middle East and South Asia lack the capacity to defend themselves against these kinds of armed attacks, and the ability of al-Qaeda-associated groups to free imprisoned militants may enable certain affiliates, such as AQI, to regenerate their capabilities.

3. Growing Sunni-Shia Rift in the Middle East and South Asia

From Lebanon to Afghanistan, the two dominant sects of Islam—Sunnism and Shiism—are in increasingly violent opposition to one another. The bloody conflict in Syria has morphed over its three-year lifespan from a popular uprising against a repressive ruler into a sectarian civil war pitting the country's Sunni Muslim majority against President Assad's minority Alawite sect, which is associated with Shia Islam and has been supported with weapons and funds by Iran's Shia rulers. Factions of the armed opposition have reportedly targeted Shia and Alawite civilians purely on the

basis of their religion, and rebel leaders have threatened to destroy entire Shia and Alawite villages.³⁴⁴

Meanwhile, continued AQI terrorist attacks targeting Iraqi state security services, as well as civilian centers, have prompted Iraq's Shia leaders to crack down on the country's Sunnis, hardening the minority group against their Shia compatriots and deepening the sectarian divide. In May 2013, the United Nations recorded the highest death toll in Iraq since 2008, when the U.S. war there was still raging. In that month alone, more than 1,045 civilians and security personnel were killed according to the U.N. data, primarily as a result of bombings claimed by AQI.³⁴⁵ It shows that AQI is becoming increasingly entrenched in Iraq's Sunni community, and it is becoming impossible to disentangle the group's violent tactics from the growing hostility the country's Sunnis and Shias feel toward one another.

The sectarian conflicts in Syria and Iraq have also spilled over into Lebanon and Egypt. On June 23, 2013, in Lebanon's port city of Sidon, soldiers clashed with supporters of a hard-line Sunni cleric, Sheikh Ahmed al-Assir, who had spoken out vehemently against the Syrian regime, as well as the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, which had entered the Syrian conflict on the government's side. Al-Assir's supporters had previously fought with supporters of Hezbollah, but the June gun battles marked the first time that Lebanese security forces had clashed with a domestic militant group since the beginning of the Syrian war.³⁴⁶

On the same day, four Egyptian Shia Muslims were stabbed, beaten, and dragged through the streets by members of a hard-line Sunni group in the Giza neighborhood of Cairo. As in Iraq, intensifying sectarian tensions in Egypt are partially the fault of the government, which has on multiple occasions stoked the fire. A week before the Giza attack, for example, President Morsi had appeared on stage with hard-line clerics who called Shias "filthy."³⁴⁸ And in May,

Salafist members of Egypt's parliament denounced Shias as "a danger to Egypt's national security."³⁴⁹

Sectarian violence has also soared in South Asia over the past few years.³⁵⁰ More than 180 members of Pakistan's minority Shia Hazara community were killed in two massive bombings in the first two months of 2013 alone.³⁵¹ In neighboring Afghanistan, violent attacks on Shia Muslims are somewhat more rare, but in December 2011, two nearly simultaneous suicide bombs in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif killed more than 60 Shia civilians as they celebrated the annual religious festival of Ashura.³⁵²

We can expect sectarian tensions to continue boiling across the Muslim world, as the Syrian conflict grinds on and political and social unrest persist in many countries in the region. Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups will seek to exploit these sectarian divisions to garner support for their own violent agenda, and may well find greater room to operate because of it. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have mobilized their deep coffers to support extremist Sunni groups in the past and will continue to do so as long as it means they are able to counterbalance Iran and its support for Shia regimes and militant groups. This use of regional proxies has been seen across the region for decades and will likely continue exacerbating the Shia-Sunni divide.

4. A Syrian Training Ground

Another wild card is the potential for the Syrian civil war to provide a locus for training and indoctrination of jihadist fighters, including those from Western countries, who may commit acts of terrorism upon their return home. Syria has drawn foreign fighters from many countries in the region, including Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia, as well from places like Russia, Dagestan, and Chechnya.³⁵³

As noted earlier, the Syrian civil war has also drawn fighters from Europe. Charles Farr, Britain's director general of the

Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, has called the flow of European fighters to Syria “a very profound game changer.”³⁵⁴ Comparing it to Iraq, Farr noted that the Syrian fighters “are much closer to us, in much greater numbers and fighting with an intensity that we have not seen before.”³⁵⁵ The counts of European fighters in Syria vary, but between 70 and 100 fighters from the United Kingdom alone are believed to be in the country.³⁵⁶ French Interior Minister Manuel Valls has estimated that there are more than 600 Europeans fighting in Syria, including 140 French citizens.³⁵⁷ And German officials estimate that there are 60 Germans in Syria.³⁵⁸ According to a study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, Europeans account for approximately 7 to 11 percent of the foreign fighters in Syria.³⁵⁹

Because of this movement, some European countries have stepped up efforts to counter the flow of fighters to Syria. Belgium, for example, has established a network to track these foreign fighters.³⁶⁰ In April 2013, Belgian police detained six individuals, including the leader of Shariah4Belgium, who they accused of sending fighters and support to Syria, and prosecutors stated that they knew of at least 33 people linked to the Shariah4Belgium group fighting in Syria.³⁶¹

A compounding concern is that the arming of Syrian rebel groups may allow heavy weapons to fall into the hands of jihadist groups. The vast majority of the rebels fighting to topple Assad’s regime were ordinary civilians before the conflict began. In many initial battles, they were armed with simple stones and firearms bought for hunting. But civilians trained in technical careers soon taught themselves to make small homemade bombs. As professional soldiers began to desert and join the rebel movement, they acquired assault rifles, machine guns, rocket-propelled and hand grenades, as well as captured armored vehicles and tanks.³⁶²

As the conflict gathered speed, weapons began pouring into Syria from across the region. In October 2012, *The New*

York Times reported that portions of the arms shipments, at the time coming from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, were reaching hard-line jihadist groups.³⁶³ But by May 2013, likely under pressure from the United States, Qatar was reportedly focusing on keeping weaponry out of the hands of al-Qaeda-linked fighters and coordinating all weapons and aid shipments to the rebels.³⁶⁴ The weapons were said to be going through the Syrian National Coalition’s General Command, the leadership of the loose coalition of Syrian rebel groups that are not believed to be militantly jihadist or anti-Western.

5. Afghanistan Post-2014

Lastly, a deeply flawed Afghan presidential election in April 2014 might be an inflection point for the beginning of intensified conflict in Afghanistan and would likely benefit the Afghan Taliban and allied groups.

However, none of the above is preordained, much less certain. Though at least three scenarios are possible. In the first, core al-Qaeda continues to degenerate. This could be accompanied by the continued ascendance of affiliates and associated groups within a broad ideological and strategic framework bequeathed by the core organization.

A second scenario would see a continually weakened core al-Qaeda producing an even more fragmented jihadi movement. These smaller, less capable entities would continue to pose a terrorist threat, but a far weaker, more sporadic, and perhaps less consequential one. However, as previously noted, they would likely be more difficult to track, identify, and counter.

A third scenario is dependent upon whether the Syria conflict revitalizes core al-Qaeda and the attendant movement. The big question is whether al-Qaeda can avoid making the same mistakes that previously undermined its struggle in Iraq, and how successfully it manages relations with its regional affiliates and associated groups.



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Chapter 6: Recommendations

I. For the Legislative Branch

1. Congress should overhaul its oversight committees on national security. The responsibilities of the different committees should be clearly defined and—to the extent possible—not overlap.

A mind-boggling 108 congressional committees and subcommittees now oversee the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), up from the already large number of 86 in 2004. Too many of these committees have concurrent or overlapping jurisdiction, which results in conflicting guidance to the 22 agencies that make up DHS.

Congress should instead create a principal point of oversight and review for homeland security. As the legislative branch, it should be helping DHS integrate the various agencies it oversees, not adding to the confusion. After all, the two Armed Service Committees, which oversee the Pentagon and the armed services, do so quite well without all of the multiple redundancies that are found when it comes to homeland security.

Recent revelations that the NSA is collecting the phone-records metadata of American citizens, even if it is not privy to the content of those communications, reinforce the urgent need for a legislative branch that exercises appropriate oversight of the executive branch. The NSA program was created with virtually no public debate, setting a potentially dangerous precedent for future such national security programs.

Spying and surveillance are parts of the national security tool kit and should be used to understand and thwart an evolving jihadist terrorist threat. But these programs are inherently secretive, and to ensure they do not constitute government overreach, American citizens must rely on Congress to protect their constitutional rights. It was clear from the reaction on Capitol Hill that most U.S. legislators

were not aware either of the extent of the NSA's monitoring program or that it existed at all. Oversight committees with clear missions can play a vital role in balancing national security interests with civil liberty values and should examine these programs to determine if their large scope is necessary.

Congress should also constantly be ensuring that the immense amount of money spent on national security is being used effectively. In 2010, the intelligence budget alone topped \$80 billion. It has fallen by small amounts since then, but remains a large expenditure. Effective oversight committees are the only mechanism for ensuring that taxpayer dollars are being spent well.

2. Congress should hold a series of public hearings on where the United States stand in its counterterrorism strategy 12 years after the 9/11 attacks.

Some key questions legislators should ask include:

- Do the various components of U.S. counterterrorism strategy match the shape of the threat today?
- Are all of these components being implemented? And with what success?
- Is the nation absorbing the institutional lessons learned over the past 12 years?
- Is the government spending money in the right places and getting the most bang for its buck?
- What is missing from the strategy?

3. Congress should use the withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan at the end of 2014 as an opportunity to review the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF).

Eight days after 9/11, Congress passed the AUMF, giving President George W. Bush the legal authority to go to war

against al-Qaeda and its Taliban allies in Afghanistan. Few in Congress understood then that they were voting for what has become America's longest war. The AUMF has since been used to justify the CIA drone campaign in countries with which the United States is not at war, such as Pakistan and Yemen.

Almost twelve years after the AUMF was passed, President Obama gave a major speech arguing that the time had come to redefine the kind of conflict the United States has been engaged in, saying, "We must define the nature and scope of this struggle, or else it will define us."³⁶⁵ The president went on to discuss the AUMF, saying he hoped to "ultimately repeal [its] mandate. And I will not sign laws designed to expand this mandate further."

This potential recalibration of the "war on terror" has significant implications for the CIA drone program, which relies in good measure on the AUMF for its legal justification, and which was rapidly accelerated under President Obama. If the AUMF were to expire when U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan cease at the end of 2014, future drone strikes could only occur when the U.S. government is responding to some kind of "imminent" threat and would be justified only under the president's Article II authority as commander-in-chief. As a practical matter, this would restrict the occasions on which drone strikes could be deployed.

For some, this is a welcome sign of potential change to the CIA drone program. While the program's expansion was undoubtedly necessary because of the continued threat posed by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the dramatic acceleration of the strikes under President Obama has sometimes overwhelmed other important objectives, namely maintaining cordial relations with Pakistan, the world's second-largest Muslim nation. Also, the excessive deployment of CIA drones to target militants could provide an unwelcome precedent for countries such as China,

Russia, and Iran as they begin to have the capacity to target individuals they regard as terrorists with drones.

While only three nations are currently confirmed to possess armed drones—Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States—at least 80 countries have drones of some kind and a number of them may already be able to arm them, according to a count by the New America Foundation. In February 2013, for example, a Chinese state-run newspaper reported that the Chinese government had contemplated deploying an armed drone in a remote, mountainous area to kill a drug lord, but decided to capture him instead.³⁶⁶ And Iran claimed it had successfully armed a drone in 2010.³⁶⁷ A congressional debate about the future of the AUMF would be the forcing mechanism American officials need to create a more stringent legislative framework around the use of armed drones to target suspected terrorists.

4. Congress should put the CIA drone program on a more sound legal footing.

This could include transferring the program to the military, setting up a court to rule on targeting decisions, creating an independent committee to review strikes post facto, and improving the program's overall transparency.

The functioning of the CIA drone program remains largely shrouded in secrecy, though mounting pressure from the public and Congress over the past couple of years have forced the administration to reveal more details about its decision-making process for the strikes. In 2012, President Obama's then-top counterterrorism adviser at the White House, John Brennan, was reportedly working on writing an extensive "playbook" that would lay out the rules developed by the administration for the drone program over the previous several years.³⁶⁸ Since Brennan moved to take over as director of the CIA in February 2013, the White House has leaked some new guidelines for the program, which likely came from Brennan's playbook.

One significant new rule, which came to light in May 2013, was the administration's intention to apply the same rules it uses to target American citizens who have joined terrorist groups abroad to target foreign terrorists.³⁶⁹ This is an important step for the program for two reasons. One, thanks to a Justice Department memo leaked in early February 2013 that justified the targeting of Awlaki in Yemen, the public already has access to at least some version of the legal rationale for targeting American citizens in drone strikes.³⁷⁰ Two, that rationale requires a senior government official to be certain the targeted individual is a senior member of al-Qaeda or an allied group, which appears to eliminate the possibility of conducting so-called "signature strikes" that are particularly concerning from both a legal and a moral standpoint. Signature strikes are those that target groups of individuals who display a particular behavioral "signature" associated with militancy, but whose identities are not known. The cessation of signature strikes would be a critical change as it reduces the likelihood of civilian casualties.

Another possible solution would be to move the CIA drone program under the control of the Pentagon. On the surface, there is much that is appealing about this idea: It would bring what is essentially a military function to an organization that is far more accountable to Congress and to the public than the CIA is; and the families of those civilians who are inadvertently killed by drone strikes would be compensated for their losses, something that doesn't seem happen with the CIA strikes. That said, if the program were simply taken over by Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which has conducted its own drone strikes in countries like Yemen, this may not be much of a fix as JSOC operates with just as much, if not more, secrecy than the CIA.

Another potential fix to the drone program that has also received a good deal of attention is the proposal to set up some kind of "drone court" that would be analogous

in some respects to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISA) court that considers U.S. government requests for surveillance in the United States of those suspected of terrorism or espionage. The FISA court, however, is hardly much of a check on the power of the executive. For example, *The Wall Street Journal* reports that the FISA court has turned down only 11 of the some 33,900 surveillance requests that were made over the past three decades.³⁷¹ There is little reason to believe that a drone court would be any less of a rubber stamp on government decisions about whom it can kill with a drone. And a drone court might be quite unwieldy at those times when a suspected terrorist target has been identified and a targeting decision must be taken quickly.

Perhaps the most practical idea is to set up some sort of government body, independent of both the CIA and the Pentagon, to conduct after-action reviews of drone strikes, ensuring that the victims of the strikes were not civilians and did indeed pose some kind of threat to the United States. The creation of such a council would also enable the issuance of compensation payments for civilian victims.

As Ben Emmerson, the U.N. special rapporteur for counterterrorism and human rights, has rightly observed, the rapid proliferation of drone technology means that whatever structural and legal framework the United States finally puts together for its targeted killing campaign "has to be a framework that the U.S. can live with if it is being used by Iran when it is deploying drones against Iranian dissidents hiding inside the territory of Syria or Turkey or Iraq."³⁷²

5. Congress should create an independent investigative body—similar to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB)—to investigate terrorist attacks in the United States, explain how the attackers evaded law enforcement, and identify the lessons to be learned.

The NTSB has a proven track record of conducting thorough, unbiased investigations into large-scale transportation disasters, which are relatively rare but can be exceedingly deadly and traumatic. It makes sense that such a body should be created for terrorist attacks. It is not enough that the FBI and other law enforcement agencies already write their own internal reports on the failures that may have led to a successful terrorist attack, because they have an inescapable institutional bias. An independent review board would not only be immune from this bias, but would also be able to hold law enforcement accountable for their failures and ensure that suggested improvements are implemented.

II. For the Administration

1. The administration should repatriate some of the prisoners still being held at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility and should continue to use civilian courts to try terrorists.

Eighty-six of the 166 prisoners still being held in Guantanamo were cleared for transfer to the custody of their home countries *three years ago* following a year-long investigation of their cases by an interagency task force.³⁷³ Fifty-six of those 86 are from Yemen, which has an insecure prison system and makes their repatriation problematic.³⁷⁴ The remaining 30 prisoners, however, are from other countries and should be released into the custody of their home countries. These detainees have good reason to despair that they will remain in Guantanamo forever. Their cases have been exhaustively investigated. They have found to be guilty of nothing, yet they are being held indefinitely, a policy usually associated with dictatorships, not democracies.

As the United States winds down its targeted killing program and is no longer sending prisoners to Guantanamo, it has

shown signs that it may increasingly turn to the use of domestic civilian courts to try terrorists captured abroad. For example, Ahmed Abdulkadir Warsame, who was captured in the Gulf of Aden on April 19, 2011, was flown to New York to stand trial on federal charges in July 2011.³⁷⁵ He pled guilty to all nine terrorism-related counts that were brought against him.³⁷⁶ And, as outlined in an earlier section, in 2013, the United States captured Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, bin Laden's son-in-law and an al-Qaeda spokesman, in Jordan after he was deported from Turkey.³⁷⁷ He will also be tried in New York.

Trying terrorists in a civilian court is a sound decision for several reasons. First, the Obama administration's goal is to close Guantanamo, not add prisoners there. Second, the conviction rate in these kinds of terrorism cases since 9/11 is 100 percent in jurisdictions such as New York. The New America Foundation maintains a database of jihadist terrorism cases involving American citizens and residents as well as individuals acting within the United States, and of the 38 such cases tried in New York since 9/11, 20 defendants pleaded guilty and 15 were convicted, while three either await or are currently on trial.³⁷⁸ When international terrorists—for example, Ahmed Warsame—have been transferred to stand trial in New York courts, they have also been convicted.

In contrast, the military commission system at Guantanamo is largely untested. The operational commander of 9/11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, for example, was arrested in Pakistan a decade ago but has yet to face trial; and it's quite possible it may be many more years before his trial even begins.

Indeed, of the 779 prisoners who have been held at Guantanamo, only six have been convicted by military commissions, according to a study by the Congressional Research Service.³⁷⁹ In other words, while courts in New York have convicted alleged terrorists at a 100 percent

rate, fewer than 1 percent have been successfully tried at Guantanamo.

2. The administration should create an Assistant Secretary for Countering Violent Extremism at the Department of Homeland Security.

There is currently no single government official responsible for U.S. CVE policy, making it difficult for different government agencies to coordinate their efforts and for anyone to assess the success or failure of these programs. As the agency in charge of coordinating U.S. homeland security policies, DHS is the right place to house such an authority. An assistant secretary would be tasked with setting policy, holding government officials accountable for implementing that policy, and evaluating performance and impact.

3. The government should incorporate lessons learned from the Boston bombings into its current emergency-response plan to ensure a more measured reaction to tragic but small-scale terrorist attacks.

Shutting down large metropolitan areas and international airports, for example, tells the enemy that they can make a large impact with a small incident, and makes terrorists appear more powerful than they are. Low-grade attacks by domestic extremists are likely to continue, albeit infrequently. When they do happen, the United States must have both the infrastructure to respond and the demonstrated ability to move on afterward. President Obama's 2011 National Counterterrorism Strategy highlighted this need to actively develop a culture of resilience that might deter potential terrorists from attacking the homeland:

Presenting the United States as a "hardened" target is unlikely to cause al-Qa'ida ... to abandon terrorism, but it can deter them from attacking particular targets

or persuade them that their efforts are unlikely to succeed. The United States also contributes to its collective resilience by demonstrating to al-Qa'ida that we have the individual, community, and economic strength to absorb, rebuild, and recover from any catastrophic event, whether man-made or naturally occurring.³⁸⁰

In the wake of tragedies like the attack on U.S. government facilities in Benghazi, Libya, and the Boston Marathon bombings, the government should continue to emphasize the strength of America's institutions and social fabric, both in order to minimize the likelihood of panic or the exaggeration of the threat by the American public, and to demonstrate to terrorists that such attacks are not a strategic threat to the United States.

4. The U.S. government should make a concerted effort to track the flow of arms into Syria and urge U.S. allies to keep these weapons out of the hands of jihadist fighters to the extent possible. The United States should also keep careful track of the foreign fighters who have joined jihadist groups fighting in Syria.

The shadowy nature of the arms shipments going into Syria, along with the growing intensity of the conflict, make it unlikely that the U.S. government will be able to keep close tabs on heavy weaponry in the country. The administration should therefore work closely with the Qatari government to maintain logs of the weapons and their serial numbers, so that when the conflict has lessened and a stable government is formed, it can know how many remain unaccounted for. It should also continue to pressure Qatar and other weapons donors to choose their recipients carefully. The likelihood, however, that these measures will keep weapons out of the hands of jihadists is unclear, and the al-Qaeda-linked groups in Syria will likely emerge from this conflict with significant battle experience, as well

as large caches of weapons. The key factor for the United States will be whether or not they also emerge with an anti-American agenda.

After the wars in Afghanistan during the 1980s and in Bosnia during the 1990s returning foreign fighters formed the heart of al-Qaeda and affiliated groups. The United States therefore should also make a careful effort to track the foreign fighters who have joined jihadist groups fighting in Syria.

5. The United States should maintain a military presence in Afghanistan after the NATO combat mission ends in December 2014.

According to recent press reports, President Obama is now contemplating withdrawing all American troops from Afghanistan sometime in 2014.³⁸¹ While the administration had been considering leaving a force of at least several thousand soldiers to act as trainers and to hunt leaders of the Taliban and other militant groups, Obama has grown increasingly frustrated with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who cut off negotiations about the size of the post-2014 American military force in June 2013.

Let us stipulate that Karzai can be a frustrating leader to deal with and that he can even be quite mercurial on occasion. That said, the Obama administration should not be making important strategic decisions merely on the basis of whether or not its leader likes dealing with another country's leader. Zeroing out U.S. troop levels in the post-2014 Afghanistan is a bad idea on its face—and even raising this concept publicly is maladroit strategic messaging to Afghanistan and the region writ large.

Afghans well remember that after the Soviet Union withdrew in 1989, something that was accomplished at the cost of more than a million Afghan lives and billions of dollars of U.S. aid, the United States closed its embassy in Afghanistan during the George H.W. Bush administration and zeroed out its aid to one of the poorest countries in the world under the Clinton administration. It essentially turned its back on the Afghans once they had served their purpose of dealing a deathblow to the Soviets. As a result, the United States had virtually no understanding of the subsequent vacuum that allowed the Taliban to rise to power in the mid-1990s and grant shelter to bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

The current public discussion of the so-called “zero option” will encourage those hard-line elements of the Taliban who have no interest in any kind of a negotiated settlement and believe they can simply wait the Americans out. It also discourages the many millions of Afghans who see a longtime U.S. presence in the country as the best guarantor that the Taliban won’t come back in any meaningful way, and as an important element in dissuading powerful neighbors such as Pakistan from interfering in Afghanistan’s internal affairs.

A much smarter American messaging strategy for the country and the region would be to emphasize that the Strategic Partnership Agreement, negotiated between the two countries last year, guarantees the United States will have some form of partnership with the Afghans until 2024. The point should also be made that the exact size of the U.S. troop presence after 2014 is less important than the fact that American soldiers will stay in the country for many years, with Afghan consent, as a guarantor of Afghanistan’s stability.

6. The government should release additional bin Laden documents captured at his Abbottabad compound.

The small number of documents released by the Countering Terrorism Center at West Point thus far present an incomplete picture of al-Qaeda’s internal operations. Of the thousands of documents recovered in the 2011 U.S. Navy SEAL raid on bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound, only 17 have been publicly released. It is in the public interest to release additional documents that do not have any operational or intelligence significance from the “treasure trove” found at the compound. The release of these documents will continue the necessary process of further understanding and demystifying bin Laden and his al-Qaeda organization.



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