

Articles

Thirty Years after its Foundation – Where is al-Qaida Going?

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Abstract

This article presents a framework for understanding al-Qaida, based on a new reading of its thirty-year history. Al-Qaida today is commonly labelled a 'global insurgency' or 'global franchise.' However, these labels are not sufficient if we want to understand what kind of threat al-Qaida poses to the West. Al-Qaida is better described as a revolutionary vanguard, engaged in a perpetual struggle to further its Salafi-jihadi ideology. Its strategy is flexible and opportunistic, and the organization uses a range of tools associated with both state and non-state actors. In the future al-Qaida is likely to treat international terrorist planning, and support to local insurgencies in the Muslim world, as two separate activities. International terrorism is currently not a prioritised strategy of al-Qaida, but it is likely to be so in the future, given that it manages to re-build its external operations capability.

Keywords: Al-Qaida, terrorism, insurgency, strategy, external operations

Introduction

The status and strength of al-Qaida (AQ) are the subject of an ongoing debate. [1] There are two opposite and irreconcilable views in this debate: The first is that al-Qaida is strong and cannot be discounted. The other is that al-Qaida is in decline. [2] Those who suggest al-Qaida is strong, tend to emphasise the size and number of al-Qaida's affiliates, especially in Syria, Yemen and Somalia; they also point to the rise of new leaders, in particular bin Laden's son Hamza. [3] Those who suggest that al-Qaida is in decline emphasise that al-Qaida has not carried out a successful terrorist attack in the West since the London bombings in 2005, except for the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in 2015. Both sides in the debate compare al-Qaida to its rival, the Islamic State (IS), to gauge the extent of the former's success or failure. Those who suggest al-Qaida is strong, emphasise that al-Qaida never lost core affiliates in Yemen, Somalia, North Africa or Afghanistan to IS, and now that IS is declining, might even absorb former IS recruits. Those who suggest al-Qaida is weak, emphasise that IS since 2014 has carried out and inspired far more terrorist attacks in the West, and has recruited far more foreign fighters than al-Qaida.

However, this controversy is not very enlightening. Rather than providing new knowledge about al-Qaida, the debate turns around different conceptions of "strength" and "threat". Should al-Qaida's strength be measured by the number and size of affiliates or the popularity and reach of its message? Or should the ability to stage international terrorist attacks be taken as yardstick? And when it comes to the threat – are we talking about the immediate threat from al-Qaida's "external operations" capability, or the long-term threat from the development of al-Qaida-friendly sanctuaries abroad? The debate illustrates that we still do not agree on what al-Qaida is, what it wants and how it "works." These are serious issues – especially since al-Qaida is still regarded a major security threat to the West. How we define and view al-Qaida is central to how we interpret and evaluate its actions, and by extension, what resources we deploy against AQ.

The purpose of this article is to propose a framework for understanding al-Qaida, based on a new reading of its thirty-year history. The aim is to sum up and expand on what we know about two basic issues: First, what is al-Qaida, and what is al-Qaida's struggle about? Second, what is al-Qaida's strategy, and how does international terrorism fit into that strategy? The questions appear simple, but as we shall see, there are no universally agreed upon answers.

The dominant understanding of al-Qaida today is that of a layered organisation – comprised of a core, a number of regional affiliates and a broader ideological movement. [4] Others view al-Qaida as a globalised insurgency, with a "core" providing ideological and strategic guidance and "regional affiliates" fighting for territory on

behalf of the core. None of these understandings are wrong. However, they have limitations when it comes to explaining what kind of threat al-Qaida poses to the West. To answer this question we must understand how al-Qaida uses international terrorism as part of its strategy.

In the following, I make the case that al-Qaida should be seen as a revolutionary vanguard [5], engaged in a perpetual struggle to further its Salafi-jihadi ideology. Al-Qaida's strategy is not static, but flexible and opportunistic, and al-Qaida uses a range of tools associated with both state and non-state actors. [6] International terrorism is currently not a prioritised strategy of al-Qaida, but it is likely to be so in the future, given that it manages to re-build its external operations capability.

Historical Overview

Before discussing what al-Qaida is, a short recap of its thirty-year history is warranted. Al-Qaida was founded in Afghanistan around 1987. [7] The word "al-Qaida" means "the base", this name referring to a military base for Arab fighters inside Afghanistan. Between 1987 and 1989 bin Laden's group took part in battles against Soviet and Afghan Communist forces in Afghanistan. In the early 1990s bin Laden moved to Sudan, where he was welcomed by the Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi. Due to international pressure on the Sudanese regime, bin Laden was expelled in 1996 and subsequently moved back to Afghanistan.

From 1996-2001, bin Laden lived in Afghanistan under the Taliban's protection and al-Qaida was allowed to grow and expand. [8] In this period, bin Laden declared war on the United States and al-Qaida started carrying out international terrorist attacks against U.S. targets – in East Africa in 1988, off the coast of Yemen in 2000 and finally, on New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001. In response to these 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush declared the now infamous "War on Terror". A U.S.-led international coalition invaded Afghanistan in late 2001 and ousted the Taliban regime, but bin Laden and several al-Qaida members managed to escape. Al-Qaida continued to thrive in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas, supporting the nascent guerrilla war in Afghanistan and spreading its influence across the Muslim world.

In 2003 the United States invaded Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein. This gave al-Qaida a golden opportunity to mobilise the Muslim world in a call for "jihad" against American forces in Iraq. At this point al-Qaida had started to establish local branches across the Middle East and North Africa – a phenomenon later referred to as al-Qaida's "franchise strategy." [9] Al-Qaida's most important, and for a time, most successful branch, was established in Iraq in 2004, when the Jordanian guerrilla leader Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi declared his allegiance to bin Laden. Al-Qaida in Iraq suffered severe setbacks from 2007, partly because of a U.S. troop surge and partly because local Sunni Muslim tribes turned against the local al-Qaida affiliate.

After al-Qaida's failure in Iraq, bin Laden pushed for the group to change strategy into a more locally oriented and "population-centric" approach in Muslim countries, while at the same time continuing to target the West through international terrorism. [10] In 2011 al-Qaida continued and strengthened the population-centric approach to take advantage of opportunities arising from the Arab Spring. By 2015 al-Qaida's international terrorist attack capability had been weakened, partly due to the U.S. drone war targeting key al-Qaida leaders, and partly because Western recruits – who had previously made up al-Qaida's networks in Europe – changed their allegiance to the so-called Islamic State. [11] However, the Islamic State has now suffered severe setbacks and according to some observers, time is ripe for an al-Qaida "comeback" of sorts. [12] As noted above, there is no agreement on what this comeback may look like, and in particular, whether, and to what extent, it will include international terrorism.

The rest of this article provides a framework for discussing how international terrorism fits into al-Qaida's strategy. But first, what is the current status of research on al-Qaida?

What is al-Qaida?

The question of how to describe al-Qaida is not new. Early books on al-Qaida, published in the wake of the 9/11

attacks, spent considerable time discussing what al-Qaida actually is. Already back then it was suggested that al-Qaida was not a classical terrorist organisation, but something broader – and above all, something *global*. [13] Jason Burke described al-Qaida as comprised of three layers – the “al-Qaida hardcore,” the “network of networks” and a third layer described as the “idea, worldview, ideology of al-Qaida”. [14] The layered description of al-Qaida became dominant in subsequent years – alongside the related idea of al-Qaida as a global insurgent group. [15] Al-Qaida’s declaration of local “franchises”, in the Middle East and North Africa from 2003 onwards, only served to strengthening the acceptance of the global insurgency-model. [16] Since then, it appears to have become commonly accepted that al-Qaida consists of a “core” providing ideological and strategic direction, and “franchises” fighting on behalf of al-Qaida to conquer territory in the Muslim world.

Limitations of the ‘Franchise Model’

There are, however, limitations to characterising al-Qaida as a “global franchise” of terrorist organisations. First, it is only valid for parts of al-Qaida’s history – namely, from 2001 onwards, and so it does not account for al-Qaida pre-2001. [17] Second, it gives the somewhat misleading impression that al-Qaida’s strategy is dependent on conquering and ruling territory. While this has undoubtedly been an important part of al-Qaida’s strategy after 2001, it was not always the case.

Historically, Osama bin Laden himself did not seek direct, territorial control. Instead he preferred his al-Qaida-organisation playing the role as “guests” of local populations – first in Afghanistan in the 1980s, then in the Sudan in the 1990s and ,again, in Afghanistan under the Taliban after 1996. In the Taliban period, bin Laden swore an oath of allegiance (*bay’at*) to Mullah Omar, partially to underline his intention not to interfere in the local governance of the Taliban. [18] In Afghanistan under the Taliban, al-Qaida had the perfect sanctuary: Al-Qaida could devote all its time to training and organization-building, while the Taliban took care of the petty day-to-day affairs of running a state. As a result, al-Qaida core experienced a peak in its recruitment and strength in the years leading up to 9/11. [19]

One could argue that al-Qaida before and after 2001 were two fundamentally different organisations; and that the post-2001 franchise model is more relevant for understanding al-Qaida today. However, we do not know the full extent of al-Qaida’s strategies after 2001 – in particular when it comes to al-Qaida’s relationship to, and possible support from, states and state-like entities. For example, if recently discovered information about al-Qaida’s relationship to Iran post-2001 is true, there is probably a need to revise our current knowledge and assumptions of how al-Qaida operated after 2001. [20]

Moreover, the franchise model has analytical shortcomings in that it depicts “al-Qaida core” and “the franchises” as two homogenous entities. In reality there is great variation in how core al-Qaida was able to control the affiliates – both across regions, and across time. Al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was operating much like the al-Qaida core at one point – especially in 2009-2010 when they attempted ambitious terrorist attacks against U.S. interests, while operating under the protection of Yemenite tribal allies. [21] This resembled how al-Qaida operated under the Taliban in 1997-2001, when AQ staged ambitious terrorist attacks on the U.S. while being under the protection of the Taliban regime. At the other end of the spectrum is al-Qaida in Iraq, which declared an “Islamic State” in Iraq in 2006 without the permission of al-Qaida’s leaders, and which in 2014 broke off from al-Qaida altogether. But even in al-Qaida’s relationship with seemingly close affiliates such as AQAP, there was constant tension: Among other things, bin Laden criticised AQAP for killing local Muslims, for wanting to escalate the conflict with Yemenite security forces, and for wanting to declare an Islamic State in Yemen – a step bin Laden at the time thought was both premature and counter-productive – but which AQAP nevertheless carried out in 2011. [22] The ambivalent relationship between al-Qaida core and its affiliates has most clearly manifested itself in the Syrian conflict – not only with the split between Islamic State and al-Qaida in 2014, but also with the prevailing disagreement between current al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the local affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (later known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham). [23] This is not to say that the franchise model is invalid, but that it should be applied with caution – especially when it comes to assessing the future threat from al-Qaida. [24]

The limitations of the franchise model are especially clear when it comes to discussing how strong al-Qaida is

today, and how much of a threat it poses to the West. By counting members of AQ's affiliates in Syria, Yemen and Somalia, one could make the argument that al-Qaida today has more than 30,000 members. [25] But this number says little, if anything, about al-Qaida's international terrorist attack capability: Most of these 30,000 members are involved in local insurgencies in the Middle East and Africa. They hardly reflect the number of people that in practice are under the direct command of Ayman al-Zawahiri; nor does the number say anything about the strength and status of al-Qaida's external operations branch.

In sum, the idea of al-Qaida as many things at once – a layered organization, a global insurgent group or a global franchise, has limitations. First, the franchise model applies to a limited time period in al-Qaida's history. Second, al-Qaida affiliation does not necessarily mean subordination. The franchise model therefore has limitations when it comes to analysing al-Qaida's strategic decision-making. While existing al-Qaida models certainly have their strengths, they are not so suitable for the purpose of this article, which is to explain how al-Qaida uses international terrorism as part of its strategy.

Al-Qaida as a 'Revolutionary Vanguard'

Instead of labelling al-Qaida a global insurgency, I suggest labelling it as a revolutionary vanguard. This idea is of course neither new, nor original. [26] In his 2003 book, Jason Burke likened al-Qaida's relationship to other Islamist guerrillas, to the relationship "of the USSR or America with their various proxies during the Cold War." [27] With that, he presented an idea that will enter my argument later, namely, that al-Qaida in some ways acted more like a state aiming to spread its ideology than a non-state actor seeking to obtain a limited political goal. [28] However, back in 2003 the observations of Burke and others that al-Qaida viewed itself as a vanguard, did not seem to have any practical policy implications. Western counter-terrorism strategies were formed based on conceptions on how to fight more familiar enemy categories, such as 'insurgents' or 'terrorists'. I am aware that re-labelling al-Qaida as a 'vanguard' does not answer the question of how it should be fought. But at least it may serve as a reminder that al-Qaida is a complex phenomenon, and that there are no ready-made recipes for how to fight it. The 'vanguard' label also says something important about the nature of al-Qaida, that would be lost if we defined it as an insurgent group or a terrorist organization.

Al-Qaida was initially established as an Arab guerrilla group, fighting alongside Afghan mujahidin in Afghanistan. The purpose was not only to enable battlefield participation for ideologically committed Arabs, but also, because bin Laden saw it as a religious duty to serve as a role model and inspiration for the Afghan mujahideen. [29] Part of bin Laden's rationale for creating a training camp on Afghan soil in 1987 was because there were few other options at the time for Arabs to participate in battle in Afghanistan. With some exceptions, Afghan mujahideen parties did not want to use Arabs in battle, instead treating them as guests, and preferring them to donate money and weapons. And the only Arab organisation at the time, the Services Office run by Abdullah Azzam, did not prioritize participation in fighting. [30] When bin Laden stepped up and established the camp dubbed "The Lion's Den" close to enemy frontlines in Khost, he believed he was following the example of the Prophet Muhammed. [31]

From here came the idea that al-Qaida should be a revolutionary vanguard who would lead by example and support Muslim insurgencies elsewhere. After the Afghan-Soviet war was over, al-Qaida continued to run training camps in Afghanistan, from where it graduated the first batch of new al-Qaida cadre. They would constitute the core of al-Qaida's organisation in years to come. [32] One of al-Qaida's first "foreign missions" was to train and assist an Islamist guerrilla fighting in Somalia. [33] Bin Laden then settled in the Sudan, probably with a desire to assist and help a nascent Islamic state on its feet. History repeated itself when al-Qaida gave support to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan from 1997 onwards. [34]

While based in Afghanistan in 1996-2001, al-Qaida did not have to send foreign missions to assist guerrillas elsewhere, like they had done in the early 1990s in Somalia. Instead, the foreign guerrillas came to al-Qaida's training camps in Afghanistan. There is primary source evidence that al-Qaida camps in Afghanistan also trained recruits from other groups, without requiring them to join al-Qaida. [35] It is hard to explain this phenomenon by looking at al-Qaida as a classical insurgent group, let alone a clandestine terrorist organisation. Al-Qaida's mission is best understood if we look at it as vanguard organisation whose goal is inherently ideological – that

is, to spread a Salafi-jihadi ideology that will eventually bring about Islamist revolutions across the Muslim world.

In light of this, one could offer an alternative interpretation of al-Qaida's "franchise strategy" after 2001: As a temporary adjustment to new geopolitical realities after al-Qaida lost its sanctuary in Afghanistan; rather than a core characteristic of al-Qaida as such. There might have been good reasons to label al-Qaida a global insurgency after 2003, because al-Qaida in this period actively sought to align itself – and to some extent co-opt – local insurgencies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Still the organisation's history shows that its core characteristic is that of a vanguard, engaged in a perpetual struggle to further its ideological agenda. In furthering this agenda, al-Qaida may use a range of tools and strategies, which is the topic of the next section.

What is al-Qaida's Strategy?

One common misconception about al-Qaida's strategy is that it is fixed, or follows some kind of master plan. As I will argue in the following, al-Qaida's strategy is more reactive than proactive. And it is more often steered by accident and chance than many tend to believe.

Flexibility and Opportunism

The history of al-Qaida is filled with coincidences, which turned out to have a profound impact on the trajectory of the organisation. In September 1996, bin Laden happened to be in Afghanistan when the Taliban came to power. This was hardly planned beforehand. When bin Laden arrived in Afghanistan in May that year he did not know who the Taliban were, or that they were about to take over the country. [36] And yet, al-Qaida's relationship with the Taliban would define the next five years of al-Qaida's history. The combination of an open, international border and a group who claimed to have established a pure Islamic state, enabled al-Qaida to receive an unprecedented number of recruits to its training camps.

Another, game-changing event for al-Qaida was the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Despite speculation that al-Qaida already prior to 2001 had planned to provoke the U.S. into invading Iraq [37], there is no firm historical evidence to support this. The U.S. decision to invade Iraq was a stroke of luck for al-Qaida, and an opportunity that was skilfully exploited once it arose. In 2003-2007, al-Qaida's main focus was to try and carve out a base on Iraqi territory through its local affiliate, al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). After some initial success, AQI ultimately failed when the local population in Anbar province turned against the group – largely due to AQI's own, brutal behaviour on the ground. [38]

One strength of al-Qaida is the ability to learn from past mistakes. In correspondence between bin Laden and al-Qaida affiliates in Yemen in 2009-10, bin Laden made clear that AQAP should not repeat the mistakes of al-Qaida in Iraq when dealing with local tribes. [39] Similar "lessons learned" were transmitted from AQAP to AQIM in 2012. [40]

After the invasion of Iraq, the next, major event to influence al-Qaida's strategy was the Arab Spring. The uprisings provided new opportunities for al-Qaida to establish a presence in the Arab world. To understand al-Qaida's strategic priorities after 2011 it is necessary to see the Arab uprisings from al-Qaida's point of view. While observers commented in 2011 that al-Qaida had been marginalised by the popular uprisings [41], the organisation's own leaders did not necessarily see it that way. On the contrary, there are indications that bin Laden saw the Arab uprisings as a sign of al-Qaida's success. [42]

Consider the context from al-Qaida's point of view: their strategy up until 2011 had been to carry out economically damaging terrorist attacks on the United States and subsequently, AQ sought to "bleed" the U.S. military in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2001 and 2003 onwards, respectively. In 2008, the U.S. was hit by a major economic crisis and the same year, U.S. forces announced their withdrawal from Iraq. Then, beginning in December 2010, the U.S. seemingly started to lose its grip on the Arab world. Whether or not this was reality is not so important – the point being that bin Laden probably interpreted the Arab Spring as another sign that

al-Qaida had succeeded in its strategy of weakening the U.S. economically, and that it could soon move to the next step – trigger revolutions in the Middle East. [43]

The most recent event to impact al-Qaida's strategic behaviour was the rise of a powerful al-Qaida rival, the Islamic State, in 2014. [44] There is little doubt that al-Qaida's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, took the challenge from IS seriously: In 2015 he made a number of speeches criticising IS and his rhetoric became increasingly hostile over time. [45] As argued by Tore Hamming in this Special Issue, the AQ-IS rivalry led to a process of outbidding between the two jihadist groups which affected the groups' strategies, but did so in slightly different ways: While IS in 2014 launched a campaign of international terrorism, al-Qaida continued and strengthened its previously adapted strategy of winning people's hearts and minds in the Muslim world. Arguably, the rise of IS made it easier for al-Qaida to pursue its population-centric strategy: In the face of IS' barbarism and exclusivist behaviour, al-Qaida was suddenly able to pose as the more "moderate" of the two. [46]

This historical overview of al-Qaida has illustrated how al-Qaida's history has taken unexpected turns, based on world events. Time and again, al-Qaida pursues a reactive strategy, in response to, and seeking to take the best advantage of, events outside its control. To pursue these various strategies al-Qaida has a range of tools at its disposal.

State- and Non-state Actor Methods

Al-Qaida differs from most other non-state actors in that it uses methods and tactics of both state- and non-state actors. It could be expected that al-Qaida would use a range of terrorist and guerrilla warfare tactics – its terrorist tactics being especially innovative. However, al-Qaida also uses methods that resemble military assistance and covert operations – methods traditionally associated with states and governmental intelligence agencies.

Military assistance was something that was conducted by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the CIA, during and after the Second World War. The OSS would organize and train anti-Nazi resistance groups in Europe and anti-Japanese groups in Asia. Similarly, during the Cold War, the CIA would train anti-Communist guerrillas in Central and South America. In a similar manner al-Qaida would, beginning in the early 1990s, train and equip third-world guerrillas to further a global Islamist agenda. [47] The point here is not to lionise al-Qaida by comparing it to the CIA or suggesting it had state-like military capabilities. The point is to explain that al-Qaida did not always behave according to what is expected of a classical terrorist group, and that is why it can be misleading to classify it as such.

Al-Qaida's repertoire also includes what may be termed *covert operations* – that is, terrorist attacks designed to inflict strategic losses on the enemy but without al-Qaida taking responsibility. Three pertinent examples are the US Embassy bombings in 1998, the *USS Cole* attack in October 2000, and the murder of Ahmed Shah Massoud in Afghanistan on September 9, 2001. None of these attacks were publicly claimed by al-Qaida. In case of the *USS Cole*, al-Qaida even explicitly denied responsibility. The reason was likely to protect their hosts, the Taliban, who were already under strong international pressure to expel Osama bin Laden. [48] The 11 September attack was likely intended as a "covert attack" as well, as indicated in correspondence between bin Laden and Mullah Omar post-9/11. [49] After the Taliban regime was destroyed and al-Qaida was routed from Afghanistan, al-Qaida no longer had anything to gain from hiding their culpability. After 2001, al-Qaida abandoned the covert strategy in favour of the franchise strategy mentioned earlier. The franchise strategy was anything but covert – it relied on spreading al-Qaida's name as far and wide as possible.

By acknowledging that al-Qaida's strategy is flexible, using tools of state- and non-state actors alike, its actions since 2011 may be interpreted in a slightly different light. Realising that the franchise strategy failed, al-Qaida may have retracted to a "covert" strategy where it keeps regional affiliates, but does not require them to adapt "al-Qaida" as part of their name. [50] Thus, instead of building influence in the MENA through official al-Qaida branches, al-Qaida now seeks to build influence through local Salafi-jihadi groups with more "neutral-sounding" names such as Ansar al-Sharia or the Mujahidin Shura Council. Yet the picture is not clear-cut – there are still examples of groups who publicly swear allegiance to al-Qaida, such as al-Shabaab in 2012 and a

new coalition group in the Sahel, Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimin, in 2017. [51]

But the real question for Western security services is whether these local affiliates will constitute a future international terrorist threat. What is the current role of international terrorism in al-Qaida's strategy?

International Terrorism in al-Qaida's Strategy

Throughout this article I have emphasised that we must separate al-Qaida's *defining features* from the various tactics and strategies it has at its disposal. This is especially true for international terrorism. Arguably, international terrorism is not a defining feature of al-Qaida, it is rather one of several strategies that al-Qaida may or may not pursue, depending on circumstances.

Al-Qaida did not carry out an international terrorist attack until 1998, at least ten years after the organisation was founded. What was al-Qaida, then, the first ten years of its existence? The standard argument is that bin Laden spent the first ten years after al-Qaida's foundation to "mature" ideologically and that while AQ started out as a guerrilla group, it eventually developed into an anti-American, international terrorist network. However, in the book *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, I demonstrate that al-Qaida only spent a small part of its resources after 1998 on staging international terrorist attacks. Al-Qaida spent much more of its resources on building a strong organisation and on providing assistance to the Taliban and other Islamist groups in Afghanistan. [52]

There is little doubt that international terrorism has played a key role in al-Qaida's strategy from 1997 until today. But the targets and methods have changed over time, and in response to external events. In 1997–2001, al-Qaida had a stable sanctuary in Afghanistan under the Taliban and access to a steady flow of recruits. In this period al-Qaida planned strategically important and spectacular terrorist attacks on the United States. After al-Qaida lost the sanctuary in Afghanistan, al-Qaida's external operations branch moved to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). From here, and especially after the outbreak of the Iraq war in 2003, al-Qaida started targeting Europe. This was partly due to strategic choice, and partly due to opportunity: Al-Qaida thought it strategically sound to target U.S. allies in order to make the U.S.-led alliance in Iraq fall apart. [53] In addition, the Iraq war provided an opportunity to mobilise European militant Islamists on a larger scale than before, as AQ functioned as a "catalyst for a new generation of jihadis in Europe." [54] After the Iraq war started to wane in importance in 2007, al-Qaida seems to have re-focused on targeting the United States in addition to keeping up a certain pressure on Europe.

One of the last major terrorist plots to be planned by al-Qaida's external operations branch in FATA was Najibullah Zazi's attempt to bomb the New York subway in 2009. The plot coincided with at least two similar plots being planned in the United Kingdom and Norway, respectively. [55] At this point, al-Qaida in FATA was under heavy pressure from the U.S. drone campaign that had been intensified by President Obama in 2008. Saleh al-Somali, the mastermind behind the 2009 series of terrorist plots in the U.S. and Europe, was killed in a drone strike in December 2009. Not long afterwards, Osama bin Laden started encouraging al-Qaida members to leave Waziristan due to the threat from drones. [56]

From 2009, al-Qaida seemed to alter its international terrorist strategy. From now on the international terrorist activity followed two separate tracks. First, al-Qaida leaders started issuing propaganda to encourage acts of "individual terrorism" in Western countries. [57] The propaganda campaign was driven by members of the al-Qaida core and by AQAP. For example, in March 2010 the American-born al-Qaida member Adam Gadahn issued a speech entitled "A call to arms", encouraging Muslims in the West to follow in the footsteps of the Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hassan. In the beginning of June 2011, only a month after the death of bin Laden, two very explicit video messages were issued: In "You are only responsible for yourself," Ayman al-Zawahiri provided religious justification for single actor terrorism [58], while in "Do not rely on others, take the task upon yourself" Adam Gadahn gave explicit advice for how Muslims in the United States should obtain weapons for individual terrorist attacks. [59]

Parallel to these efforts by the al-Qaida core, AQAP ran its own propaganda campaign to encourage Muslims in the west to carry out attacks on their own. Most famously, this was done through the English-language

magazine *Inspire*. The first issue was published online in the summer of 2010, and contained the infamous article “Make a bomb in the kitchen of your Mom.” The bomb recipe was said to have inspired the Tsarnajev brothers, who carried out the bombing of the Boston Marathon in April 2013. [60]

In addition to inspiring a campaign of “individual terrorism” in the West, al-Qaida continued to plot ambitious international terrorist attacks through its external operations branch. Al-Qaida seemed to move this activity from FATA to the Middle East in 2010–2011. [61] AQAP in Yemen carried out two near-successful attacks on U.S. aviation in the same period – first in December 2009 with the so-called “underwear bomber” and again, in mid-2010 with the attempted bombing of two U.S. cargo planes. [62] Like al-Qaida in Waziristan, AQAP suffered from drone strikes on its leadership. The American-born ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki was killed by a U.S. drone in January 2010 and the Yemenite AQAP leader, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, was killed in April 2015. There were indications of an al-Qaida external operations cell in Syria – the so-called “Khorasan group” but key members were killed by drones in July 2015 and it is unknown if the group is still operational.

The question, then, is what al-Qaida’s international terrorist efforts are likely to look like in the future. Judging from official statements, including those of Hamza bin Laden and Zawahiri, al-Qaida is likely to continue the two-track strategy it has pursued from 2009. They will continue to incite Muslims living in the West to carry out acts of “individual terrorism” by highlighting highly symbolic issues, like insults against the Prophet Muhammad. These operations are low-cost, and with potentially high benefit, for al-Qaida.

In addition, al-Qaida may attempt to re-build their external operations capability. This is potentially the biggest security threat to the West but also the biggest unknown. Al-Qaida’s external operations branch does not have to be big. With access to Internet-based encrypted communications channels, it can practically operate from anywhere in the world. It doesn’t have to be based in one of the regions controlled by al-Qaida affiliates. Al-Qaida has already invested much in “de-branding” groups in the Middle East and to get embedded in local insurgencies. Staging international terrorist attacks from these territories would jeopardize al-Qaida’s effort to stay invisible – that is, unless al-Qaida decides to use the same strategy as in 1997–2001, when it sought to keep its international terrorist activities in Afghanistan covert so as not to endanger its hosts. But perhaps more likely, al-Qaida would prefer to hide its external operations branch in a place that cannot be hit by drones – for example, a populated urban area, or even a state-sponsored sanctuary. [63]

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented a framework explaining how to understand al-Qaida, based on a re-reading of its thirty-year history. The bottom line is that we must distinguish between al-Qaida’s nature and the tactics and tools at its disposal. International terrorism is a tool, covert operations is another. In future, we may see several of these tactics merging into new forms of terrorism. Al-Qaida in the late 1990s moved beyond international terrorism, starting to use a form of “covert terrorism” as a strategy. In the late 2000s, al-Qaida arguably moved beyond its franchise strategy and introduced a “covert” version of the same strategy. The good news is that al-Qaida’s strategy is reactive, rather than proactive. But anticipating its next step still requires thinking outside the box.

For now, al-Qaida may decide to rely on one track of its international terrorist strategy – that of encouraging “individual terrorism,” coupled with supporting insurgencies in the Muslim world. This does not mean that it will abandon top-down planning of external operations – but in the future, al-Qaida’s external operations branch will not necessarily be located in territory controlled by al-Qaida affiliates. It would be too obvious a hiding place – and a rather easy target for drones. Al-Qaida has adopted in the past, so there is no reason it will adapt its strategy again in the future.

Ultimately, al-Qaida’s support to Islamist insurgencies, and al-Qaida’s international terrorist planning, should be seen as two different problem sets which require different countermeasures. It may be difficult for Western governments to deal with both at the same time and thus, we may have to pick our battles.

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Notes

[1] The author would like to thank Thomas Hegghammer, Petter Nesser, Henrik Gråtrud and Truls Hallberg Tønnessen for their useful comments and input to earlier versions of this article.

[2] See, for example, Bruce Hoffman, “A Growing Terrorist Threat on Another 9/11,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 2017; URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-growing-terrorist-threat-on-another-9-11-1504888986>; Daniel Byman, “Judging Al Qaeda’s Record, Part I: Is the Organization in Decline?” *Lawfare*, June 27, 2017; URL: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/judging-al-qaedas-record-part-i-organization-decline>. For a middle view on the debate, see Seth G. Jones, “Will al Qaeda Make a Comeback?” *Foreign Affairs*, August 7, 2017; URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-08-07/will-al-qaeda-make-comeback>.

[3] Ali Soufan, “Hamza bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to al-Qa’ida’s Leader in Waiting,” *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 8 (September 2017): 1–7.

[4] Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: Penguin, 2003): 13; Bruce Hoffman, *Inside terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006): 285–288.

[5] Refers here to jihadists’ own use of the term. For example, Abdullah Azzam spoke of the necessity of establishing a vanguard (*tali’a*) back in 1987. But the term was also used much earlier, for example, by Sayyid Qutb in his 1964 manifesto *Milestones*. Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, 2; Sayyid Qutb, *ma’alim fi al-tariq* (no publisher, 1964): 5–6. Accessed via *Jihadi Document Repository* at University of Oslo: URL: <https://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/jihadi-document-repository>.

[6] While al-Qaida’s strategy is described here as ‘flexible,’ this does not mean: ‘anything goes.’ Al-Qaida is restricted in its actions by its adherence to salafi-jihadi ideology. While this ideology is certainly open to interpretation, there are a number of ‘red lines’ that normally cannot be crossed. Participation in democratic elections, for example, would be very hard to justify from a salafi-jihadi point of view.

[7] For a more thorough review of al-Qaida’s foundation and early years, see Leah Farrall, “Revisiting al-Qaida’s foundation and early history,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017).

[8] For more details about al-Qaida’s Afghanistan period, see Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[9] See, for example, Barak Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[10] This new strategy was discussed in a number of letters found in bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad. See, for example, “Letter from UBL to Atiyatullah Al-Libi,” undated, *CTC West Point*, document no. SOCOM-2012-0000019-HT, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-UBL-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-4-Translation.pdf>.

[11] As argued by Hamming in this Special Issue, the internal competition between al-Qaida and IS further accentuated al-Qaida’s strategy change – possibly leading al-Qaida to halt its international terrorist planning, while at the same time continuing its *verbal* attacks on the U.S. and its allies through propaganda. Tore Refslund Hamming, “Jihadi Competition and Political Preferences,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017).

[12] “Terror expert warns of al-Qaeda’s comeback,” *PRI*, September 11, 2017; URL: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-09-11/terror-expert-warns-al-qaedas-comeback>.

[13] See, for example, Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (London: Phoenix, 2002): 199; Michael Scheuer, *Through our Enemies’ Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s 2002): 273; Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002): 72–74; Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: Penguin, 2003): 1–21.

[14] Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, 13.

[15] For example, in 2002, Stein Tønnessen used the term ‘global civil war’ to describe the nature of the conflict between the U.S. and al-Qaida. Stein Tønnessen, “A ‘Global Civil War?’” in *The Consequences of September 11*, (Ed.) Bengt Sundelius (Stockholm: SIIA, 2002): 103–111. For more general works on terrorism as global insurgency, see, for example, John Mackinlay, *The Insurgent*

Archipelago: From Mao to bin Laden (London: Hurst, 2009); David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting small wars in the midst of a big one* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[16] The global insurgency model was also argued for in 2011. Michael Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 73.

[17] Al-Qaida pre-2001 also had ties to other jihadist groups, of course, but the ties were informal, and the groups at the time were not bound by any oath of allegiance to bin Laden. The first group to swear an actual oath of allegiance (*bay'a*) to al-Qaida's leader was probably the Afghanistan-based branch of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), in the spring of 2001. EIJ's merger to al-Qaida in 2001 was mostly symbolic, because the individuals involved were already cooperating closely with bin Laden. Moreover, the 'merger' was rejected by the Egypt-based branch of EIJ (whose leaders were imprisoned in Egypt at the time). Al-Qaida's first "regional affiliate," with a capability to carry out operations in their home country, was Al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula established in 2003, followed by al-Qaida in Iraq in 2004.

[18] Anne Stenersen and Phillipp Holtmann, "The Three Functions of UBL's "Greater Pledge" to Mullah Omar (2001–2006–2014)," *Jihadology*, January 8, 2015; URL: <http://jihadology.net/2015/01/08/guest-post-the-three-functions-of-ubls-greater-pledge-to-mullah-omar-2001-2006-2014>.

[19] Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, 100–109.

[20] See, for instance, Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, "Al-Qaeda Has Rebuilt Itself—With Iran's Help," *The Atlantic*, 11 November 2017; see also Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Exile: The stunning inside story of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in flight* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

[21] The most well-known example is the so-called "underwear bomber," Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who attempted, but failed, to down a U.S. passenger plane over Detroit on December 25, 2009.

[22] Contrary to bin Laden's advise, in 2011 AQAP declared an Islamic Emirate in the Abyan provinve of Yemen. AQAP subsequently lost this territory to Yemenite security forces. In 2015 the group had apparently learnt from its mistakes. AQAP did not declare an emirate when it took territorial control in Mukalla in 2015. Brynjar Lia, "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015); Thomas Joscelyn, Arab coalition enters AQAP stronghold in port city of Mukalla, Yemen," *Long War Journal*, April 25, 2016; URL: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/04/arab-coalition-enters-aqap-stronghold-in-port-city-of-mukalla-yemen.php>.

[23] See, for example, Tore Hamming, "What we learned from Sami al-Uraydi's testimony concerning Abu Abdullah al-Shami," *Jihadica*, October 24, 2017; URL: <http://www.jihadica.com/what-we-learned-from-sami-al-uraydis-testimony-concerning-abu-abdullah-al-shami/>; see also Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "Success for AQ in Syria?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017).

[24] It is unclear whether al-Qaida still follows the "franchise strategy" today. On the one hand, al-Qaida declared a new affiliate, Al-Qaida on the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), in 2013 and it continues to exist, along with AQIM and AQAP. On the other hand, it seems that several al-Qaida-aligned groups after 2011 stopped calling themselves al-Qaida. The first group to abandon the al-Qaida label was in fact al-Qaida in Iraq, which changed its name Mujahideen Shura Council in 2006, before changing to Islamic State in Iraq later the same year. Al-Qaida-connected groups in, for instance, Yemen, Libya and Tunisia started calling themselves Ansar al-Sharia after the Arab uprisings in 2011. Another sign of change in al-Qaida's naming policies came in 2012 when al-Shabaab in Somalia kept its old name, despite publically swearing allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri. Another group that swore allegiance to Zawahiri, but without adopting the al-Qaida label, was Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimin, an umbrella group formed in the Sahel region 2017. Documents found in bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad indicate that it was bin Laden himself who introduced these new "naming policies" as part of a new al-Qaida strategy to win popular support in the MENA region. On the formation of AQIS, see Anne Stenersen, "Al-Qa'ida's Comeback in Afghanistan and its Implications," *CTC Sentinel*, September 7, 2016; URL: <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaidas-comeback-in-afghanistan-and-its-implications>; on the Ansar al-Sharia phenomenon, see Michael Horton "Capitalizing on Chaos: AQAP Advances in Yemen," *Terrorism Monitor* 14, no. 4 (February 2016) ; URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/capitalizing-on-chaos-aqap-advances-in-yemen>; Henrik Gråtrud and Vidar Benjamin Skretting, "Ansar al-Sharia in Libya: An Enduring Threat," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2017); and Aron Zelin, "Tunisia: Uncovering Ansar al-Sharia," *Think Africa Press*, October 25, 2013 URL: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tunisia-uncovering-ansar-al-sharia>; on Al-Shabaab declaring allegiance to Zawahiri, see "Somalia's al-Shabab join al-Qaeda," *BBC*, February 10, 2012' URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16979440>; on Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimin, see Héni Nsaibia, "Jihadist Groups In The Sahel Region Formalize Merger," *Jihadology*, March 27, 2017; URL: <http://jihadology.net/2017/03/27/guest-post-jihadist-groups-in-the-sahel-region-formalize-merger>; on bin Laden's ; URL: naming policies, see, for example, "Bin Laden wanted to change al-Qaida's bloodied name," *Guardian*, 24 June 2011; URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/24/bin-laden-documents-alqaida-struggle>.

[25] The number is based on a recent estimate that al-Qaida has 20,000 fighters in Syria, 4,000 in Yemen and 7,000 in Somalia. Hoffman, "A Growing Terrorist Threat on Another 9/11."

[26] See, for example, Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda*, 5, 9; Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, 2, 19, 37.

- [27] Burke, Al-Qaeda, 12–13.
- [28] I also had great benefit from discussing the Cold War-analogy with Frank ‘Scott’ Douglas in Oslo in September, 2017.
- [29] A. Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, 21.
- [30] L. Farrall, “Revisiting al-Qaida’s foundation and early history.”
- [31] A. Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, 17.
- [32] *Ibid.*, 35–39.
- [33] For details on al-Qaida’s Somalia mission, see *Al-Qaida’s(Mis) adventures in the Horn of Africa* (West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010), <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Al-Qaidas-MisAdventures-in-the-Horn-of-Africa.pdf>.
- [34] For details on al-Qaida’s strategy for Afghanistan in 1996-97, see Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, 66–68.
- [35] *Ibid.*, 108.
- [36] *Ibid.*, 53.
- [37] “Bin Laden wanted US to invade Iraq, author says,” *ABC News*, August 24, 2007; URL: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-08-24/bin-laden-wanted-us-to-invade-iraq-author-says/648888>
- [38] Truls Hallberg Tønnessen, URL: *Al-Qaida in Iraq: The Rise, The Fall and the Comeback* (PhD Dissertation, University of Oslo, 2015).
- [39] See, for example, “Letter to Abu Basir,” CIA-ODNI, released March 1, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20to%20Abu%20Basir.pdf>.
- [40] Horton, “Capitalizing on Chaos.”
- [41] See, for example, Rania Abouzeid, “How the Arab Spring Made Bin Laden an Afterthought,” *TIME*, May 2, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2068931,00.html>.
- [42] See, for example, “Afghani Opportunity,” CIA-ODNI, released May 20, 2015, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Afghani%20Opportunity.pdf>.
- [43] For example, in one Abbottabad document, the writer (who is presumably bin Laden) notes that “in 2001, America’s horn was broken ... [and] in 2011, their necklace around the Arab world was broken.” It seems bin Laden viewed the 9/11 attacks as the first, major blow to the U.S. and that the Arab uprisings demonstrated that the U.S. was no longer in a position to give life-saving support to suppressive Arab rulers. More research into this topic is needed, however, especially with the recent release of a collection of 470,000 additional files from the Abbottabad compound on November 1, 2017. “Afghani Opportunity,” CIA-ODNI, released May 20, 2015; URL: <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Afghani%20Opportunity.pdf>; “CIA Releases Nearly 470,000 Additional Files Recovered in May 2011 Raid on Usama Bin Ladin’s Compound,” CIA, November 1, 2017; URL: <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/2017-press-releases-statements/cia-releases-additional-files-recovered-in-ubl-compound-raid.html>.
- [44] For a thorough analysis of how IS came to rival al-Qaida, see Jerome Drevon, “The Jihadi Social Movement (JSM) between Factional Hegemonic Drive, National Realities, and Transnational Ambitions,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017).
- [45] Henrik Gråtrud, “A Snapshot of Al-Qaida’s Attempt to Reassert its Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement,” Master Thesis, University of Oslo, 2016.
- [46] Colin P. Clarke, “The Moderate Face of Al Qaeda: How the group has rebranded itself,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 24, 2017; URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-24/moderate-face-al-qaeda>; Donald Holbrook, “Al-Qaeda and the Rise of ISIS,” *Survival*, Vol. 57, Issue 2 (2015): 93–104.
- [47] Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, 74–75.
- [48] Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, 160.
- [49] Anne Stenersen, *Brothers in Jihad: Explaining the Relationship between al-Qaida and the Taliban, 1996–2001* (PhD dissertation, University of Oslo, 2012): 221.
- [50] See discussion in footnote 24.
- [51] Héni Nsaibia, “Jihadist Groups In The Sahel Region Formalize Merger,” *Jihadology*, March 27, 2017; URL: <http://jihadology.net/2017/03/27/guest-post-jihadist-groups-in-the-sahel-region-formalize-merger>.

- [52] Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, 2.
- [53] Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaida Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27, no. 5 (2004): 355–375.
- [54] Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History* (London: Hurst, 2015): 130
- [55] Raffaello Pantucci, “*We Love Death as You Love Life*”: *Britain’s Suburban Terrorists* (London: Hurst, 2015): 274.
- [56] “Dear Brother Shaykh Mahmud,” 27/12/1431H [December 3, 2010], CIA-ODNI, released March 1, 2016; URL: <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Dear%20Brother%20Shaykh%20Mahmud.pdf>.
- [57] The strategy of “individual terrorism” was not unknown in jihadi circles – it was described in detail by the jihadi theoretician Abu Musab al-Suri back in 2005. SEE: Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus’ab Al-Suri* (London: Hurst, 2009).
- [58] “As-Sahāb Media presents a new video message from al-Qā’idah: “For Incitement and Publishing: You Are Held Responsible Only for Yourself, Parts 1 and 2,” *Jihadology*, June 3, 2011; URL: <http://jihadology.net/2011/06/03/as-sa%E1%B8%A5ab-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-qa%E2%80%99idah-thou-are-held-responsible-only-for-yourself-parts-1-2/>.
- [59] “‘What are you waiting for’: U.S. born Al-Qaeda spokesman calls on Americans to ‘buy guns and start shooting people,’” *Daily Mail*, June 4, 2011; URL: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1394113/Al-Qaeda-spokesman-Adam-Gadahn-calls-Americans-buy-guns-shoot-people.html>.
- [60] “The Magazine that “Inspired” the Boston Bombers,” *Frontline*, April 30, 2013; URL: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-magazine-that-inspired-the-boston-bombers/>.
- [61] According to the *Long War Journal*, three of al-Qaida’s external operations chiefs were killed in Waziristan between May 2008 and December 2009 (the last of them being Saleh al-Somali). Afterwards, al-Qaida-linked plots in the West were traced back to planners in Yemen, not Waziristan – indicating that al-Qaida had moved its external operations activities away from Waziristan. The attempted bombing of Times Square on May 1, 2010, was traced back to Waziristan, but linked to the Pakistani Taliban, not to al-Qaida. Bill Roggio, “Al Qaeda’s external operations chief thought killed in US strike in Pakistan,” *Long War Journal*, December 11, 2009; URL: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/12/al-qaedas-external-o.php>; “Taliban behind Times Square plot, says US,” *The Guardian*, May 9, 2010; URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/09/times-square-bomb-pakistani-taliban>.
- [62] Thomas Joscelyn, “AQAP claims responsibility for cargo planes plot,” *Long War Journal*, November 6, 2010: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/11/aqap-claims-responsi.php>.
- [63] In light of recently revealed information about the al-Qaida-Iran connection, and with a continued high level of conflict in the Middle East, it cannot be excluded that al-Qaida would have access to a form of state sanctuary in the future. Levy and Scott-Clark, “Al-Qaeda Has Rebuilt Itself—With Iran’s Help.”