

A REPORT OF THE CSIS HOMELAND SECURITY
AND COUNTERTERRORISM PROGRAM AND
THE CSIS TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT

A Threat Transformed

AL QAEDA AND ASSOCIATED MOVEMENTS IN 2011

Principal Authors

Rick “Ozzie” Nelson
Thomas M. Sanderson

Contributing Authors

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

The AQAM Futures Project is a joint study undertaken by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project and the CSIS Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program. The initiative will produce a series of “alternative futures” regarding the state of al Qaeda and Associated Movements in the year 2025 and generate recommendations to defeat the threat over the long term. Drawing on historical analysis, social science research, expert interviews, and targeted fieldwork, this effort will provide policymakers and strategists a vision beyond the next few years and consider the trends and shocks that may shape AQAM over the next decade and a half.

Interim deliverables will include this assessment, a podcast series providing updates on the project, insights from the field, and other relevant content. The study will culminate in a final report that will be released in September 2011 during a capstone conference examining the evolving AQAM threat and ongoing efforts to defeat it.

A distinguished group of former counterterrorism practitioners and experts serve on the project’s Senior Advisory Group (SAG). Led by Juan Zarate, former deputy national security adviser for combating terrorism, the SAG provides guidance and substantive input to the research team. Arnaud de Borchgrave, director of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project, serves as senior adviser to the study.

This project is codirected by Rick “Ozzie” Nelson, director of the CSIS Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program, and Thomas M. Sanderson, deputy director of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project.

The U.S. Department of Defense and the National Security Coordination Secretariat of Singapore are the primary supporters of this effort.



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AIAI	al-Ittihad al Islami
AQAM	al Qaeda and Associated Movements
AQAP	al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	al Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
ETIM	East Turkestan Islamic Movement
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
IJU	Islamic Jihad Union
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
LeT	Lashkar-e-Taiba
LIFG	Libyan Islamic Fighting Group
NCTC	National Counterterrorism Center
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Al Qaeda today poses a far different threat from that posed on September 11, 2001. What was once a hierarchical organization composed of Osama bin Laden and his close associates has grown to include an array of regional terrorist groups, small cells, and even individuals. This report terms these entities Al Qaeda and Associated Movements, or AQAM.

AQAM has three basic tiers. Bin Laden and his close associates comprise *al Qaeda core*, the group responsible for 9/11 and now based in western Pakistan. *Al Qaeda affiliates and like-minded groups* is a broad category that includes al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al Shabaab, and several other regional terrorist organizations. *Al Qaeda-inspired non-affiliated cells and individuals* is a diffuse tier comprising radicalized groups and individuals that are not regularly affiliated with, but draw clear inspiration and occasional guidance from, the core and affiliates.

AQAM's constituent parts retain operational independence and are often motivated by unique local concerns. Still, these disparate elements exhibit a degree of ideological coherence. In some form, all members of AQAM agree that violent struggle, which is often directed against the West, is necessary to catalyzing an Islamic spiritual revival. AQAM, then, is a decentralized movement comprising a diverse set of subcomponents.

The transformation of the al Qaeda threat into a broader movement has important implications for U.S. and international counterterrorism strategy. First, the diffusion of global Islamist terrorism has greatly complicated the work of policymakers and national security practitioners. Al Qaeda core, while operationally diminished, plays an active role within the syndicate of armed groups active in Pakistan and Afghanistan, often facilitating attacks that it could not perpetrate alone. Emerging affiliates pose a range of threats; in less than a year, AQAP attempted two attacks on the U.S. homeland, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, in carrying out the 2008 Mumbai bombings, provoked further military tensions between Pakistan and India. Nonaffiliated cells and individuals, while mostly unsophisticated, represent a unique threat; “homegrown” extremists—that is, those who tend to be legal U.S. or European residents or citizens that possess certain qualities, including legal status and language and cultural skills—could enable domestic attacks.

The emergence of affiliates and nonaffiliated cells and individuals also presents a troubling paradox for the United States and its partners: despite extensive counterterrorism successes against the group responsible for 9/11, the al Qaeda “brand” now resonates with an increasingly diverse (though still narrow) cross-section of Muslims around the world. Indeed, bin Laden and other senior leaders have seized on the presence of U.S. and allied forces in Muslim-majority countries, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq, to underscore al Qaeda's stock narrative that the West is at war with Islam. That narrative is central to the shared ideology that unifies AQAM's disparate components.

The continued relevance of AQAM's ideology goes hand in hand with the advent of the Internet—particularly innovations in peer-to-peer technologies—as a facilitator of global Islamist terrorism. YouTube videos and online chat-rooms now help disseminate AQAM's ideology to far-flung audiences, thus reducing the importance of in-person interaction as a driver of radicalization. This development only adds to the diffusion and complexity of global Islamist terrorism: policymakers must now counter extremism in virtual, rather than merely physical, realms.

If one word describes the cumulative effect of these developments, it is change. How and why AQAM might continue to transform—and whether it will even endure—will determine the future of counterterrorism policy. This report examines the nature of these changes and lays the foundation for a larger, year-long study that will forecast the nature of AQAM in 2025.



INTRODUCTION

On September 11, 2001, the terrorist group al Qaeda launched an attack that killed more Americans on U.S. soil than the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Nearly a decade later, that organization and its leader, Osama bin Laden, remain dangerous.¹ But al Qaeda has evolved and grown to include threats outside bin Laden's core group. Today's al Qaeda threat is more complex and diffuse than in 2001. It emanates from bin Laden's group, from al Qaeda affiliates and like-minded networks that support bin Laden's agenda, and from nonaffiliated cells and individuals inspired by al Qaeda and its affiliates. Together, these entities constitute al Qaeda and Associated Movements, or AQAM. It is this combination of three constituent parts that makes AQAM distinct from its antecedent. Understanding the implications of this transformation is key to combating the current AQAM threat.

A Foundation for Forward-Looking Analysis

This report provides the foundation for a larger, year-long study that will forecast the nature and evolution of AQAM—including its geographic reach, its operational capabilities, and the relative threats posed by constituent elements—in 2025. The goal is to enable governments to constrain and counteract global Islamist terrorist threats more proactively. This effort entails gaining a keener sense of where these threats will be most prevalent in the coming years and what tools can be applied by state and nongovernmental actors to defeat AQAM.

The first section deals with the evolution of bin Laden's core organization, beginning in the 1990s. Section two describes the rise of al Qaeda affiliates and nonaffiliated cells and individuals after 9/11. Section three examines the AQAM threat today.

Every effort has been made to discuss these developments chronologically. For analytical clarity, AQAM has been grouped into three tiers: *al Qaeda core*, *al Qaeda affiliates and like-minded groups*, and *al Qaeda-inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals*. Although categorizing a diverse set of movements in this fashion carries certain drawbacks, it is necessary for a study of this breadth. Please refer to textbox 1 for a detailed explanation of the reasoning behind this decision.

1. According to unnamed intelligence officials, bin Laden directed unspecified affiliates and partners to use gunmen to open fire in tourist centers and take over hotels in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The attacks would have mimicked the November 2008 terrorist attacks that paralyzed Mumbai, India. See Dina Temple-Raston, "Bin Laden Told Partners to Plan Mumbai-Like Attacks," NPR, September 30, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130242602>.

Parsing AQAM

Because *al Qaeda* can be used to describe many things at once, the term often lacks specificity. Stating that an individual or group is part of al Qaeda could mean a number of different things depending on context. Inaccurate reporting and the tendency of some governments and analysts to conflate unrelated expressions of Islamism with the movement led by Osama bin Laden have made the term *al Qaeda* even less specific than it already was. To avoid ambiguity, the authors will employ the following terminology throughout this analysis:

Al Qaeda core includes Osama bin Laden and the cluster of ideologues, field commanders, and facilitators who have sworn *bay'at* (an oath of allegiance) to him.

Al Qaeda affiliates and like-minded groups encompasses both “official” al Qaeda affiliates that have formally merged with the core, such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and groups that have links to al Qaeda core but retain ideological and operational independence, like al Shabaab in Somalia.

Al Qaeda-inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals comprises radicalized groups and individuals that are not regularly affiliated with, but draw clear inspiration and occasional guidance from, the core or affiliated movements. Examples include Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader, a self-radicalized citizen of Singapore, who attempted to travel to Pakistan to receive training before fighting in Afghanistan; five young men from Northern Virginia who sought to join the Taliban; and the would-be Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad.

Together, these three tiers constitute *al Qaeda and Associated Movements*. The AQAM construct is not meant to imply a homogeneous, coherent group of al Qaeda terrorists. As discussed on page 12, there are important differences within AQAM.

1

FROM THE EARLY 1990s TO THE EARLY 2000s

THE EVOLUTION OF AL QAEDA CORE

During the 1990s, al Qaeda built alliances with other militant Islamist groups and launched a series of high-profile attacks, thus establishing itself as an increasingly formidable terrorist organization.¹ The 9/11 attacks represented the culmination of these efforts. They also presaged a shift in focus among al Qaeda's associates; in subsequent years, many of these formal and informal affiliates have increasingly targeted the United States and its Western allies, in addition to local Muslim governments. This section describes the rise of al Qaeda core and how its seminal attack on the U.S. homeland foretold a strategic innovation in global Islamist terrorism.

Bin Laden and other future leaders of al Qaeda famously participated in the resistance movements to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s, along with the power struggles following Moscow's withdrawal in 1989.² Despite having had little impact on the outcome, bin Laden and his followers claimed credit for the Red Army's defeat and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. They would later seize on this narrative as proof that they could confront a global superpower like the United States.

In the ensuing years, al Qaeda began building alliances with militant groups in a number of other Muslim countries. While in Sudan in 1994, bin Laden established the Islamic Army Shura, bringing together groups from Algeria, Egypt, Eritrea, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Tunisia.³ Around the same time, he forged less formal ties to militants in Burma, Chad, Malaysia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Thailand, and Uganda.⁴ In addition to these relationships, bin Laden also extended direct assistance to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Abu Sayyaf Group, both located in the southern Philippines; Jemaah Islamiyah, based in Indonesia; and rebels in Tajikistan.⁵

Over time, then, al Qaeda's relationships and financial patronage expanded into Africa, the Balkans, Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, the United States, and Western Europe.⁶ These affiliations linked al Qaeda to several successful terrorist plots in the early to mid-1990s, although there is disagreement over the extent of al Qaeda's direct involvement.⁷ According to one analyst, the group's organizational strategy was to assemble a coalition of regional militant groups and

1. *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 58–70.

2. *Ibid.*, 55–57.

3. *Ibid.*, 58.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 57–59.

7. *The 9/11 Commission Report* linked al Qaeda to the 1992 bombing of a hotel in Aden used by U.S. forces in transit to Somalia, the attack on U.S. forces on the streets of Mogadishu in 1993 known as the Blackhawk Down engagement, and two bombings in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996 (*ibid.*, 59–60). Bruce Riedel, however, argues that there is insufficient evidence to implicate al Qaeda in these attacks; see Bruce Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2008), 50–51.

“point all the players in one direction (via propaganda, technical assistance, broad strategic direction, and occasional direct guidance).”⁸

As al Qaeda consolidated its partnerships, it also bolstered its own military capacity. Thousands of fighters passed through the network of training camps in Afghanistan supported by bin Laden, and the most promising cadres were selected and indoctrinated into his organization.⁹ The administration of this force was highly bureaucratic. Al Qaeda had a constitution and by-laws,¹⁰ a leadership council, and committees dedicated to military affairs, politics, information, administration, security, and surveillance.¹¹

Al Qaeda distinguished itself from other Islamist militants by arguing for a reorientation of Islamist terrorism. Traditionally, militant Islamist groups had looked to overthrow strong-armed heads of state to establish sovereign territory governed by Sharia, or Islamic law.¹² Rather, bin Laden contended, al Qaeda and its affiliates should look to attack the United States and its Western allies directly.¹³ According to bin Laden, Western governments propped up Muslim leaders, offering them critical military and financial support; decisive terrorist attacks directed at the United States and its allies might convince them to withdraw such assistance, thus leaving Muslim governments more vulnerable to attack by al Qaeda and its affiliates and clearing the way for the imposition of Sharia.¹⁴

In this vein, bin Laden issued fatwas, or Islamic religious rulings, in 1996 and 1998, declaring war on the United States and decrying its use of Saudi Arabia as a military base during the first Gulf War and its support for Israel.¹⁵ Months after the 1998 fatwa, al Qaeda planned, financed, and launched its first major attacks against the United States. On August 7, two near-simultaneous car bombs struck the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, killing more than 200 people.¹⁶ Just over two years after the embassy bombings, al Qaeda successfully carried out its second direct attack against an American target. On October 12, 2000, al Qaeda terrorists maneuvered a small boat packed with explosives into the USS *Cole* as it sat in the Port of Aden. The blast killed 17 U.S. sailors and wounded around 40.¹⁷ As the 2000s began, al Qaeda had convincingly established itself as a new kind of Islamist terrorist group intent on striking a different kind of target.

8. David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14.

9. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 67.

10. Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 2007), 162.

11. *Ibid.*, 162–63.

12. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 50–51.

13. *Ibid.*, 54.

14. Osama bin Laden, “Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,” *Al Quds Al Arabi*, August 1996, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html; and “Jihad against Jews and Crusaders Issued by the World Islamic Front,” in *The Cannons of Jihad*, ed. Jim Lacey (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 1–3.

15. *Ibid.* See also Osama bin Laden, text of fatwa urging jihad against Americans, *Al Quds Al Arabi*, February 23, 1998, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1998.html.

16. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 68–70.

17. Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, 190.

9/11 and the Hunt for al Qaeda Core

It was with this structure, global vision, and escalating lethality and reach that al Qaeda launched the September 11 terrorist attacks. Because other studies, particularly the 9/11 Commission Report, cover the events in exhaustive detail, they are only briefly reviewed here. Bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, his deputy, and other close associates were able to effectively plan and execute a series of attacks that involved 19 operatives and killed almost 3,000 people.¹⁸ The United States responded to 9/11 far more aggressively than to previous attacks, like the African embassy and USS *Cole* bombings, which the Clinton administration had countered mostly with airstrikes.¹⁹ In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, President George Bush ordered the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to “launch a covert war against al Qaeda and its Taliban supporters.”²⁰ Washington inserted small groups of CIA paramilitary officers, supported by special operations forces, which effectively partnered with indigenous Afghan elements.²¹ Combined with the precision and potency of American aircraft, this hybrid force began rooting out al Qaeda core and its Taliban allies.²²

Following the collapse of the Taliban regime, al Qaeda core retreated into the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, where it was pursued by coalition forces. After engagements at Tora Bora in early December 2001 and the Shah-i-Kot Mountains in March 2002, surviving members of al Qaeda core, including bin Laden and Zawahiri, fled Afghanistan to Pakistan.²³

The U.S.-led assault on Afghanistan severely degraded al Qaeda core. By one estimate, nearly 80 percent of the group’s fighters in Afghanistan were killed within the first two months of the campaign.²⁴ Bin Laden’s network of guest houses and training camps was destroyed, and information gathered from these sites and gleaned from the interrogation of captured fighters provided actionable intelligence that further aided the pursuit of terrorists in the region.²⁵

The continued program of kinetic pressure, combined with multilateral initiatives to constrain the core’s ability to raise and transfer money, severely limited the group’s capacity to train and conduct attacks.²⁶ Non-Western countries played a role, too. In 2002 and 2003, for instance, Pakistani officials captured several al Qaeda core figures, among them the mastermind of 9/11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammad.²⁷ Iran also arrested a group of high-ranking al Qaeda core members that had fled from Afghanistan. Among these individuals were Saif al-Adel, al Qaeda’s core’s military

18. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Executive Summary*, 1–2.

19. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 115–121.

20. Henry Crumpton, “Intelligence and War: Afghanistan, 2001–2002,” in *Transforming U.S. Intelligence*, ed. Jennifer Sims and Burton Gerber (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 162.

21. “United States Special Operations Command History: 1987–2007,” U.S. Special Operations Command, 87–93.

22. *Ibid.*

23. For a detailed account of bin Laden and Zawahiri’s escape from Tora Bora, see Peter Bergen, “The Battle for Tora Bora: How Osama bin Laden Slipped from Our Grasp: The Definitive Account,” *New Republic*, December 22, 2009, <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-battle-tora-bora?page=0,5>.

24. Lawrence Wright, “The Master Plan,” *New Yorker*, September 11, 2006, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/09/11/060911fa_fact3.

25. Crumpton, “Intelligence and War,” 162.

26. Greg Bruno, “Al-Qaeda’s Financial Pressures,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 1, 2010, http://www.cfr.org/publication/21347/alqaedas_financial_pressures.html.

27. Kenneth Katzman, “Al Qaeda: Profile and Threat Assessment,” Congressional Research Service, August 17, 2005, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/56106.pdf>; and Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between the Mosque and Military* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), 306.

commander; Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, a spokesman for the group; and Saad bin Laden, Osama bin Laden's son.²⁸

Despite these efforts, many senior leaders remained at large. The failure to capture or kill bin Laden and Zawahiri, in particular, allowed the two men to remain potent strategic and symbolic figures within AQAM.²⁹ In the subsequent years, the global Islamist terrorist threat changed in important ways. During this time, an array of formal and informal al Qaeda affiliates, along with clusters of nonaffiliated cells and individuals, emerged as increasingly significant threats to U.S. and global security. The next section explores this transformation.

28. Faye Bowers, "Iran Holds Al Qaeda's Top Leaders," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 28, 2003, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0728/p01s02-wome.html>.

29. John Kerry, "Tora Bora Revisited: How We Failed to Get bin Laden and Why It Matters Today," report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, November 30, 2009, 10–20, <http://foreign.senate.gov/reports/download/?id=30753123-b747-4b7c-83fb-d350cc0aacef>.

2

THE RISE OF THE REST

THE EMERGENCE OF AL QAEDA AFFILIATES, LIKE-MINDED GROUPS, AND NONAFFILIATED CELLS AND INDIVIDUALS DURING THE 2000s

As the United States and its partners degraded bin Laden's core organization throughout the 2000s, policymakers became increasingly focused on an emerging set of formal and informal al Qaeda affiliates. Some of these elements had been active since the 1990s but had received less attention from American policymakers focused on al Qaeda core. Other groups rose to prominence in reaction to U.S. or allied counterterrorism operations. Along the way, bin Laden and his associates consciously worked to build or sustain alliances with these organizations.

Toward the end of the decade, policymakers grew more concerned about cells and individuals that were not regularly associated with al Qaeda or its affiliates but that drew clear inspiration, and occasional guidance and support, from the groups.¹ This development, along with the rise of formal and informal affiliates, marked a definitive shift in the nature of al Qaeda; it was now more appropriate to conceptualize it as a movement, or AQAM. How exactly did this transformation occur?

Although the initial response to 9/11 focused primarily on al Qaeda core in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a series of plots soon made it clear that other Islamist terrorist groups posed important threats. One of the most notable of these plots unfolded on October 12, 2002, when Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a Southeast Asian Islamist terrorist group, launched the deadliest attack in Indonesian history. Exactly two years after the USS *Cole* attack, JI operatives detonated sequential backpack and car bombs in a crowded tourist area of Bali, an Indonesian island, killing 202 people.²

JI's relationship with al Qaeda core had roots in the late 1980s and flourished during the 1990s. The 9/11 Commission Report notes that by 1998, JI and al Qaeda core had reached an agreement whereby the former "would perform necessary casing activities and locate bomb-making materials and other supplies," while the latter "would underwrite operations, provide bomb-making expertise,

1. A number of recent plots have involved individuals who were not formal members of al Qaeda core or its affiliates but who received a measure of direction or support from these organizations. These individuals should be viewed as like-minded "free agents" rather than as fully associated and controlled operatives. Examples of such cases include the so-called Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad, who received limited training and funds from the Pakistani Taliban, as well as a group centered around Najibullah Zazi, who sought to attack the New York City subway system after receiving training and direction from al Qaeda core in Pakistan. While both had contact with al Qaeda core or an affiliate, neither was an active organizational member. See "Faisal Shahzad Indicted for Attempted Car Bombing in Times Square," Department of Justice press release, June 17, 2010, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2010/June/10-ag-713.html>; and William Rashbun and Karen Zraick, "Government Says Al Qaeda Ordered N.Y. Plot," *New York Times*, April 23, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/nyregion/24zarien.html>.

2. "Bali Death Toll Set at 202," BBC News, February 19, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2778923.stm>.

and deliver suicide operatives.”³ This support continued after 9/11; according to one JI operative detained in August 2003, al Qaeda core provided \$30,000 to fund the Bali attacks.⁴

As described in the first section, the relationship between JI and al Qaeda core was one of many partnerships that bin Laden forged with smaller regional terrorist groups during the 1990s. Following 9/11, al Qaeda core maintained loose affiliations with several other organizations, many of which included foreign fighters who had opposed Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Among these groups were the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which had been an active Taliban ally;⁵ the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), whose focus is Western China; al-Ittihad al Islami (AIAI), a now-defunct Somali terrorist group responsible for the 2002 attacks in Mombasa, Kenya;⁶ and the Abu Sayyaf Group, which is based in the southern Philippines.

As al Qaeda core faced an ongoing, post-9/11 global counterterrorism assault, these affiliates played a crucial role in keeping bin Laden’s organization relevant. Groups like JI and AIAI became responsible for a larger share of Islamist terrorist attacks. Al Qaeda core understood this transition and, as seen in the 2002 Bali bombings, actively encouraged and enabled local groups to execute attacks. Bin Laden seized on these operations to aggrandize the core’s own influence. In a December 2002 speech, he categorized such attacks as part of a monolithic campaign against the United States and its partners conducted by the “zealous sons of Islam.”⁷ As bin Laden saw it, al Qaeda was now acting as the vanguard force that he and his cohorts had originally envisioned.

The rise of regional affiliates continued during the middle of the decade. One of the most violent of these groups came about because of the American invasion of Iraq. Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) emerged from the chaos of the Sunni insurgency. Under the leadership of the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the group soon earned a reputation for its particularly brutal suicide bombings and assassinations. Aside from its frequent attacks in Iraq, the group also gained notoriety for its October 2004 formal declaration of allegiance to bin Laden.⁸ The partnership preceded another merger nearly two years later, when the Algerian-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) recast itself as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) after officially joining al Qaeda core in September 2006, becoming the second formal al Qaeda affiliate.⁹

Other formal and informal affiliates emerged later in the decade. In Yemen, a February 2006 prison break freed 23 militants and eventually led to the unification of disparate Saudi and Yemeni terrorist cells under the banner of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In January 2009, AQAP’s leader, Nasir al-Wuhaysi, declared the group’s formal allegiance to the core. Since then, AQAP has claimed responsibility for at least two major plots directed at the U.S. homeland: the

3. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 151.

4. Simon Elegant, “The Terrorist Talks,” *TIME*, October 5, 2003, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,493256,00.html>.

5. Thomas Sanderson, Daniel Kimmage, and David Gordon, *From the Ferghana Valley to South Waziristan: The Evolving Threat of Central Asian Jihadists* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2010), 7, http://csis.org/files/publication/100324_Sanderson_FerghanaValley_WEB_0.pdf.

6. “Al Qaeda Claims Credit for Kenya Attacks,” CNN, December 2, 2002, http://articles.cnn.com/2002-12-02/world/kenya.probe_1_kenyans-and-three-israelis-al-qaeda-israeli-charter-jet/2?s=PM:WORLD.

7. “Full Text: ‘Bin Laden’s Message,’” BBC News World Edition, November 12, 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2455845.stm.

8. Mary Anne Weaver, “Inventing al-Zarqawi,” *Atlantic Monthly* (Jul/Aug 2006), 98–99.

9. Souad Mekhennet, Michael Moss, Eric Schmitt, Elaine Sciolino, and Margot Williams, “A Threat Renewed: Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline from Al Qaeda,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01algeria.html?pagewanted=1>.

December 25, 2009, attempted bombing of a transatlantic flight bound for Detroit and the October 2010 plan to ship explosives to the United States on cargo planes.¹⁰ These events have led some American officials to describe AQAP “as a more potent threat” than al Qaeda core.¹¹

Like AQAP, al Shabaab, a Somali insurgent group, has taken on a transnational dimension. Since 2006, al Shabaab has been waging a nationally focused insurgency to expel African Union peacekeepers and overthrow Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government, which succeeded Mogadishu’s previous government, the deposed Islamic Courts Union. While the group is thought to be focused mostly on internal matters, it pledged support for al Qaeda core’s agenda in February 2010.¹² Perhaps most startling, al Shabaab recruited a number of individuals from the large Somali diaspora community living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Beginning around 2007, as many as two dozen U.S.-based Somalis traveled to Mogadishu to join the group.¹³ Among these individuals was Shirwa Ahmed, who became the first U.S. citizen to conduct a suicide bombing.¹⁴ Even though none of these Western recruits has carried out attacks in Western countries, al Shabaab’s ability to tap into diaspora communities and its July 2010 attack in Kampala, Uganda, suggest the group poses a threat beyond Somalia.

Throughout the decade, Al Qaeda core also began consolidating alliances closer to its base in western Pakistan. In the aftermath of 9/11, Pakistani President Musharraf opted to side with the United States publicly. Behind the scenes, however, Pakistan’s intelligence service, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), maintained ties with numerous militant proxies, among them the Haqqani Network and surviving leaders of the Quetta Shura Taliban. Despite this hedge, President Musharraf’s open support for the U.S.-led crackdown provoked several Pakistani militant groups, pitting them against Islamabad and its American allies.

This realignment had important implications for bin Laden’s organization. As al Qaeda core established a new safe haven in western Pakistan, the group exploited President Musharraf’s unpopular support for U.S. counterterrorism efforts to consolidate or establish relationships with a wider range of partners.¹⁵ A series of peace deals struck between the Pakistani government and tribal leaders in Waziristan beginning in 2004 led to the withdrawal of Pakistani forces from the area. The withdrawals provided legitimacy and valuable breathing room for al Qaeda core and aligned groups, allowing them to reconstitute training camps and operational capabilities.¹⁶

10. Jon Alterman and Rick “Ozzie” Nelson, “AQAP in Yemen,” *CSIS Critical Questions*, November 5, 2010, <http://csis.org/publication/aqap-yemen>.

11. Greg Miller and Peter Finn, “CIA Sees Increased Threat for al-Qaeda in Yemen,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/24/AR2010082406553.html>.

12. “Somali Islamists al-Shabab ‘join al-Qaeda fight,’” BBC News, February 1, 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8491329.stm>.

13. Dina Temple-Raston, “Al-Shabab Becomes Magnet for Would-Be Jihadists,” NPR, August 6, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129021164>.

14. Spencer Hsu and Carrie Johnson, “Somali American Recruited by Extremists: U.S. Cites Case of Minnesotan Killed in Suicide Blast in Africa,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/10/AR2009031003901.html>.

15. Shuja Nawaz, *FATA—A Most Dangerous Place: Meeting the Challenge of Militancy and Terror in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2009), 26, http://csis.org/files/media/csispubs/081218_nawaz_fata_web.pdf.

16. C. Christine Fair and Seth G. Jones, “Pakistan’s War Within,” *Survival* 51, no. 6 (December 2009–January 2010): 171.

The confrontation between militants and the Pakistani government intensified and widened following the siege of Islamabad's Red Mosque in 2007. This escalation encouraged disparate groups to align against the Pakistani state, drawing them into the orbit of al Qaeda core. By the mid- to late 2000s, bin Laden's organization had grown into an important force multiplier in the loose syndicate of insurgent, terrorist, and criminal groups that operate within Pakistan and across the Durand Line in Afghanistan.¹⁷ By virtue of colocation, shared infrastructure, and operational cooperation, al Qaeda core maintains closer alliances within this syndicate than with any other set of groups.

Alliance Building in Perspective

Such formal and informal mergers raise vexing questions for U.S. counterterrorism officials and their international partners. What does it mean for a terrorist group in Iraq or North Africa to have a formal alliance with al Qaeda core, which is based in South Asia? What benefits do such partnerships confer on the respective groups? Above all, what do the changing relationships within AQAM mean for U.S. and allied counterterrorism efforts?

It is important to note the tremendous diversity within the set of formal and informal alliances that al Qaeda core has cultivated. No two relationships developed for the same reasons, and some affiliates, like JI and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), have turned away from the core in recent years.¹⁸ Still, at least a few common themes run throughout al Qaeda core's alliance building. Affiliates have seemed to proclaim allegiance to bin Laden to gain a certain notoriety associated with al Qaeda core, which after 9/11 solidified its reputation as the most infamous global terrorist group. Alliance building has also allowed regional affiliates and like-minded groups to tap into new sources of training, funding, and recruits. Even if such groups do not share the core's global ideology, al Qaeda's imprimatur might confer both intangible and concrete benefits to their mostly local agendas.¹⁹

For bin Laden's organization, networking and alliance building have enabled a beleaguered group to sustain its mission and, to some extent, its operations. Al Qaeda affiliates appear increasingly intent on targeting Western interests, a trend that Thomas Hegghammer, an expert on violent Islamist ideology, has termed "ideological hybridization." Writing in 2009, Hegghammer argued that the distinctions between "revolutionary Islamists," focused on toppling "apostate" Muslim regimes, and "global jihadists," like al Qaeda, focused on attacking Western countries, had blurred. Now, typically parochial groups like AQIM were targeting Western and global institutions, as with the December 11, 2007, attack on the United Nations office in Algiers.²⁰

17. Al Qaeda core has provided a combination of training, explosives, strategic communications, and counterintelligence expertise to the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Haqqani Network, the Quetta Shura Taliban, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, as well as Pakistani-based sectarian groups and separatists. It also provides protection for South Asian criminal organizations involved in narcotics cultivation, kidnapping, and smuggling. See Haider Ali Hussein Mullick, "Al Qaeda and Pakistan: Current Role and Future Considerations," *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding*, October, 2010, 15–16, http://www.ispu.org/files/PDFs/Al_Qaeda_and_Pakistan_Report_-_Haider_Mullick.pdf.

18. See, for instance, Juan C. Zarate, "Al Qaeda in 2010: How Should the U.S. Respond?" statement before the House Armed Services Committee, January 27, 2010, http://csis.org/files/ts_100127_Zarate.pdf.

19. Daniel Byman, "Al Qaeda's M&A Strategy: Is Franchising a Successful Way to Build a Global Terror Network?" *Foreign Policy.com*, December 7, 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/12/07/al_qaedas_m_and_a_strategy?page=0,0.

20. Thomas Hegghammer, "The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 9 (November 18, 2009).

Despite al Qaeda core's alliance building, the group has rarely exercised operational control over its affiliates. Bin Laden, in particular, has often been limited to the role of al Qaeda's "inciter-in-chief, not commander-in-chief."²¹ Even when the core sought an advisory role over its affiliates, in some instances, especially in the relationship between al Qaeda core and AQI, it seemed to have little influence. As criticism over AQI's excessive methods mounted, Zawahiri and a senior al Qaeda core leader identified only as "Atiyah" sent letters to Zarqawi urging him to exercise greater restraint.²² Zarqawi ignored these instructions.

Nonetheless, the rise of al Qaeda franchises and the geographic diffusion of Islamist terrorism have played a defining role in al Qaeda core's evolution into AQAM. That some of these regional networks are undergoing a process of ideological hybridization has ensured that AQAM retains, to varying degrees, bin Laden's focus on the West.

Beyond Terrorist Groups

Formal and informal affiliates are not the only entities that constitute AQAM. In the past few years, small cells and individuals that are not regularly affiliated with al Qaeda but that draw clear inspiration, and occasional guidance, from the core and its affiliates have emerged as salient actors in global Islamist terrorism. The trend is most pertinent in Europe and the United States, where would-be homegrown terrorists possess the sort of "insider" traits—legal status, fluency in Western languages, and cultural familiarity, among others—that could facilitate successful attacks in their home countries.

Shortly after 9/11, al Qaeda-inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals garnered increased attention from U.S. and European counterterrorism officials. In September 2002, five Yemeni-American citizens were arrested in Lackawanna, New York, on charges that they and a sixth associate had provided material support to al Qaeda by attending one of the group's training camps in Afghanistan during the spring of 2001. Known as the "Lackawanna Six," the group, while not operationally active, raised fears about the emergence of al Qaeda-inspired American homegrown extremism in the post-9/11 era.²³ Around this same time in Europe, Dutch intelligence officials uncovered evidence that a loose group of individuals, eventually labeled by some authorities the "Hofstad Network," may have been planning terrorist attacks in the Netherlands.²⁴

In some cases, cells and individuals based in the United States and Europe have managed to link up with al Qaeda core, along with its formal and informal affiliates. The Minnesota Somalis

21. Michael Scheuer, "Coalition Warfare, Part II: How Zarqawi Fits into Bin Laden's World Front," *Jamestown Terrorism Focus* 2, no. 8 (April 28, 2005).

22. "Letter Exposes New Leader in Al-Qa'ida High Command," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, September 25, 2006, <http://ctc.usma.edu/harmony/pdf/CTC-AtiyahLetter.pdf>; "Zawahiri's Letter to Zarqawi," dated July 9, 2005, translated and accessed from "Harmony Project" of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, released October 11, 2005, <http://ctc.usma.edu/harmony/pdf/CTC-Zawahiri-Letter-10-05.pdf>.

23. See, for example, Matthew Purdy and Lowell Bergman, "Where the Trail Led: Between Evidence and Suspicion; Unclear Danger: Inside the Lackawanna Terror Case," *New York Times*, October 12, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/12/nyregion/where-trail-led-between-evidence-suspicion-unclear-danger-inside-lackawanna.html?scp=2&sq=Lackawanna+Six&st=nyt>.

24. See for example, Gregory Crouch "Netherlands Arrests 7 in Plot to Assassinate Top Politicians," *New York Times*, October 15, 2005, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E02E6DC143FF936A25753C1A9639C8B63&scp=1&sq=hofstad%20group&st=cse>.

stand as one example. In February 2010, Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan citizen and lawful U.S. permanent resident, pled guilty to terrorism charges after having been arrested the previous year when federal officials foiled his plan to bomb the New York subway system. Zazi had traveled to Pakistan to receive explosives and weapons training from al Qaeda core.²⁵ Just over two months after Zazi's conviction, in May U.S. citizen Faisal Shahzad was arrested following a failed attempt to detonate a car bomb in Times Square. Like Zazi, Shahzad had received terrorist training in Pakistan, although he worked with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operatives.²⁶ In at least one instance, direct training appears not to have been necessary for perpetrating a successful attack; U.S. Army Major Nidal Hasan, the suspect in the November 2009 Fort Hood shootings, drew inspiration from radical Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, a key figure within AQAP, but is alleged to have acted alone.²⁷

These and other recent cases are part of an uptick in the number of U.S. legal residents and citizens implicated in extremist violence in the past few years.²⁸ As will be explored later, the trend appears to be tied to the resonance of al Qaeda's stock narrative of a war between the West and Islam. The increasing power of the Internet, both to disseminate propaganda and to forge connections between physically separate, like-minded individuals, also plays a role. Above all, the rise of al Qaeda-inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals demonstrates just how much global Islamist terrorism, which once revolved around bin Laden and his close associates, has changed and become a broader movement in the past decade.

Ideological Affinity

The connective tissue that links the three tiers of AQAM, and the basis for identifying them as part of a movement, is ideological affinity. AQAM's components share an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam grounded in the belief that the *ummah*, or Muslim community, is in a state of decay. The solution to this crisis lies in returning to the practices used during the times of the Prophet Muhammad and reestablishing Sharia. Furthermore, they believe that their enemies—be they “Zionist-Jewish Crusaders,” Hindus, or “apostates”—actively conspire to weaken the *ummah* and prevent the implementation of Sharia. Under these conditions, violent struggle becomes justifiable and obligatory to remove these deleterious influences and catalyze an Islamic revival.²⁹

25. William K. Rashbaum and Karen Zraick “Government Says Al Qaeda Ordered N.Y. Plot,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/nyregion/24zazien.html?adxnln=1&ref=najibullahahzazi&adxnlnx=1294074006-tRDwBG2BobJ6b6t9vWNRTg>.

26. Benjamin Weiser, “Call to Taliban after Bomb Attempt in Times Sq.,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/30/nyregion/30shahzad.html?ref=faisalshahzad>.

27. Jerome P. Bjelopera and Mark A. Randol, “American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat,” Congressional Research Service, December 7, 2010, 34, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/153298.pdf>.

28. See Charles Kurzman, “Muslim-American Terrorism Since 9/11: An Accounting,” Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, February 2, 2011, http://sanford.duke.edu/centers/tcths/about/documents/Kurzman_Muslim-American_Terrorism_Since_911_An_Accounting.pdf. Kurzman identifies 67 total Muslim-American terrorist suspects and perpetrators in 2009 and 2010, compared to 94 total from 2001–2008 and just 50 from 2004–2008.

29. This is not to imply that every foot soldier and homegrown radical associated with AQAM has an in-depth understanding of ideology. This might be the case for intellectual and religiously literate cadres, but others are drawn to the movement by more simplistic narratives. These narratives are the “lowest common denominator of the various ideologies of global Islamist terrorism” and tend to inspire those who seek

Upon closer examination of the ideologies of AQAM's constituent parts, clear fissures emerge. Examples of such disagreements include the identity of the primary enemy, strategic approaches, and the "excommunication" and killing of Muslims, among other matters.³⁰ These disputes have plagued AQAM from the very beginning. When al Qaeda core was first created in the late 1980s, its founders differed over where the organization's efforts should be directed. Abdullah Azzam, an influential Islamist instrumental in bin Laden's rise, believed that the group should focus on freeing historically Muslim lands from "infidel" rulers, effectively concentrating on the periphery of the Muslim-majority world.³¹ The other camp, influenced heavily by Zawahiri, initially sought to use the organization to free Egypt and other Muslim lands from the grips of leaders that had strayed from the "true path" of Islam.³²

Even as a single, hierarchical group, therefore, al Qaeda core was subject to internal discord. As the organization expanded and morphed into a diversified movement, the frequency of these differences increased. In some cases, these disputes prompted entities to dissociate themselves from the movement or its ideological underpinnings. An example includes LIFG's 2009 recantation, which criticized the targeting of civilians and the violent overthrow of Muslim leaders, central tenants of bin Laden's ideology.³³

Although rifts within AQAM over strategy and tactics are significant, the groups' shared goal of purifying Islam through violent action helps them see past their differences. Cooperation within AQAM is also driven by common interests. Many actors within AQAM collaborate with one another due to overlapping short- and medium-term goals, which often relate to Western intervention, local regimes, and rival sectarian groups. These shared objectives downplay ideology in favor of pragmatism and are exemplified in the South Asia syndicate described in the third section.

radical Islam for adventure, personal meaning, or redemption. See Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 114.

30. For a good accounting of this, see Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, "Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qa'ida and Its Periphery," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 16, 2010, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Self-Inflicted%20Wounds.pdf>.

31. Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 36.

32. Aryn Baker, "Who Killed Abdullah Azzam?" *TIME*, June 18, 2009, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1902809_1902810_1905173-2,00.html.

33. See Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, "New Jihad Code Threatens al Qaeda," CNN, November 10, 2009, http://articles.cnn.com/2009-11-09/world/libya.jihadi.code_1_jihad-libyan-islamic-fighting-group-qaeda?_s=PM:WORLD; and Ian Black, "Libya's Jihadis Reject Violence as Leader Bids for Acceptance," *The Guardian*, September 4, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/04/libyan-islamist-fighters-reject-violence>.

3

AQAM TODAY

In 2004, a Syrian-born militant and al Qaeda associate named Abu Musab al-Suri released a manifesto entitled “A Global Call to Islamic Resistance.” This 1,600-page tract candidly examined the historic failures of several Islamist terrorist groups and acknowledged that their hierarchical organization was problematic. Instead, al-Suri advocated a new model inspired by his concept of *nizal, la tanzim*, or system, not organization.¹

Al-Suri’s approach called for the integration of “secret bands of disconnected cells that are both varied and abundant”² into a global movement that could withstand penetration. Senior leaders would provide overall guidance to this movement and cede tactical authority to cell commanders.³ This movement would be completely decentralized, with nothing connecting its individual nodes besides “the common aim, a common name, the common doctrinal jihadi program, and a comprehensive educational program.”⁴ Even if al-Suri’s writing was not responsible, the transformation that he advocated has largely come to pass. AQAM today is a decentralized movement composed of diverse subcomponents drawn together by a shared set of goals grounded in a perversion of Sunni Islam.

Combating such a movement presents unique analytic challenges. This section assesses the current threat that AQAM poses to the United States and its partners in a manner that appreciates the inherent complexities of a decentralized movement composed of varied elements. It begins by exploring the dangers emanating from AQAM’s three constituent parts and concludes by evaluating the dynamics shaping the overall movement.

The Current Threat from al Qaeda Core

Although still intent on striking the West directly, al Qaeda core’s ability to plan, finance, and execute attacks on Western targets has decreased since 9/11. Bin Laden’s organization does play an active role in the loose syndicate of armed groups that operate in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but its direct contributions to global Islamist terrorism should not be overstated.⁵ Much of al Qaeda

1. Brynjar Lia, “The al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri: A Profile,” Norwegian Defense Research Establishment, March 15, 2006, 17, http://www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00076/_The_Al-Qaida_strate_76568a.pdf.

2. Jim Lacey, *A Terrorist’s Call to Global Jihad: Deciphering Abu Musab al-Suri’s Islamic Jihad Manifesto* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 28.

3. Lia, “The al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus’ab al-Suri.”

4. Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus’ab Al-Suri* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2008), 445.

5. In June 2010, CIA director Leon Panetta estimated that there were only 50 to 100 al Qaeda core members left in Afghanistan, while National Counterterrorism Center director Michael Leiter has stated that there are roughly 300 members in Pakistan. This diminished local capacity was evidenced when, in plot-

core's day-to-day attention is reportedly focused on survival, leaving little available bandwidth for operations.⁶

The group's most significant contribution to global Islamist terrorism today comes in the form of ideological direction and inspiration. As the innovator that directed global Islamist terrorism against Western interests, or the "far enemy," bin Laden maintains his symbolic value as a figure-head. Accordingly, his statements and those issued by his deputies still carry significant weight in militant circles.⁷

The Current Threat from al Qaeda Affiliates and Like-Minded Groups

Al Qaeda core's formal and informal affiliates pose a variety of local, regional, and, at times, global threats. For the purposes of this study, "threat" is gauged by evaluating a group's capabilities and intentions. Capabilities in turn are measured along three dimensions: a group's ability to strike Western targets, its ability to inspire others to plot or act in support of AQAM's agenda, and its capacity to destabilize a particular region. Intentions are determined by assessing how a group allocates its finite resources. Is the bulk of its attacks and plots directed against the West, local regimes, or rival sectarian groups?

Based on this analytic framework, three subsets emerge among al Qaeda-linked groups: those that possess neither the capability nor the intention to strike Western targets or destabilize a region; those that possess the intention to strike Western interests or undermine regional stability but lack the capability; and those that possess both the capability and the intention for such

ting the suicide attack that killed seven CIA officers in Khost on December 30, 2009, al Qaeda was forced to rely heavily on the Haqqani network and the Pakistani Taliban for operational and logistical support. It appears that al Qaeda core currently possesses the motivation for continued attacks but is constrained by a limited capability to operate independently. See *This Week* transcript "Panetta," ABC, June 27, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/week-transcript-panetta/story?id=11025299>; David Sanger and Mark Mazzetti, "New Estimate of Strength of Al Qaeda Is Offered," *New York Times*, June 30, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/01/world/asia/01qaeda.html>; and "Video: CIA Bomber, Jordan Doctor Humam Khalil Abu Mulal al-Balawi, Calls for Jihadist Attacks on U.S.," Associated Press, January 9, 2010, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/2010/01/09/2010-01-09_video_cia_bomber_jordan_doctor_humam_khalil_abu_mulal_albalawi_calls_for_jihadis.html.

6. John Rollins, "Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, February 5, 2010, 2, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R41070.pdf>.

7. A number of terrorist plots appear to have been directly inspired by statements made by al Qaeda core members, including multiple attempted attacks against a Danish cartoonist and newspaper for publishing depictions of the Prophet Mohammed. Further, numerous groups, including AQI, AQIM, AQAP, and Al Shabaab continue to pledge loyalty to bin Laden, reference al Qaeda core in their statements, and generally adhere to bin Laden's established ideology, an indicator that the core has maintained influence within AQAM despite a limited ability to conduct operations itself. See Michael Leiter, "Looming Challenges in the War on Terror," remarks before the Washington Institute, February 13, 2008, http://www.nctc.gov/press_room/speeches/wash-inst-written-sfr-final.pdf; Firouz Sedarat, "Al Qaeda Video Vows More Denmark Attacks," Reuters, September 5, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL562398920080905>; Tracy McVeigh, "Assassin Shot in Cartoonist's Home Has Links to al-Qaeda, Say Police," *The Observer*, January 3, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/03/kurt-westergaard-cartoon-muhammad-denmark>; Rollins, "Al Qaeda and Affiliates."

actions. Little evidence suggests that al Qaeda affiliates possess that capability but lack violent intention. Of course, capabilities and intentions can change over time; the assessment that follows provides a snapshot of the threats posed by formal and informal affiliates today.

Relatively small networks, such as ETIM, fall into the first subset. They remain focused on local regimes and often have less formal ties to bin Laden's organization.⁸ While they launch periodic attacks, these groups do not present a direct threat to the United States and the West, nor do they seem capable of causing regional instability.

Groups such as AQIM and the Islamic Jihad Union, an IMU splinter implicated in the 2007 plot to attack the U.S. airbase in Ramstein, Germany, constitute the second subset.⁹ Should the operational capabilities of these groups increase, they would become a more significant threat to the United States and its partners. AQIM's role in the transshipment of narcotics from West Africa to Europe, therefore, is a very disturbing trend, as it could provide the necessary financial resources to bolster the group's operations.¹⁰

The third subset contains a range of affiliates that present varying, and sometimes unique, threats. AQI seems unable to launch attacks on the U.S. homeland, but because of the large U.S. military presence in Iraq, the group poses a continuing threat to American interests. AQI also remains capable of further destabilizing an already fragile Iraq, which could in turn destabilize the Middle East.¹¹ Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Pakistani terrorist group with longstanding ties to Islamabad's ISI, has even greater potential for inflaming regional tensions; the group was implicated in the December 2008 Mumbai attacks, which provoked further military tensions between India and Pakistan.¹² Some experts argue that a similar attack by LeT would almost certainly lead to a military exchange between the two nuclear-armed countries.¹³ In addition to its ability to destabilize South Asia, LeT has demonstrated an increasing willingness to strike non-Indian targets, such as the Jewish community center in Mumbai and the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh.¹⁴

Although al Shabaab has yet to launch a direct attack outside East Africa, its operating environment is expanding, as shown by its role in the Kampala bombing.¹⁵ The group's ability to

8. Holly Fletcher and Jayshree Bajoria, "Backgrounder: The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)," Council on Foreign Relations, July 31, 2008, http://www.cfr.org/publication/9179/east_turkestan_islamic_movement_etim.html.

9. Guido Steinberg, "A Turkish al-Qaeda: The Islamic Jihad Union and the Internationalization of Uzbek Jihadism," *Strategic Insights*, Center for Contemporary Conflict, Naval Postgraduate School, July 2008, 2, http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/fachpublikationen/sbg_IJU_Strategic_Insights_ks.pdf.

10. Scott Baldauf, "Air Al Qaeda: Are Latin America's Drug Cartels Giving Al Qaeda a Lift?" *Christian Science Monitor*, January 15, 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/2010/0115/Air-Al-Qaeda-Are-Latin-America-s-drug-cartels-giving-Al-Qaeda-a-lift>.

11. Rollins, "Al Qaeda and Affiliates," 13–14.

12. C. Christine Fair, "Antecedents and Implications of the November 2008 Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) Attack upon Several Targets in the Indian Mega-City of Mumbai," testimony before the House Homeland Security Committee, Subcommittee on Transportation Security and Infrastructure Protection, March 11, 2009, http://home.comcast.net/~christine_fair/pubs/CT-320_Christine_Fair.pdf.

13. Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, "Assessing the Terrorist Threat," report of the Bipartisan Policy Center's National Security Preparedness Group, September 10, 2010, 13, <http://www.bipartisanpolicy.org/sites/default/files/NSPG%20Final%20Threat%20Assessment.pdf>.

14. Jeremy Kahn, "The Next Al Qaeda? Terror Group Lashkar-e-Taiba Is Now Focusing on Foreigners and the West," *Newsweek*, February 26, 2010, <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/02/25/the-next-al-qaeda.html>.

15. "Somali Militants 'behind' Kampala World Cup Blasts," BBC News, July 12, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10602791>.

tap into Western communities, like the Somali diaspora in Minneapolis, presents an important challenge for counterterrorism officials: al Shabaab is better positioned than almost any other affiliate to actively cultivate homegrown extremism in the United States.¹⁶ The group's Western recruits have so far joined al Shabaab in fighting Mogadishu's Transitional Federal Government rather than focusing on Western targets, but the connections to Western communities nonetheless remain a concern for their potential to spur domestic radicalization.¹⁷

AQAP's high-profile attempted attacks on the U.S. homeland have led some American officials to describe the group as the most urgent terrorist threat facing the country.¹⁸ In addition to its clear capability and intention to strike directly at the United States, AQAP also seeks to radicalize individuals living in the West. This effort is largely driven by Samir Khan, thought to be the author of *Inspire*, the group's online English language magazine,¹⁹ and al-Awlaki, who is fast emerging as the most important AQAM spokesman for English-speaking audiences. Al-Awlaki has been linked to several recent homegrown terrorist plots in the United States, making him an important catalyst for violence beyond the Arabian Peninsula.

The group's ability and intent to confront the Yemeni regime further compounds the AQAP threat. Bordering the world's largest oil-producing state, Saudi Arabia, and confronted with resource depletion, insurgencies, and unemployment, among other challenges, Yemen is already teetering on the brink of failure.²⁰ Within this troubling context, the danger from AQAP could prove destabilizing for this strategically important region.

The rise to prominence of this third, and most dangerous, subset of al Qaeda affiliates illustrates the diffusion of power in global Islamist terrorism since 9/11. Whereas al Qaeda core previously posed the most significant threat to global security, affiliates now account for a larger share of attacks.

The Current Threat from al Qaeda-Inspired Nonaffiliated Cells and Individuals

Most of the recent plots involving al Qaeda-inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals have failed. In many cases, like that of Faisal Shahzad, operational incompetence prevented terrorists from launching successful attacks. In the United States, law enforcement officials have relied on Muslim communities to help foil several recent plots.²¹

16. Randy James, "Al-Shabab: Recruiting Americans for Somalia's Jihad," *TIME*, December 7, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1945855,00.html>.

17. Andrea Elliott, "A Call to Jihad, Answered in America," *New York Times*, July 11, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/12/us/12somalis.html>.

18. Greg Miller, "CIA Sees Increased Threat in Yemen," *Washington Post*, August 25, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/24/AR2010082406763.html>.

19. "Second Edition of *Inspire* Magazine: Continues to Encourage Attacks in the West," joint intelligence bulletin, Department of Homeland Security and FBI, October 15, 2010, <http://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-Inspire2Warning.pdf>.

20. Robert Worth, "Is Yemen the Next Afghanistan?" *New York Times*, July 6, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/11/magazine/11Yemen-t.html>.

21. According to Alejandro Buetel, in "Data on Post-9/11 Terrorism in the United States," Muslim Public Affairs Council, January 2011, 1–11, <http://www.mpac.org/assets/docs/publications/MPAC-Post-911-Terrorism-Data.pdf>, 7 out of 11 recent disrupted al Qaeda plots in the United States were foiled with the aid of the Muslim community.

This third tier of AQAM, however, could become a far more serious threat in the coming years. As previously mentioned, homegrown extremists operating within American and European borders possess certain qualities—including legal status and language and cultural skills—that may facilitate attacks. Furthermore, policymakers have fewer tools for targeting isolated self-starters, especially those with no criminal records, than for targeting established terrorist groups operating in foreign countries. Finally, measures to counter domestic extremism, like the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) undercover operations used in several recent plots, run the risk of alienating the friends and family of suspected homegrown terrorists. This outcome would prove problematic, since friends and family are often the first to notice an individual's move from hateful rhetoric to violent action. These and other factors could contribute to the emergence of al Qaeda-inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals as more forceful actors in global Islamist terrorism in the coming years.

The Dynamics of the AQAM Movement Today

Understanding how and why this movement is evolving is necessary for assessing the contemporary threat from AQAM. Recent analysis has argued that its appeal may be in decline.²² The vast majority of AQAM's victims in recent years have been Muslim.²³ The widespread killing and maiming of Muslim civilians by a movement purporting to represent their interests has led to a backlash against AQAM. Evidence of this shift is reflected in polling data from seven countries captured by the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, which showed that confidence in bin Laden dropped everywhere but Nigeria between 2003 and 2009. This drop can be seen in figure 1. Figure 2 illustrates declining public support for suicide bombing, a favored AQAM tactic, in all countries for which data were available.

Mounting criticism from influential Muslim elites has reinforced reduced public support for AQAM. In July 2005, for example, 200 of the world's most prominent Islamic scholars gathered in Jordan and unanimously issued the Amman Message, which banned the practice of *takfir*²⁴ and in so doing repudiated one of AQAM's ideological pillars.²⁵ The public recantations of former militants and clerics that once supported AQAM have further discredited the movement.²⁶

One would reasonably expect that these developments would undermine AQAM's cohesion and stymie its growth. After all, why would terrorists choose to associate themselves with an un-

22. Rollins, "Al Qaeda and Affiliates," 1–2.

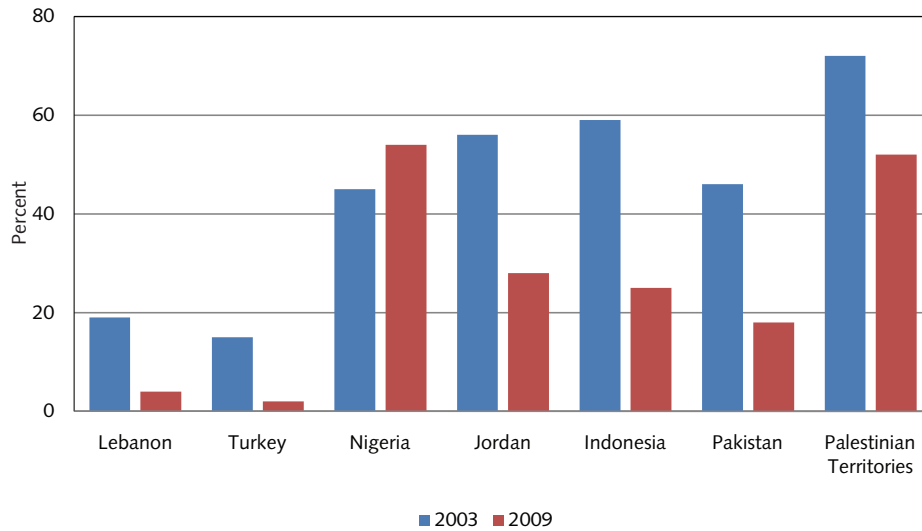
23. Among the victims of AQAM attacks that took place between 2004 and 2008, only 15 percent were from the West. If one limits this period to between 2006 and 2008, only 2 percent of AQAM's victims were of Western origin. See Scott Helfstein, Nassir Abdullah, and Muhammad al-Obaidi, "Deadly Vanguard: A Study of al-Qa'ida's Violence against Muslims," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2009, http://www.ctc.usma.edu/deadly%20vanguards_complete_1.pdf.

24. *Takfir* is "the act of Muslims declaring other Muslims to be infidels" and "is an important stepping stone to engaging in violence against secular Muslim rulers and others who are perceived to be supportive of these rulers"; Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, "Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qa'ida and its Periphery," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 16, 2010, 19, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Self-Inflicted%20Wounds.pdf>.

25. See <http://www.ammanmessage.com/>.

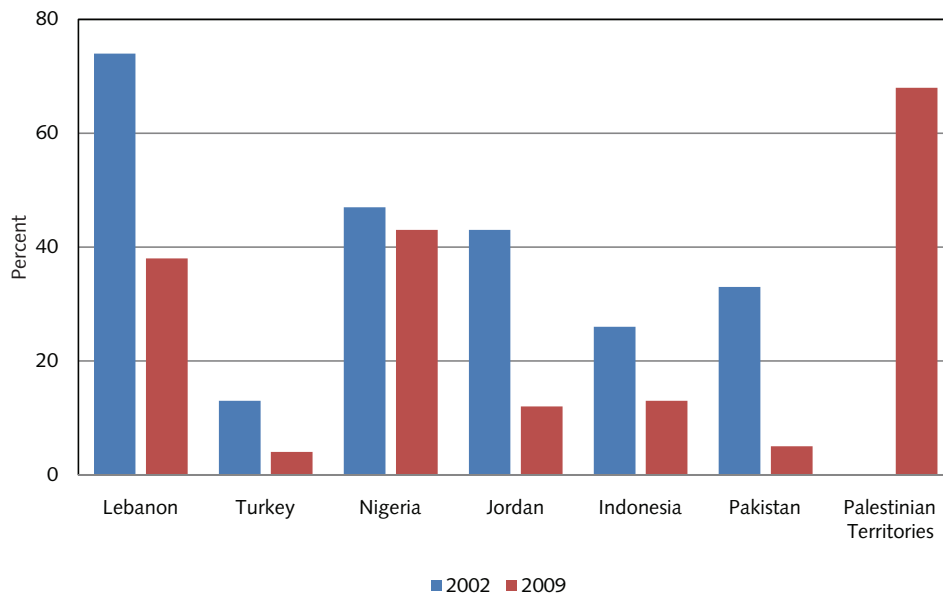
26. See Peter Bergen, "The Unraveling: The Jihadist Revolt against bin Laden," New America Foundation with Paul Cruickshank, NYU Center on Law and Security, June 11, 2008, http://www.newamerica.net/publications/articles/2008/unraveling_7221, for a good article explaining the extent of these recantations.

Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents with Confidence in Osama bin Laden in Seven Countries or Territories, 2003 and 2009.



Source: David Gordon, Transnational Threats Project, CSIS; data from “Pew Global Attitudes Project,” Pew Research Center, from 2002 to 2009, <http://pewglobal.org/database/?indicator=20&survey=10&response=Confidence&mode=table>.

Figure 2. Percentage of Respondents in Seven Countries or Territories Indicating That Suicide Bombing Is Often or Sometimes Justified, 2002 and 2009.



Source: David Gordon, Transnational Threats Project, CSIS; data from “Pew Global Attitudes Project,” Pew Research Center, from 2002 to 2009, <http://pewglobal.org/database/?indicator=19&survey=10&response=Often/sometimes justified&mode=table>.

Note: No 2002 data were available for the Palestinian territories.

popular movement? Unfortunately, this seems not to be the case. The number of regional networks that have associated themselves with bin Laden has steadily grown throughout the second half of the decade, as has the frequency of homegrown plots in the United States inspired by AQAM.²⁷ These are clear signs that the AQAM movement is both expanding and diversifying. What is fueling this development, particularly if reports about AQAM's declining support are indeed true?

In the past, al Qaeda core largely drove the movement's enlargement. As recounted in the first section, bin Laden provided patronage to several militant groups throughout the 1990s, bringing them into his orbit.²⁸ He and his lieutenants successfully encouraged some of these groups to attack the West, as illustrated by the description of the Bali attack in the second section. Today, however, al Qaeda core has neither the financial wherewithal nor the infrastructure to exert the same degree of influence. Instead, this process is occurring organically.

Three explanations help account for the ongoing growth of AQAM. The first is that AQAM may not actually be as unpopular as it seems. Despite anger over AQAM's violent tactics, the basic grievances that bin Laden and his allies claim to redress continue to resonate globally. Evidence can be seen in a poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland. As figure 3 illustrates, large percentages of the poll's respondents in Egypt, Indonesia, Morocco, and Pakistan support goals articulated by AQAM.²⁹ For a small fringe, the benefit of achieving these goals remains paramount, even if it means supporting AQAM's murderous and increasingly unpopular approach.

A more significant explanation for AQAM's expansion is the growing resonance of bin Laden's ideology in the post-9/11 world. Since 2001, the presence of U.S. forces in Muslim-majority countries, particularly Afghanistan and Iraq, has fed the perception of a U.S. occupation of Muslim lands and has been used by al Qaeda core and its affiliates to underscore their narrative of a Western war against Islam. Images on the Internet and satellite television reinforce this viewpoint. At the same time, the West has bolstered its support to several states that are forcefully confronting terrorism. Al Qaeda core has used these policies to focus attention on the West. In addition, these Western policies have aligned the interests of disparate groups, encouraging them to put their ideological and theological differences aside and cooperate in the face of a perceived occupier.

The final driving factor behind AQAM's expansion is the material benefits that groups accrue when they embrace bin Laden's ideology. GSPC's merger with al Qaeda core and transformation into AQIM is a good example. Although the leader of AQIM, Abdekmalek Droukdal, claimed the merger was driven by "religious motivations," an article in the *New York Times* based on interviews with a former AQIM lieutenant as well as American, European, and Arab officials argued that opportunism was a more likely explanation for Droukdal's decision.³⁰ The merger brought enhanced prestige for AQIM along with the associated fund-raising and recruiting benefits. In return, al

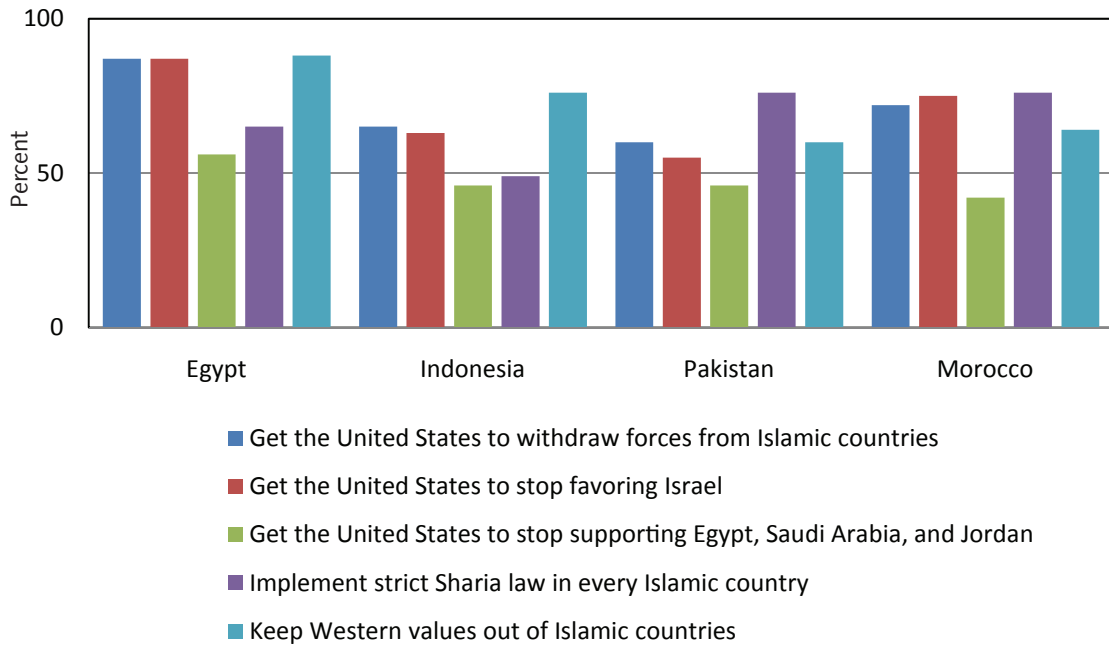
27. Brian Michael Jenkins, "No Path to Glory: Deterring Homegrown Terrorism," testimony before the House Security Committee, Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing and Terrorism Risk Assessment, May 26, 2010, 1–2, http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/2010/RAND_CT348.pdf.

28. Ibid.

29. "Public Opinion in the Islamic World on Terrorism, al Qaeda, and US Policies," WorldPublicOpinion.org, February 25, 2009, http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/feb09/STARTII_Feb09_rpt.pdf.

30. Souad Mekhennet, Michael Moss, Eric Schmitt, Elaine Sciolino, and Margot Williams, "A Threat Renewed: Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline from Al Qaeda," *New York Times*, July 1, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01algeria.html?pagewanted=1>.

Figure 3. Percentage of Respondents in Four Countries Who Agree with AQAM's Goals, 2006–2008.



Source: David Gordon, Transnational Threats Project, CSIS; data from “Public Opinion in the Islamic World on Terrorism, al Qaeda, and US Policies,” WorldPublicOpinion.org, February 25, 2009, 20–22, http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/feb09/STARTII_Feb09_rpt.pdf.

Qaeda core was able to expand its brand of terror to North Africa, the most notable manifestation being the 2007 attack on the United Nations office in Algiers.³¹

The Internet as a Facilitator of Global Islamist Terrorism

AQAM has long relied on modern information and communication technologies to disseminate propaganda and issue operational guidance. In preparation for the 9/11 attacks, for example, hijackers used the Internet to communicate, select targets, and research flight schools.³² Since 9/11, the Internet’s rapid innovation—which includes the rise of “Web 2.0,” or user-generated, social media content—has enabled AQAM to develop a new set of capabilities centered on the dissemination of propaganda and recruitment.³³ The exploitation of these features of the Internet by cell leaders, spokesmen, and nonaffiliated al Qaeda supporters is part and parcel of the enduring appeal of AQAM’s ideology, as described above.

31. Ibid.

32. Frank Cilluffo et al., *NETworked Radicalization: A Counter-Strategy*, special report of the George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute and the University of Virginia Critical Incident Analysis Group, 2007, 11, <http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/policy/NETworkedRadicalization.pdf>.

33. Michael Moss and Souad Mekhennet, “An Internet Jihad Aims at U.S. Viewers,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/15/us/15net.html>.

The Internet has allowed AQAM to reach a flatter audience that transcends age, gender, background, and geographic boundaries. By exploiting the Internet's advantage in disseminating new forms of media, for example, AQAM has been able to target so-called digital natives, or younger, tech-savvy recruits who are at home in virtual realms.³⁴ AQAM has used increasingly creative media, including video games, rap videos, and comic books, to project an image of "jihadi cool" and to lure "young people nursing resentments and looking for thrills."³⁵

In addition to these so-called digital natives, the Internet helps AQAM reach those "who might not be theologically devout or even have a sound religious foundation, but [who] are using this new jihadi cool to justify criminal acts of terrorism."³⁶ According to surveys conducted to assess militants' motivation for joining the movement, "The top three answers were motorcycles, guns and access to women. You had to go pretty far down the list to get to religious motivation."³⁷

Evidence from several recent cases of homegrown extremism in the United States points to the centrality of the Internet in the growth of al Qaeda–inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals. Hasan sought guidance from al-Awlaki via email in the lead up to the Fort Hood shootings. Al-Awlaki's influence on Hasan remains unclear, but in any event, the Internet enabled contact between two men who might not otherwise have communicated.³⁸

Other, more recent online innovations also seem to have facilitated the rise of nonaffiliated cells and individuals. Ahmed Abdullah Minni, one of the five young men from Northern Virginia arrested on charges of trying to join the Taliban, often viewed YouTube videos depicting insurgent attacks on coalition forces in Afghanistan. His praise for those attacks, posted on the Web site's user-generated comments section, attracted the attention of a Taliban recruiter known as "Saifullah." The two began exchanging emails and conspired to have Minni and his friends travel to Pakistan, where the group was eventually arrested.³⁹

That incident demonstrates just how potent and multifaceted a force the Internet has become in fostering radicalization, enabling the recruitment of would-be terrorists, and coordinating logistical details, like how to travel to a terrorist training camp. For "wannabe" terrorists living in the United States and other Western countries, online content like an al-Awlaki lecture must very often supplant the counsel of a living, breathing cleric. Once an al-Awlaki lecture, or a YouTube video of terrorist violence, helps spark radicalization, e-mail, Facebook, and other forms of online communication can forge links between terrorist operatives and recruits thousands of miles apart. With radicalization, recruitment, and planning now possible in a virtual realm, Islamist extremists no longer must meet in person to enact their agenda.

34. Akil N. Awan, "The Virtual Jihad: An Increasingly Legitimate Form of Warfare," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 5 (May 2010).

35. Dina Temple-Raston, "Jihadi Cool: Terrorist Recruiters' Latest Weapon," *NPR's Morning Edition*, March 26, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125186382>.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. David Johnston and Scott Shane, "U.S. Knew of Suspect's Tie to Radical Cleric," *New York Times*, November 9, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/10/us/10inquire.html>.

39. Scott Shane, "Web Posts Began Tale of Detained Americans," *New York Times*, December 13, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/14/world/asia/14pstan.html>.

This assessment has argued that the threats emanating from AQAM's constituent parts are highly varied, in both severity and impact. As a movement, AQAM is expanding and diversifying despite signs of eroding legitimacy among former supporters, influential religious figures, and the Muslim public writ large. The ongoing resonance of AQAM's core grievances, the negative impact of certain aspects of Western policies and counterterrorism activities, and the benefits of association with al Qaeda core drive these trends. The Internet has further expanded AQAM's scope by exposing its propaganda to individuals living in the West, by creating a virtual global community of like-minded extremists, and by facilitating plots and violent action by nonaffiliated cells and individuals.



CONCLUSION

As the foregoing analysis has shown, the threat from al Qaeda has evolved significantly over time. What began as a small group of Arab militants in Peshawar, Pakistan, in the late 1980s has since morphed into a terrorist “Hydra”¹ with global reach and, within some quarters, widening appeal. This transition has fundamental implications for the manner in which governments conduct counterterrorism today.

How and why the movement might continue to change—and whether it will even endure—are crucial questions that will shape the future of counterterrorism policy. These questions are at the heart of the CSIS AQAM Futures Project and will be the focus of subsequent reports. By conducting unrestricted, long-range analysis of AQAM, this effort will help policymakers and strategists preempt and prepare for the full spectrum of possible al Qaeda threats in the year 2025.

1. Juan Zarate, former deputy national security adviser for combating terrorism and current senior adviser at CSIS, has used the term *Hydra* to refer to the current AQAM threat.



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