

# The Global State of al-Qa`ida 24 Years After 9/11

By Colin P. Clarke and Clara Broekaert

**Al-Qa`ida has evolved considerably over the past four decades. Today, it is no longer a hierarchical organization with charismatic leadership, but rather a decentralized network of franchise groups dispersed throughout Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. The group has not conducted spectacular external operations (EXOPS) for many years, but instead has been focused on patiently rebuilding, dedicating its resources and manpower to forging relationships with regional affiliates and championing their grievances, which are often locally focused. Al-Qa`ida Central, including its senior leadership, has been attenuated, but the organization's branches in Somalia and the Sahel are gaining momentum, and there is growing concern that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is also looking to rebound. All of this is occurring against a backdrop of decline in the overall tempo of Western counterterrorism efforts, signaling the end of more than two decades of the Global War on Terrorism. Even in its diminished form, 24 years after the 9/11 attacks, al-Qa`ida and its global network of affiliates pose a serious latent security threat, including to the West, which takes these groups for granted at its own peril.**

**A**l-Qa`ida's infrastructure in Afghanistan has been steadily expanding since the Taliban seized power in August 2021, with the group now operating training camps in at least a dozen provinces in the country.<sup>1</sup> The jihadis have a complicated relationship with the Taliban, which allows al-Qa`ida members to use the country as a "permissive haven," even as it seeks to reduce the visibility of the relationship.<sup>2</sup> "The loyal people of the Ummah interested in change must go to Afghanistan, learn from its conditions, and benefit from their [the Taliban's] experience," al-Qa`ida leaders messaged their supporters and followers last June.<sup>3</sup> Battle-hardened jihadis from Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Chechnya, and Xinjiang operate alongside Arab militants, Afghans, and members of the fearsome Haqqani

network.<sup>4</sup> Two high-ranking al-Qa`ida lieutenants were reportedly tasked in 2024 with reactivating cells in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. Global officials have noted the group's growing "appetite for external operations."<sup>5</sup>

In September 2025, 24 years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the operating environment in Afghanistan has some concerning similarities to the situation more than two decades ago, even if al-Qa`ida is believed to have fewer men under arms in the country in the present day.<sup>6</sup> The group's longtime leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who succeeded Usama bin Ladin after he was killed in a U.S. Special Operations Forces raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in May 2011, was killed in a Haqqani safe house in Kabul in July 2022.<sup>7</sup> Al-Qa`ida is currently headed by its de facto leader, Saif al-`Adl, and his deputy, Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi, al-Zawahiri's son-in-law. It remains unclear exactly where the leadership is based, though for many years al-`Adl was known to operate from Iran. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) noted that after 9/11, al-Maghrebi fled to Iran and possibly travels between Iran and Pakistan.<sup>8</sup>

Afghanistan remains, at least in part, a safe haven and sanctuary for al-Qa`ida members to the present day. But the nature and extent of that safe haven are uncertain. Indeed, there is much we do not know about the current status of al-Qa`ida and its capabilities, priorities, and strategy. Put simply, al-Qa`ida represents a latent threat. The group still exists, it is attempting to rebuild, it still intends to attack the West, yet the scope and scale of its capabilities are elusive. In this sense—the uncertainty surrounding how al-Qa`ida operates in Afghanistan and what limitations or constraints dictate its activities—the murkiness and lack of available intelligence evokes parallels to the mid-1990s, when its full operational capabilities were poorly understood, leading to strategic surprise as it struck U.S. targets in Yemen, East Africa, and finally on U.S. soil in 2001.

But to assess the threat of al-Qa`ida only in terms of its presence in Afghanistan is reductionist, misleading, and risks obfuscating a much bigger picture. With branches operating in theaters in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and throughout South Asia, al-Qa`ida is an organization, even when operating in a highly decentralized manner, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Al-Qa`ida now has deeper roots in Africa than at almost any point in its history, and despite being one of the most hunted organization in the world, it "still maintains its intent to target the United States and U.S. citizens across its global affiliates."<sup>9</sup> This is true even if the group may have reached its apex long ago and is overshadowed in capabilities and prestige by the Islamic State and its global network of provinces.

To put things in perspective, al-Qa`ida is widely considered a less potent and immediate threat globally than the Islamic State in terms of external operations (EXOPS). However, in both the Sahel and Somalia, al-Qa`ida's regional branches are more lethal than Islamic State affiliates.<sup>10</sup> These branches—al-Shabaab and Jama`at

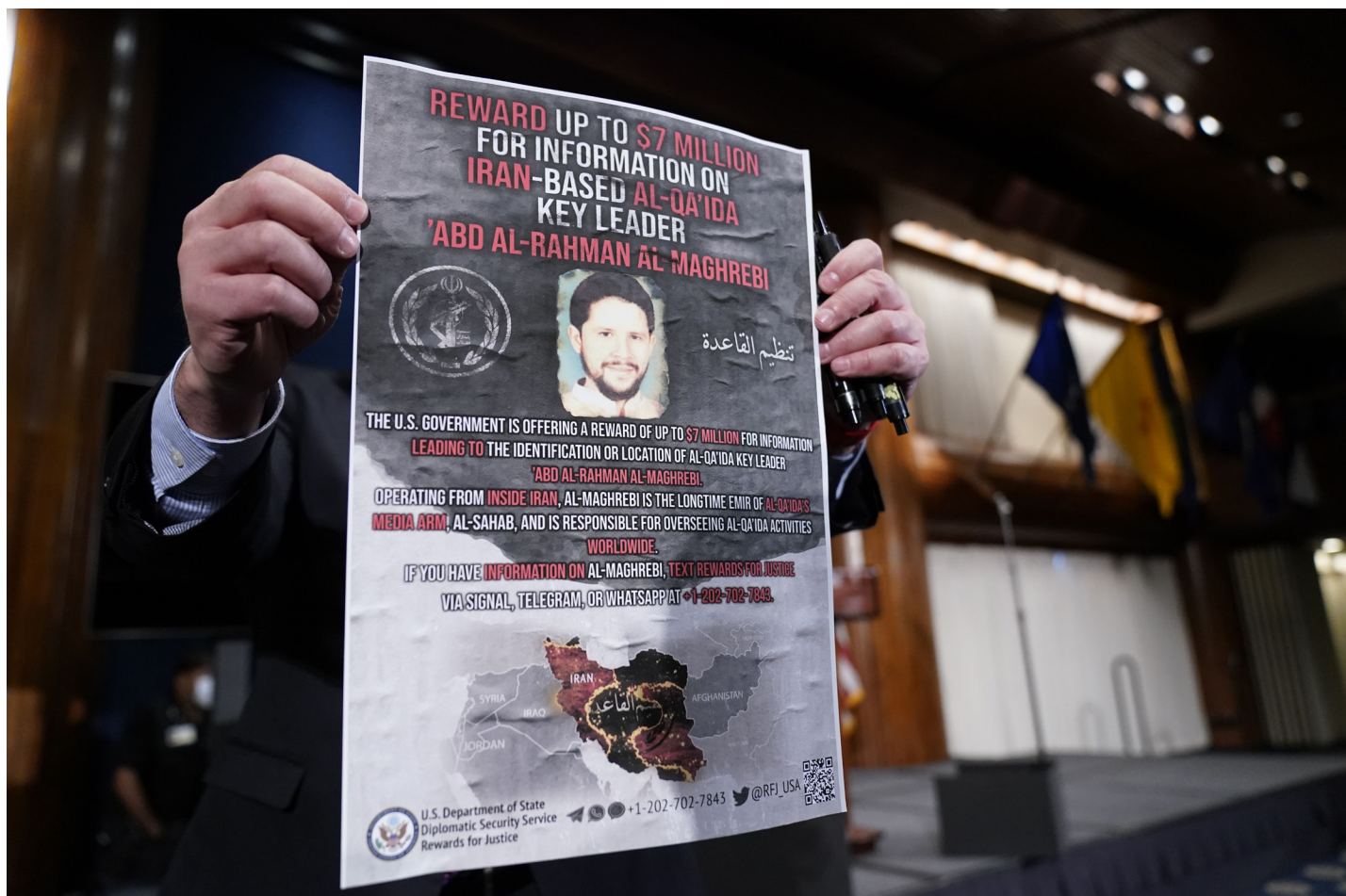
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*A reward poster for information on Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi is displayed at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on January 12, 2021. (Andrew Harnik/pool/AFP via Getty Images)*

Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)—have benefited from the preponderance of Western counterterrorism efforts focusing on the Islamic State for the past decade. And with the pivot away from counterterrorism, the end of the Global War on Terrorism, and the shift toward great power competition, al-Qa`ida also benefits from significantly reduced pressure overall, which offers it the space to rebuild without having to dedicate most of its bandwidth to operational security, as it was forced to do prior to the U.S. departure from Afghanistan in August 2021.

As Bruce Hoffman has warned for years, the group is rebuilding, while also trying to ensure that the global jihadi movement writ large “remains impervious to a single, knockout blow of its entire senior leadership.”<sup>11</sup> Just as concerning, there has been a growing sense of malaise and complacency permeating the U.S. government’s counterterrorism community, which has been severely impacted by budget and personnel cuts and has had its resources attenuated by a reallocation of priorities.<sup>12</sup> Flippant comments belie a distorted understanding of the nature of the threat. Just as President Obama once dismissed the Islamic State as a “J.V. team” compared to al-Qa`ida,<sup>13</sup> an unnamed senior Biden administration official dismissed concerns about the terrorist threat in Afghanistan under the Taliban, likening the situation to “a nursing home for AQ seniors.”<sup>14</sup>

To understand the current state of al-Qa`ida as it stands in late 2025, 24 years after the 9/11 attacks, this article will proceed

in four parts. First, the article provides a brief overview of the context within which al-Qa`ida evolved, including its history, goals, and objectives. Second, the article analyzes al-Qa`ida’s ideology and mobilizing concepts, including its media operations to radicalize, recruit, and inspire. Third, the article examines al-Qa`ida’s operating environment and its operational capabilities across various categories. This section will also evaluate the group’s alliances, partnerships, and global network. Fourth, the article concludes with an assessment of al-Qa`ida’s organizational capabilities, including its leadership strength, finances, logistics, and command and control. The article then turns to possible future developments as the group continues to adapt and evolve.

### **Al-Qa`ida and its Franchises: Objectives and Historical Trajectory**

The idea of al-Qa`ida began to emerge after the establishment of Makhtab al-Khidamat (MAK) in 1984 in Peshawar, Pakistan, and was forged in the crucible of the Soviet-Afghan War, the legacy of which looms large in al-Qa`ida lore. To bin Ladin, it was a David versus Goliath moment; the ragtag group of rebels had defeated a global superpower in battle, in his eyes, as a result of their faith in Allah and desire to defend Islam.<sup>15</sup> Bin Ladin soon set his sights on the United States, which he saw as the core of all evil, given America’s unflinching support for Israel and the nonchalance with which Washington meddled in the Islamic world. When al-



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Qa`ida was first established, the group consisted of approximately 15 key members.<sup>16</sup> It was headquartered in Afghanistan, before relocating to Sudan in the early to mid-1990s, and then returning to Afghanistan in 1996, where it grew its manpower to approximately 400 fighters by September 2001.<sup>17</sup> Over time, al-Qa`ida expanded, establishing franchise groups in Iraq (2004), North Africa (2007), Yemen (2009), Somalia (2012), Syria (2012), and the Indian Subcontinent (2014).

Functioning in a parasitic manner by attaching to the host, al-Qa`ida’s blueprint is to enter a theater and parrot the grievances of local tribes, clans, and militias. It then slowly begins to take over, with its fighters marrying into local families and ingratiating themselves in these communities. Next, al-Qa`ida fuses the local and global, overlaying its transnational agenda on top of what regional affiliates are expressing in their own propaganda. The local, global, or “glocal” nature of an al-Qa`ida affiliate’s agenda may fluctuate over time in response to the group’s most pressing needs and the approach that will be most effective in meeting them.<sup>18</sup> This pragmatism and ideological flexibility have evolved as the group has matured, serving al-Qa`ida well in navigating major geopolitical events that could have decimated more rigid organizations.<sup>19</sup> In general, al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State also have far different approaches to controlling territory, with the former’s most aptly being described as a gradualist approach. Al-Qa`ida has, almost from its inception, been more focused on the long game.<sup>20</sup>

To measure, assess, or evaluate whether al-Qa`ida has achieved its core objectives, it is imperative to understand what those are. The most quixotic goal al-Qa`ida espoused was establishing a global caliphate stretching from al-Andalus (Iberian Peninsula) to Southeast Asia.<sup>21</sup> Even the most confident jihadi leader, perhaps bin Ladin himself, would recognize that in reality this was too ambitious and could never occur in the modern geopolitical environment of nation-states and high-tech militaries. Still, guiding documents such as Abu Bakr Naji’s “The Management of Savagery” (2004) offered al-Qa`ida a tailor-made playbook to exploit state weakness, spread chaos, and eventually begin erecting the pillars of Islamic governance that, in the long run, would lead to the establishment of a caliphate.<sup>22</sup>

Two of bin Ladin’s overarching goals were expelling the U.S. presence from Islamic countries and goading the United States into a war where al-Qa`ida could inflict death by a thousand paper cuts. After witnessing the U.S. retreat from Somalia in the early 1990s, bin Ladin grew convinced that America was little more than a ‘paper tiger.’ The al-Qa`ida attacks against U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1998, and

the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000, were intended to send a message to the United States: to leave the Muslim world. But the attacks of September 11, 2001, which were of an entirely higher order of magnitude, were designed to provoke a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Numerous high-level al-Qa`ida and Taliban leaders were apoplectic, realizing that a U.S. invasion would be the end of their jihadi proto-state. At the time, few could have imagined that it would merely be a 20-year interregnum.

In terms of its more practical objectives, al-Qa`ida’s track record is mixed. The group has not been able to drive a wedge between the United States and Israel, as it sought to do. One could argue that, as evidenced by U.S. military support to Israel’s campaign against Iran this summer, cooperation between the two countries has never been closer. Moreover, al-Qa`ida has failed in its quest to evict the U.S. military from the Middle East. As of mid-2025, there were approximately 40,000 U.S. servicemembers deployed to the region, and the United States maintains military facilities across 19 sites, including in Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>23</sup>

Other aspects of al-Qa`ida’s master plan were more esoteric. Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, aka Abu Musab al-Suri, once wrote, “Al-Qaeda is not an organization, it is not a group, nor do we want it to be ... It is a call, a reference, a methodology.”<sup>24</sup> For bin Ladin, establishing al-Qa`ida was less about individual battles, whether against the Soviets or the Americans, and more about what he called “the flame of jihad,” which he saw continuing long after he had helped to establish the organization in the mid-1980s.<sup>25</sup> Journalist Lawrence Wright argues in his upcoming play *Did bin Laden Win?* that many of al-Qa`ida’s objectives, as envisioned by bin Ladin, have in fact been realized, including by drawing the United States into seemingly endless wars, eroding the country’s moral standing globally, and fueling declining trust in public institutions among Americans.<sup>26</sup>

### **Al-Qa`ida’s Current Ability to Inspire and Mobilize**

Although Usama bin Ladin was killed in 2011, what former FBI special agent Ali Soufan terms “bin Ladenism” has endured as a potent and evolving ideology, metastasizing far beyond its origins in al-Qa`ida. Explaining the ability of al-Qa`ida to mobilize jihadi cadres, Soufan likens bin Ladenism to a Hydra: Each time one leader or network is struck down, others emerge, ensuring the survival of the movement.<sup>27</sup> But the Hydra-like nature of the group is a double-edged sword. Just as it helps build in an added layer of redundancy, intended to make the group more resilient to kinetic strikes, it also can serve to dilute the central strength of al-Qa`ida’s ideology and purpose, especially over time. The more decentralized the group becomes, and the more its affiliates champion local narratives over core al-Qa`ida’s global themes, the less coherent al-Qa`ida becomes as a movement. At this time, the ideological coherence of the movement across affiliates remains murky.

Just as decentralization is an effort to prepare the group’s organizational structure to ensure its durability, so too is it a way to motivate its followers. This capacity to inspire and mobilize persists through a resilient narrative of global jihad—one that continues to attract new recruits and fuel violence globally. Indeed, while the coupling of the puritanical salafi interpretation of Islam with the belief in armed struggle as a viable and theologically sanctioned path to defending the Islamic world remains the overarching framework for the group’s operations, ideological adaptation for

strategic purposes has been central to its endurance. This does not translate in EXOPS tempo. The ability of al-Qa`ida itself to inspire and mobilize cadres to act in its name outside of its spheres of influences in conflict zones has been significantly attenuated. When lone actors or homegrown violent extremists plan or commit attacks, they are far more often motivated by the Islamic State.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, as bin Ladin intended, the broader jihadi ideology, which al-Qa`ida's longtime leader is credited with introducing on a global scale, indeed continues to inspire and mobilize, a legacy that will likely extend beyond the lifespan of individual groups including al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, or any of their affiliates or branches as the global jihadi movement continues to evolve in the years ahead.

Initially grounded in what it considered a purely defensive posture, al-Qa`ida focused on expelling foreign occupiers from Afghanistan and later removing U.S. forces from the Middle East more broadly. This shift was marked by bin Ladin's longstanding grievance over the ballooning U.S. military presence in his native Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites, which he expounded on at length in his 1996 "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Lands of the Two Holy Places."<sup>29</sup> In many ways, this was the beginning of the 'near enemy' (apostate regimes in the Middle East) versus 'far enemy' debate that continues within the global jihadi milieu to this very day.<sup>30</sup>

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the group's global footprint expanded through its franchising, with affiliates emerging from Iraq to North Africa. This expansion catalyzed a decentralization that was not just logistical but also ideological, as local branches molded the group's tenets to their own parochial contexts.<sup>31</sup> The franchising process expanded al-Qa`ida's repertoire of legitimate targets to include any perceived threat to the *ummah*, broadly defined, and often justified through the exploitation of local grievances, including economic, social, and ethnic resentment fueled by sectarianism.

The rise of the Islamic State after 2014, and its rapid establishment of a proto-state, was accompanied by a wave of spectacular external operations tied to that network that energized jihadis worldwide, especially in the West. Accordingly, this further pressured al-Qa`ida to articulate a coherent but distinct ideology.<sup>32</sup> Although al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State are often distinguished only at the tactical level—usually in terms of their use of extreme, theatrical violence—their differences have also been strategic. Al-Qa`ida Central has long articulated a vision of "strategic patience" or "controlled pragmatism" and has articulated a far more nuanced view on the Sunni-Shi'a divide, laid out in 2005 in correspondence from al-Zawahiri, then al-Qa`ida's deputy, to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the thuggish leader of al-Qa`ida in Iraq.<sup>33</sup> Soufan has aptly noted that "while the latter [Islamic State] squanders blood and treasure defending its ever-dwindling 'caliphate' in Syria and Iraq, al Qaeda's looser span across two continents makes it all but impossible to pin down. Where Islamic State focuses on the short-term (not least because it believes the End of Days is imminent), al Qaeda has demonstrated strategic patience, retreating and regrouping where necessary while keeping its eyes locked on its goals."<sup>34</sup>

The most recent chapter in al-Qa`ida's ideological adaptation may be best described as 'localization' rather than the earlier period of 'globalization,' the latter defined by a focus on leveraging local grievances "marshalled as recruiting tools and propaganda weapons in the interest of the Global Jihad and its objectives."<sup>35</sup> JNIM has

engaged in a strategy of pastoralist populism, exploiting grievances predominantly held by the Fulani ethnic group, while al-Shabaab has adroitly exploited frustrations related to the patrilineal clans and sub-clans-based system of governance, only occasionally paying lip service to global jihadi causes.<sup>36</sup> This ideological diversification has been effective, but the primary beneficiaries have been the affiliates themselves, not necessarily al-Qa`ida core. Still, that both JNIM and al-Shabaab are highly active and remain card-carrying members of al-Qa`ida's worldwide network does facilitate the broader organization's global standing. This is particularly true in terms of the way al-Qa`ida views its long-term strategy. In the near term, al-Qa`ida core will have to be content living vicariously through its African franchises.

In the case of JNIM, its relative autonomy from al-Qa`ida Central has led some analysts to suggest that the jihadis may follow the path of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, severing ties to the core in search of a path to legitimate governance.<sup>37</sup> However, JNIM's diversity could also be its Achilles' heel. Because the group is spread throughout multiple countries, it makes replicating HTS' success in Syria or the Taliban's arrangement in Afghanistan far more complicated and thus unlikely. Targeting a specific state, whether Burkina Faso, Mali, or Niger, for a full jihadi takeover would elevate one of several centers of power within the group and could lead to infighting or splintering.

Today, the decentralization of al-Qa`ida, with al-Shabaab and JNIM dominating the group's successes, demonstrates how this aspect of its strategy—supporting local conflicts and insurgencies and nurturing them where possible—is being privileged above other key pillars of its methodology. One consequence of al-Qa`ida's decentralization is that its ability to inspire and mobilize jihadi cadres varies across its franchises, with al-Shabaab and JNIM standing out above the rest. However, while embedding itself within localized insurgencies helps keep al-Qa`ida relevant in the current discourse of the jihadi movement, the central lack of control could also prove damaging, leading to the fracturing of al-Qa`ida's organization over time. The tipping point could be that local grievances completely marginalize al-Qa`ida's efforts to elevate the global aspect of its messaging and its big picture worldview is relegated to the periphery altogether.

The lack of external al-Qa`ida-linked operations in the West in recent years, either directed or facilitated, in addition to the lack of al-Qa`ida-inspired attacks, indicates that the group may no longer command a meaningful following among jihadi operatives and sympathizers in the West and elsewhere—despite its propaganda encouraging such attacks. At present, individual terrorists and cells appear more inclined to act in the Islamic State's name. This is despite al-Qa`ida Central, derided as anachronistic and long dismissed as technically outdated and unable to compete with the digitally savvy Islamic State in the propaganda sphere, intensifying its messaging on Gaza after the October 7 Hamas attacks to mobilize individuals worldwide to launch operations.<sup>38</sup> This call has not yet manifested in al-Qa`ida-inspired attacks, but the impact could be felt at some point in the near future.<sup>39</sup>

Al-Qa`ida's ability to mobilize is regionally situated. Al-Shabaab has been the single most active franchise in recruiting foreign fighters, mostly from East Africa, and is notorious for seeking to appeal globally through its media as early as 2009, when it released "At Your Service, oh Osama," seeking to recruit al-Qa`ida sympathizers.<sup>40</sup> While recent reporting points to the extent of

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foreign fighters in al-Shabaab’s ranks, including its leadership, the Somali group had seemingly deprioritized the recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters in late 2024, potentially in part because of the need for interpreters to communicate with non-Somali fighters.<sup>41</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the group’s recruitment strategy in early 2024, when al-Shabaab’s online propaganda was actively seeking to lure foreign fighters with specialized skills to Somalia, aiming, for example, to find “individuals with engineering expertise to assist with drone modifications, as well as clerics for propaganda dissemination.”<sup>42</sup> However, it would be premature to assume this indicates a true shift in al-Shabaab’s philosophy pertaining to the use of foreign fighters. It could reflect an actual change, but it could also be an obfuscation.

JNIM does not draw from a significant pool of foreign fighters—though it indeed operates across borders in the Sahel—nor has it instituted a strategy of foreign recruitment. However, its continued expansion does attest to its ability to resonate with local grievances beyond its Fulani and Tuareg base. JNIM is estimated to have up to 6,000 fighters under its command, making it the most well-armed militant force in the Sahel.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, its southward expansion campaign and its push toward the Gulf of Guinea littoral states, combined with the escalation of violence on the border between Benin, Niger, and Nigeria, have been driven by the “pursuit of new manpower and recruitment opportunities” in addition to securing smuggling and illicit trade routes.<sup>44</sup>

By proselytizing among disaffected youth and providing economic benefits, JNIM steadily replenishes its ranks. In late 2024, it began openly presenting recruiters to community leaders in northern Benin, replicating its earlier tactics in Burkina Faso and Mali.<sup>45</sup> However, its expansion derives from both genuine mobilization for the jihadi causes as well as from JNIM’s coercive practices, as the group compels communities to accept its cultural, governance, and economic dictates in exchange for protection and a semblance of order.<sup>46</sup> The strategy has been a success. To put it in perspective, JNIM now controls territory that is five times the size of Texas.<sup>47</sup>

Globally, the Islamic State continues to attract the vast majority of jihadi cadres, undoubtedly because of its advanced digital propaganda ecosystem and its ability to project power beyond its local branches, through external operations.<sup>48</sup> Even as al-Qa`ida Central has stepped up its propaganda efforts in the wake of October 7, the group has not been linked to a single terrorist operation related to the October 7 attack and the subsequent humanitarian crisis inflicted by Israel, while the Islamic State and its supporters have been involved in numerous plots since.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the clearest indication of al-Qa`ida’s difficulties in mobilization is the absence of inspired or directed plots in the West since December 2019, when a Royal Saudi Air Force officer carried out a deadly shooting at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida. That attack, which was remotely facilitated by AQAP through guidance rather than direct operational support, remains its most recent case in the West.<sup>49</sup>

Nonetheless, it would be naive to conflate al-Qa`ida’s sclerotic operational tempo in recent years with a lack of intent. Its interest in such operations has persisted and is recently believed to have increased.<sup>50</sup> Recent foreign fighter movements suggest the group may once again be wagering on strategic patience and moving assets into place. Foreign fighters have attempted to join al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups in Syria, including Ansar al-Islam and others that maintain logistical ties with the network. It is worth noting that Hurras al-Din (HAD), al-Qa`ida’s Syrian representative, has been considerably degraded and remains a focus of U.S. counterterrorism efforts.<sup>51</sup> The future of al-Qa`ida in Syria remains an open question, particularly following the alleged disbandment of HAD following the fall of the Assad regime.<sup>52</sup> There are also still likely linkages between some foreign fighters in Syria who have been integrated into the state security forces and various elements of al-Qa`ida.

More concerning are reports that fighters from al-Qa`ida-aligned groups such as Khatiba Imam Al-Bukhari and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have sought to relocate from Syria to Afghanistan, scouting locations in anticipation of bringing more reinforcements.<sup>53</sup> As Syria’s transitional government grapples with consolidating its monopoly on the use of force within its borders and bringing militias into the fold,<sup>54</sup> the forced moderation of battle-hardened fighters, many of foreign origin, may lead them to gravitate toward Afghanistan or elsewhere in search of new opportunities. This shift risks emboldening al-Qa`ida there, or in other locations, with fighters whose experience and transnational networks could reinvigorate its external ambitions.

To reach regional and global audiences, al-Qa`ida and its branches operate a decentralized ecosystem of official media foundations, in parallel with unofficial propaganda outlets directed by supporters. This combination has resulted in a durable, redundant media ecosystem that has proven resilient in the face of the emergence of a global content moderation and takedown industry. Much like its ability to mobilize and inspire, the tempo and strength of its media operations are branch-situated. Al-Shabaab, through its Al-Kataib Media Foundation, and JNIM, through Az-Zallaqa Foundation, are prolific, delivering a constant stream of content anchored to local developments and often related

a In 2024, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK) conducted successful external operations in Turkey, Russia, and Iran. The group was also behind several high-profile terrorist plots in Europe that were disrupted the same year. Islamic State propaganda was responsible for the radicalization of the perpetrator of the New Year’s Day terrorist attack in New Orleans, Louisiana.



to regionally situated narratives and grievances.

While much of al-Qa`ida's propaganda is thus regionally anchored, the group seized on the Hamas October 7 attacks in 2023 to pivot its messaging to Western-sanctioned Israeli aggression and the Palestinian cause more broadly. Al-Qa`ida has sought to present itself as an authentic defender of al-Aqsa, co-opting anger about the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza while distancing itself from its long-standing ideological disagreement with Hamas.<sup>55</sup> Groups aligned with al-Qa`ida in Gaza, such as Jaysh al-Ummah and the newcomer Hurras al-Masra, demonstrate the persistent ideological influence of al-Qa`ida in insurgencies where it lacks a formal affiliate.<sup>56</sup> Al-Qa`ida's leader, Saif al-`Adl, under his *nom de plume* Salim al-Sharif, penned a series of essays in 2023 and 2024 on Gaza through al-Qa`ida Central's media wing, As Sahab Foundation, urging sympathizers to migrate to Afghanistan to receive training to fight against Israel and the West.<sup>57</sup> This signaled a revival in As Sahab's media operations, which had a reduced presence after the death of al-Zawahiri in July 2022.<sup>58</sup>

AQAP—through its Al-Malahem Media Foundation, and with the new leadership of Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki since 2024, following the death of Khaled Batarfi—has also sought to increase its involvement with global events and has waged the most prolific media campaign on Gaza among al-Qa`ida's affiliates. Al-Awlaki threatened U.S. President Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and other high-level U.S. officials in a June 2025 propaganda video focused on the war in Gaza, stating: "There are no red lines after what happened and is happening to our people in Gaza."<sup>59</sup> AQAP has even begun promoting its efforts to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza, with a recent video published by al-Shabaab's Shahada News Agency showing the spokesperson for Ahrar Beit al-Maqdis—"an obscure organization in the Gaza strip"—thanking AQAP for its donation.<sup>60</sup> Similar to its rapid propaganda pivot to Gaza, AQAP was the first al-Qa`ida branch to champion the rebel offensive of ex-affiliate HTS, which toppled the Assad regime in December. As some have pointed out, this co-optation of global developments may attest to AQAP's own irrelevance in major international events.<sup>61</sup>

Al-Qa`ida's media operations today are thus mostly regionally focused and simultaneously have attempted to embed al-Qa`ida's messaging within tectonic shifts in regional affairs, such as those resulting from the Hamas-Israel War and the nearly two years of conflict between Israel and Iran's Axis of Resistance. Regardless, al-Qa`ida's didactic, often austere communiqués stand in stark contrast with the Islamic State's vast and aesthetically optimized multimedia productions. This is not to suggest that the propaganda lacks utility altogether. On the contrary, the successes broadcast by al-Qa`ida branches in East Africa and the Sahel may resonate beyond the regions in which they operate.

By mediatizing its victories in local insurgencies and occasionally messaging on more 'palpable' causes to jihadis worldwide, such as the humanitarian suffering in Gaza, the Central branch is striving to position itself once again as a legitimate, reliable, and enduring jihadi group, able to conquer, govern, and deliver services. This, in turn, may help rebuild an effective foreign fighter pipeline and/or some form of broader based support that the group could attempt to capitalize upon. While not nearly as flashy or able to muster kinetic attacks as frequently, al-Qa`ida is betting that it can position itself as a viable long-term alternative to the Islamic State, immune to the latter's missteps and hubris, including the backlash to its extreme theatrical violence.

**“Franchising allowed al-Qa`ida to survive a sustained U.S. counterterrorism campaign that decapitated its leadership and drove it from its preferred safe havens. It also helped al-Qa`ida weather the Islamic State storm ... But at the same time, the dispersion and franchising model has watered down what al-Qa`ida actually stands for, having a deleterious impact on group cohesion and brand identity.”**

Beyond inspiring and mobilizing jihadi cadres, the group's media operations play a crucial role in maintaining cohesion across its franchises. Members of al-Qa`ida Central regularly appear in productions by local franchises. In a 2021 As Sahab release featuring senior leaders from AQAP and AQIM, it was explicitly acknowledged that the video had been filmed in "cooperation" with the media wings of the two respective organizations.<sup>62</sup> When one theater of operations is dormant, or a regional group is on the back foot, al-Qa`ida's media production simply shifts focus to activities the group deems successful. Its operations throughout Africa provide a readymade source of messaging, given the high operational tempo of JNIM throughout the Sahel and al-Shabaab throughout the Horn of Africa.

### **Al-Qa`ida's Operating Environment and its Organizational and Operational Capabilities**

Al-Qa`ida's operational and organizational capabilities need to be assessed in relation to its operating environment, which fundamentally shapes how they manifest. The availability of safe havens, the level of counterterrorism pressure, the presence of allies or rivals, the stability of governance, and community support all determine whether latent capacity can be translated into effective action. Capacity itself represents organizational capabilities; the resources and arrangements that allow a group to endure such as leadership, recruitment pipelines, financing, and operational capabilities, which denote the human capital; tactical expertise; logistics; intelligence; and command-and-control systems that enable the group to mount operations.

### **Operating Environment**

To understand al-Qa`ida's operating environment, it is worthwhile to revisit the reasons why the group operates in a franchise-based manner. As terrorism expert Barak Mendelsohn has described, al-Qa`ida turned to franchising in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Unable to expand from a position of strength, the organization turned to franchising, both by deploying its fighters to specific theaters of operations and by partnering with local jihadi groups, which enabled it to maintain relevance and project influence globally.<sup>63</sup> Al-Qa`ida lacks critical mass, by design; the networked approach is a deliberate

effort aimed at improving longevity. It comes with its limitations, but also obvious benefits, as evidenced by the group now lasting into its fourth decade. As Jacob Shapiro notes, “al-Qa`ida traded operational control and financial efficiencies for security and organizational survival.”<sup>64</sup> So while franchising allowed the movement to navigate some immense challenges that it faced, this strategy also had clear drawbacks, and momentary benefits may ultimately be eclipsed by larger and more permanently damaging consequences in the long run.

This framing of franchise-based expansion as a strategy borne out of al-Qa`ida's weakness is compelling given the cautionary tale of Jabhat al-Nusra's decision to sever ties and growing rumors that JNIM may pursue a similar path after the remarkable success of HTS in Syria. An assessment of al-Qa`ida's franchise-based system as of September 2025 could suggest that the group has won the battle, but lost the war. In essence, franchising allowed al-Qa`ida to survive a sustained U.S. counterterrorism campaign that decapitated its leadership and drove it from its preferred safe havens. It also helped al-Qa`ida weather the Islamic State storm, allowing al-Qa`ida to remain relevant outside of the Middle East after being steamrolled by the Islamic State juggernaut in Iraq and Syria. But at the same time, the dispersion and franchising model has watered down what al-Qa`ida actually stands for, having a deleterious impact on group cohesion and brand identity.

Al-Qa`ida and its franchise-based modality thrive in weak and failed states and ungoverned spaces, exploiting governance gaps to establish safe havens and sanctuaries beyond the reach of the state. Or, as in the case of Afghanistan, both pre-9/11 and current day, it operates at the invitation of the governing entity, the Afghan Taliban. The Sahel, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Horn of Africa are each regions where violent non-state actors, including al-Qa`ida affiliates, strongly contest, or in some cases dominate, governance. Physical sanctuary is not a prerequisite for a terrorist organization, but “the most capable and resilient terrorist organizations operating today ... all have well-established sanctuaries,” including al-Qa`ida.<sup>65</sup> JNIM, al-Shabaab, AQAP, and al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan all operate with varying degrees of maneuverability.

Counterterrorism pressure additionally determines whether its capabilities can be expressed or contained. The most accurate way to describe current CT pressure on al-Qa`ida and its affiliates is localized and selective. Since taking office, the administration has targeted members of al-Shabaab,<sup>66</sup> as well as al-Qa`ida-linked figures in Syria.<sup>67</sup> There have been no known strikes against al-Qa`ida in Yemen, Afghanistan, or the Sahel, though this simply could reflect a lack of viable targets.

In the Sahel, where the locus of today's terrorist threat is concentrated, CT capacity has eroded after the wind-down of major French and U.N. military and stabilization operations there. In the junta-controlled Alliance of Sahel States (AES Confederation), where al-Qa`ida's most lethal affiliate, JNIM, operates, CT is not just complicated by the drawdown of these international missions, but also further complicated by the presence of Russian mercenary groups such as the Wagner Group (rebranded as Africa Corps) following the expulsion of Western counterterrorism partners.<sup>68</sup> Human rights monitoring reports detail extensive abuse by armed forces bolstered by Russian mercenaries against civilians, providing further narrative fuel for JNIM and other Sahel-based salafi jihadi groups to exploit.

In Somalia, U.S. and allied forces have actively struck al-

Shabaab. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), in coordination with Somalia's Federal Government, carried out multiple precision airstrikes against al-Shabaab. According to a dataset maintained by New America, the United States has carried out 71 strikes in Somalia in 2025 so far.<sup>69</sup> These operations have been explicitly aimed at degrading al-Shabaab's capability “to plan and conduct attacks that threaten the U.S. homeland, our forces, and our citizens abroad.”<sup>70</sup> In tandem, Somalia's own security forces have engaged al-Shabaab in central and southern regions, although Islamist militants still control much of southern Jubaland and the Lower Shabelle. Financially, multilateral efforts continue to disrupt al-Shabaab's support networks. In April 2025, the U.S.-Gulf Terrorist Financing Targeting Center (TFTC) jointly sanctioned 15 al-Shabaab financiers and operatives in Somalia.<sup>71</sup>

The United States' pivot away from counterterrorism and toward great power competition, as well as bandwidth occupied by other foreign policy priorities, has contributed to a favorable operational environment for al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. There are notable exceptions including an active counterterrorism campaign against Iran-backed proxies, the Islamic State in Somalia, and both al-Qa`ida and Islamic State jihadis in Syria.

## ***Organizational Capabilities***

### ***Leadership Structure***

Leadership remains a paramount dilemma for al-Qa`ida. Since the death of bin Ladin in May 2011, the group has lacked a charismatic head of the organization. While Ayman al-Zawahiri was effective in shepherding the group through tumultuous times and keeping most of the global network intact (al-Nusra evolved into its own separate entity in Syria), he was not exactly inspirational. It was also under his tenure that al-Qa`ida was eclipsed in almost every way by the rise of the Islamic State.<sup>72</sup> Following al-Zawahiri's death in 2022, the group has yet to formally announce a new leader, although most observers consider Saif al-`Adl the de facto emir of the organization.<sup>73</sup> It should be acknowledged that there is much we do not know about the current state of al-Qa`ida's leadership and leadership structure, including its upper echelon. This is evident by the ongoing debate surrounding whether al-`Adl is actually the emir of the organization, as well as a lack of clarity over where he is currently based.

At various points, Hamza bin Ladin, one of Usama's sons who was being groomed in the image of his father, was thought to be the future of the group.<sup>74</sup> He was even deemed “al-Qa`ida's leader in waiting.”<sup>75</sup> Instead, his death deprived al-Qa`ida of a potential leader with youth, charisma, and name recognition, dealing yet another blow to the group at a time when it desperately needed help with its struggling brand.<sup>76</sup>

According to the United Nations' Monitoring Team, al-Qa`ida central leadership “remains weak,” is and has been “ineffectual in providing strategic guidance,” and demonstrates increasing dissent with al-`Adl. Al-Qa`ida expert Kevin Jackson assessed that some of the group's high-ranking leaders have problems with al-`Adl being located in Iran. Both the late HTS commander Abu Mariya al-Qahtani and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a Palestinian jihadi and onetime mentor to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, offered critiques.<sup>77</sup> Still, if there was such a groundswell of opposition to al-`Adl being based in Iran, these individuals would likely have left al-Qa`ida long ago. After all, al-`Adl, along with other al-Qa`ida notables,

has been based in Iran since 2002 or 2003.<sup>78</sup> In addition to al-`Adl and his deputy, al-Maghrebi, other notable al-Qa`ida senior leaders include Sultan al-Abdali, AQIM's Yazid Mebrak (aka Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi), al-Shabaab's Ahmed Diriye, JNIM's Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Kouffa, and Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki and Ibrahim al-Qosi (Sheikh Khubayb al-Sudani) of AQAP.

#### *Finance*

Discerning an accurate and updated snapshot of core al-Qa`ida's finances is extremely difficult. Little is known about how the group makes money in Afghanistan or how its members access funds. A U.N. Monitoring Team report from February 2025 did note, however, that al-Qa`ida had deployed one of its militants to manage finances from Iran into Afghanistan.<sup>79</sup> A report last year in *Foreign Policy* suggested that al-Qa`ida was profiting handsomely from gold and gem mines in Afghanistan's Badakhshan and Takhar provinces.<sup>80</sup>

Across the organization's affiliates, the picture is a mixed bag, as the revenue generated by its regional branches ebbs and flows according to local conditions. As reported by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the shift in al-Qa`ida's organizational structure extends to the way the organization manages its money, with franchise groups expected to generate funds locally.<sup>81</sup> Al-Qa`ida's relationships have been most effective when the group has money and fighters to offer to its partners. As it rebuilds, the group will seek to prioritize fundraising and recruitment, while continuing to let the Islamic State receive most of the attention of Western counterterrorism forces.

JNIM's funding portfolio is diverse and includes money earned from operating kidnapping networks, smuggling drugs and motorcycles, involvement in cattle-rustling schemes, and illicit gold mining in Burkina Faso and Mali.<sup>82</sup> It also levies taxes, or *zakat*, on communities living within the territory over which it extends its shadow governance, as well as extortion and protection payments. Some experts have reported that the group earns between \$18 million and \$35 million annually.<sup>83</sup> Al-Shabaab maintains a robust and diversified funding stream, which accounts for between \$100 million and \$200 million annually, according to some estimates.<sup>84</sup> Al-Shabaab relies on extortion, forced taxation, trade-based money laundering (including with charcoal), kidnapping for ransom, donations and remittances, and piracy.<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, as the recent U.N. Monitoring Team report noted, "the financial situation of AQAP showed slight improvement."<sup>86</sup> The group continued conducting kidnapping for ransom operations (which is believed to account for half of its operating budget), targeting employees of international organizations; other revenue streams include robbery, weapons trafficking, extortion, and protection payments, as well as selling petroleum derivatives.<sup>87</sup> At times, AQAP has struggled to generate revenue, and its growing partnership with al-Shabaab (discussed in more detail below) has seen the latter providing financial support.

#### *Alliances and Partnerships*

In terms of high-end cooperation and forging strategic partnerships, al-Qa`ida has been incredibly adept, collaborating across ideological, operational, and logistical lines.<sup>88</sup> The group has successfully built a global network that spans decades and dozens of countries, demonstrating "a superior aptitude for alliance building."<sup>89</sup> Now, its affiliates are doing the same. Increasing

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cooperation between Somalia-based al-Shabaab and Iran-backed Yemen-based Ansar Allah (the Houthis) is a case in point. Since 2024, evidence has emerged that al-Shabaab receives arms and training in exchange for Houthi piracy operations off the coastline of Somalia it controls.<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile, in Yemen, AQAP has not only ceased hostilities with Ansar Allah but has also begun cooperating with the group in launching joint attacks against government forces.<sup>91</sup> This apparent de-prioritization of ideology, often due to strategic necessity, has been observed across theaters. Yet, the ideological dilution that may be assumed to be part of pragmatic collaboration with non-salafi jihadi groups does not necessarily signal diminished intent to conduct attacks and, on the contrary, often directly bolsters operational capabilities. In Yemen, Ansar Allah has supplied AQAP with armed drones, thermal rockets, and reconnaissance equipment, and released key AQAP figures from prison.<sup>92</sup>

#### *Operational Capabilities*

##### *Human Capital*

Manpower across the al-Qa`ida network is highly uneven, underscoring the group's reliance on affiliates rather than its core. Al-Qa`ida Central has been reduced to a small cadre: U.N. monitors estimate only 30 to 60 operatives in Afghanistan, while U.S. officials suggest its presence there may be "in the low tens" as of 2024.<sup>93</sup> By contrast, al-Shabaab in Somalia and JNIM in the Sahel each command thousands of fighters. JNIM disposes of 6,000 fighters operating across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.<sup>94</sup> Al-Shabaab retains a force of roughly 10,000-18,000 fighters, while AQAP in Yemen still fields 2,000-3,000 combatants.<sup>95</sup> In short, al-Qa`ida's manpower is decentralized: The core has dwindled to a symbolic remnant, while African affiliates provide the bulk of fighters sustaining the network's operational relevance.

##### *Command and Control*

While al-Qa`ida began as a hierarchical, vertically structured organization, it has evolved over time into what it is today: a decentralized global network of affiliates, each exercising significant autonomy but ostensibly loyal to the cause of global jihad as al-Qa`ida defines it.<sup>96</sup> As has always been the case, the strategic picture for the organization originates from the top, but day-to-day operations are left to the regional branches. Some of al-Qa`ida's most serious challenges, such as difficulties in communication, financial problems experienced by al-Qa`ida Central, and the deemphasis of a transnational agenda in favor of local concerns,



could indicate the broader risks of strategic drift.

AQAP, under the leadership of Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki, may also be looking to assert greater independence from the core.<sup>97</sup> On some level, al-Qa`ida senior leaders must be wary of watching any more of its affiliates follow a similar path to al-Nusra, which rebranded as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and then HTS before splitting from al-Qa`ida altogether. Yet again, considering HTS' divorce from al-Qa`ida, and rumors swirling about the future of al-Qa`ida's affiliates in the Sahel and the Arabian Peninsula, it is fair to wonder whether the organization's franchising strategy and continued decentralization have proven to be centrifugal forces so powerful that they have disaggregated al-Qa`ida's global network past a point where it can be easily reconsolidated.

#### *Sustainment and Logistics*

Al-Qa`ida franchise groups have fluctuated in terms of their respective capacity for sustainment and logistics, often in response to counterterrorism pressure and local and regional dynamics. In the Sahel, JNIM's ability to sustain its operations and facilitate logistical networks has been vastly improved by its control of territory. JNIM militants have sustained and resupplied their arsenal through military victories over government security forces in the areas in which they operate. This includes machine guns, drones, and anti-aircraft weaponry.<sup>98</sup> Although JNIM has not yet fully encroached upon littoral West Africa, the group has been using Ghana as a sanctuary where it restocks supplies and provides its fighters with rest after operations in Burkina Faso.<sup>99</sup> Farther north, AQIM takes advantage of jurisdictional arbitrage to use Libya as a transit route for smuggling fighters, weapons, and other logistical necessities throughout the broader region.<sup>100</sup>

Al-Shabaab has also been able to resupply its weaponry through military conquest, including overrunning Somali army bases and looting the equipment, weapons, and other supplies. And, like JNIM, al-Shabaab's ability to sustain its operations and enhance its logistical networks is underpinned by its control of territory, where it has reasserted dominance in parts of central and southern Somalia. So far this year, the jihadis have launched offensives that have reversed some of the Somali government's gains in prior battles.<sup>101</sup> Al-Shabaab was able to recapture several strategic locations in the Middle Shabelle region, including Adan Yabaal. This town had served as al-Shabaab's regional center of operations before Somali government forces captured it at the end of 2022.<sup>102</sup> Now that it is back under al-Shabaab control, Adan Yabaal serves as a critical logistical hub for moving fighters, weapons, and supplies, given its central location in connecting routes between Mogadishu, Jowhar, and areas of Galmudug to the north. And because it is 245 kilometers northeast of the Somali capital, it is far enough away to function as a staging and fallback area for attacks.<sup>103</sup>

Not only has al-Shabaab been successful in expanding its own logistical and sustainment footprint in Somalia, but it has also denied the Somali government and security forces the option of doing the same. Al-Shabaab's large-scale operations and control of territory have overextended government forces, leading to "strained logistical capacities, making it difficult to resupply or support front-line units with adequately trained reinforcements."<sup>104</sup> Compounding the problem is al-Shabaab's infiltration of the Somali army's ranks.<sup>105</sup>

AQAP has grown more active in attempting to gain control over strategic infrastructure along Yemen's southern coast, where

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it has repositioned its forces.<sup>106</sup> AQAP has also moved to control shipments and supply routes in Hadramawt and Shabwah. Following the death of Hamza al-Mishdali in June 2024, the group struggled with supply challenges and the further development of its drone program. To address these and other difficulties, the group began collaborating closely with the Houthis, as described above. Despite ideological differences, this relationship has proven mutually beneficial, expanding the networks of arms traffickers and maritime smugglers.<sup>107</sup> Tacit knowledge transfer from the Houthis to AQAP has also enhanced the latter's technical capabilities, particularly in manufacturing 'do-it-yourself' drones.<sup>108</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

Few would credibly argue that al-Qa`ida presents the same level of threat to the U.S. homeland today that it did 24 years ago. Al-Qa`ida has practically fallen off the list of concerns for global security officials altogether; many of whom are focused on a multitude of other issues, including the ongoing war in Ukraine, the conflict in Gaza, challenges posed by accelerating climate change, and the ubiquity of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, and their impact on the ever-escalating strategic competition with China.

Four years after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, al-Qa`ida is in a better place in the country. And while the Taliban has strong incentives to control al-Qa`ida and prevent the group from using Afghanistan as a launching pad for attacks against the West, the jihadis likely have free rein in the broader region to recruit new members, train its existing cadres, and spearhead the rebuilding of its organization in South and Central Asia.<sup>109</sup> Al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan may end up functioning as a force multiplier for a group like al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which is often neglected by many Western counterterrorism analysts, but remains a major concern throughout South Asia. Al-Qa`ida could be poised for growth in South Asia, with core leadership and AQIS focused on expanding across India, Pakistan, and Kashmir.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) remain an ally of both al-Qa`ida and the Afghan Taliban.<sup>111</sup>

When assessing terrorist groups, there will always be an element of uncertainty. The conventional wisdom about Hamas, in the decade before the attacks of October 7, 2023, was that the

group was content to rule Gaza and had no interest in picking a fight with Israel. Those assumptions proved wrong, and the cost was unacceptable for Israel, serving as a reminder that the threat posed by terrorist groups can linger for years, if not decades, before surfacing again. One must wonder if there is a statute of limitations on the Taliban's willingness to curtail al-Qa`ida's transnational ambitions. If Western assumptions about the Taliban's intent or capability to suppress al-Qa`ida plotting on Afghan soil prove faulty—just as Israel dismissed the threat posed by Hamas before 10/7—the result could be similar, a mass casualty attack perpetrated by a group that most experts believed to be semi-dormant.

There is also a possibility that Iran looks to help al-Qa`ida reassert its relevance by providing the group with intelligence, weapons, and training. After all, Tehran has provided a safe haven to Saif al-`Adl and other senior members of the group for the last two decades.<sup>112</sup> At some point, Iran will want to benefit from the relationship. Following the recent joint U.S.-Israeli assault on Tehran's nuclear infrastructure, which came five years after the targeted assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, this could be a logical time for Iran to activate or enable al-Qa`ida, as there are already growing connections between members of Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' and al-Qa`ida affiliates al-Shabaab and AQAP. This, in turn, could create a contagion effect that facilitates terrorism, or terror actors, in other neighboring regions to become more active.

Analytical failures could result in a heightened threat environment. As AQAP prepared to conduct attacks in the West, it was still viewed by many in the U.S. government as a regional

threat, leading some analysts to misjudge the nature of its capabilities and intent, and miss indicators that the group was gearing up for something as major as the attempted Christmas Day 2009 airline attack, the case of the so-called "underwear bomber" Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab.<sup>113</sup> While some analysts are sanguine that al-Qa`ida's affiliates will remain primarily focused on local or regional issues for the foreseeable future, these problems may spill over. In other words, the indications and warnings for when jihadi groups pivot to project outwards from local theaters are not always apparent, until the conventional wisdom becomes dated, as it did with al-Shabaab when a Kenyan operative was arrested in the Philippines in 2019 for plotting a transnational aviation attack modeled on 9/11.<sup>114</sup>

Under al-`Adl's leadership, al-Qa`ida may take the practical route and steer clear of attempts at spectacular 9/11-style attacks, instead going back to its comparative advantage with terrorist attacks: targeting embassies and consulates, commercial aviation, and tourist destinations.<sup>115</sup> When a group repeatedly expresses its intent to conduct terrorist attacks, that group should be taken seriously, even if the counterterrorism community believes the group to be in a weakened state. Al-Qa`ida has done that repeatedly over the years, with its South Asia-based leadership delivering warnings, and threats issued by a range of al-Qa`ida veterans operating in Syria.<sup>116</sup> If left unmolested, al-Qa`ida will likely continue to regenerate at a steady pace over time, continuing bin Ladin's legacy, and ensuring that, even as it fades from the headlines, al-Qa`ida remains a threat to the West, biding its time until it can strike again. **CTC**

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