

Chadian special forces soldier receives basic rifle marksmanship training at live-fire range in Massaguet, Chad, as part of exercise Flintlock 17, March 6, 2017 (U.S. Army/Derek Hamilton)



# The Revival of Al Qaeda

By Jami T. Forbes

*Today's terrorist threats have changed, and terrorist groups are now more geographically dispersed and their tactics more diversified.*

—NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR COUNTERTERRORISM OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, OCTOBER 2018

*Time and territory allow jihadist terrorists to plot, so we will act against sanctuaries, and prevent their reemergence before they can threaten the U.S. homeland.*

—NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, DECEMBER 2017

**O**n March 2, 2018, militants conducted near-simultaneous assaults on the French embassy and the military headquarters of Burkina Faso in Ouagadougou, the West African nation's capital. By the

end of the day, 16 people were dead and more than 80 injured.<sup>1</sup> The attack on the military headquarters was likely aimed at targeting a gathering of senior officers, and Burkinabe officials stated the attack could have “decapitated”

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their military had the meeting not been moved to a different location at the last minute.<sup>2</sup> Al Qaeda's West Africa affiliate Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) claimed credit for the attack, stating it was a message to France and its partners in the Sahel that the group was advancing "with a resolve unhindered by wounds and pains" inflicted by French-led counterterrorism (CT) pressure in the region. The events served as an ominous reminder of an ascendant al Qaeda that targeted the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania more than 20 years ago.

Since its emergence in 2013, the so-called Islamic State (IS) has been at the forefront of the U.S. CT effort. The brash and often shocking tactics of IS largely overshadowed al Qaeda, which was weakened due to internal fissures, robust CT pressure, the death of Osama bin Laden, and battlefield losses in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Al Qaeda ceded its prominence in the Salafist jihadist world to a faster, flashier, and more aggressive movement and became a seemingly peripheral actor in the global war on terror.

However, while IS was promoting its use of terror as a means to become a state, al Qaeda was quietly laying the foundation for its resurrection. This article argues that al Qaeda is resurgent due in part to its ability to exercise strategic patience. While the high-profile tactics of IS made it easy to understand IS strategy and intent, al Qaeda pursued a more discreet path, making it more difficult to judge its actions. It diffused its leadership cadre out to a variety of geographic locations, empowered leaders, created cohesion among its global affiliates, and developed more durable havens by gaining inroads with vulnerable populations and exploiting fragile states. Al Qaeda's slower and more long-term strategy was much less salient than the one pursued by the Islamic State, but it is likely to be more dangerous in the long term, particularly if it helps the group to expand its support base and enhance local control through cooperation rather than coercion.

According to the December 2017 National Security Strategy, groups such

as al Qaeda continue to present the most dangerous terrorist threat to the United States, and they draw from networks around the globe to "radicalize isolated individuals, exploit vulnerable populations, and inspire and direct plots."<sup>3</sup> As such, it is imperative that we challenge the narrative that al Qaeda has all but been defeated, seek to gain a better understanding of how al Qaeda is rebuilding its movement, and utilize diverse inter-agency resources to degrade the ability for a potential resurgence of the group.

### Global Resurgence

Despite the broad focus on IS, al Qaeda and its affiliated networks likely hold the largest swaths of territory under jihadist control, including areas of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Over the past few years, the group has enhanced its footprint by cultivating local support and by forging alliances with local armed groups. In 2014, al Qaeda announced the creation of a new affiliate called al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), its first official network in Asia.<sup>4</sup> AQIS operates in Afghanistan and Pakistan but also has ambitions for India, Burma, and Bangladesh. The group is responsible for several small attacks in Pakistan and reportedly attempted to hijack a Pakistani vessel off the port of Karachi in 2014.<sup>5</sup> In Afghanistan, al Qaeda senior leaders appear to continue to benefit from Taliban-provided haven and are reportedly facing a "resurgence" in areas of Afghanistan stymied by limited governance.<sup>6</sup> In Somalia, al-Shabaab reportedly controls up to 30 percent of the country (a region with a coastline comparable in size to the Eastern Seaboard of the United States) and is operating with an estimated 7,000 to 9,000 fighters.<sup>7</sup> In Syria, despite some operational setbacks and a lack of cohesion, al Qaeda helped to broker the early 2018 creation of Hurras al-Din—a merger of smaller armed groups that has bolstered its ranks by attracting members who fought alongside al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>8</sup> In Yemen, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) controls wide swaths of the southern part of the

country and is reportedly garnering revenue from the extortion of state-owned firms and oil companies.<sup>9</sup> In Africa, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) oversees an arc of instability that flows from the Maghreb into the Sahel. In February 2017, AQIM oversaw the merger of several armed groups in Mali, creating JNIM, which now controls a large portion of northern Mali and is expanding attacks into Burkina Faso and western Niger (an area roughly equivalent to the geographic size of Mexico).<sup>10</sup>

On occasion, these affiliates are willing and able to conduct high-profile operations, including external attacks. This suggests that al Qaeda's slow and patient strategy does not equate to a lack of operational activity. For example, in addition to the embassy attack in Ouagadougou, AQAP was responsible for the January 7, 2015, assault on the offices of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in France, which resulted in the death of 12 people and the injury of at least 11.<sup>11</sup> In addition, in October 2017, al-Shabaab detonated an explosives-laden vehicle in Mogadishu, causing 500 casualties—Somalia's largest terror attack to date.<sup>12</sup>

### Adaptive Yet Consistent Leadership

One key factor that has likely enabled al Qaeda to withstand CT pressure and usher in a potential resurgence is its leadership cadre, which appears to have embraced traditional leadership while also implementing evolutionary changes. Al Qaeda senior leaders have long benefited from haven in Iran, where they have largely been inoculated from CT pressure.<sup>13</sup> Shortly following the attacks on September 11, 2001, some al Qaeda senior leaders sought shelter in Iran, where they likely recognized that the region would provide a sanctuary from U.S. drone strikes. Although the relationship between al Qaeda and Iran was at times contentious (with some al Qaeda leaders even being placed under occasional house arrest), the common enemies of the United States and the Islamic State likely drove a sense of collaboration.<sup>14</sup>

Since at least 2009, Iran has allowed al Qaeda to “operate a core facilitation pipeline through the country,” enabling the group to “move funds and fighters to South Asia and Syria,” according to the State Department.<sup>15</sup> In addition, al Qaeda officials indicated that Iran was a “main artery for funds, personnel, and communication” for the group, according to documents recovered during the Abbottabad raid against Osama bin Laden.<sup>16</sup>

Starting in 2015, al Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri, who has likely largely been confined to the remote tribal regions of Pakistan, appeared to empower some Iran-based leaders such as Saif al-Adel to make decisions and command operations on his behalf. Al-Adel, a former colonel and special forces soldier in the Egyptian army, is a founding member of al Qaeda who helped mastermind the U.S. Embassy attacks in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.<sup>17</sup> He almost certainly has the experience and capabilities that could be central to any efforts to regenerate operational activities.<sup>18</sup> This has likely helped to reverse the previous isolation (and pressure) faced by al Qaeda officials who were reliant on haven in Pakistan and Afghanistan and is probably an enabler of al Qaeda’s efforts to raise its public profile operational tempo. In addition to diffusing decisionmaking capabilities, al Qaeda has also expanded perceptions of its leadership cadre by drawing on images and statements from Hamza bin Laden (now deceased), using his lineage as the son of Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda heir apparent to inspire a new generation of fighters.

Furthermore, in early 2015, several members of the al Qaeda military council in Iran were relocated to Damascus, where they were credited with helping lead the fight against IS, and began commanding “an unprecedented number of veteran” fighters.<sup>19</sup> This infusion of leadership helped al Qaeda weather the loss of several senior leaders to airstrikes and mitigate the loss of some commanders to IS. It also helped al Qaeda develop a broader and more adaptive identity rather than just being an Afghanistan/Pakistan-based organization.

## Cohesion Among Global Affiliates

Al Qaeda appears to be increasing cohesion among its disparate affiliates, with several issuing joint statements regarding external issues. This cohesion is likely being driven in part by the increased access to senior leaders. For example, in February 2017, AQAP and AQIM issued a joint statement eulogizing Omar Abdel Rahman, also known as the “Blind Sheikh,” who died while in U.S. Federal custody. The statement called for fighters to conduct attacks against U.S. interests to avenge his death. Also, in September 2017, both al-Shabaab and AQAP issued nearly identical statements calling for support of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Furthermore, when AQIM announced the merger of several armed groups in Mali in March 2017, the groups pledged loyalty to both al Qaeda and the Taliban, underscoring that even in a remote area such as Timbuktu, al Qaeda affiliates are in line with the movements’ strategic messaging.

Al Qaeda is also attempting to resume its public role as the vanguard of global jihad, an effort underpinned by more robust and diverse media outreach. Al Qaeda media statements portray the group as the only force capable of fighting against tyrannical regimes in North Africa and against the United States, which was referred to as the “first enemy of Islam” in March and May 2018 statements.<sup>20</sup> Starting in late 2017, al Qaeda began to quicken the pace at which it disseminated media statements. For example, between mid-January and mid-October 2018, al Qaeda published 13 statements attributed to al-Zawahiri. This pace reflects a significant change from previous years when guidance and outreach from al Qaeda leaders were much more elusive (al Qaeda only issued nine statements attributed to al-Zawahiri in all of 2017).

Al Qaeda’s deliberate reintroduction of its external vision is also reinforced by several statements advocating for attacks on the “far enemy” in the West. Since 2017, al Qaeda affiliates have issued at least 12 public statements

calling for attacks on the United States, suggesting the long-term aspirations of the group to target the U.S. homeland have not diminished. In a March 20, 2018, statement, al-Zawahiri called for the worldwide Muslim community to unite, stating, “Let us fight America everywhere the same way it attacks us everywhere. Let us unite in confronting it, and never divide. Let us unify and never disperse. Let us gather and never become shattered.”<sup>21</sup>

The ambitions to develop more global visions and operational capabilities are likely being adopted by al Qaeda’s affiliates as well. For example, in May 2017, al-Shabaab issued a 55-minute video featuring statements from several al Qaeda senior leaders. The narration called the United States the “Satan of our time” and stated that al-Shabaab’s jihad is a global one that is not restricted to geographical boundaries.

Al Qaeda is also endeavoring to reabsorb fighters from the Islamic State, calling for the unification of jihadist ranks and advocating for a common fight against the United States. This outreach has probably enabled the potential for operational cooperation between elements of IS and al Qaeda. For instance, in the Sahel region of Africa, al Qaeda and IS fighters are reportedly conducting joint operations against the Sahel G5 security forces there.<sup>22</sup> According to the United Nations mission in Mali, al Qaeda’s affiliate JNIM and the IS branch in the Sahel (known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) are reportedly cooperating and conducting “more sophisticated and deadly attacks.”<sup>23</sup> Although a formal unification of IS and al Qaeda is unlikely in the near term, any potential cooperation between the two groups could expand operational capabilities, and the recruitment of former IS fighters could help bolster al Qaeda ranks with seasoned and experienced operatives.

## Developing More Durable Havens

In addition to the leadership changes, al Qaeda has made efforts to cultivate durable havens by slowly integrating with local groups. Nowhere is there a



MQ-9 Reaper flies training mission over Nevada Test and Training Range, July 15, 2019 (U.S. Air Force/William Rio Rosado)

better example of al Qaeda's strategic patience than its efforts in Mali and Sub-Saharan Africa. Al Qaeda's strategy in the Sahel reflects a shrewd long-term vision, with the group calling its efforts there similar to caring for "a baby" that needs to mature and grow.<sup>24</sup> According to documents recovered in Timbuktu, al Qaeda saw the 2012 Tuareg rebellions in Mali as a "historic" opportunity to exploit vulnerable populations and develop a haven for its fighters. Since then, al Qaeda has methodologically integrated with disenfranchised tribal and ethnic groups via endeavors such as intermarrying with them, fighting alongside them in support of local grievances, and providing rule of law.<sup>25</sup>

Central to al Qaeda's strategy for the Sahel is the co-option of several ethnic and Salafist armed groups. In 2012, al Qaeda stated that it needed to put aside rivalries and "win allies" and "be flexible" enough to establish an organizational

relationship with groups so that it could combine the groups' regional efforts with al Qaeda's "global jihadi project."<sup>26</sup> This effort came to fruition in February 2017, when AQIM announced the merger of several Salafist armed groups under the al Qaeda umbrella. This merger represented a variety of ethnic and tribal backgrounds, including Arab, Fulani/Peuhl, and Tuareg identities.

The creation of JNIM has helped to advance operations in the Sahel, where since 2015 al Qaeda-affiliated attacks have expanded not only in number but also in geographic scope, shifting further into Burkina Faso and portions of Western Niger. In addition to the March 2, 2018, attack, al Qaeda is responsible for two other high-profile external attacks that specifically targeted Western-affiliated locations in Ouagadougou, including a January 2016 assault on a hotel that killed 29 civilians and a February 2017 assault on a café

that killed 18 civilians.<sup>27</sup> In March 2016, al Qaeda elements also targeted hotels and tourist venues in the Ivory Coast, resulting in the deaths of 22 civilians.<sup>28</sup> The group is also responsible for several attacks in Bamako, the capital of Mali. Following a June 19, 2017, attack against a Western-affiliated hotel, JNIM stated that it was sending a "message dripping with blood and body parts" that Western "crusaders" would never be secure in Mali. Furthermore, the group is likely holding at least six Westerners hostage, including one U.S. citizen.<sup>29</sup>

The development of a haven in the Sahel represents a dangerous precedent that, if left unabated, could help enable future global aspirations of al Qaeda. For instance, the recovered guidance indicated that al Qaeda leaders saw the opportunity to shape Mali and the Sahel into a base from which it could conduct training and eventually launch global jihadist operations against the West.<sup>30</sup>



Nigerien soldiers receive counter-IED class as part of exercise Flintlock 17 in Diffa, Niger, February 28, 2017 (U.S. Army/Kulani Lakanaria)

In line with its patient and calculated strategy for establishing a caliphate, al Qaeda's guidance directed developing strong ties to locals, while hiding broader jihadist ambitions until favorable conditions are sufficiently set. Al Qaeda stated it was better for fighters in the Sahel to currently "be silent and pretend to be a 'domestic' movement" in the short term, hiding the fact that al Qaeda had "expansionary, jihadi" aspirations for the region.<sup>31</sup>

This strategy is not limited to the Sahel. It mirrors AQAP's approach in Yemen, where the group also forged alliances with tribal militias to help expand its presence.<sup>32</sup> In addition, AQAP has been able to implement development projects, including providing access to water and electricity, and has established governance bodies to help provide goods and services to locals. The group also reportedly provides rule of law through shariah courts and has promoted humanitarian efforts such as handing out food

baskets to locals who are in need, according to Twitter users.

### Outlook

Al Qaeda has likely laid the foundation for its movement to present a more durable threat. As outlined in the 2018 National Security Strategy, both time and territory help enable terrorist groups to threaten the U.S. homeland. As such, it is imperative to gain a better understanding of how groups such as al Qaeda are using "quieter" methods such as exploiting sociopolitical and ethnic grievances to develop havens. This will require a strategy underpinned on initiatives outside of military force, including diplomatic engagement, humanitarian aid to vulnerable populations, enhanced collaboration with law enforcement, and international partnerships.

To reverse the positive trend for al Qaeda, it will be important for the United States and our partners to understand that the degradation of IS

does not equate to the degradation of global Salafist jihadist movements. Al Qaeda will almost certainly continue to evolve and may emerge from behind the shadows of IS with a renewed vision, empowered leaders, a more cohesive global network, and a perceived moral high ground among fighters. Moreover, we must recognize the potential bias we have placed on IS. Saliency bias describes the phenomenon in which humans focus on items or information that are more noticeable or prominent and dismiss those that are less obvious. Undoubtedly, the actions of the Islamic State were salient—the brash and often shocking tactics of the group have made it difficult for the United States to ignore. As such, IS has been at the forefront of our counterterrorism focus. While al Qaeda was not completely dismissed, its longer term approach made it more difficult to understand the impact and pattern of its actions, possibly enabling the group to adapt and evolve.

Finally, the United States and its partners must carefully monitor the progression of al Qaeda affiliates, particularly JNIM in Mali, where al Qaeda is expanding its geographic footprint and has momentum. As outlined in the National Strategy for Counterterrorism, “veteran Al-Qa’ida leaders are working to consolidate and expand the group’s presence in several regions . . . from which it aspires to launch new attacks on the United States and our allies.” Should al Qaeda successfully build a haven and establish a state built on its own brand of shariah law, it could serve as the flagship enterprise that will regenerate confidence in al Qaeda as a movement, and possibly enable the group to shift from developing sanctuary to expanding its ability to conduct external attacks against the United States and Western interests. JFQ

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Al Qaeda Affiliate Claims Responsibility for Burkina Faso Attacks,” Reuters, March 3, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Perez-Pena and Jamie Yayha Berry, “Militants Carry Out Deadly Attack in Burkina Faso,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017).

<sup>4</sup> “Al-Qa’ida Chief Launches Al-Qa’ida in South Asia,” BBC News, September 4, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Craig, “An Offshoot of Al-Qa’ida Is Regrouping in Pakistan,” *Washington Post*, June 3, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Afghanistan’s Terrorism Resurgence: Al-Qa’ida, ISIS and Beyond,” Brookings Institution, April 28, 2017; see also Dan Lamothe, “Probably the Largest Al-Qa’ida Camp Ever Destroyed in Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, October 30, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Global Conflict Tracker, “Al-Shabab in Somalia,” Council on Foreign Relations Web site, updated daily.

<sup>8</sup> Mohanad Hage Ali, “Guarding the Al-Qa’ida Flame,” Carnegie Middle East Center, June 6, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Schmitt and Saeed Al-Batati, “The U.S. Has Pummeled Al Qaeda in Yemen. But the Threat Is Barely Dented,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Rinaldo Depagne, “Burkina Faso’s Alarming Escalation of Jihadist Violence,” International Crisis Group, March 5, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Yuhas, “How Yemen Spawned the *Charlie Hebdo* Attacks,” *The Guardian*, January 14, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Jason Burke, “Mogadishu Truck Bomb: 500 Casualties in Somalia’s Worst Terrorist Attack,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); see also “Iran Denies Saudi Allegations of Harboring bin Laden’s Son,” Reuters, March 20, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Scott-Clark and Levy, *The Exile*.  
<sup>15</sup> Country Reports on Terrorism 2017, “Chapter 2: State Sponsors of Terrorism,” Department of State, September 19, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Callum Paton, “Iran’s Secret Funding for Al-Qa’ida in Exchange for Attacks on U.S. Targets Exposed in Bin Laden Files,” *Newsweek*, November 2, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Most Wanted Terrorists, Saif Al-Adel, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

<sup>18</sup> Scott-Clark and Levy, *The Exile*.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Lister, “Al Qaeda Is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria,” *Foreign Policy*, May 4, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri, “America Is the First Enemy of the Muslims,” Eng. trans., As-Sahab Media, March 20, 2018; see also Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Tel Aviv Is also the Land of Muslims,” Eng. trans., As-Sahab Media, May 13, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Zawahiri, “America Is the First Enemy of the Muslims.”

<sup>22</sup> Olivier Monnier, “Islamic State, Al-Qa’ida Support Fuels Attacks in West Africa,” *Bloomberg.com*, February 5, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, “In Timbuktu, Al-Qa’ida Left Behind a Manifesto,” Associated Press, February 14, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Jami Forbes, “Revisiting the Mali al-Qa’ida Playbook: How the Group Is Advancing on Its Goals in the Sahel,” *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 9 (October 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Callimachi, “In Timbuktu, Al-Qa’ida Left Behind a Manifesto.”

<sup>27</sup> Nadia Khomami, “Burkina Faso Hotel Attack, at Least 18 Nationalities among Dead,” *The Guardian*, January 16, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Michael E. Miller, “Horror at the Beach: 22 Dead in Terrorist Attack on Ivory Coast Resorts,” *Washington Post*, March 14, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> “Hostages Shown in Al-Qa’ida Mali Video as Macron Flies In,” BBC News, July 2, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Callimachi, “In Timbuktu, Al-Qa’ida Left Behind a Manifesto.”

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Yemen’s Al-Qa’ida: Expanding the Base*, Report No. 174 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, February 2, 2017).

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By Joel Wuthnow



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