Testimony of Thomas Joscelyn

Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Senior Editor, The Long War Journal

Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade

United States Congress

"Global al-Qaeda: Affiliates, Objectives, and Future Challenges"

July 18, 2013

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Sherman and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the threat posed by al Qaeda. We have been asked to "examine the nature of global al Qaeda today." In particular, you asked us to answer the following questions: "What is [al Qaeda's] makeup? Is there a useful delineation between al Qaeda's core and its affiliates? If so, what is the relationship? Most importantly, what is the threat of al Qaeda to the United States today?"

I provide my answers to each of these questions in the following sections. But first, I will summarize my conclusions:

- More than a decade after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks there is no commonly accepted definition of al Qaeda. There is, in fact, widespread disagreement over what exactly al Qaeda is.

- In my view, al Qaeda is best defined as a global international terrorist network, with a general command in Afghanistan and Pakistan and affiliates in several countries. Together, they form a robust network that, despite setbacks, contests for territory abroad and still poses a threat to U.S. interests both overseas and at home.

- It does not make sense to draw a firm line between al Qaeda's "core," which is imprecisely defined, and the affiliates. The affiliates are not populated with automatons, but they are serving al Qaeda's broader goals. And al Qaeda has dispatched "core" members around the globe. As the 9/11 Commission found, Al Qaeda's senior leaders have always pursued a policy of geographic expansion. The emergence of formal affiliates, or branches, has been a core al Qaeda objective since the early 1990s. While the affiliates have varying degrees of capabilities, and devote most of their resources to fighting "over there," history demonstrates that the threat they pose "over here" can manifest itself at any time.

- In addition to its affiliates, al Qaeda operates as part of a "syndicate" in Central and South Asia. As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said in 2010, "A victory for one [member of the syndicate] is a victory for all." Al Qaeda and its allies control territory inside Afghanistan today. If additional parts of Afghanistan fall to the syndicate in the coming years, it will strengthen both al Qaeda's ideological messaging and operational capability.

What is al Qaeda?

This should be a straightforward question to answer. But in reality there is no commonly accepted understanding of al Qaeda. Writing in 2003, Bruce Hoffman wrote that there was

"[d]isagreement over precisely what al Qaeda is."[1] It is "remarkable," Hoffman noted, that "al Qaeda remains such a poorly understood phenomenon" even after the 9/11 attacks. Incredibly, any attempt to answer basic questions about al Qaeda's structure (similar to the ones proposed by this committee), "provokes more disagreement than agreement in government, intelligence, and academic circles."

Ten years later, Hoffman's words still ring true. In early 2013, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) commissioned a workshop of experts to assess the future of al Qaeda. CSIS was interested in how al Qaeda will adapt to the "death of Osama bin Laden, the popular uprisings spreading across the Middle East and North Africa, and the global recessionary pressures that are causing governments to re-evaluate their [counterterrorism] strategies." The final report issued at the conclusion of the workshop reads: "Workshop participants recognized that part of the challenge in imagining AQ's future lies in the very definition of AQ." Unsurprisingly, there was a "lack of consensus" among the experts. Echoing Hoffman's assessment a decade earlier, CSIS found: "How AQ adopts to the challenges and opportunities that will shape its next decade is a source of spirited debate amongst government officials, academic experts, think-tank analysts and private consultants."[2]

"At its broadest," the CSIS report's authors found, "the phenomenon includes a central group of senior leaders commonly referred to as AQ Core, regional affiliates which together with that core make up the AQ network, like-minded groups in the network's key operating areas (eg, fellow travelers), homegrown Islamist extremists in Western countries, sympathisers across the globe and the AQ ideology itself." Despite this complex mix, the workshop's participants concluded that the "AQ Core and its network affiliates" will have "the most profound" impact "on the broader phenomenon's future prospects." For the most part, I concur with the CSIS definition of al Qaeda.

The Al Qaeda Network

The backbone of today's al Qaeda consists of its "general command" in Afghanistan and Pakistan (others refer to this as the "AQ Core") and its formal affiliates. The established al Qaeda affiliates include: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Shabaab in Somalia. All of the affiliates have publicly sworn *bayat* (an oath of fealty) to al Qaeda's senior leadership. Jabhat al Nusra in Syria should also be included in this list as well, because the group has openly proclaimed its allegiance to Ayman al Zawahiri. Collectively, al Qaeda's general command and the affiliates form an international terrorist network that is focused on both

---

[1] Bruce Hoffman, "Al Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism and Future Potentialities: An Assessment," The Rand Corporation, 2003.

[2] Canadian Security Intelligence Service, "The Future of Al Qaeda: Results of a Foresight Project," World Watch: Expert Notes Series publication No. 2013-05-01, May 1, 2013; http://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/pblctns/cdmctrch/20130401_th_ftr_f_lgd-eng.asp.

acquiring territory and executing terrorist attacks against the West. There is evidence showing that al Qaeda's general command guides the overall strategy pursued by the affiliates and even sometimes gets involved in specific tactical matters. However, the affiliates enjoy a large degree of latitude in deciding how to run their day-to-day operations. Relentless pressure from the U.S. and its allies has repeatedly disrupted the network, making the general command's job more difficult.

In addition to the established affiliates, there are numerous associated jihadist organizations that the Al Qaeda Network either influences or outright directs without officially recognizing the group as an affiliate. Consider two brief examples. In Mali, AQIM has fought alongside Ansar al-Dine (AAD), which was designated a terrorist organization by the State Department in March.[3] At the time, the State Department noted that AAD "cooperates closely with" and "has received support from AQIM since its inception in late 2011." AAD "continues to maintain close ties" to AQIM and "has received backing from AQIM in its fight against Malian and French forces." Similarly, Boko Haram in Nigeria is not a formal al Qaeda affiliate, but according to the U.S. government the group has maintained ties to three affiliates. "There are reported communications, training, and weapons links between Boko Haram, al Qaida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Shabaab, and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which may strengthen Boko Haram's capacity to conduct terrorist attacks."[4]

Still other pro-al Qaeda organizations have emerged since the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring under the name Ansar al Sharia (Partisans of Sharia Law). The very first Ansar al Sharia was simply a rebranding of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula -- that is, it was a new name chosen by an established al Qaeda affiliate.[5] It is hardly surprising, therefore, to learn that other Ansar al Sharia chapters are run by jihadists with known ties to al Qaeda.

Ansar al Sharia Tunisia is headed by Seifallah ben Hassine (also known as Abu Iyad al Tunisi), who has been designated by United Nations as a terrorist.[6] Ben Hassine previously established the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), "in coordination with" al Qaeda, according to the UN. Ben Hassine has known ties to a constellation of al Qaeda terrorists, including the group's senior leaders, and the TCG played a key role in the September 2001 assassination of Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Massoud. Other UN-designated al Qaeda terrorists hold leadership positions within Ansar al Sharia Tunisia, too.[7] Ansar al Sharia Egypt is led by Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ)

---

[3] U.S. Department of State Media Note, Office of the Spokesperson, "Terrorist Designations of Ansar al-Dine," March 21, 2013; http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/03/206493.htm.
[4] http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/index.cfm?page=shekau&language=english (last accessed July 16, 2013).
[5] Thomas Joscelyn, "State Department: Ansar al Sharia an alias for AQAP," *The Long War Journal*, October 4, 2012; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/state_department_ans.php.
[6] Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda ally orchestrated assault on US Embassy in Tunisia," *The Long War Journal*, October 2, 2012; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/al_qaeda_ally_orches.php.
[7] Thomas Joscelyn, "From al Qaeda in Italy to Ansar al Sharia Tunisia," *The Long War Journal*, November 21, 2012; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/from_al_qaeda_in_ita.php.

leaders who have remained loyal to al Qaeda emir Ayman al Zawahiri.[8] Ayman's younger brother, Mohammed al Zawahiri, has played a starring role at Ansar al Sharia Egypt's events. Other Ansar al Sharia chapters, including inside Libya, have known al Qaeda ties as well. The groups calling themselves Ansar al Sharia are all open about their support for al Qaeda's agenda. We cannot rule out that the possibility that these organizations are simply al Qaeda's attempt at rebranding. It is easy to connect the dots.

The point is that outside of the formal affiliates, the Al Qaeda Network holds sway over dozens of organizations that are, at a minimum, ideological kinsmen. We often cannot see the operational ties between these groups because al Qaeda still maintains a substantial clandestine apparatus that is tasked with hiding such relationships. For some of these organizations, there may very well be no concrete ties and their relationship to al Qaeda's jihad is purely rhetorical.

The al Qaeda-led 'syndicate' in Afghanistan and Pakistan

In Central and South Asia, al Qaeda has forged what former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has called a "syndicate" of terrorist groups.[9] "What we see is that the success of any one of these groups leads to new capabilities and a new reputation for all," Gates said during a press conference in 2010. "A victory for one is a victory for all."

Gates continued: "It's dangerous to single out any one of these groups and say if we could beat that group that will solve the problem. Because they are, in effect, a syndicate of terrorist operators." Gates blamed al Qaeda for orchestrating the syndicate's attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The "syndicate" description remains apt today, as there is no evidence that this coalition has frayed in the wake of al Qaeda's senior leadership losses.[10]

Consider this brief sketch of the main groups that belong to the syndicate.

In Afghanistan, al Qaeda has fought alongside the Taliban since the mid-1990s. Before the September 11 attacks, Osama bin Laden established the 55th Arab Brigade to serve as al Qaeda's contribution to the Taliban's side in Afghanistan's bloody civil war. The 55th was crushed during the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001, but was later reconstituted as part of the Lashkar al Zil, or "Shadow Army."[11] This paramilitary fighting force is still very much alive.

---

[8] Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar al Sharia Egypt founder 'honored to be an extension of al Qaeda,'" *The Long War Journal*, November 27, 2012; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/ansar_al_sharia_egyp.php.
[9] Craig Whitlock, "Gates: Al-Qaeda has assembled a 'syndicate' of terror groups," *Washington Post*, January 20, 2010; http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2010-01-20/world/36888348_1_qaeda-al-qaeda-syndicate-of-terrorist-operators.
[10] Al Qaeda can also be described as the tip of the jihadist spear. For an analysis of al Qaeda's relationships with various other jihadist organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, see: Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Analysis: Al Qaeda is the tip of the jihadist spear," *The Long War Journal*, October 8, 2009; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/10/analysis_al_qaeda_is.php.
[11] Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda's paramilitary 'Shadow Army'," *The Long War Journal*, February 9, 2009; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/02/al_qaedas_paramilita.php.

The U.S. has targeted members of the "Shadow Army" in recent weeks.[12] And, in early June, the U.S. Treasury Department added an al Qaeda explosives expert to its list of designated terrorists. This expert, a Libyan, is "in charge of IED component construction at the AQ electronics workshop" and has "provided AQ paramilitary brigades in Afghanistan with timers, circuits, mines, and remote control devices for use in IEDs."[13] Senior Taliban commanders continue to facilitate al Qaeda operations inside Afghanistan as well.[14]

Other groups fighting in Afghanistan, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), have long been part of al Qaeda's plan.[15] The IMU operates throughout the country, as well as in Pakistan, and also maintains a facilitation network in neighboring Iran. The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), a splinter of the IMU, continues to fight alongside other al Qaeda-affiliate parties and take part in anti-Western plotting. Allies such as the Eastern Turkish Islamic Party (ETIP) provide fighters and leaders for the syndicate, too.

In Pakistan, al Qaeda helped establish the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), or Pakistani Taliban, which has unleashed a prolific terror campaign inside Pakistan, fought in Afghanistan, and even exported its operations elsewhere around the globe. Recent reports indicate that the TTP has sent a contingent to Syria, but some within the TTP have denied that claim. As recognized by the State Department, the TTP is clearly a part of al Qaeda's camp as the two maintain a "symbiotic relationship."[16]

---

[12] Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda 'paramilitary commander,' Haqqani Network leader reported killed in recent drone strike," *The Long War Journal*, July 6, 2013; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/07/al_qaeda_military_co.php. See also: Patrick Megahan and Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda facilitator targeted in eastern Afghanistan," *The Long War Journal*, June 15, 2013; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/al_qaeda_facilitator_2.php.

[13] U.S. Department of the Treasury Press Release, "Treasury Designates Senior Al-Qa'ida Bomb Maker," June 6, 2013; http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl1973.aspx.

[14] See, for instance: Patrick Megahan and Bill Roggio, "ISAF targets al Qaeda facilitator in eastern Afghanistan," *The Long War Journal*, May 17, 2003; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/05/isaf_targets_al_qaed_6.php.

[15] *The Long War Journal*'s regular review of press releases from NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has revealed a staggering degree of coordination between the IMU and al Qaeda, as well as other insurgent groups. Osama bin Laden helped convince the Taliban to host the IMU in the late 1990s. See Rashid, Ahmed. *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*. Penguin Books: 2003. Page 229. ("Bin Laden has encouraged the Taliban leaders to embrace a pan-Islamic ideology; for example, he played a key role in persuading the Taliban to give sanctuary to the IMU in 1999.") For another good description of al Qaeda's influence on the IMU see the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) database: http://www.start.umd.edu/start/data_collections/tops/terrorist_organization_profile.asp?id=4075 (last accessed July 16, 2013).

[16] According to the State Department, "TTP [Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan] and al Qaeda have a symbiotic relationship; TTP draws ideological guidance from al Qaeda, while al Qaeda relies on TTP for safe haven in the Pashtun areas along the Afghan-Pakistani border. This mutual cooperation gives TTP access to both al Qaeda's global terrorist network and the operational experience of its members. Given the proximity of the two groups and the nature of their relationship, TTP is a force multiplier for al Qaeda." Philip J. Crowley, "Designations of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan and Two Senior Leaders," State Department Press Statement, September 1, 2010; http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/09/146545.htm .

The Haqqani Network, straddling the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan, remains one of al Qaeda's most important allies. The Haqqanis provide not only key logistical support for the syndicate's Afghan-focused operations, but also a safe haven from which al Qaeda can direct attacks against the West. As the authors of a recent, in-depth profile of the Haqqani Network concluded, "the Haqqani Network has long served as a local enabler of al Qaeda and its global jihad."[17] A string of plots against Europe and the U.S. have been traced to Haqqani-controlled territory.[18]

Other Pakistan-based, al Qaeda-allied groups include: Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI), Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). All of these groups have decades-old ties to al Qaeda, and have cooperated with al Qaeda in operations. These organizations have provided al Qaeda with a deep roster of skilled operatives who have replaced fallen terrorist commanders.

What is the relationship between al Qaeda's "core" and the affiliates?

All of the established al Qaeda affiliates – Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Shabaab and, I would add, Jabhat al Nusra in Syria – have sworn an oath of *bayat* (loyalty) to al Qaeda's general command and Ayman Zawahiri. As Osama bin Laden's chief co-conspirator, Zawahiri was involved in all facets of al Qaeda's operations, from strategic questions to attack planning. Prior to the slaying of bin Laden: Zawahiri negotiated mergers with al Qaeda affiliates (such as AQIM), reprimanded problematic commanders (such as deceased AQI head Abu Musab al Zarqawi), and oversaw at least parts of al Qaeda's international operations (from calling off a planned 2003 attack on New York City's subways to orchestrating other attacks).

It is impossible to assess how frequently the affiliates are in contact with the general command, as much of that data is not available to the outside world. But Zawahiri is in charge of the Al Qaeda Network. The affiliates recognize Zawahiri as their leader, even when they disagree with his decisions. And Zawahiri is still communicating with his subordinates, even if his missives are delayed due to security concerns. For instance, Zawahiri communicated with one of his Egyptian followers, Muhammad Jamal al Kashef, in 2011 and 2012.[19]

---

[17] Brown, Vahid and Rassler, Don. *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. P. 229.
[18] Ibid. pp. 229 – 233.
[19] Thomas Joscelyn, "Communications with Ayman al Zawahiri highlighted in 'Nasr City cell' case," *The Long War Journal*, February 10, 2013; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/02/communications_with.php.

In April and May of this year, Zawahiri sent messages to, and received replies from, the heads of al Qaeda's affiliates in Iraq and Syria.[20] Those communications revealed a serious dispute between the emirs of al Qaeda in Iraq and Jabhat al Nusra over who commands al Qaeda's growing army in Syria. Zawahiri ruled in Jabhat al Nusra's favor, but the head of al Qaeda in Iraq subsequently defied Zawahiri's order.[21] It remains to be seen how this dispute is worked out, but it should be noted that the squabble is over al Qaeda's successful growth inside Syria. In other words, they are not arguing over who owns an unsuccessful franchise. And even with AQI's open defiance, Jabhat al Nusra has proven to be extremely deferential to Zawahiri. Despite AQI's rancor, Al Qaeda's general command has gained a new affiliate inside Syria since late 2011. To put it another way, suppose Zawahiri were to entirely lose AQI's loyalty (so far, there is no reason to believe this is the case), he has still gained Jabhat al Nusra.

Another serious dispute has erupted in Somalia, where Shabaab's leadership has reportedly executed al Qaeda operatives with well-established pedigrees, including Ibrahim al Afghani. This cannot please al Qaeda's general command, as al Afghani was loyal to al Qaeda during the Battle of Tora Bora and the years that followed.

The Al Qaeda Network is not comprised of automatons. Like all manmade organizations, the terror network houses personalities who may clash and sometimes have competing interests. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the network has "fragmented" or "splintered," as some analysts contend. Keep in mind this striking example: Prior to 9/11 there was a significant amount of internal dissent over whether al Qaeda should launch its most devastating attack in history. The 9/11 attacks became al Qaeda's signature strike, and yet several high-level al Qaeda members disagreed with bin Laden's decision to move forward with the operation. This did not force these senior jihadists outside of al Qaeda's ranks. In fact, some of them went on to praise the 9/11 attacks after the fact while maintaining their leadership positions.

Since its inception in the late 1980s, al Qaeda has faced substantial hurdles. Yet, the organization has proven to be remarkably adaptive, in part, because its leaders devised a strong plan for broadening their base of support within the jihadist world and beyond. The plan relies upon loyal followers throughout the world, not just in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The al Qaeda "core" is imprecisely defined.

There is no standardized definition of al Qaeda's "core." In general, when U.S. officials and independent analysts use this term, it appears that they are referring to al Qaeda's senior leadership in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which is headed by al Qaeda emir Ayman al Zawahiri. The al Qaeda honcho is, in turn, served by several committees and an unknown number of advisers. As far as I can tell, this is what is meant by the "core" of al Qaeda. As I've made clear

---

[20] Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Zawahiri's letter to al Qaeda branches in Syria, Iraq," *The Long War Journal*, June 10, 2013; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/analysis_alleged_let.php.
[21] Thomas Joscelyn, "Islamic State of Iraq leader defies Zawahiri in alleged audio message," *The Long War Journal*, June 15, 2013; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/islamic_state_of_ira_3.php.

in my testimony, I prefer the term "general command" to "core" (which I have used elsewhere) as this is what is used in al Qaeda's own correspondence.

It does not make any sense to assume that "core" al Qaeda members, as they are commonly referred to, are confined to Pakistan and Afghanistan. We know, for example, that al Qaeda's senior leaders have dispatched or otherwise rely upon numerous terrorists around the world to do their bidding, both as part of the group's operational cells, as well as within the Al Qaeda Network's affiliates. Consider the following examples.

Headquartered in Yemen, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is led by Nasir al Wuhayshi, a terrorist who served as Osama bin Laden's aide-de-camp for several years prior to 9/11. Wuhayshi was bin Laden's protégé and remained loyal to the al Qaeda master even through the darkest times, including the Battle of Tora Bora in late 2001, when all could have been lost. Bin Laden later returned the favor, rejecting a plea by some AQAP members to replace Wuhayshi as their leader with Anwar al Awlaki, the charismatic al Qaeda ideologue who has since been killed in a drone strike. Some of Wuhayshi's most trusted lieutenants, including several former Guantanamo detainees, also served al Qaeda in Afghanistan well before the 9/11 attacks. Together, they are advancing al Qaeda's global jihadist agenda, simultaneously fighting for territory inside Yemen while overseeing plots against the United States.

According to the Obama administration, the terrorist who leads al Qaeda's network inside Iran today is a Kuwaiti named Muhsin al Fadhli. Few al Qaeda terrorists were trusted with foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks; al Fadhli was one of them. The network that al Fadhli oversees is the result of an agreement with the Iranian regime that was brokered by Osama bin Laden's right-hand man, who traveled to and from Iran. This Iran-based network serves as a "core" pipeline for al Qaeda's senior leadership. At least several important al Qaeda operatives have served this Iran-based network while living in other Gulf countries. After 9/11, numerous al Qaeda leaders, including members of the group's management and military councils, fled to Iran where some were held under house arrest. One of these senior al Qaeda members is Saif al Adel, who has since been allowed to leave Iran, although it is unclear where he is currently stationed. Al Adel and his ilk did not cease being "core" al Qaeda members simply because they fled to Iran after the fall of the Taliban's Afghanistan.

A Defense Department report ("Al Qaeda in Libya: A Profile") published by the Library of Congress in August 2012 identified at least two senior operatives who were dispatched to Libya to oversee al Qaeda's efforts there. The first is known as Abu Anas al Libi, who was long ago convicted of terrorism charges for his role in al Qaeda's 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Abu Anas is coordinating his efforts with al Qaeda's senior leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The second terrorist identified in the report, Abd al Baset Azzouz, was sent to Libya by Ayman al Zawahiri. Another al Qaeda terrorist who was not identified in the Defense Department's report, but is known to operate inside Libya, is Faraj al Chalabi (or al Shibli), who

was detained earlier this year after returning to Libya from Pakistan.[22] Al Chalabi may have been involved in the September 11, 2012, terrorist attack in Benghazi.

In March, the State Department offered a $5 million reward for information leading to the capture of an American known as Jehad Mostafa, who is believed to be Ayman al Zawahiri's emissary to Shabaab, al Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia. Shabaab is currently engaged in serious infighting and it is not publicly known how Mostafa's role has been affected.

There are credible reports that senior al Qaeda operatives, including a member of the group's Shura council, have gone to Syria. And Ayman al Zawahiri has appointed a longtime al Qaeda operative known as Abu Khalid al Suri to resolve the dispute between Jabhat al Nusra and al Qaeda in Iraq.

Other core al Qaeda members have returned to their home countries in the wake of the Arab Spring. One declassified Abbottabad document shows that Osama bin Laden recommended that a terrorist named Mohammed Islambouli leave northern Pakistan for Kunar, Afghanistan. Mohammed's brother, Khaled Islambouli, was the assassin who killed Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. While bin Laden was willing to lose some al Qaeda leaders, he was not willing to lose Mohammed Islambouli, who is the equivalent of royalty in jihadist circles and is today a free man inside Egypt, where is joined by other Zawahiri loyalists who have either been freed from prison or returned from abroad.

Nasir al Wuhayshi, Muhsin al Fadhli, Abu Anas al Libi, Abd al Baset Azzouz, Jehad Mostafa, Abu Khalid al Suri, Mohammed Islambouli: These are just some of the men who can be counted on to advance al Qaeda's agenda outside Afghanistan and Pakistan. It does not make sense to consider them anything but "core" al Qaeda members.

Al Qaeda's Affiliate Strategy

The emergence of al Qaeda's affiliates is no accident. Al Qaeda has always sought to push forward its agenda by working with, co-opting, or otherwise directing like-minded jihadist groups. The principal Al Qaeda organization – its general command – is itself a joint venture, which bin Laden's organization and Ayman al Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) forged through a merger.

Al Qaeda began laying the groundwork for the emergence of its affiliates in the early 1990s.[23] Bin Laden was headquartered in Sudan at the time and, according to the 9/11 Commission, "had a vision of himself as head of an international jihad confederation." Bin Laden established an "Islamic Army Shura," which "was to serve as the coordinating body for the consortium of

---

[22] Thomas Joscelyn, "Benghazi suspect fled to Pakistan, recently detained in Libya," *The Long War Journal*, March 14, 2013; http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/03/al_qaeda-linked_beng.php
[23] My colleague at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Jonathan Schanzer, has written an excellent primer on how al Qaeda's affiliates began to develop. Schanzer, Jonathan. *Al-Qaeda's Armies: Middle East Affiliate Groups & The Next Generation of Terror*. Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2004.

terrorist groups with he which he was forging alliances." The Shura "was composed of his own al Qaeda Shura together with leaders or representatives of terrorist organizations that were still independent." [24]

As part of this Islamic army, bin Laden "enlisted groups from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Oman, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Somalia, and Eritrea." The burgeoning al Qaeda network "also established cooperative but less formal relationships with other extremist groups from these same countries; from the African states of Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Uganda; and from the Southeast Asian states of Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia." Al Qaeda also supported efforts in the Balkans, Central Asia, Chechnya, and the Philippines. Bin Laden and al Qaeda pursued a "pattern of expansion through building alliances" and had laid the "groundwork for a true global terrorist network"[25]

In 1996, bin Laden was forced to leave the Sudan for Pakistan and then Afghanistan. But al Qaeda's strategy of alliance building continued. The 9/11 Commission wrote: "The alliance with the Taliban provided al Qaeda a sanctuary in which to train and indoctrinate fighters and terrorists, import weapons, forge ties with other jihad groups and leaders, and plot and staff terrorist schemes."[26] In addition to maintaining his own facilities, bin Laden "also provided support to and benefited from the broad infrastructure of such facilities in Afghanistan made available to the global network of Islamist estimates."[27] During this period in Afghanistan, al Qaeda continued "to collaborate closely with the many Middle Eastern groups – in Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Somalia, and elsewhere – with which it had been linked when Bin Ladin was in Sudan."[28] And al Qaeda "reinforced" and "bolstered" its ties to still other groups.

It is estimated that from 1996 to September 11, 2001, between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters "underwent instruction in Bin Laden-supported camps in Afghanistan," with only some becoming full-fledged al Qaeda members. The remaining newly-trained jihadists were a "potential resource for al Qaeda." [29]

The connection between bin Laden's original plan, which evolved through the years, and the emergence of al Qaeda's affiliates has not been lost on outside observers. In 2011, a Congressional Research Service report noted: "In many ways, the dispersion of Al Qaeda affiliates fits into the larger strategy of Bin Laden and his associates. They have sought to serve as the vanguard of a religious movement that inspires Muslims and other individuals aspiring to

---

[24] 9/11 Commission Report, p. 58.
[25] *Ibid*.
[26] 9/11 Commission Report, p. 66.
[27] 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 66 -- 67.
[28] 9/11 Commission Report, p. 67.
[29] *Ibid*.

join a jihadi movement to help defend and purify Islam through violent means."[30] After all, the name "Qaeda" means "base," from "which its members hope to build a robust, geographically diverse network." [31]

What is the threat of al Qaeda to the United States today?

Today, the Al Qaeda Network is more geographically diverse than ever. Al Qaeda and its affiliates are fighting in more countries than at any other time before or after 9/11. It has several established affiliates, which it lacked on September 11, 2001. The ebb and flow of fighting changes the scope of al Qaeda's footprint on a regular basis, but the network has shown the capacity to challenge for territory across Africa, through the Middle East and into Central and South Asia. Meanwhile, al Qaeda's general command maintains safe havens in the Kunar and Nuristan provinces of Afghanistan today.

It is true that al Qaeda's affiliates allocate most of their resources to waging guerilla warfare against their "local" enemies. But if we have learned anything since 9/11 it is that the gains made by al Qaeda "over there" can easily lead to a threat against Americans "over here."[32] Indeed, al Qaeda's expansion in recent years has led to more threats against the U.S. Homeland, not less.

Here are four examples.

First, AQAP has emerged as a threat to the U.S. Homeland. AQAP was decimated after 2003 by a relentless counterterrorism campaign. But in early 2009 the group was reborn after al Qaeda's Saudi and Yemeni wings united. By December 25, 2009, AQAP had placed a suicide bomber on board a Detroit-bound plane. Luck and the vigilance of the passengers on board Flight 253 saved the day. Prior to the Christmas Day bombing attempt, many counterterrorism analysts assumed that AQAP was only interested in attacking targets inside Yemen. Several attempted attacks by AQAP have followed that initial failure.

Second, months later, in May 2010, the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) dispatched a terrorist to Times Square. The SUV bomb did not go off, saving numerous lives. The Pakistani Taliban is the same group, discussed above, that shares a "symbiotic relationship" with al Qaeda. The Pakistani Taliban's resources are devoted, by and large, to operations inside Pakistan and Afghanistan. And yet the group almost detonated a truck bomb in the heart of New York.

Third, on April 22 of this year, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) announced that they had disrupted an al Qaeda plot to derail a passenger train traveling from New York to

---

[30] John Rollins, "Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, January 25, 2011.

[31] *Ibid*.

[32] The "over there"-"over here" dynamic was first employed by the 9/11 Commission. See 9/11 Commission Report, p. 367.

Toronto. This was the first known al Qaeda plot against Canada since 9/11. RCMP officials said the plotters received "direction and guidance" from al Qaeda members in Iran.

Fourth, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) has had a hand in plots against the West. In 2004, according to the Department of Homeland Security, Osama bin Laden instructed then AQI emir Abu Musab al Zarqawi to assemble a cell capable of striking the U.S. In 2007, failed attacks in London and Glasgow were tied back to AQI.[33] And in June of this year Iraqi officials claimed to have disrupted a sarin and mustard gas plot that was intended to target Iraq, Europe and the U.S.[34]

Luckily, these plots have either been foiled or failed for other reasons. It has always been difficult to mount a large-casualty attack against the U.S. Homeland. But the diversity of attempted attacks against the U.S. Homeland demonstrates that while the Al Qaeda Network is fighting for territory "over there," it remains a threat to Americans "over here."

---

[33] Raymond Bonner, Jane Perlez and Eric Schmitt, "British Inquiry of Failed Plots Points to Iraq's Qaeda Group," *The New York Times*, December 14, 2007;
http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/14/world/europe/14london.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.
[34] Bill Roggio, "Iraq breaks up al Qaeda chemical weapons cell," *The Long War Journal*, June 1, 2013;
http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/iraq_breaks_up_al_qa.php.