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Winning? Grading the Administration’s Counterterrorism Policy”

**Missing the Target:  
Why the U.S. Has Not Defeated al Qaeda**

Frederick W. Kagan

Christopher DeMuth Chair and Director, Critical Threats Project

American Enterprise Institute

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American Enterprise Institute*

All conditions are set for a series of significant terrorist attacks against the US and its allies over the next few years. But that's not the worst news. Conditions are also set for state collapse in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and possibly Jordan. Saudi Arabia, facing a complex succession soon, is likely to acquire nuclear weapons shortly, if it has not already done so. Turkey and Egypt confront major crises. Almost all of Northern and Equatorial Africa is violent, unstable, and facing a growing al Qaeda threat. And Vladimir Putin's assault on Ukraine is likely to empower al Qaeda-aligned jihadists in Crimea and in Russia itself. That eventuality is, of course, less worrisome than the prospect of conventional and partisan war on the European continent, likely threatening NATO allies. The international order and global stability are collapsing in a way we have not seen since the 1930s. There is little prospect of this trend reversing of its own accord, and managing it will require massive efforts by the US and its allies over a generation or more.

This distressing context is essential for considering the al Qaeda threat today. On the one hand, it makes that threat look small. The long-term effects of global chaos and conflict among hundreds of millions of people across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East on US security, interests, and way of life are surely greater than any damage al Qaeda is likely to do to us in the immediate future. Yet the two threats feed each other powerfully. Disorder and conflict in the Muslim world breed support for al Qaeda, which is starting to look like the strong horse in Iraq and even in Syria. Al Qaeda groups and their allies, on the other hand, powerfully contribute to the collapse of state structures and the emergence of horrific violence and Hobbesian chaos wherever they operate. They are benefiting greatly from the regional sectarian war they intentionally triggered (the destruction of the Samarra Mosque in 2006 was only the most spectacular of a long series of efforts by al Qaeda in Iraq to goad Iraq's Shi'a into sectarian conflict, for which some Shi'a militants, to be sure, were already preparing)—and have been continuing to fuel. Al Qaeda is like a virulent pathogen that opportunistically attacks bodies weakened by internal strife and poor governance, but that further weakens those bodies and infects others that would not otherwise have been susceptible to the disease. The problem of al Qaeda cannot be separated from the other crises of our age, nor can it be quarantined or rendered harmless through targeted therapies that ignore the larger problems.

Yet that is precisely how the Obama administration has been trying to deal with al Qaeda. Neither the White House nor the intelligence community has offered anything approaching a clear definition of al Qaeda, as a forthcoming paper by Mary Habeck from AEI's Critical Threats Project (CTP) shows in detail. But such statements as the Administration has made—and its actions and inactions, which speak louder than its words—make the scope of its definition pretty clear. This White House, like its predecessor, focuses on al Qaeda as a terrorist group aiming to attack the US homeland. It appears to have narrowed the scope of what it considers to be al Qaeda even more than did the Bush Administration, by observing an extremely limited and legalistic reading of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) resolution that requires individuals and groups to have been al Qaeda members on 9/11/2001. There are several

problems with this approach that ensure that it will be ineffective against al Qaeda in the long run.

To begin with, this administration is compounding an important mistake made by the Bush White House by seeing al Qaeda as a terrorist group. It certainly is that, of course, but that is not its main focus. As my fellow panelists and many other colleagues have shown, al Qaeda never conceived of itself as a terrorist group and has long devoted the lion's share of its global resources to what it regards as its main effort—seizing and governing terrain and populations in the Muslim world. Al Qaeda has always seen itself as a global insurgency that uses terrorism, and its ability to field small irregular armies in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere demonstrates the seriousness with which it takes that self-conception.

Mis-defining al Qaeda as a US-focused terrorist group has important ramifications for US policy. It encourages the belief that the "real" threat from the "real" al Qaeda—that is the portion of the group actively planning and preparing for further attacks on the US—is very small and susceptible to attrition and disruption by targeted strikes. The corollary is that the much larger, more organizationally-sophisticated, better-equipped, and wealthier "franchises" such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or the erstwhile al Qaeda in Iraq are either not "real" al Qaeda groups or are part of the network in a way that means that the US can largely disregard them as threats apart from isolated individuals within them, who can be removed as needed.

Since al Qaeda does not define itself in this way, it should be no surprise that it has not behaved as expected in the face of the massive attrition of its "core group" largely in Pakistan. The killing of Osama bin Laden certainly warranted a victory lap, although not one as grandiose and full of leaks of highly-sensitive details as this White House took. But the sequel highlights the falsity of the narrow conception of the threat. If al Qaeda really were a small group of extremists hiding out in the mountains—or villas—of Pakistan and dreaming of flying planes into more American buildings, then the death of bin Laden and the deaths of most of the leaders who were active in 2001 should have demoralized the group and its supporters. Al Qaeda's failure, despite repeated efforts, to carry off any other mass-casualty attacks in the US should also have been devastating to group cohesion, support, morale, and activity. Above all, it should have damaged the al Qaeda brand severely. Al Qaeda supporters are fanatics, and in some cases, willing to die (although not the leaders, interestingly, who take great pains to avoid the martyrdom toward which they encourage their followers), but they don't like losing any more than normal people do. On the contrary, Islam has a very strong tradition of seeing divine blessing or curse manifested in this-worldly success or failure.

Yet the brand is spreading like wildfire, the groups affiliating themselves with it control more fighters, land, and wealth than they ever have, and they are opening up new fronts. The Syrian civil war—and the refusal of this White House and the West generally to support the moderate Sunni opposition materially and meaningfully early on, has allowed and encouraged the emergence of a new al Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al Nusra (JN), alongside al Qaeda in Iraq, which

precociously and mutinously now calls itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS; al Sham refers to the land that is now both Syria and Lebanon). African Union forces drove affiliate al Shabaab from many of its strongholds in Somalia, although it is fighting to defend those it still has and to regain some of the ground it has lost. But al Shabaab has also metastasized throughout the region, activating and expanding cells in Kenya (such as the one that conducted the Westgate Mall attack), in Burundi, and in Uganda.

AQIM has seen the most dramatic expansion of its capabilities and operating area of any al Qaeda franchise in recent years. Not long ago, AQIM was little more than a small terrorist cell sitting atop a large kidnap-for-ransom and smuggling apparatus. Now it is a fighting force organized into “battalions” and “brigades” that operate in Algeria, Tunisia, Mali, and Libya. AQIM has excelled at putting sub-components through branding bankruptcy periodically, presenting a bewildering array of group names. But as a recent product by CTP's Andreas Hagen shows, the human networks have remained the same despite multiple rebrandings.<sup>1</sup>

AQIM, ISIS, JN, AQAP (al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), al Shabaab, the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus, and the rest of the al Qaeda alphabet soup, are primarily engaged in regional conflicts to which they devote the overwhelming proportion of their resources. The Obama administration has consistently indicated that it does not see those “locally-focused” groups as major threats to the US or even, depending on the briefer, part of the “real” al Qaeda. Katherine Zimmerman, Senior Analyst and al Qaeda Team Lead at the Critical Threats Project, has shown the degree to which such a parsing of the networks is simply wrong.<sup>2</sup> The very fact that all of these groups retain their formal al Qaeda affiliations and branding speaks volumes.

Jihadist leaders are evil and, by our standards, insane. That does not mean they are stupid. They are well aware that any individual or group claiming to be part of al Qaeda is considerably more likely to be targeted by the US and many other states. They have even discussed such things—bin Laden opposed formally recognizing al Shabaab as an affiliate for fear of attracting attention to it. But the group continued to clamor for al Qaeda recognition, which bin Laden's successor, Ayman al Zawahiri, granted shortly after taking power. Jabhat al Nusra in Syria tried for some time to obfuscate its relationship with al Qaeda in order to portray itself as a Syrian nationalist group. Its leadership (and Zawahiri) was incensed when ISIS declared itself the single al Qaeda franchise in both Iraq and Syria, forcing JN to publicly accept or repudiate its al Qaeda affiliate status. JN not only affirmed its status, but also appealed to Zawahiri rather publicly to mediate the dispute with ISIS—which he did, ineffectively, ultimately “expelling” ISIS from al Qaeda, although the effects of that “expulsion” remain unclear.

The Syria case put sharply the issue of al Qaeda membership. JN recognized that al Qaeda is regarded throughout the Muslim world not simply as a radical Sunni fighting force, but also as an ideology with regional and global aspirations. All al Qaeda affiliates know that membership in the group antagonizes other local fighting groups and some local populations (there have been anti-ISIS popular uprisings in Syria, in fact), as well as exposing them to Western attack. Yet

they fight—literally in the case of Syria—to retain the affiliation and reaffirm it when publicly challenged. Why?

None of the possible answers support the current Administration assessments of al Qaeda or the current strategy. Affiliates are certainly not fighting to join and stay with a group and brand they believe is "on its last legs" or losing or about to lose. Neither are they driven by any local imperatives, since those imperatives drive the other way. They surely are not taking risks and paying a price to be part of a group whose networks, leadership, shared resources, and cooperation are as tenuous and limited as some analysts have suggested. We should be comfortable with the idea that their motivations seem crazy to us, but not with the idea that they are just plain dumb.

There are two major reasons that make sense for groups to show this degree of loyalty to al Qaeda, and they are not mutually-exclusive: the affiliates get something from membership and/or they really believe in the ideology. The something they get is likely money in the form of donations from wealthy Gulfis who believe in and value the brand and the human networks that control it. Flows of "foreign fighters" from around the Muslim world are directed in part by the al Qaeda networks in ways that can favor or disadvantage particular local groups. Those fighters bring zeal, expertise, money, and, frequently, either the desire for martyrdom or the psychological weaknesses upon which skilled handlers can play to produce suicide bombers. But the affiliates seem also to seek some form of group governance that leads groups like JN to imagine that Zawahiri can and will mediate on their behalf with other affiliates. All these benefits suggest a network and leadership that is real enough to be worth risking life and group success to be part of.

We should also seriously consider the possibility that they really believe in the ideology, and, specifically in the part that is most dangerous to us. The global (and anti-US) objectives that lead to efforts to attack the US and Europe are precisely the things that distinguish the al Qaeda brand of Sunni violent extremism from all others. If you're just a *takfiri* who wants to make all women wear burqas, stop people from smoking, and implement a distorted and draconian interpretation of something you call Shari'a law, you do not need to join al Qaeda. Plenty of extremist groups have those goals, and some, like the Afghan Taliban, explicitly reject al Qaeda's global aims (without, however, repudiating its ties to al Qaeda in the Taliban's case). The ideological reason for joining al Qaeda is precisely because you believe in global jihad at some point, even if you are currently caught up in local struggles. Sound threat assessment therefore requires assuming that affiliates that have consciously chosen to adhere to this global objective do, in fact, intend to attack the US and its allies at some point or at least to support such attacks. From which it follows that the capabilities those groups are developing may be used in the future to facilitate such attacks.

And that is the most worrying thing of all, since multiple affiliates have shown the ability to plan and execute year-long campaigns at the operational level of war integrating improvised explosive

devices (IEDs), car bombs, suicide attacks, light infantry operations, crew-served weapons, and even, on limited occasions, armored vehicles. Nothing would please the US military more, of course, than the fielding of an al Qaeda armored division, which we could easily destroy even after the foolish decision to retire the A-10 without replacement. Nor will al Qaeda find it easy to set up vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) cells or infantry training centers in the US. The skills they have shown in planning, logistics, communications, direction and control of operations, training, and adaptability, however, are all transferable. The transfer has, in fact, already begun as fighters from Syria, Iraq, and the Maghreb have started to return to their homes in Europe, Ukraine, and Russia—and the U.S. The U.S. intelligence community has put the number of foreign fighters in Syria at around 7,000. What will happen when a lot of them start going home? The good news is that the al Qaeda of 2001 is gone; the bad news is that Son of al Qaeda is a lot more lethal.

No discussion of the al Qaeda threat these days can be complete without considering the nature of our defenses. Here conditions are parlous and getting worse. I will not get into the merits of the debate over civil liberties, what the NSA is or is not doing, how complete or accurate is the Senate report on CIA interrogations, or what should be done about any of these important issues. Torture is bad and should be forbidden, and we can have a sensible conversation about where to draw the line. Civil liberties are vital to the American way of life and must be protected, even at the cost of greater risk to life and limb. Again, we can and must have a sensible discussion about how to draw the balance.

But NSA operations are already being curtailed by White House fiat even before we have completed that national discussion, and the CIA bids fair to become the “Central Self-Defense Agency” in the face of this Senate report. So the guardians on whom we rely to see and understand the minute changes in intent that alone distinguish potential from actual threats posed by al Qaeda groups with expanding capabilities will be distracted by internal debates, attacks, and requirements just as the danger grows most acute. And they will be further distracted by dramatic budget reductions that also constrain their abilities to keep up with the evolving threats. That is why I began this statement by saying that all conditions are set for future attacks. The threat is growing in size and capability while we are dismantling our defenses. Surely we should consider other approaches, and soon.

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Hagen, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Leaders and their Networks,” AEI’s Critical Threats Project, March 27, 2014, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/al-qaeda/hagen-aqim-leaders-and-networks-march-27-2014>.

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Zimmerman, “The al Qaeda Network: A New Framework for Defining the Enemy,” AEI’s Critical Threats Project, September 10, 2013, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/al-qaeda/zimmerman-al-qaeda-network-new-framework-defining-enemy-september-10-2013>