



AL-QAEDA

Quick Facts

Geographical Areas of Operation: East Asia, Eurasia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, North America, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa.

Numerical Strength: Exact numbers unknown

Leadership: Ayman al-Zawahiri

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

Source: The Counter Extremism Project, 2016

INTRODUCTION

Al-Qaeda remains arguably one of the most notorious Islamist terrorist groups in existence today, and today the extent of its rise in global strength has become clearer than ever to observers. The 2007–09 defeat of its major affiliate, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI, which would later become the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS) spurred a shift in al-Qaeda’s strategic thinking. Iraqi Sunnis had come to see AQI as a foreign imperialist force, thus prompting local opposition in the form of the Sahwa (Awakening) movement. At the same time, AQI had attracted a massive U.S. counterinsurgency response. Intent on avoiding being the focus of such intense negative attention again, al-Qaeda began emphasizing localization (making its affiliates appear to be an organic part of local aspirations) and the use of front groups, which would obfuscate whether a militant group was part of its orbit.

This strategy’s success has been facilitated by a confluence of factors. The “Arab Spring” revolutions gave the group more operating room than ever before, due to both the policies of emerging governments and the diminishing capacity of regional states to control their own territory. Growing regional competition between Sunni states and Iran further expanded al-Qaeda’s space for maneuver. Al-Qaeda positioned itself as anti-Iran, as well as a bulwark against ISIS’s rise. Further, al-Qaeda was able to “rebrand” by contrasting itself with ISIS, portraying itself within the Middle East and North Africa region as the more “moderate,” rational, and perhaps even controllable jihadist alternative. Al-Qaeda happily let the majority of Western and Middle Eastern states’ counterterrorism and counterinsurgency resources target ISIS.

The absence of a major attack from al-Qaeda and a lack of attention to al-Qaeda’s objectives in the West of late has helped cast the group as merely a local or regional problem across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. However, al-Qaeda’s global network remains robust, even as the group continues to operate under the radar of the international community. For example, Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s Syria-based and most powerful faction, has rebranded itself to become Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This rebranding exemplifies al-Qaeda’s success it pursues its strategy of embedding in local contexts. Al-Qaeda has created doubt as to whether the HTS group retains ties to Ayman al-Zawahiri’s organization, and HTS

limits references to the global jihad. The military pressure being brought to bear by the Global Coalition on ISIS's remaining positions in Iraq and Syria, as well as ISIS's overall decline as a territorial entity, has positioned al-Qaeda to lead the global jihadist movement once again.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Though the attacks of September 11, 2001 are the most profound symbol of al-Qaeda's notoriety, the group finds its roots in another, more conventional, war. Al-Qaeda was formally created in the latter years of the Afghan-Soviet war (1979–1989).¹ Various theories have been offered about the etymology of “al-Qaeda”—which in Arabic literally means “the base”—including that it refers to a “database” of names of Arab-Afghan mujahideen compiled by al-Qaeda's first emir, Osama bin Laden, and Palestinian jihadist theoretician Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, who argued for the formation of a group like al-Qaeda in an article entitled *The Solid Base* (al-Qaeda al-Sulbah).² However, there is no reason to doubt bin Laden's own explanation that “al-Qaeda” was originally used as a generic phrase to denote the mujahideen's base of combat or operations.³ This is borne out by the fact that al-Qaeda sometimes refers to itself as *qaeda al-jihad*,⁴ or “base of jihad.”

Coming on the heels of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, when Islamist fervor had reached a fever pitch internationally, the Afghan-Soviet conflict attracted jihadists and other fighters and supporters from across the Arab world. Among them was Saudi multi-millionaire Osama bin Laden, who, in conjunction with Azzam, opened a “services bureau” (*maktab al-khidamat*) in Peshawar, Pakistan, supporting the Afghan jihad.⁵ Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian physician who rose to become al-Qaeda's emir following bin Laden's death in May 2011, also made periodic stops in Peshawar, lending his medical skills to the care of wounded mujahideen.⁶ Bin Laden eventually entered Afghanistan to fight the Soviets and often recounted his spiritual near-death experiences and feelings of tranquility in the midst of furious shelling.⁷

The victory of the mujahideen over the Soviets and the subsequent collapse of the USSR instilled a sense of destiny and invincibility in the mujahideen. This victory was viewed as a harbinger of even greater Muslim glory to come.⁸ Ascribing their success to divine intervention, Islamists and jihadists became more confident of their destiny to defeat better-equipped and more technologically advanced foes.

After returning to his homeland of Saudi Arabia, where he was hailed as a hero, Osama bin Laden found another opportunity to test the mettle of his cadre of seasoned mujahideen, popularly known as the “Afghan Arabs” or “Afghan alumni.” That test was Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The invasion, along with neighboring Saudi Arabia's fear that it was next on Saddam's list of targets, furnished bin Laden with an opportunity to rally his now-unemployed fighters, this time to defend not just a peripheral Muslim nation but the very sanctity of Arabia, home of the haramain (the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina). He petitioned the Saudi monarch, King Fahd, to allow the Afghan Arabs to defend the country, only to be rebuffed. Fahd opted instead to accept the United States' offer to deploy its “infidel” troops on Arabian soil. Bin Laden later referred to the U.S. troop presence in Saudi Arabia in his 1996 declaration of war against America as the West's greatest aggression against the Ummah (global Muslim community).⁹

Saudi Arabia's acceptance of American soldiers on its soil turned bin Laden against the Saudi monarchy. Because of his outspoken criticism, the former war hero was ostracized and exiled from the kingdom, and forced to flee to Sudan. Khartoum had just experienced its own Islamist coup d'état, after which it welcomed fundamentalists from across the globe. During this time (1992–1996), Ayman al-Zawahiri and his organization, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, also used Sudan as a base to launch attacks against the Egyptian government. Zawahiri eventually merged the Egyptian Islamic Jihad with al-Qaeda, and expanded the scope of its jihad well beyond Egypt's borders.¹⁰

Bin Laden's early sponsorship of terrorist attacks against U.S. interests, along with Zawahiri's failed assassination attempt in 1995 against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak,¹¹ brought international pressure

on the Sudanese government to evict al-Qaeda. They eventually did so, and in 1996 al-Qaeda's leadership returned to Afghanistan and found refuge with another Islamist regime, the Taliban. That militant group, whose leadership was composed of former students indoctrinated in Pakistan's madrassas (Muslim religious schools), had risen out of the chaos that followed the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Pakistan-backed Taliban government welcomed bin Laden and his Afghan Arabs and allowed them to set up militant bases and training camps.

Al-Qaeda is a Salafi-jihadi organization. Salafism denotes the emulation of the Prophet Muhammad and the first three generations of Muslims, al-salaf al-salih (righteous predecessors). Al-Qaeda's ultimate goal is to resurrect a global caliphate that enforces sharia law, and al-Qaeda's ideology holds that Muslims are obligated to use armed force to achieve this, making the organization jihadist. But the Salafist worldview is not unique to al-Qaeda. Rather, it is a form of Islamism increasingly subscribed to by other Islamist activists, both militant and non-violent.¹² Under the originalism inherent in the Salafist approach, centuries of jurisprudence about sharia according to Islam's madhahib (four mainstream schools of thought) can no longer dictate to the believer what the Islamic faith truly means.

Al-Qaeda justifies the attacks of September 11, 2001, in which nearly 3,000 civilians were killed, with the sunna (examples or acts from the Prophet Muhammad's life), which tells of Muhammad employing catapults during the siege of the town of Ta'if.¹³ Similarly, al-Qaeda excuses the act of killing women and children by referring to reported permission to do so granted by the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁴ Al-Qaeda also supports "martyrdom operations" by reference, for example, to a Qur'anic verse that calls on believers to "kill and be killed" (Surah 9:111). Other verses simply call for violence, such as the famous "sword verse": "fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war)."¹⁵

Another practice regularly used by al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups is taqiyya,¹⁶ a doctrine that espouses deceiving the enemy either when the enemy is in a dominant position or during war—two conditions that al-Qaeda believes apply today. In his lengthy treatise "Loyalty and Enmity," Zawahiri dedicates an entire section to taqiyya, quoting classical ulema (clerics) who believed that Muslims under the authority of non-Muslims should behave loyally while harboring feelings of hatred toward them.¹⁷ In another treatise, Zawahiri quotes Muhammad's famous assertion that "war is deceit."¹⁸ While al-Qaeda has readily justified violence and terror, it has also taken on a softer, more methodical image in recent years to give itself more operating space. This underappreciated strategic shift is discussed at length below.

GLOBAL REACH

From 2010 onward, the Obama administration heavily pushed the idea that al-Qaeda's core leadership had been significantly eroded. In the summer of 2010, then-CIA director Leon Panetta estimated there were only 50–100 al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan.¹⁹ The idea that al-Qaeda's core leadership was in steep decline gained more adherents after bin Laden's death in May 2011. In July 2011, Panetta said that the United States was "within reach of strategically defeating Al Qaeda."²⁰

That assessment turned out to be premature, as Al Qaeda is now rebuilding its core leadership. The decimation of senior figures within the al Qaeda network, especially after the May 2011 raid in Abbottabad Pakistan, was doubtless a setback for the group. But the organization has adapted, and Hamza bin Laden, Osama bin Laden's son, has increasingly taken to the global stage in al-Qaeda's name.²¹ He, and other up-and-coming leaders like Abu Muhammad al-Julani in Syria, are being groomed to assume leadership of the al Qaeda organization even as other senior operatives, like Saif al Adel, remain active.

Similarly—and related—both the administration and many independent observers believed in early 2011 that the revolutionary events of the Arab Spring would marginalize al-Qaeda. Former CIA deputy director Michael Morell, describing the prevailing analytical outlook at the time, wrote that the CIA "thought and told policy-makers that this outburst of popular revolt would damage al Qaeda by

undermining the group's narrative. Our analysts figured that the protests would send a signal throughout the region that political change was possible without al-Qa'ida's leading the way and without the violence that al-Qa'ida said was necessary."²²

Assessments concerning the decline of al-Qaeda's core leadership were always questionable, but even when most analysts thought that the group's core was badly damaged, nobody doubted that its affiliates remained robust. As one U.S. counterterrorism official put it in 2010—mirroring the conventional wisdom of the time—“while (core) Al Qaeda is now struggling in some areas the threat it poses is becoming more widely distributed, more geographically diverse. The rise of affiliated groups such as Al Qaeda the Arabian Peninsula and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is a troubling development.”²³ Al-Qaeda had, by the early 2010s, developed a global network that increased its overall resilience and ensured that al-Qaeda could survive the loss of its core group or one of its affiliates.²⁴

Yemen. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is one of al-Qaeda's most capable affiliate organizations. The group resulted from a merger of al-Qaeda's Saudi and Yemeni franchises in January 2009. While it attempted several attacks against foreign targets at its inception, AQAP has also exhibited a persistent local focus and has exploited the recent chaos of Yemen's civil war.

In 2010, Yemen's government estimated the AQAP's strength to be just 200 to 300 members,²⁵ though unofficial estimates at that time put the number somewhat higher, at between 500 and 600 militants.²⁶ AQAP has grown in size and scope since then. In 2011–2012, AQAP succeeded in gaining control of large swathes of territory in southern Yemen. This prompted a major response from the Yemeni government, forcing the organization into a “strategic retreat” from Abyan Province.²⁷

But thereafter, a civil conflict erupted between Iran-backed Houthis, Sunni tribes, and the forces of nominal president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. AQAP benefited from this chaos. It gained popular support by positioning itself against the Houthis.²⁸ At one point, AQAP gained control over Yemen's fifth-largest city, al-Mukalla.²⁹ An Emirati-led counterterrorism offensive caused AQAP to retreat from the urban areas of al-Mukalla, but did not remove its powerful foothold in Yemen and popular support base. AQAP grew stronger in areas along the frontlines of Yemen's civil war, but has increasingly begun to target Emirati-backed Yemeni security forces operating in southern Yemen. A new Emirati-led counterterrorism offensive in eastern Yemen launched in August 2017 has pushed AQAP from the populated areas it gained control of since 2015.³⁰ The group's media output has also visibly deteriorated, likely due to the pressure the group has been under. AQAP's operational tempo has decreased since the offensive, and its leadership has discussed recent obstacles to its military operations.³¹

Syria. Al-Qaeda operates in Syria as part of a local network of Salafi-jihadi organizations that are now shaping the armed opposition to the Assad regime. Al-Qaeda used support from its former affiliate in Iraq (al-Qaeda in Iraq, now ISIS) to transform the logistics network that had run through Syria into Iraq into a military organization fighting alongside the Syrian armed opposition. Jabhat al Nusra announced its presence in Syria in December 2012 and publicly affiliated with al-Qaeda in April 2013.

On July 28, 2016, Nusra's emir, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, held a press conference in which he announced that his group would, from then on, “have no links whatsoever with foreign parties.”³² Nusra adopted the new name Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS). This move was widely interpreted as JFS dissociating itself from al-Qaeda, but the heavy presence of al-Qaeda senior leaders in Syria makes it likely that Julani considers al-Qaeda to be a non-foreign party.³³ It seemed that the rebranding of Nusra as JFS signaled a return to al-Qaeda's pre-ISIS strategy for Syria, in which the local affiliate has taken on a different name and a different brand and is allegedly independent.

The group rebranded a second time in Syria in January 2017, establishing Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).³⁴ Notably Ahrar al-Sham, a group closely associated with al-Qaeda in Syria, distanced itself further from HTS, which could be a ploy to portray itself as even more “moderate” and nationalist than the rebranded al-Qaeda organization. The creation of a new organization, with former Ahrar al-Sham leaders at the helm

of HTS, came after weeks of infighting between Ahrar al-Sham and JFS.³⁵ A November 2017 statement from Ayman al-Zawahiri confirmed he did not give permission for Jabhat al Nusra to leave al Qaeda in 2016 and that al Qaeda actively sought for the various groups to reunify in Syria.³⁶ HTS has consolidated its position in northwest Syria, particularly in parts of Idlib.³⁷ A former HTS member led the formation of a new group, Hurras al-Deen, in February 2018 that unified a coalition of Salafi-jihadi militias.³⁸ The points of friction among Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria are over current operations, leadership, and resources.

Maghreb and Sahel. Also prominent among al-Qaeda's regional franchises is al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM. AQIM was formed in September 2006, when Algeria's radical Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) joined forces with al-Qaeda. With the merger, the organization's focus became broader than the GSPC's goal of ousting Algeria's Bouteflika regime. AQIM now "has aspirations of overthrowing 'apostate' African regimes and creating an Islamic Caliphate," according to the U.S. Department of State.³⁹ AQIM is currently headed by Abdelmalek Droukdel, its founder and a veteran of the jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

By late 2012, AQIM was the dominant force in northern Mali and instituted a harsh brand of sharia in the territory under its control.⁴⁰ France intervened in January 2013, after which AQIM's northern Mali safe haven became less tenable. AQIM adapted by moving parts of its organization to southwest Libya.⁴¹ Thereafter, AQIM played a central role in an insurgency in Mali that has significantly heated up between 2015–17.⁴²

AQIM's capabilities were further bolstered when it reunited with master terrorist Mokhtar Belmokhtar and his splinter group, al-Murabitun, in December 2015. This rapprochement was announced following a notorious attack on Bamako's Radisson Blu Hotel.⁴³ A Malian group associated with AQIM, Ansar al-Din, merged with three other Salafi-jihadi groups in the Sahel to form a unified command under the name of Jama'a Nusrat al Muslam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM).⁴⁴ JNIM has continued to carry out deadly attacks on hotels and resorts in West Africa that are popular with Westerners.⁴⁵ JNIM responded to a recent French targeting of its leadership with an assault on the French embassy in Ougadougou, Burkina Faso, in early March 2018.⁴⁶ The group's reach remains extensive in the region even as French military operations against it are ongoing. AQIM has also continued high-profile kidnappings of European hostages.

Somalia. AQAP and AQIM are not the only al-Qaeda affiliates that are growing in power and prominence. The Somali militant group al-Shabaab was the dominant military force in southern Somalia until an offensive against it led by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) pushed it from its urban strongholds in 2011–12. Despite those setbacks, al-Shabaab sought to expand its operations into East African states like Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Kenya, which it did by 2014.⁴⁷

Al-Shabaab has in recent years become a noticeably more potent insurgent force.⁴⁸ Al-Shabaab still governs parts of south-central Somalia and is poised to exploit security and governance gaps.⁴⁹ Al-Shabaab continues to conduct explosive attacks against Somali Federal Government and Turkish targets. An unclaimed October 2017 truck bombing that killed over 320 people may have been intended for nearby government ministries or army training compounds.⁵⁰ Per the 2017 UN Somalia Monitoring Group report, al-Shabaab may have begun to manufacture homemade explosives, which may be allowing it to produce more-potent explosive devices.⁵¹

Al-Shabaab may again be launching a counter-offensive against the AMISOM troops present in Somalia. Al-Shabaab militants attacked a Ugandan AMISOM base outside of the capital, Mogadishu, in April 2018, killing dozens of peacekeepers in an attack reminiscent of its offensives in 2015 and 2016.⁵² Al-Shabaab specifically targeted a U.S. special operators' combat outpost in southern Somalia, killing a Green Beret, in June 2018.⁵³

South Asia. Al-Qaeda announced a formal presence on the Indian subcontinent in September 2014, but Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) has not displayed capabilities and strength similar to the organization's other affiliates.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the June 2018 death of Mullah Fazlullah, the leader of the al

Qaeda-linked Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), may weaken the TTP, which has suffered setbacks after a series of Pakistani military campaigns against it.⁵⁵

RECENT ACTIVITY

Though the Arab Spring revolutions did not diminish al-Qaeda in the way that many experts had predicted, when ISIS emerged as an independent challenger from within the jihadist ranks, many observers thought this was the development that would finally push al-Qaeda to the margins. Though it did not do so, ISIS's emergence has had a tremendous impact on al-Qaeda.

ISIS was once a part of al-Qaeda, where it was known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The organization suffered significant setbacks during the course of the second Iraq War. (Throughout its history, the group has taken several names, including AQI, the Islamic State of Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, and most recently, the Islamic State.)

During the Iraq war, AQI grew in influence, becoming, in the words of Col. Peter Devlin, the “dominant organization of influence” in Iraq’s majority-Sunni Anbar province by August 2006.⁵⁶ But the group suffered a catastrophic collapse in popular support even as it gained influence as a result of the brutal policies of its leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Against the instructions of al-Qaeda’s leadership,⁵⁷ Zarqawi adopted a policy of indiscriminately targeting and butchering local Sunnis and Shi’ites in Iraq deemed to be at variance with his exclusionary interpretation of Islam. The backlash to these excesses helped form and sustain the so-called Sunni Awakening, which served as a critical complement to the Bush administration’s surge of forces into Iraq in 2007.

Following the onset of instability in neighboring Syria as well as the drawdown of U.S. troops from Iraq, ISIS staged a bloody comeback. ISIS first attained a significant foothold in Syria, where the regime of Bashar al-Assad was struggling against an array of opposition forces. ISIS soon captured land in northeast Syria. It did so initially in conjunction with al-Qaeda’s local Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, but internal infighting between the two prompted al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to intervene.⁵⁸ Zawahiri ordered ISIS to leave Syria and return to Iraq, but ISIS refused to comply.

Thereafter, a strategic and ideological schism developed between al-Qaeda and ISIS. In February 2014, Zawahiri formally disavowed ISIS.⁵⁹ In June 2014, ISIS launched a dramatic offensive from Syria into Iraq, capturing a broad swath of territory, and by the end of the month declared that it had reestablished the caliphate. In doing so, the late ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani stated that the caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had become the “leader for Muslims everywhere.”⁶⁰ Adnani’s statement also declared that the caliphate’s establishment made all competitor organizations—a category that included al-Qaeda—legally void.

The competition between al-Qaeda and ISIS for primacy in the jihadist movement soon reached a fever pitch. ISIS began loudly trying to lure al-Qaeda’s affiliates into its own orbit and succeeded in winning over a couple of less significant pro-al-Qaeda groups, such as Sinai’s Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and Nigeria’s Boko Haram (which had been within the al-Qaeda network, but not a public affiliate). The U.S. intelligence community estimated at that time that ISIS could field as many as 31,000 armed men.⁶¹ This number was likely an underestimation.⁶² ISIS was also, at the time, perhaps the richest militant group in the world, with assets valued at around \$2 billion.⁶³ ISIS controlled segments of northern Iraq and eastern Syria equivalent to the size of the United Kingdom.⁶⁴

But despite the massive advantages ISIS enjoyed in both territory and resources, its strategy was fraught with problems from the start. The group purposefully surrounded itself with enemies by betraying allies and attacking forces that were not at war with it.⁶⁵ Due to the group’s aggressiveness, which included launching a genocidal campaign against the Yazidi minority group that posed no military threat to it, ISIS provoked an international response. In September 2014, the Obama administration authorized air strikes against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and worked to create a coalition, including both European nations and

Gulf Arab states, to coordinate the fight against the Islamic State. The anti-ISIS fight was slow going at first, with extremely conservative targeting rules limiting the air campaign.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, ISIS has lost significant ground over time, with its losses spiraling in the latter half of 2016. Further, despite the noise ISIS has made about expanding internationally, the group did not succeed in making a significant dent in al-Qaeda's global network and in fact has been outmaneuvered by al-Qaeda and its allies in most theaters outside the Iraq-Syria caliphate.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda has been able to pivot off of ISIS's raw brutality to undertake a strategic shift that it had sought since AQI's defeat in Iraq. Bin Laden had written about the need to change public perceptions of the organization prior to his death. In a May 2010 letter to Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, he proposed that al-Qaeda should "correct [the mistakes] we made," and "reclaim... the trust of a large segment of those who lost their trust in the jihadis."⁶⁸ In other words, bin Laden viewed AQI's conduct as a black mark on how al-Qaeda was perceived globally, and he thought correcting al-Qaeda's image was vital. He cautioned that if al-Qaeda alienated the public, it could win "several battles while losing the war at the end."⁶⁹ Some of the early efforts at changing al-Qaeda's public image were reflected in Zawahiri's "General Guidelines for Jihad," released in September 2013.⁷⁰ The document aims to reduce the amount of unnecessary violence associated with al-Qaeda, including advising affiliate organizations not to kill women and children and also to stop attacking markets and mosques where Muslims could be killed.

As the Arab Spring revolutions struck, al-Qaeda undertook further adaptations and exploited developments in the region. One of al-Qaeda's adaptations was making use of front groups to conduct dawa (evangelism) and other forms of public outreach, in the form of organizations like Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Libya. Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria initially functioned as such a front group until ISIS's loud entry into Syria and subsequent claim that Nusra was subservient to it forced Nusra emir Abu Muhammad al-Julani to make his relationship with al-Qaeda public. This use of front groups allowed al-Qaeda to gain adherents locally without attracting outside counterterrorism resources against it.

Al-Qaeda also sought to mirror what the United States had done when it defeated AQI in 2007–9, and became more population-centric. Al-Qaeda built relationships with other armed groups, including those that were not jihadist. For example, after a coalition of Islamist armed groups, including Nusra, captured the Syrian city Idlib in April 2015, Nusra's Julani said that his group did not "strive to rule the city or to monopolize it without others."⁷¹ This approach contrasted with that of ISIS, which wanted to dominate all other groups, including Sunni militias. Al-Qaeda intentionally relied on local Salafi proxies to govern in its stead, obscuring al-Qaeda's role in governance and retaining a mirage of local acceptance of the administrations.⁷²

Thus, while ISIS's emergence was a real challenge for al-Qaeda, ISIS's rise also presented an opportunity. In contrast to al-Qaeda's efforts to tone down its brutality and appear more rational or even "moderate," ISIS broadcast its brutality to the world and reveled in its increasingly ingenious and repulsive methods of torturing and murdering its victims. Al-Qaeda, in turn, became more acceptable to local populations and in cases like Derna, Libya, was even welcomed after ISIS.

Al-Qaeda used ISIS as its rhetorical foil. Not only did al-Qaeda contrast itself with ISIS's brutality, it also downplayed its own successes. The world was worried about ISIS's growth, and for good reason, and al-Qaeda was content to allow the bulk of counterterrorist and counterinsurgent resources to focus on ISIS. Typifying this strategy is a June 2015 interview in *The Guardian* with senior al-Qaeda religious figures Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada. Maqdisi said that al-Qaeda's organization had "collapsed," and Abu Qatada described Zawahiri as "isolated."⁷³ This portrayal was almost certainly disinformation.

Indeed, al-Qaeda has survived and thrived despite recent challenges. The Arab Spring did not marginalize it, but presented it an opportunity to grow. ISIS did not eclipse it, but presented it the opportunity to undertake a rebranding that it had sought ever since AQI's defeat. The signs of al-Qaeda's growing strength are evident in multiple theaters, including in its return to Afghanistan and the intensifying al-

Qaeda-linked insurgencies in Mali and Somalia. AQAP and AQIM remain potent and destabilizing forces.

Al-Qaeda is quietly strengthening on the ground and benefits from the near-myopic focus of the West on defeating ISIS.⁷⁴ The impression of al-Qaeda's global weakness, in fact, is deliberately cultivated by the group in order to pursue its objective of transforming local Muslim communities into its image.

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