
Al-Qaeda in a Changing Region

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Introduction

On Tuesday 10 April 2012, Osama bin Laden was finally replaced on the FBI's most wanted list by a fugitive schoolteacher accused of possessing child pornography. As the United States' perception of threat has shifted, so too has the broader national security discourse. The prominent al-Qaeda analyst Peter Bergen observed that the terrorist group which launched the 9/11 attacks is now more or less out of business.¹ He argued, too, that it is time to declare al-Qaeda defeated and "move on to focus on the essential challenges now facing America": fixing the country's economy, containing a rising China, managing the rogue regime in North Korea, and continuing to delay Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons.²

This change represents more than perspective regained inside the United States; it is also a reflection of the significant reversals suffered by al-Qaeda in the last five years. These wounds were, in many ways, self-inflicted – arising, as they did, from one essential and undeniable fact: most of al-Qaeda's victims, since 9/11, have been Muslim civilians. The impact of this reality was, in the words of Osama bin Laden taken from a letter written in 2010, "the alienation of most of the [Muslim] nation from the *muhajidin*".³ In that same correspondence, captured by US Special Forces during the raid on his Abbottabad hideout in 2011, bin Laden called for a "new phase of amendment and development" in order to regain the trust of the Muslims masses.⁴ Al-Qaeda does indeed find itself at the threshold of a new era, thrust upon it by its strategic crisis as well as by the dramatically changing regional landscape. But do these shifting sands work to al-Qaeda advantage, or will they only guarantee its decline?

¹ P. Bergen, "And Now, Only One Senior Al-Qaeda Leader Left", *CNN Opinion*, 5 June 2012.

² P. Bergen, "Time to Declare Victory: Al-Qaeda Is Defeated", *CNN Security Clearance*, 27 June 2012.

³ Document "SOCOM-2012-0000019", p. 9, made available by the Combating Terrorism Centre at Westpoint, at <<http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined>>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

On the ropes

In recent years, al-Qaeda has suffered three major setbacks. In the first place, the predominantly Muslim death toll from terrorist attacks, estimated as between 82 and 97 per cent over the last five years,⁵ plunged al-Qaeda in to strategic and ideological disarray. After 9/11 and the destruction of its headquarters in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda fractured into a moving target, a global cadre of autonomous cells which enabled it to continue to both elude and fight its enemies. However, with the globalisation of his *jihad*, bin Laden's authority was at once far-reaching and fragmented. Ceding command-and-control to self-defined "al-Qaeda" franchises exacted a high cost.

Bin Laden portrayed al-Qaeda as a vanguard group with a clear and simple mandate: to defend Muslims. Every one of his statements made clear that his was a defensive *jihad* to protect the innocent blood of Muslims from a Crusader onslaught. All of his legal, moral and political arguments rested on this premise. Yet the credibility of bin Laden's claim to be defending Muslims exploded alongside the scores of suicide bombers dispatched to civilian centres with the direct intention of massacring swathes of (Muslim) civilians. On the run in Pakistan, bin Laden and his colleagues at "al-Qaeda central" were unable to control their over-zealous offspring in places like Algiers, Amman, and the Al-Anbar Province. Each of al-Qaeda's tight political and theological arguments justifying attacks against civilians assumed that the targets were non-Muslims who voted for western governments which allegedly perpetrated aggression against Muslims. As a result, these tens of thousands of Muslim deaths were left with no ideological cover – even from within the *jihad*'s moral universe.

The onset of the so-called 'Arab Awakening' in late 2010 dealt a second body blow to al-Qaeda's ideology. One of the fundamental assumptions of the global *jihad* strategy was dramatically undercut. For years, al-Qaeda's ideologists had argued that changes to the status quo "can only be achieved through *jihad*"⁶ – and yet it was rainbow coalitions of demonstrators who, within a few months and with a predominantly secular discourse, claimed the political scalps of the region's most notorious strongmen. In Libya, where the

⁵ See "National Counterterrorism Centre: 2011 Report on Terrorism". The report also noted that Muslim majority countries bore the greatest number of attacks involving ten or more deaths.

⁶ Interview with Rahimullah Yousafzai (ABC), 22 December 1998.

revolutionary process was decidedly bloodier, it was NATO-backed military forces which toppled the tyrant.

Al-Qaeda is as much threatened by the boon which the revolutions have provided to Islamism, as by the end of the tired and unstable binary opposition between secular kleptocracies and violent 'Islamic' movements (the autocratic regimes argued that they were the guarantors of stability and the only bulwark against a *jihadi* takeover, while the *jihadis* maintained that the only way to remove those autocracies was through violence). For indeed, as Islamists integrate themselves into a democratic process and throw off decades of political impotence, they offer a viable and effective alternative to al-Qaeda when it comes to the question of Islam and governance. As the Islamists of al-Nahda in Tunisia and the Ikhwan in Egypt seek to promote Islamic norms within the framework of democratic politics, they simultaneously embody the strongest counter-argument to al-Qaeda's political philosophy.

The awkwardness, for al-Qaeda, of these developments has been palpable in many of its statements. While some preachers, such as Sheikh Abu Hayyan of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), continue to argue simplistically that the Arab Awakening heralds the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, al-Qaeda's spokesmen have attempted to interject some nuance into their analyses of the uprisings, arguing variously that al-Qaeda prepared the ground for the revolutions by cultivating a spirit of defiance (Abdullah al-Adam); that the protests were not in fact peaceful and people were not so much demanding democracy as Islamic notions of freedom and opposition to tyranny (Atiyeh Abdulrahman); that because of al-Qaeda's war on America, US governments pressured local tyrants to clamp down on their subjects and this created the popular anger which triggered the revolts (Zawahiri).⁷ More than anything, the tenuousness of these ownership claims emphasises the ever-widening chasm between al-Qaeda and the constituency it seeks to represent.

Beyond the ideological wound inflicted by the Arab Awakening, al-Qaeda has also had to contend with the rapid disappearance of the established order. Most of the pioneers of the global *jihad* against the West cut their teeth fighting local tyrants. One of the reasons they threw down the gauntlet to the 'far' enemy in the first place, was because western governments helped to prop up the godless 'near' enemies that ruled over Muslims with an iron fist. These enemies have been replaced by governments freely chosen by the people who, in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, will accord a strong place to Islam. To violently challenge these new authorities forces al-Qaeda onto a more radical and counterproductive footing – killing people for being insufficiently 'Muslim' or for interpreting the sharia in

⁷ See videos at "Al-Qaida 2011: l'aube d'une victoire imminente", YouTube, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYfoEvs5pH4&feature=related>> [accessed 3 October 2011]. For an overview of Al-Qaeda's reactions to the "Arab Spring", see R. Green, "Putting a Spin on the Arab Spring: Al-Qaeda Struggles to Prove Its Relevance in the Era of Arab Revolutions", MEMRI, 10 October 2011.

a different way – at a time when it must urgently reinvent itself as the vanguard group protecting Muslims against violence and injustice. Equally bad news for al-Qaeda are the US withdrawal from Iraq and the troop drawdown in Afghanistan, which deprive al-Qaeda of its most important target – US military forces – as well as its principal source of radicalisation – the occupation of Muslim lands by western armies.

At the same time, President Obama's shift away from Bush's 'war paradigm' in the struggle against terrorism has permitted his administration to focus on the hunt for al-Qaeda's leadership, with significant results. In addition to Osama bin Laden, a series of al-Qaeda operations chiefs have been felled in Pakistan – Osama al-Kini (January 2009), Mustafa Abu al-Yazid (May 2010), Fateh al-Masri (September 2010), and Abu Hafs al-Shahri (September 2011). Potential heirs to bin Laden and Zawahiri were also killed, including the charismatic commander, Abu Yahia al-Libi (Pakistan, June 2012), the thoughtful bin Laden aide, Atiyeh Abd al-Rahman (Pakistan, August 2011), and the most influential of al-Qaeda's English-speaking ideologists, Anwar al-Awlaki (Yemen, September 2011). Important regional lynchpins were killed too, including Ilyas Kashmiri (Pakistan, June 2011) and Fazul Abdullah Mohammed (Somalia, June 2011). US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta has stated that "only a small handful" of operatives on the original al-Qaeda terror list remain at large.⁸ The Pentagon is now reorganizing and shifting its focus towards Iran and China.⁹ Al-Qaeda, it would seem, was yesterday's ghost.

⁸ P. Stewart, "Strikes on Al-Qaeda Leave Only 'Handful' of Top Targets", *Reuters*, 22 June 2012.

⁹ E. Schmitt, "Defense Department Plans New Intelligence Gathering Service", *New York Times*, 23 April 2012.

The fight back?

However, with the region in flux, there is some scope, at least, for the return of history. The future of Afghanistan beyond 2014 is uncertain, at best, and two scenarios favourable to al-Qaeda cannot be ruled out: the (re-)ascendance of the Taliban and/or widespread ethnic conflict. In Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki is increasingly attempting to concentrate power in his own hands, the security forces have been infiltrated, and the legitimacy of the government is the lowest it has been since the 2003 invasion, owing to its appalling record on service delivery as well as corruption. At the time of writing, the al-Qaeda-linked group, the Islamic State of Iraq, is resurgent. Technological advances are also seen as offering potential for al-Qaeda to engage on new fronts: Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are routinely used, Pakistani *jihadis* are looking to spread MP3 files of lectures using mobile phones, and al-Qaeda is actively seeking a cyberattack capability. Elements of continuity are advantageous for al-Qaeda as well, not least the ongoing military occupation of Palestine – an end to which ought to have been the priority of any effective global counter-terrorism campaign.¹⁰

There are four areas of promise for al-Qaeda, which are worth focusing on in greater detail: the opportunity to capitalise on any chaos which ensues from the Arab Awakening; the recent development of a common consciousness among previously unconnected al-Qaeda ‘affiliates’, particularly in Africa; the rising star of al-Qaeda’s most intelligent and determined affiliate, AQAP in Yemen; the radicalising effects of civilian casualties among Muslim communities resulting from drone strikes.

¹⁰ Just as the occupation of Palestine featured prominently in Osama bin Laden’s theological, moral and political platform when Al-Qaeda was established in the early 1990s, so it continues to be relevant in lone-wolf and similar cases. For example, at his sentencing hearing, in which Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab received four consecutive life sentences for attempting to bring down a Detroit-bound airplane with plastic explosives sown into his clothes, the “underwear bomber” avowed that attacks would continue until the “Jews are driven out of Palestine.”

1. Capitalising on chaos

The breezes of the Arab Spring do whistle one note of optimism for al-Qaeda, given that the power vacuums which develop as the result of ousted regimes afford *jihadi* militants the opportunity to gain new footholds. Shortly before his death, Anwar al-Awlaki argued that, “with the new developments in the area, one can only expect that the great doors of opportunity would open for the *mujahidin* all over the world”.¹¹ Abdullah al-Adam also advised the *mujahidin* to take advantage of the power vacuums which ensue across the world. While the global dimension is no doubt exaggerated, *jihadi* militants have indeed sought to capitalise on chaos in the region.

In Yemen, for example, Al-Qaeda’s most aggressive affiliate,¹² Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), made significant advances during the nation-wide anti-government protests which erupted in 2011. Together with an allied group known as Ansar al-Sharia, AQAP managed to seize a number of towns in Abyan Province, where they ran a parallel government named the ‘Emirate of Waqar’. The Yemeni military appeared paralysed by rivalries between supporters and opponents of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and it was not until vice President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi took over in February 2012 that a sustained attempt to reclaim the territory was made. In recent days, al-Qaeda and its allies have finally been pushed out of Abyan and eastwards into the more mountainous terrain of Shabwa province.

Over in Egypt, Al-Qaeda in the Sinai was established in July 2011, issuing a pamphlet which blended global *jihadi* demands with local Bedouin grievances, prompting Israel to reorient scarce resources to the south.¹³ Since the fall of Hosni Mubarak’s government, militants have launched fifteen separate attacks on a gas pipeline serving Israel, as well as sporadic assaults on police installations. In Syria, as the political crisis turns increasingly violent with the prospect of a protracted proxy war, a mix of local and foreign Salafis continue to facilitate an entry point for global *jihadis*. A shadowy group calling itself Jubhat Al-Nusra Li-Ahl Al-Sham has claimed responsibility for a spate of car bombings. According to a report for *Le Figaro*, one hundred Lebanese and 300-400 foreign fighters had found their way into Syria, including nationals from Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, France,

¹¹ Shaykh Anwar al-Awlaki, “The Tsunami of Change”, *Inspire V*, March 2011, p. 53.

¹² It is worth noting that AQAP is considered here to be more potent than AQIM, which has likewise made significant territorial gains through allied groups in Mali, because, alongside such developments, AQAP is actively committed to striking targets outside of the MENA region and in the heartland of the west. This will be discussed in further detail below.

¹³ B. Reidel, “Al-Qaeda Grows in Sinai”, *National Interest*, 10 February 2012.

Belgium and the UK.¹⁴ At the same time, the Iraqi authorities have warned that weapons and fighters from its own al-Qaeda linked group, the Islamic State of Iraq, are passing into Syria.

In February this year, Tunisian forces clashed with an armed group which, according to the interior minister, was in touch with al-Qaeda elements in Libya.¹⁵ In June, a Tunisian military court convicted two Libyan al-Qaeda operatives of killing two Tunisian soldiers.¹⁶ Across the border in Libya itself, a *jihadi* group claimed responsibility for attacks against the Red Cross and the US Mission in Benghazi, and Ayman al-Zawahiri is believed to have despatched a commander named Abdelbaset Azuz in order to build up an al-Qaeda presence in Libya. The US is now flying surveillance drones over suspected camps near Derna where hundreds of fighters are said to be undergoing training.¹⁷

However, the most significant security legacy of the conflict in Libya is to be found beyond its southern borders, in the West African state of Mali. In a chain of extraordinary opportunities, militants now control over half the country.

First, hundreds of well-armed Tuareg fighters flowed into Mali after the downfall of their sometime patron, Colonel Qadhafi, re-igniting a separatist rebellion in the north. Next, on 22 March 2012, a group of low-ranking Malian soldiers toppled the government in Bamako, motivated by, among other things, their exhaustion and disillusionment at fighting the increasingly confident Tuaregs with poor equipment. With the Malian military focused on the coup d'état, the Tuareg rebels went on the offensive, seizing vast swathes of territory in the north and declaring an independent state of Azawad in April. Shortly thereafter, the gains made by the secular Tuareg independence movement were apparently usurped by an Islamist faction known as Ansar Eddine, linked to AQIM and led by the Salafi Tuareg chieftain, Iyad ag Ghaly.

Ansar Eddine, together with an affiliated group known as the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), now controls major northern towns, including Timbuktu, Goundam, Gao and Kidal. Its militants are seeking to impose a puritanical vision of Islam on the local, largely Sufi population. Destroying ancient tombs, implementing a harsh interpretation of Islamic justice, and meting out lashings for even small behaviours deemed insufficiently Muslim, Ansar Eddine's militants have earned widespread comparisons with the Taliban when it took control of Kabul in 1996.

¹⁴ G. Malbrunot, "La Syrie, nouvelle terre d'élection des djihadistes", *Le Figaro*, 22 May 2012.

¹⁵ B. Ben Bouazza, "Minister: Armed Gang in Tunisia had Al-Qaeda Links", *Daily Star* (Lebanon), 13 February 2012.

¹⁶ "Tunisia Jails Two Libyan Qaeda Agents for Killing Soldiers", *Al-Arabiya*, 10 June 2012.

¹⁷ N. Robertson, P. Cruickshank, J. Karadsheh, "Libyan Official: US Drones Seeking Jihadists in Libya", *CNN Security Clearance*, 7 June 2012.

Certainly, Ansar Eddine's impact will not remain confined to the local for long. The President of Niger recently claimed that Afghan and Pakistani *ihadis* were training recruits for Islamist groups in Mali.¹⁸ Earlier this year Niger's foreign minister, Mohammed Bazoum, warned that the Nigerian militant group Boko Haram received explosives training at AQIM camps in the Sahel.¹⁹ The ungoverned spaces of the Sahel have long been a refuge for militants and criminals – and to AQIM, which combines both elements. Algerian *ihadis* have increasingly used the region as a base for their networks, a reality which, when taken together with the alarming developments in northern Mali, undermines the recent announcement that the Algerian government has “neutralised” AQIM in Algeria.²⁰ It seems entirely possible that AQIM has deliberately shifted its centre of gravity southwards.

2. A common consciousness

Indeed, whether forced by the Algerian government's tough counter-terrorism campaign or chosen as a course of strategy, AQIM may be moving into a new, more regional phase. Since its formation in 2007 out of the remnants of the Algerian Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, AQIM's Algeria-centricism has been its abiding weakness. Dominated by Algerian fighters and narrowly focused on overthrowing the Algerian regime and implementing an Islamic state, the group appeared to be an al-Qaeda affiliate in name only. At times, its criminal preoccupation – mainly smuggling, human trafficking and kidnapping for ransom (which alone has yielded an estimated \$130 million) – seemed to be an end in itself.

However, recent developments in Libya – from where its fighters have no doubt obtained heavy weaponry – and in Mali – as a result of which allied groups have now seized vast northern territories – have provided the group with the prospect of a more regional footing. In addition, the leadership of allied factions appears to be increasingly non-Arab – for example, MUJAO, which currently controls Gao, and which claims to have very recently extracted an \$18.4 million ransom for three European hostages,²¹ is led by a Hamadou Ould Khairou, a Mauritanian national. From its deeper entrenchment in the region, beyond Algeria, AQIM may combine with

¹⁸ President Mahamdou Issoufou interview with France 24, 7 June 2012, at <<http://www.france24.com/fr/20120607-mahamadou-issoufou-niger-mali-aqmi-touareg-onu-wb-fr-entretien>>.

¹⁹ L. Prieur, “Boko Haram got Al-Qaeda Bomb Training, Niger Says”, *Reuters Africa*, 25 January 2012.

²⁰ “Officials: Feared Al-Qaeda Offshoot Neutralised”, *Associated Press*, 9 July 2012.

²¹ “Mali Islamists Say \$18.4 Million Ransom Paid, Prisoners Released to Free 3 Europeans”, *Associated Press*, 20 July 2012.

other, previously localised militant groups, as well as cells based in Europe, to present a more robust threat on Europe's southern flank.

To be sure, there has been a notable rhetorical shift towards global *jihad*. In a long interview in November 2011, the senior AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar articulated AQIM's mission in strikingly Ladenese terms. He explained that it was not AQIM's policy to war with the Mauritanian army itself and justified AQIM's assault against a Mauritanian outpost on the basis that the Mauritanian government was conducting joint operations with the American military, and hosting an Israeli embassy as well as CIA prisons. Belmokhtar described AQIM's strategy as "the declared strategy of al-Qaeda... to confront the Crusader occident and the Jews" and underlined that it was the West which has meted out terrible punishments to innocent Muslims in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine.²²

AQIM is not alone in increasingly self-identifying as part of a global *jihad* focused on avenging Muslim suffering by hitting western targets. In Pakistan, for example, groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba have been trying to broaden their scope beyond the conflict with India, boasting transnational networks and even plotting a unilateral attack in Denmark.²³ The Pakistani Taliban, unlike its Afghan counterpart, has also actively threatened²⁴ and plotted²⁵ attacks against western interests. However, because of the emerging threat posed by possible synchronicity, the most significant development concerns al-Qaeda linked groups in Africa.

In Somalia, al-Shabaab's nationalist narrative has undeniably shifted so that one of its primary goals in 2012 appears to be waging global *jihad*. Increasingly using the internet and even setting up its own media arm (Al-Kata'ib), al-Shabaab now counts dozens of foreign fighters among its ranks, including at least fifty British nationals²⁶ and forty Americans,²⁷ and actively seeks to recruit from within the western heartland. The group has chalked up some regional successes, as with the World Cup restaurant bombing in Kampala, but not yet any global ones. That said, documents

²² "Entretien exclusif avec Khaled Abou Al-Abass, alias 'Belaouar'", *Agence Nouakchott d'Information*, 9 November 2011. Khaled Abou Al-Abass and Belaouar are two of Belmokhtar's aliases (see <https://www.interpol.int/public/Data/NoticesUN/Notices/Data/2002/55/2002_16355.asp>). It has been suggested, but not confirmed, that Belmokhtar was killed on 28 June 2012 in a battle between Tuareg rebels and Islamist militants during the latter's takeover of Gao.

²³ S. Tankel, "Lashkar-e-Taiba in Perspective: An Evolving Threat", New America Foundation: Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, February 2010, p. 5, at <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Lashkar-e-Taiba_in_Perspective.pdf>.

²⁴ In May 2010, the group's leader, Hakimullah Mehsud, openly threatened the US, vowing that "inshallah very soon in some days or a month's time, the Muslim umma will see the fruits of most successful attacks of our fedayeen in the United States".

²⁵ For example, the so-called "Times Square bomb plot", also in May 2010.

²⁶ "UK Terrorism Analysis: Counter-terrorism in an Olympic Year", *RUSI*, 1 February 2012, at <<http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/UKTA1.pdf>>.

²⁷ N. Robertson and P. Cruikshank, "Somali Al-Qaeda's Western Reach", *CNN*, 24 February 2012.

recovered from a slain al-Shabaab leader in 2011 detailed plots to attack Eton College in Windsor and the Ritz and Dorchester hotels in London,²⁸ and in February 2012 it formally announced its merger with al-Qaeda. In June 2012, the United States included seven al-Shabaab leaders in its 'Rewards for Justice' programme, for the first time, offering up to \$7 million for information leading to their location (in response, al-Shabaab mockingly offered ten camels for information on the whereabouts of "the idiot Obama" and ten chickens and ten roosters for information on "the old woman Hillary Clinton"²⁹). Because of a multi-front war with African Union, Kenyan and Ethiopian troops, a spate of defections and vicious infighting, a successful international attack is urgently required in order to unify and energise the ranks and, most importantly, to consummate the desperately needed relationship with al-Qaeda.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram's attacks against Christians led to the declaration of a state of emergency in northern parts of the country earlier this year. Inter-communal violence continues, with killings reported almost daily, raising the spectre of a religious war. Boko Haram emerged in 2002 as a product of domestic power struggles between the predominantly Muslim north and the Christian south, with localised objectives – namely, the implementation of Islamic law and education. Boko Haram continues to issue its communiqués in the Hausa language of northern Nigeria, emphasising its internal mission, and some analysts believe the group is divided into competing factions with conflicting objectives.

However, there are tentative signs Boko Haram's mandate has recently widened. Last summer, the group claimed responsibility for a suicide car bombing of the UN headquarters in Abuja. It also released an Eid message through AQIM's media wing, Al-Andalus, suggesting that ties to al-Qaeda are developing, and its supposed leader, Abubaker Shekau, stated in an audiotape that, from Bush to Obama, "Americans have always been fighting and destroying Islam".³⁰ Indeed, in December 2011 a US Congressional report declared that Boko Haram was an emerging threat to America, and in June 2012 the State Department designated Shekau and two others as 'foreign terrorists'.³¹

General Carter Ham, head of the US military's Africa Command, stated in June 2012 that AQIM, Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram are "seeking to coordinate and synchronise" their efforts,

²⁸ M. Shephard, "Star Exclusive: Documents Found on Body of Al-Qaeda's African Leader Detail Chilling Plans for Kidnapping, Attacks", *Toronto Star*, 11 July 2012.

²⁹ "Al-Qaeda Group Says Obama, Clinton Worth Only Chickens, Camels", *Reuters*, 9 June 2012.

³⁰ M. Oboh, "Boko Haram Leader Tape Threatens Nigeria Forces", *Reuters*, 27 January 2012.

³¹ A. Quinn, "In First, US Adds Boko Haram Members to 'Terrorist' List", *Reuters*, 21 June 2012.

sharing funds, training and explosives material.³² Sceptics will suggest that these alarmist statements are predominantly aimed at securing additional resources and justifying Africa Command's continuation. Yet there can be no doubt that a regional-cum-global consciousness is slowly developing among these once obsessively local groups, who may also see in combined action a way of shaking off their divisions and their domestic setbacks to reinvent themselves as more faithful, and effective, affiliates of the global al-Qaeda brand.

3. The Yemeni Crucible

There are signs that al-Qaeda's most disciplined affiliate, AQAP in Yemen, is forging ties with African militants. It is believed to be hosting several hundred al-Shabaab fighters, who fled from Mogadishu earlier this year as African Union forces advanced, and two Nigerian nationals have been charged with receiving money from AQAP "with intent that the said money shall be used to recruit and transport members of a terrorist organisation from Nigeria to Yemen for combat training terrorism".³³ Certainly, AQAP has much to teach al-Qaeda's would-be allies on the continent.

As discussed above, in 2011 AQAP and Ansar al-Sharia achieved considerable territorial gains in the south of Yemen where they effectively ran a parallel government. Yet the strength of AQAP derives not so much from its estimated 1000 fighters nor its proven ability to seize and hold territory, but rather from the fact that it is a learning organisation. Its leaders are the creatures of Osama bin Laden; they have internalised his assessments of the strategic mistakes which have been made and they are striving to reclaim al-Qaeda's original mission. This involves two courses of action.

In the first place, AQAP is intent on the winning the 'hearts and minds' of Yemenis by providing security, justice and services, including water, sanitation and electricity, as well as showing a more tolerant face to the people and the tribes. Their statements articulate the political and economic discontent of the populace. In Abyan province they planted trees, screened *jihadi* films, encouraged the playing of football (which is banned by more zealous groups operating under the al-Qaeda banner) and even tolerated the pervasive use of the stimulant *qat*.³⁴ Since AQAP emerged in 2009, it has consistently shown mercy towards its prisoners, releasing government soldiers rather than beheading them, and granting

³² D. Lerman, "African Terrorist Groups Starting to Cooperate, US Says", *Bloomberg*, 26 June 2012.

³³ "Two Nigerians Charged with Links to Al-Qaeda", *Reuters Africa*, 6 July 2012.

³⁴ G. Abdul-Ahad, "Al-Qaida's Wretched Utopia and the Battle for Hearts and Minds", *Guardian*, 30 April 2012.

access to human rights groups.³⁵ The AQAP leadership subscribes to bin Laden's argument that violence must be used strategically and not wantonly.

Secondly, AQAP has been determined to reorient the *jihad* back towards the West. It wants to force a break with the past (of killing mainly Muslim civilians) by going back to basics and landing a sucker-punch against the superpower. In recent years, AQAP's fingerprints were found on a number of high profile attempts to strike the western heartland, including the December 2009 bid by the 'underwear bomber' to blow up a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, the November 2010 cargo bomb plot to detonate explosive printer cartridges in the freight holds of two airliners, and the Spring 2012 plan to bring down a passenger plane with an upgraded, non-metallic device implanted in the underwear of another operative.

AQAP has also devoted significant resources and energy to radicalising Muslims already living in the West; to regenerating the *jihadi* threat with a native grasp of language, culture and environment. Before his death in a drone strike in 2011, Anwar al-Awlaki, the charismatic head of external operations, pioneered a body of clever and culturally specific English-language propaganda and used the internet to reach out to western 'lone wolves'. With his fluent English, soft intonation and sharp wit, Awlaki conscientiously directed his sermons at Muslims living in the West, cleverly suffusing his addresses with an articulate brand of anti-imperial politics.

Awlaki personally directed the 'underpants bomber' and was in email contact with Nidal Hassan, the US military psychiatrist who went on a shooting rampage at the Fort Hood army base in Texas, but Awlaki's most significant impact was more ethereal. His ideas inspired a slew of 'individual terrorism' plots in the United States. For example, Carlos Bledsoe, a Memphis native, shot two people outside an army recruiting office in Arkansas, from a car containing Awlaki literature. Before attempting to bomb the offices of a congressman, Michael C. Finton quoted Awlaki on his MySpace page. Najibullah Zazi pleaded guilty in 2010 to plotting to bomb the New York City subway, testifying that he was radicalised after listening to Awlaki audiotapes. In the United Kingdom, Awlaki's speeches were found on the computer of Roshonara Choudhry, the prize-winning student who stabbed the British MP Stephen Timms. Awlaki's preaching also influenced the four men who conspired to detonate a bomb at the London Stock Exchange in 2010.

Lone wolves have accounted for over 40% of terrorism-related cases in the United States since 9/11. Plots continue to be disrupted – individuals have recently pleaded guilty to planning to blow up the Capitol (Amine El Khalifi) and attack the Pentagon with remote-controlled model airplanes (Rezwan Ferdous). According to AQAP's ideologists, lone wolf attacks are almost impossible to contain.

³⁵ F. Darem, "Yemeni Tribes Broker Release of 73 Soldiers Captured by Al-Qaeda in Abyan", *Al-Shorfa*, 1 May 2012.

However, the lone wolf strategy emerged primarily because, after years of counterproductive bloodshed, it was seen as a key means of taking the fight out of the region and back to the West; it aimed at damage control as much as at any strategic advance. In addition, lone wolf plots can be combated with a counterterrorism approach which is rooted in a law-enforcement paradigm, as opposed to a war paradigm, and which plays to the strengths and experience of western forces.

4. Civilian casualties

Still, on the ground in Yemen, AQAP's attempted renaissance may be helped along by the upsurge in the use of unmanned aerial vehicles by the Obama administration in its counter-terrorism campaign. A decade after the tactic was first used against al-Qaeda in Yemen in November 2002, missile strikes by Predator drones are now being launched at a rate of around one every week.³⁶ In half the time, President Obama has ordered five times the number of drone strikes that his predecessor did during eight years in office, and the targeting rules have recently widened to allow strikes against individuals who have not been identified by name but are suspected of terrorist activity and of posing a threat to the US.

The controversy surrounding drone strikes has led to a growing debate within the United States about due process, Obama's legacy, executive authority and targeted killing, as well as at least two law suits filed by victims' relatives against national security officials and the president. The ethical problems raised by this new mode of death-dealing have also been seized upon by spokesmen for al-Qaeda's cause, including the father of Anwar al-Awlaki who, in a message to British Muslims, lambasted US double-standards for murdering his son, a US national, when "no evidence was ever presented against him" and he was "far from any battlefield".³⁷

Indeed, the Obama administration's aggressive drone campaign, which has no doubt led to the decapitation of al-Qaeda's leadership, is dangerously double-edged. Drones are believed to have killed more than 3,000 people designated as terrorists, but also, in the process, more than 800 civilians.³⁸ In the wider context of extreme poverty, resource scarcity, poor development indicators and the abject failures of the Yemeni government – to which the US has allied itself – such deaths are sure to have a radicalising effect. In fact, the Yemeni analyst Abdul Ghani al-Iryani stated that one drone

³⁶ P. Seale, "What is Obama's Game Plan?", *Gulf News*, 8 June 2012.

³⁷ "Message from Dr. Nassar al-Awlaki to Muslims of UK", *YouTube*, 2 December 2011, at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AlywZqHjIE>>.

³⁸ M. Hastings, "The Rise of the Killer Drones: How America Goes to War in Secret", *Rolling Stone*, 16 April 2012.

strike in Abyan in December 2009, which killed 14 women and 21 children, radicalised an entire province. The event led to the formation of the Ansar al-Sharia faction which went on to control much of Abyan: “the majority were not al-Qaeda; they were angered by what they saw as American aggression”.³⁹ Similarly, the Yemeni activist Ibrahim Mothana argued that rising civilian death tolls from drone strikes has provided a boon to AQAP recruitment and that “a new generation of [militant] leaders is spontaneously emerging in furious retaliation to attacks on their territories and tribes”.⁴⁰ There is potential for a similar dynamic to take hold in Pakistan and Somalia, where drone programmes were recently escalated.

As Ibrahim Sharqieh points out, the Obama administration’s covert drone campaign takes place as part of a larger pattern of “investing resources in a security solution – even at the expense of economic development”. Success in Yemen has been measured by the number of AQAP members killed, rather than by the development of a viable state.⁴¹ An approach which privileges aerial attacks and military spending cannot deal with the realities that make parts of Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan and Mali hospitable to al-Qaeda. In failing states such as these, it would make sense to place the human security of the population at the forefront of counter-terrorism strategies. The alternative course would seem to only confirm al-Qaeda’s narrative and guarantee its continued relevance.

³⁹ Quoted in M. Shephard, “Drone Death in Yemen of an American Teenager”, *Toronto Star*, 14 April 2012.

⁴⁰ I. Mothana, “How Drones Help Al-Qaeda”, *New York Times*, 13 June 2012.

⁴¹ I. Sharqieh, “Focus on Al Qaeda in Yemen Magnifies Chronic Instability”, *The National*, 25 April 2012.

Conclusion

While these four areas might boast some opportunities for al-Qaeda, they also present significant challenges. In fact, it is possible that developments in one realm will work to undermine progress in others. For example, it is likely that Boko Haram and al-Shabbab will increasingly join forces with AQIM (and indeed Ansar Eddine) to pose a sharper threat on the African continent. However, this may well undercut AQAP's concerted attempt to win back Muslim hearts and minds, as well as the radicalising impact of US drone strikes. This is owing to the dismal track record of al-Qaeda's affiliated fighters in winning "the trust of the Muslim masses", as Osama bin Laden put it.

Where al-Qaeda in Iraq gained control over territory, for example, the quality of life on offer was bleak: music, smoking and shaving were banned, women were forced to take the veil, punishments for disobedience included rape, the chopping of hands and the beheading of children. Brutality was blended with farce as female goats were killed because their parts were not covered and their tails turned upward. In Somalia, al-Qaeda partnered with al-Shabaab during the 2011 East African food crisis in order to deliver grain, powdered milk and dates to starving people. The aid sacks were marked: 'Al-Qaeda campaign on behalf of Martyr Bin Laden. Charity relief for those affected by drought'⁴², yet al-Shabaab, which was already infamous for banning games, music and bras, had in fact imprisoned those starving Somalis and consistently blocked the access of international relief organisations to parts of the country labelled famine zones. Like bin Laden, AQAP has well understood that this course of tyranny and fanaticism is mistaken. But will its new allies on the African continent learn from AQAP or, instead, undermine it?

Strangely enough, the death of Osama bin Laden has meant the loss of a moderating force for al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda's fate will ultimately depend on the survival of the critical current within its own ranks, and its ability to maintain focus on hitting western targets.

To that end, the rising star of AQAP bodes well. If al-Qaeda does manage to strike a major target in the US or Europe, the perpetrator will likely be a western passport holder, and the trail will lead in some way to AQAP, perhaps via its bomb-maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, and/or the sermons of Anwar al-Awlaki. However, if loosely

⁴² See J. Gettleman, "Al Qaeda Tries a New Tactic in Somalia: Philanthropy", *New York Times*, 16 October 2011.

affiliated groups with puritanical, sectarian agendas also make large gains, they will exacerbate al-Qaeda's strategic crisis.

Yet it is worth remembering that, while the failed policies of al-Qaeda's radical affiliates have made us safer in the West, they have had catastrophic consequences for civilian populations across the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa.