



DOES AL QAEDA CENTRAL STILL MATTER?

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Abstract:

This article examines whether Al Qaeda Central are still relevant or not. By investigating Al Qaeda Central's activities, which are aimed at provoking violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as its continuous plots of direct attacks against the US, this article shows that Al Qaeda's operational capability is stronger than anticipated by the US and other scholars. In addition, Al Qaeda affiliates maintain a close relationship with the group which in turn facilitates Al Qaeda Central's resiliency. Moreover, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)'s aggressive support and contribution to the Al Qaeda network indicates that Al Qaeda Central's longevity depends on its relationship with affiliates. The article concludes that under these conditions, Al Qaeda Central still has a place in global security discussions.

Keywords: Al Qaeda, Islamic State, terrorism, Haqqani network, Pakistani Taliban, Al Qaeda affiliates, operational methods.

Resumen:

El artículo discute si Al Qaeda central es todavía relevante o no. Tras estudiar la actividades de Al Qaeda central cuyo objetivo es provocar la violencia en Afganistán y Pakistán, así como los planes continuos de ataques directos contra los Estados Unidos, el artículo muestra que la capacidad operativa de Al Qaeda es más sólida y fuerte que la que Estados Unidos y otros investigadores y eruditos han anticipado. Además, el apoyo virulento y la contribución Al Qaeda en la Península Arábiga a la red de Al Qaeda muestra que la longevidad de Al Qaeda depende de la relación con sus afiliados. El artículo concluye que, en estas condiciones, Al Qaeda central todavía ocupa un lugar en las discusiones de seguridad global.

Palabras clave: Al Qaeda, Estado Islámico, terrorismo, red Haqqani, Talibanes de Pakistán, afiliados de Al Qaeda, métodos operativos.

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1. Introduction

In terms of global terrorism the presence of Al Qaeda Central is one of its most controversial and complicated subjects. After enduring more than 10 years of the ‘war on terror’, the US invasion of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, US drone policy against Al Qaeda members and the death of Osama bin Laden, this organization is believed to have been severely damaged. However, Government officials, scholars, and analysts continue to debate the central leadership of al Qaeda. Most assessments of Al Qaeda Central therefore fall into one of two categories: al-Qaeda is stronger than ever, or al-Qaeda is dead or dying.

Although many analysts, especially those who work closely to the Obama administration, say US counter terrorism policy has got al-Qaeda on the run. National Journal reporter Michael Hirsch quoted a State Department official as saying “*The war on terror is over,*” in part because the core elements of al-Qaeda -- its vast network and logistics trail for planning and launching attacks - are essentially destroyed.²

However, while Al Qaeda Central was believed to be decimated, there has been a significant growth in terrorism in globally especially, where Al Qaeda affiliates still wield strong influence through terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare. This situation thus begs the question, “is Al Qaeda really no longer relevant? If they are or they are not, what is behind recent developments of Al Qaeda affiliates that have caused severe security degradation in Middle East and West Africa?”

Therefore, this thesis will attempt to answer those questions through in-depth analysis of several issues connected to Al Qaeda Central. The fact Al Qaeda Central is believed to be defunct, yet Al Qaeda-related terrorism is growing, suggests how we should analyse this issue.

In the first chapter, I will briefly describe the context of the debate over Al Qaeda Central and will attempt to identify the main reasons for the split in opinion about the organisation amongst experts. In the second chapter I will focus on Al Qaeda Central in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and carefully examine if their capability has really been neutralized or if they are still operative. In the third chapter I will analyse the relationship between Al Qaeda Central and affiliates, because those affiliates are behind recent uprisings in many countries. The final chapter is a case study of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula which is an Al Qaeda affiliate in Yemen. This chapter will mainly focus on AQAP’s close links to Al Qaeda Central and their role in the broader Al Qaeda network.

2. Context

Al Qaeda Central refers to the terrorist organization established by Al Qaeda’s original top commanders including Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri. Al Qaeda Central has a direct connection to the Majlis al Shura of Al Qaeda, which is presumed to be located somewhere on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border (Majlis al Shura means religious body regarding caliphate and Al Qaeda's Shura council is the governing council of the organization, ranked just below Bin Laden in seniority). Despite its controversy, this group is believed to be defunct today. The aim of this chapter is to discover how to analyse Al Qaeda Central. For this purpose, I will analyse in detail scholars’ two different views on Al Qaeda Central and attempt to identify what sparks debate.

² Foust, Joshua: “How Strong Is al Qaeda Today, Really?”, *The Atlantic*, 1 May 2012, at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/05/how-strong-is-al-qaeda-today-really/256609/>.



The development of Al Qaeda as a formal organization began with the formation of the 'World Islamic Front' and the declaration of a Jihad against 'Jews and Crusaders' on February 23, 1998 in Afghanistan. This declaration indicates the development of bin Laden's thoughts into a body of clear objectives for al-Qaeda operatives and terrorists worldwide. It is reasonable to identify the formation of the World Islamic Front as the beginning of Al Qaeda Central - because after this declaration, Al Qaeda organized itself into more formal organizations, with Al-Qaeda Majlis al Shura and committees for finance, religion, military affairs, and propaganda.³ It is questionable if Al Qaeda Shura council really functioned after the war on terror and subsequent military action by the US army. However, the military committee including Al Zawahiri was still operating and supporting terrorist operations around the world. This effort led to the bomb attack in Bali, Indonesia in 2002.

Bin Laden's Al Qaeda group declared a formal merger with Al Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) in 2001.⁴ We believe the structure of Al Qaeda at this time was fully organized. Al Qaeda members scattered all over the world as a result of the US invasion of Afghanistan and merged with other cooperative terrorist groups - creating Al Qaeda franchise groups. Therefore, probably the best way to describe Al Qaeda Central today is that it is made up of the surviving core members, including Al Zawahiri. October 17, 2004 the CIA begins using the term 'AQCore,' for Al Qaeda core, to distinguish bin Laden's Pakistan-based group from such offshoots.⁵

Al Qaeda's senior leadership is indisputably being placed under pressure to an extent not seen since the opening phases of the war on terrorism more than ten years ago. In 2007, a U.S. military press release, noted the al Qaeda Shura council (leadership of Al Qaeda Central) was in fact 'defunct.' A number of the Shura members, detailed in 1998 by Jamal al-Fadl, do not appear on the U.S' 'most-wanted' lists, suggesting they are no longer functional members of the organization. A few are certainly captured or dead; some are still active, but the fate of others is uncertain.⁶ It is not clear if al-Qaeda's Shura and committee structure has therefore existed in any real form since 2001.

Indeed, thirteen Al Qaeda key members have died in drone attacks since July 2008 and the assassination of Bin Laden, who has long been al Qaeda's tactical and spiritual leader, appeared to neutralize al Qaeda's operational capability. Moreover, reports from the US Treasury Department indicating al Qaeda's poor financial status are also proof of themovement's faltering capabilities.

Meanwhile, among terrorism scholars and government officials, there are two opposing views regarding Al Qaeda Central. Marc Sageman, a leading terrorism expert, has analysed Al Qaeda Central in his book *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty First Century*. In his book, he discusses the two sides of al Qaeda: the organization and the social movement. Sageman addresses this dichotomy:

"We can no longer talk about Al Qaeda as a centralized organization. In the wake of the closure of the training camps in Afghanistan, the halt of financial transfers, and the detention or death of key personnel, Al Qaeda Central has receded in importance. In its

³ Sageman, Marc (2008): *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, New York, University of Pennsylvania Press, p.45.

⁴ Atwan, Abdel Bari (2006): *The Secret History of al Qaeda*, California, University of California Press, p. 54.

⁵ McCormick, Ty: "Al Qaeda Core: A Short History", *Foreign Policy* (March 2014), at <http://www.english.rfi.fr/node/130954>.

⁶ "Al-Qaeda majlis al Shura", *Global Security*, at http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/profiles/al-qaeda_majlis_al_Shura.htm.



place, of no less concern to those trying to understand terrorists and their actions, is a looser social movement with its own strengths and vulnerabilities.”⁷

The author believes Al Qaeda Central’s golden age was ended by the war on terror. Heavy pressure from the US led to the shutdown of training camps, the cutting of funding sources, and moreover, the arrest or killing of key players in Al Qaeda’s leadership. In the result of war against al Qaeda, the group has receded in importance. Sageman emphasized in 2013 that the Al Qaeda threat is fading away and the movement has been weakened. He contended “Governments, by overreacting, may actually bring back the Al Qaeda movement”.⁸

The view that Al Qaeda had been diminished in every measurable way was embraced by the U.S. government, and top officials issued similar statements about al Qaeda's impending demise.⁹ The US government has put a lot of effort into defeating Al Qaeda Central. After a US drone killed significant numbers of key personnel and Osama bin Laden, the US government declared Al Qaeda Central as defunct or severely degraded. Moreover, President Obama declared victory war against al Qaeda. “The war in Afghanistan is winding down. Al Qaeda has been decimated,”¹⁰ Obama’s confident remarks about Al Qaeda were readdressed during a campaign rally in Green Bay, Wisconsin November 1, 2012. “Bin Laden is dead. So we’ve made real progress these past four years.”¹¹ Before president Obama, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta revealed his prediction in the year right after the bin Laden’s death. He said, if the U.S. keeps up the pressure on al Qaeda, “I’m convinced that we’re within reach of strategically defeating al Qaeda,”¹² National Director of Intelligence James Clapper also mentioned al Qaeda’s possible demise in the U.S. Senate. January 31, 2012, “With Osama bin Laden's death, the global jihadist movement lost its most iconic and inspirational leader...and the death or capture of prominent al-Qaeda figures has shrunk the group's top leadership layer.”¹³

Sageman’s view of the Al Qaeda phenomenon is more focused on a social Ideology movement that seems able to explain the lone wolf terrorism launched by individuals without any connection to al Qaeda. Sageman says it is true Al Qaeda and bin Laden were trying to build something like a formally organized global terrorist organization that was supposed to incorporate numerous terrorist groups across the world. However this plan failed due to the loss of training camps and financial resource that led to the collapse of operational backing, while bin Laden provided the jihad. The elimination of infrastructure caused the international jihad movement to return to its roots before al Qaeda’s appearance, the time when they acted by themselves without any support or orders from the top (top-down operation). These groups follow the methodologies and precepts of Al Qaeda, but without direct links to the

⁷ Sageman, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁸ Hassan, Mehdi: “Woolwich Attack: Overreacting To Extremism 'Could Bring Back Al Qaeda' Ex CIA Officer Warns”, *Huffpost Politics*, 28 May 2013, at http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/05/27/sageman-interview_n_3342206.html.

⁹ Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed: “Interpreting Al Qaeda”, *Foreign Policy* (January 2014), at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/06/interpreting-al-qaeda/>.

¹⁰ Lucas, Fred: “Obama Has Touted Al Qaeda’s Demise 32 Times since Benghazi Attack”, *CNS*, 1 November 2012, at <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/obama-touts-al-qaeda-s-demise-32-times-benghazi-attack-0>.

¹¹ Koffler, Keith: “Obama During Campaign: “Al Qaeda Has Been Decimated””, *White House Dossier*, 8 August 2013, at <http://www.whitehousedossier.com/2013/08/08/obama-campaign-al-qaeda-decimated/>.

¹² Benson, Pam: “CNN Fact Check: Is al Qaeda's core decimated or is group growing?”, *CNN*, 22 October 2012, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/22/politics/fact-check-al-qaeda/>.

¹³ Oswald, Rachel: “Badly Weakened Al-Qaeda Still Seen as Top Terrorist Threat to U.S.”, *Global Security Newswire*, 1 February 2012, at <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/even-decline-al-qaeda-still-seen-top-terrorist-threat-us/>.



group. "This is a bottom-up thing," he says. "This is a bunch of friends who get together and want to do something. Are they coordinated with the top leadership? No."¹⁴

However, his 'bunch of guys' theory doesn't explain the more organized jihad movement under the banner of al Qaeda. His books spend a lot of time analysing the mechanism of Al Qaeda as a social movement and at the same time the author denies every notion that Al Qaeda is more structured and there could be general command over the affiliates. However, it is true Al Qaeda Central has been aggressively expanding its network, merging with other jihad groups, accepting their loyalty to the leadership of Al Qaeda and communicating with them - while Sageman assumes Al Qaeda Central is defunct. His book, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* analyses Al Qaeda's terrorism-network consulting historical facts. The author says that Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is just Al Qaeda in name, trying to acquire the reputation of Al Qaeda by using its name.¹⁵ It is true it is arguable as to whether there is a clear chain of command between AQIM and Al Qaeda Central or not. However, the leadership of AQIM calls Al Qaeda Central 'leadership' while they have a local leadership as revealed from AQIM's letter to Moktar Belmoktar in 2012¹⁶ and bin Laden's personnel document seized from the Abbottabad raid clearly tells us bin Laden was actually communicating with AQIM during the mid-2000s.¹⁷

Moreover, as Bruce Hoffman points out, although so-called lone wolves have no connection to the core group, their presence is the result of Al Qaeda propaganda as part of the strategy of the core group. The emergence of lone wolf terrorism doesn't mean Al Qaeda Central ceased to exist.¹⁸ Some lone wolf terrorism cases even clearly suggest that there is evidence of the intervention of Al Qaeda Central in plotting or funding activities. However, Sageman appears to have ignored this important factor and has never tried to understand Al Qaeda and affiliate's loyalty, structure and strategy. Due to the gap between Sageman's argument and reality, the view that Al Qaeda Core is on the brink of collapse seems premature.

Nevertheless the view that Al Qaeda is defeated is based on weak evidences, the notion of a scattered and ineffective Al-Qaeda central leadership has been overplayed over the past few years. Meanwhile, Hoffman has contended that Al Qaeda Central is still a major threat to global security. Hoffman also agrees that Al Qaeda was weakened as a result of Osama bin Laden's death and the loss of the stronghold in Afghanistan. However, he maintains Al Qaeda hasn't changed at all and the threat is the same as ever.¹⁹ He emphasizes that Al Qaeda Central has stubbornly survived by close connection between Al Qaeda Central and affiliations. He believes these connections between the central and affiliate members, that have been perceived as loose and decentralized by the US government and some scholars, are actually much more intimate and well structured. According to Hoffman, Al Qaeda Central was

¹⁴ Telvick, Marlana: "Al Qaeda Today", *Frontline*, 25 January 2005, at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/etc/today.html>.

¹⁵ Sageman, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

¹⁶ "Benghazi: A guide to the controversy", *Mercury News*, 5 September 2014, at http://www.mercurynews.com/nation-world/ci_25729852/benghazi-guide-controversy.

¹⁷ Fisher, Max: "What the Osama bin Laden raid discovered on al-Qaeda's links in Algeria", *The Washington Post*, 22 January 2013, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/01/22/what-the-osama-bin-laden-raid-discovered-on-al-qaedas-links-in-algeria/>.

¹⁸ Sageman, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

¹⁹ "Understanding Al Qaeda and its Affiliates: A Global Threat or JV Squad?", *Defend Democracy*, at <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/events/understanding-al-qaeda-and-its-affiliates-a-global-threat-or-jv-squad/#sthash.o1Du5J9K.dpuf>.



interested in expanding its network to West Africa in 2003, so they contacted the leaders of Nigeria's Boko Haram group that has risen in power since 2009.²⁰

The on-going situation in the Middle East and Africa gives credit to Hoffman's arguments. It is obvious that Al Qaeda contributed towards building a wider terrorism network through the whole world. Al Qaeda started laying the foundations for a formally integrated wider terrorism network in the early 1990s.

Al Qaeda began laying the groundwork for the emergence of its affiliates in the early 1990s. As part of plan that aimed at building terrorism network, bin Laden kept a close relationship going between jihad groups in Yemen, Algeria and other countries. Many of them have become franchise group of Al Qaeda today.²¹ It is unclear whether they have a top-down command structure or not but, Al Qaeda Central influences its affiliates in other ways. As evidence, Nasser al Wuhayshi, the emir of AQAP, also serves as al Qaeda's general manager and is responsible for the management of the whole Al Qaeda franchise.²² The appointment of al Wuhayshi does not just represent a close relationship between Al Qaeda Central and AQAP, but also refutes the belief that Al Qaeda Central's influence is merely restricted to some parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Indeed, Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorism has been increasing over the last few years despite the belief al-Qaida's leadership has been decimated. For example, terrorist attacks rose 43% worldwide in 2013 according to new statistics released by the State Department.²³ The annual report released by the state department highlights the global security has been rapidly deteriorated by terrorism, insurgency and sectarian violence in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan and Afghanistan. All of these countries suffered from a significant growth in terrorism incidents. A major jihadist group responsible for many of the attacks in these countries, is the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), as well as the al Nusra front, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Haqqani Network. The terrorist group behind this surge of terrorism are not a bunch of guys or lone wolf terrorists but much more professionally structured terrorist groups that have clearly cooperated with Al Qaeda Central.

But why are scholars' opinions on a single terrorist group so different? Behind the scholars' debate on Al Qaeda Central, are some factors that cause much confusion when judging Al Qaeda Central. The first factor is disagreement on the definition of al Qaeda. For example, the Obama administration defines Al Qaeda in extremely narrow terms: it considers Al Qaeda central to the September 11 attacks in the U.S. and a single group in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The report from Mary Habeck, a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and author of numerous books on al Qaeda, argues the administration's vague definition of the terrorist group has hampered America's response to its global threat.²⁴

²⁰ Hoffman, Bruce: "Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 36, no. 8 (March 2013), pp. 635-653.

²¹ Gunaratna, Rohan (2002): *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 215.

²² Cruickshank, Paul: "Analysts: Terror warning may be linked to choice of Al Qaeda chief deputy", *CNN*, 3 August 2013, at <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2013/08/03/analysts-terror-warning-may-be-linked-to-choice-of-al-qaeda-chief-deputy/>.

²³ Ackerman, Spencer: "Global terrorism rose 43% in 2013 despite al-Qaida splintering, US reports", *The Guardian*, 30 April 2014, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/30/global-terrorism-rose-despite-al-qaida-splintering>.

²⁴ Habeck, Mary, "Getting it right: US national security policy and Al Qaeda since 2011", *AEI Critical Threats* (April 2014), at http://www.aei.org/files/2014/04/23/-getting-it-right-us-national-security-policy-and-al-qaeda-since-2011_154934325907.pdf.



President Barack Obama's National Strategy for Counterterrorism has divided Al Qaeda into three parts: its core leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan, its affiliates and its adherents. However, his definition never explains what is 'core' and who are those 'affiliates' and 'adherents', nevertheless such definition is supposed to be a guideline designed to target the use of force. Moreover, this narrow definition doesn't give consideration to closely the connected network between the core and affiliates that facilitates al Qaeda's survival and reconstitution. Indeed, Obama seems to clearly make a distinction between Al Qaeda and affiliates as he argues, "*There is a distinction between the capacity and reach of a bin Laden and a network that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the homeland versus jihadists who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian... If a jayvee team puts on Lakers uniforms, that doesn't make them Kobe Bryant.*"²⁵

These inconsistencies and confusion make it difficult to evaluate the status of al Qaeda, especially when the Al Qaeda franchise group rises and Al Qaeda Central doesn't seem operational. To US government, Al Qaeda Central is irrelevant to recently violence in the Middle East and Africa, because Al Qaeda is a single group in Afghanistan and Pakistan which has been severely weakened already.

The second factor is characteristic of al Qaeda's operational method. Generally, the number of attacks is considered to be one way of measuring terrorist group's operational capability. However, there is serious confusion as to which terrorist attacks Al Qaeda was actually involved in. For example, Sageman argues the organisation doesn't have many members and has only carried out one successful series of attacks against the West since 9/11 and the London bombings in July 2005.²⁶ Sageman suggests the 2004 Madrid bombing is Al Qaeda-inspired terrorism, rather than an Al Qaeda operation. However, almost ten years later, there are experts such as Fernando Reinares still arguing Al Qaeda Central was involved in the Madrid bombing.²⁷

This is not a single case, as every time a terrorist attack occurs there is controversy as to whether Al Qaeda is involved or not. The 2008 Mumbai attack, 2012 Benghazi attack and 2013 Nigeria Westgate shopping mall attack, are all attacks with suspected Al Qaeda involvement although, in most of cases no concrete evidence has been found.

Both factors should be understood in the context of how Al Qaeda operates. Al Qaeda has a unique method of plotting terrorist attacks by coordinating with fellow Jihad groups. For instance, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, who bombed the World Trade Centre in 1993, was not a formal Al Qaeda member.²⁸ And the USS Cole bombing emerged from a co-operation of Al Qaeda with a Yemeni jihad group.²⁹ Even on 9/11, there were several guests from other jihad groups involved in the operation. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed had never been an Al Qaeda member until 1998 and never swore loyalty to bin Laden.³⁰ Hambali, the key member of Jemaah Islamiyah, supported and financed the 9/11 terrorists.³¹ He also played a key role in the 2003 Bali nightclub bombing, coordinating with al Qaeda. These cases are generally

²⁵ Remnick, David, "Going the distance", *The New Yorker* (January 2014), at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-2?currentPage=all>.

²⁶ Schlafli, Samuel, "Al-Qaeda has never been strong", *ETH Zurich*, 25 November 2011, at http://www.ethlife.ethz.ch/archive_articles/110525_Interview_Sagemann_sch/index_EN.

²⁷ Reinares, Fernando: "The evidence of Al-Qaida's role in the 2004 Madrid attack", *Combating Terrorism Center* (March 2012), at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-evidence-of-al-qaidas-role-in-the-2004-madrid-attack>.

²⁸ Sageman, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

²⁹ Gunaratna, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

³⁰ Sageman, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

³¹ 9/11 commission (2004): "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States", New York, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 150.



considered to be Al Qaeda terrorist attacks, but as we can see most involved other terrorist groups. These cases clearly suggest that Al Qaeda must not be understood as one single group. There is a formal leadership but below the top of hierarchy, it is less formal, more dependent on a terrorist network. This is the reason why we cannot think of Al Qaeda Central apart from the affiliates.

As Thomas Joscelyn points out, even though Al Qaeda Central has been damaged, its close links to affiliation have been the driving force of Al Qaeda Central regaining its power. According to Joscelyn, several signs indicate that Al Qaeda is recovering from this damage and actively expanding their network. Joscelyn says a strong Al Qaeda presence in Syria is one of those signs, as senior Al Qaeda members relocated from Pakistan to Syria penalized by the Treasury Department in 2013 and U.S. officials have tracked communication traffic going back and forth between Syria, Pakistan and Afghanistan. *“This shows, to my mind, that we’re not dealing with this sort of discrete core entity in Pakistan and Afghanistan that can be droned to death, but in fact an international network that poses a lot graver challenges,”* he says.³² The evidences he cites indicates that Al Qaeda Central and the affiliate network is much more structured and they use ideology to integrate the terrorism network. Therefore, as long as their connection is solid, Al Qaeda Central cannot be defeated.

My findings from this chapter are that there is a lack of consensus about what the Al Qaeda phenomenon consists of, and what the information about organization consists of - which makes it harder to judge Al Qaeda Central’s capability. Therefore the argument that Al Qaeda is no more relevant, which is based on the notion that Al Qaeda is just a single group, seems less effective in the context of recent developments. Indeed, security is getting worse in countries where Al Qaeda is active. All of these findings place more weight on the argument which underlines al Qaeda’s resilience.

3. Operational capabilities of Al Qaeda Central

This chapter aims to determine whether Al Qaeda is still operationally capable or neutralized. In order to do this I will consult several theories to measure the terrorist group’s operational capability. After that this chapter will analyse the evidence of Al Qaeda Central’s demise. Finally I will demonstrate why Al Qaeda Central’s operational capability is still solid.

So, how can one measure if Al Qaeda Central has been defeated or not? Although there are no clear metrics to measure it, most simple way would be to look into the number of operations the terrorist group is involved in and the number of active members in their organization.

Daniel Byman suggests several indicators to measure a successful counter policy against a terrorist group as follows; the reduced freedom of terrorists to operate (achieved via the elimination of safe havens). the disruption of terrorist recruitment (in order to stem, over time, the flow of new blood into the organisation, and finally the reduced number of terrorist attacks (as attack capability reflects both the threat posed by a group as well as its very viability).³³

Walid Phares suggests a similar way to measure Al Qaeda Central’s operational capability. Phares suggested three ways: Operational, Control and Recruitment. First, is Al

³² Riechmann, Deb: “Al-Qaida Decentralized, but not necessarily weaker”, *AP*, 1 Jun 2014, at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/al-qaida-has-changed-shape-it-weaker>.

³³ Byman, Daniel L: “Al-Qaeda as an Adversary: Do We Understand Our Enemy?”, *World Politics*, vol. 56, no. 1 (July 2004), pp.139-163.



Qaeda waging the same number of operations? Second, does it control enclaves? Third, is it recruiting in high numbers?³⁴ This is quite a simple way to measure a terrorist group's capability, because if the group does not conduct any terrorist operations and has no active members, then the group's operational capabilities are neutralized.

However, this approach might be too simple and may not be applicable to network-based groups such as al Qaeda. As noted above, the Al Qaeda phenomenon today widely encompasses many jihad groups and individuals in different countries. In this regard, Alex P Schmid and Rashmi Singh's approach towards this matter is worth consulting. They include Al Qaeda affiliates in order to measure the group's capability. They suggest a reasonable way in which to measure should be looking at the increase or decrease in the number of terrorist groups affiliated with or not with Al Qaeda, the increase/decrease of the size and recruiting rate and related groups, and the increase/decrease in the number of, and intervals between, Al-Qaeda-related attacks. These authors also propose an analysis of the size of civilian and security forces, casualties from jihadist terrorist attacks, the losses of Al Qaeda and related terrorist jihadists (casualties, arrests, exit from struggle) and the balance of losses, stock and new recruitments, collateral damage (civilians wounded and killed) in the War on Terror, any increase/decrease in the number of countries and geographical zones in which Al Qaeda and related terrorist groups operate in, and finally the increase/decrease in the sophistication of Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda related attacks.³⁵

However, scholars who argue the demise of Al Qaeda Central seem to prefer a much simpler approach that measures al Qaeda's operational capability by a couple of simple factors. There are two main pieces of evidence used to support the argument that Al Qaeda has been defeated. Firstly, the death of bin Laden and the demise of Al Qaeda's core group of members, especially members of the Shura council. Secondly, the absence of terrorism in the West that Al Qaeda Central is involved in. These are central pieces of evidence that points towards al Qaeda's demise, which suggest Al Qaeda Central is incapable of carrying out any attacks.

For example, in 2012, Peter Bergen argued Al Qaeda is defeated because CIA drone policy in Afghanistan (Al Qaeda Central's stronghold for long time), successfully eliminated 28 Al Qaeda key members especially those on the Shura council revealed by Jamal al fadl, a former Al Qaeda member. Bergen said as a result, Al Qaeda only has one senior leader left, al Zawahiri, who lacks charisma, and who took over the group after the death of Osama bin Laden.³⁶ According to Bergen, Al Qaeda Central has never launched a successful terrorist attack in the West since 9/11 except for the 7/7 London bombing that killed 52 commuters. Even so-called affiliates and lone wolves inspired by Al Qaeda have only killed 17 people in the United States since 9/11.

Sageman backs up this assertion, and in 2011 added to Bergen's claim, arguing a comprehensive survey of global neo-jihadi terrorism in the West highlights that there were 60 plots over the past 20 years, perpetrated by 46 different networks. Of these only 14 successfully inflicted any casualties, and only two were perpetrated by al-Qaeda proper in the past 20 years. Over the past five years, global neo-jihadi and al-Qaeda terrorism in the West has been in decline and the vast majority of the plots were perpetrated by independent home-

³⁴ "How to measure al Qaeda's defeat?", *Counter-Terrorism Blog* (June 2008), at <http://counterterrorismblog.org/2008/06/how-to-measure-al-qaedas-defeat.php>.

³⁵ Schmid, Alex P; Hindle, Garry F (ed.) (2009): *After the War on Terror Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counter-Terrorism Strategy*, London, RUSI Books, p. 47.

³⁶ Bergen, Peter: "Time to declare victory: Al Qaeda is defeated", *CNN*, 27 June 2012, at <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/06/27/time-to-declare-victory-al-qaeda-is-defeated-opinion/>.



grown groups, inspired by al- Qaeda but not linked to it or its allies.³⁷ Many terrorist attempts launched by like-minded terrorist groups or individuals have not been traced back to Afghanistan. Moreover, he says, there is no evidence Al Qaeda Central was involved in any terrorist plots since 9/11. Al Qaeda Central currently does not run a training centre for terrorists, and the group is not capable of funding terrorist attacks anymore due to the loss of its financial resources. There has been no global neo-jihadi terrorist casualty in the West in the past four years and none in the U.S. in the past eight years.

According to Javier Jordán, terrorism expert and the author of *The Effectiveness of the Drone Campaign against Al Qaeda Central: A Case Study*, US drone policy managed to oppress the group's operational capability. Jordán claims that there were 136 terrorist incidents from 2001 to 2012, and Al Qaeda Central was involved in only 33 cases out of 136, 5 in the United States and 28 in Europe. From 2001 to 2006, Al Qaeda Central was quite active in plotting terrorist attacks, as 20 incidents were conducted during the first half of that period. Whereas, Al Qaeda Central's activity came to a lull especially after 2007, the year US drone activity was stepped up in Afghanistan. Even 13 cases of attacks between 2007 and 2012, did not cause any casualty or damage to Western society. Jordán concludes the complexity and lethality of Al Qaeda Central's terrorist actions on American and European soil have fallen dramatically.³⁸ Jordán evaluates Al Qaeda endured immense structural damage from the CIA drone campaign. As a result, Al Qaeda lost control over affiliates in strategic and operational positions, and switched into a significantly decentralized organization that has tried to recover its influence to affiliates but due to difficulties in communicating with affiliates, their efforts have largely failed. Now Al Qaeda Central has no or very little capability to plot and launch terrorist attacks, probably none outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁹

After the US drone policy commenced, approximately 60 key members of Al Qaeda were killed by drones. It is unclear exactly how many Al Qaeda members died in this campaign, although Jordán and Sageman presumed around 60.

As matter of fact, even bin Laden was concerned about the loss of experienced members and his anxiety is well expressed in one of his documents seized from the Abbottabad raid.

*It is important to have the leadership in a faraway location to gain expertise in all areas. When this experienced leadership dies, this would lead to the rise of lower leaders who are not as experienced as the former leaders and this would lead to the repeat of mistakes.*⁴⁰

Although the effect of the targeted killing policy has never been proved, the killing of key members in the organization seems to have caused some level of disconnection between groups. As per bin Laden's recommendation to avoid wiretapping or signal intercepting by CIA, Al Qaeda members prefer hand-written letters to communicate with each other. This is safe but it takes time to communicate especially with affiliates outside of Afghanistan.

³⁷ Sageman, Marc: "Confronting al-Qaeda: Understanding the Threat in Afghanistan" *Perspective on Terrorism*, vol. 3, no. 4 (September 2009), at <http://www.terrorismnalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/79/html>.

³⁸ Jordán, Javier: "The Effectiveness of the Drone Campaign against AlQaeda Central: A Case Study" *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1 (February 2014), at <http://www.ugr.es/~jjordan/AlQaedaDronesPakistan.pdf>, pp. 4-29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Rassler, Don; Koehler-Derrick, Gabriel; Collins, Liam; Al-Obaidiand, Muhammad; Lahoud, Nelly: "Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelines?", *Combating Terrorism Center* (May 2012), at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined>.



Indeed, along with beginning of drone program, al Qaeda's terrorism operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan have significantly decreased since 2008. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) shows that only one terrorist attack occurred in Pakistan after 2008, conducted by Al Qaeda Central.⁴¹ Nevertheless, we have no idea what has brought on the decrease in the number of terrorism incidents.

As we can see, most of these scholars evaluate Al Qaeda Central's operational capability by using the number of terrorism incidents the group was involved in as dependent variables to measure their ability to continue terrorist or insurgency activity. Simply put, Al Qaeda Central is defunct because it has conducted only a few terrorist attacks. Of course, the number of terrorist attacks could be an important indicator to measure the terrorist group's military capacity. However, it might not be the best way to measure its ability to disrupt and influence others. As Megan Smith and James Igoe Walsh point out, we do not know which attacks were actually carried out by al Qaeda. The group does not always claim responsibility and even it does a lack of evidence means it cannot be proven, as seen in the Benghazi attack.⁴² Al Qaeda Central also engages in both launching terrorist attacks and provoking sectarian violence including insurgency with fellow Jihad groups. This makes it difficult to determine if a particular attack should be attributed to Al Qaeda.

Another reason why terrorist attacks or insurgent violence is not the only reasonable measure of a group's capacity is that its effectiveness could be unclear especially to a less hierarchical group like al Qaeda.⁴³ Generally, a targeted killings strategy is more effective against hierarchical terrorist organizations that have a top-down management structure. However, Al Qaeda adopted decentralized forms which are both top-down and bottom-up.⁴⁴ This structural form can protect the group from being vulnerable to the loss of some members in the hierarchy because the bottom can launch terrorist attacks with little or no help from the leadership. This indicates that there is a need to strike against members in both the top and bottom of the organisation to have an effect on Al Qaeda's ability to engage in violence.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, we must understand that although Al-Qaeda may be increasingly decentralised, it is by no means less united. In fact, since 2001, disparate Islamist groups have united under Al-Qaeda's banner in, among others, Yemen, North Africa, Central Africa and Indonesia.⁴⁶ Germany, Britain and the US all now have radical Islamists, born within their borders, claiming to fight for al Qaeda. Similar effects can be observed in Spain, Northern Ireland, and Israel.⁴⁷

Moreover, although Al Qaeda Central seems inoperative, Al Qaeda Central has many ties to fellow jihad organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and oppression from drone policy has actually generated an alliance to local jihad groups. According to Zahid Hussain, one of Pakistan's most noted security specialists, drone strikes and the loss of many leaders

⁴¹ "The Global Terrorism Database", at

<http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?search=al+qaeda+central&sa.x=0&sa.y=0&sa=Search>.

⁴² "Benghazi: A guide to the controversy", *Mercury News*, 5 September 2014, at http://www.mercurynews.com/nation-world/ci_25729852/benghazi-guide-controversy.

⁴³ Smith, Megan; Walsh, James Igoe: "Do Drone Strikes Degrade AlQaeda? Evidence From Propaganda Output", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 25, no. 2 (March 2013), at <http://www.jamesigoewalsh.com/tpv.pdf>, pp. 311-327.

⁴⁴ Sageman, Marc; Hoffman, Bruce: "Does Osama Still Call the Shots?", *Foreign Affairs* (July-August 2008), at www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/64460/marc-sageman-and-bruce-hoffman/does-osama-still-call-the-shots.

⁴⁵ Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

⁴⁶ Burke, Jason (2007): *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, London, Penguin UK, p. 24.

⁴⁷ Patrick, Keith: "Beheading the Hydra? Does Killing Terrorist or Insurgent Leaders Work?", *Defence Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3 (December 2013), at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14702436.2013.845383#.VLk7mSusUys>, p. 307.



have had little effect on the group's operations. He concluded that contrary to the notion that Al Qaeda is not functioning, Al Qaeda has been behind multiple attacks in Pakistan – the Islamabad Marriot hotel bombing in 2008 and the massive jail break that occurred in north western Pakistan in 2013.⁴⁸ His assertion makes sense, given the increasing cooperation between Al Qaeda Central and local militias such as Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Haqqani network.

TTP and TTP alternatively referred to as the Pakistani Taliban, is an umbrella organization of various Islamist militant groups based in the North western Federally Administered Tribal Areas along the Afghan border in Pakistan. The Haqqani Network is an Islamist insurgent group using asymmetric warfare to fight against US-led NATO forces and the government of Afghanistan. Maulvi Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin Haqqani lead the group. The group operates on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and U.S. officials believe it is based in Pakistan's Waziristan tribal frontier.

Al Qaeda Central undoubtedly has a close relationship to TTP as they were involved in TTP's establishment. TTP can be seen anywhere both Pakistan and Afghanistan, unleashing terrorism and insurgency, and provoking sectarian violence. In 2013, TTP also dispatched its small branch to Syria⁴⁹ Now, TTP shares funding, weapons and even members with Al Qaeda Central. John Brennan, President Obama's chief counterterrorism adviser, said: "*It's a group that is closely allied with al-Qaeda. They train together, they plan together, they plot together. They are almost indistinguishable.*"⁵⁰ Ambassador-at-large Daniel Benjamin also clearly stated, "*The TTP and Al Qaeda have a symbiotic relationship: TTP draws ideological guidance from Al Qaeda, while Al Qaeda relies on the TTP for safe haven in the Pashtun areas along the Afghan-Pakistani border*"⁵¹

The same relationship can be seen with the Haqqani Network that operates on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Haqqani network reportedly supports Al Qaeda in logistics and provides safe havens to key members using its tribal-based human network that has existed for more than a hundred years. Vahid Brown, the author of *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus*, clarified their relation in his book. *The Haqqani Network has long served as a local enabler of Al Qaeda and its global jihad.*⁵²

The cooperative relationship of Al Qaeda and TTP appears to have started in 2008. Baitullah Mehsud established TTP by merging five different militant groups in 2007 and he met al-Zawahiri in South Waziristan in 2008. By this time, Mehsud was believed to be an Al Qaeda member by the Pakistani government.⁵³ In the same year, the Haqqani network, which was never directly involved in any terrorist attack, started their terrorism campaign against the Afghan government. In February 2009 Baitullah Mehsud, Hafiz GulBahadur and Maulavi Nazir, the commander of TTP released a statement in which they reaffirmed their

⁴⁸ Kugelman, Michael: "Al-Qaeda is alive and well in Afghanistan and Pakistan", *War on the Rocks*, 13 February 2014, at <http://warontherocks.com/2014/02/al-qaeda-is-alive-and-well-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>.

⁴⁹ Mujeeb, Ahmed Wali: "Pakistan Taliban 'sets up a base in Syria'", *BBC News Asia*, 12 July 2013, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-23285245>.

⁵⁰ Hennessey, Kathleen: "N.Y. bomber has Al Qaeda tie, White House says", *Los Angeles Times*, 10 May 2010, at <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/N-Y-bomber-has-al-Qaeda-tie-White-House-says-3264841.php>.

⁵¹ Savage, Charlie: "U.S. Adds Legal Pressure on Pakistani Taliban", *The New York Times*, 1 September 2010, at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/02/world/asia/02talib.html?_r=0.

⁵² Brown, Vahid; Ressler, Don (2013): *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 181.

⁵³ Murphy, Eamon (2013): *The Making of Terrorism in Pakistan: Historical and Social Roots of Extremism*, London, Routledge, p. 148.



allegiance to Osama bin Laden.⁵⁴ The US government increased drone attacks against Al Qaeda since 2008. These groups have shown an even deeper connection as drone attack becoming severe. Clearly it indicates Al Qaeda Central has transformed into a more adaptable organization to survive.

There are considerable signs of Al Qaeda's influence in local militia's tactics to terrorism. Suicide attacks were barely seen in Pakistan even during the war on terror, as only 3 cases were reported in 2002 and 2003. On the other hand, there were 76 attacks in 2009 and 37 attacks also reported in the first 10 months of 2013, according to the New Delhi-based South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP).⁵⁵ This trend indicates suicide bombings have become ubiquitous in recent years due to al-Qaeda's influence. Al Qaeda Central's role in the relationships is not restricted to spiritual guidance or tactical support, but they are also involved in bringing fellow jihad groups including TTP and Haqqanis together. CTC's Ressler wrote in 2009 that al-Qaeda "assumed a role as mediator and coalition builder among various Pakistani militant group factions by promoting the unification of entities that have opposed one another or had conflicting ideas about whether to target the Pakistani state."⁵⁶

Uprisings in Pakistan and Afghanistan clearly indicate Al Qaeda Central's resilience since 2007, as terrorist groups have targeted political leaders, the military and police, tribal leaders, minority Shia, and schools. A US report on terrorism in 2013 showed that Afghanistan and Pakistan continued to experience aggressive and coordinated attacks by the Afghan Taliban, Haqqanis, and other insurgent and terrorist groups. A number of these attacks were planned and launched from safe havens in Pakistan.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, some assert Al Qaeda Central is no longer capable because there is no active terrorist plot against the US which means Al Qaeda is not functioning anymore. This is generally considered to be evidence of Al Qaeda Central's demise by the US government.

First of all, we should know that there seems to be some notion that Al Qaeda exists only to attack the US and the West. As Thomas Joscelyn argues, even if Al Qaeda stopped plotting terrorism against the US, it does not mean the organization has stopped existing. Al Qaeda's main goal is not defeating US or western countries but establishing a Caliphate - an Islamic state led by a supreme religious and political leader known as a caliph in the Middle East, South East Asia and Africa. "Attacking the West is just part of large strategy of Al Qaeda and that's not only thing they care about"⁵⁸ For instance, Al Zawahiri, current leader of Al Qaeda, has been engaging in violence against the Pakistani government. Zawahiri has called on Pakistanis to revolt against their government and military in a video released in

⁵⁴ Gall, Carlotta: "Pakistani and Afghan Taliban Unify in Face of U.S. Influx", *New York Times*, 27 March 2009, at http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/27/world/asia/27taliban.html?_r=0.

⁵⁵ Laub, Zachary: "Pakistan's New Generation of Terrorists", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 November 2013, at <http://www.cfr.org/pakistan/pakistans-new-generation-terrorists/p15422>.

⁵⁶ Ressler, Don: "Al-Qaeda's Pakistan Strategy", *CTC Sentinel* vol. 2, n° 6 (March 2009), at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida%E2%80%99s-pakistan-strategy>.

⁵⁷ United States Department of State: "Country report on Terrorism 2013", *United States Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism* (April 2014), at <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/>, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Foundation For Defence and Democracies (2014): *Understanding Al Qaeda and its Affiliates: A Global Threat or JV Squad?*, at <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/events/understanding-al-qaeda-and-its-affiliates-a-global-threat-or-jv-squad/#sthash.o1Du5J9K.dpuf>.



2012.⁵⁹ In 2008, Al Qaeda Central was suspected of bombing the Islamabad Marriott Hotel that killed at least 54 people. Pakistan's top leaders were thought to have been in the Islamabad Marriott hotel when it was bombed.

Therefore, attacking US and western targets should be considered a tactical step. Al Qaeda's main goal is getting rid of Western influence in Muslim society but this goal is only achieved by attacking the US, according to their belief. However we must remember that most Al Qaeda affiliates and even Central itself have been more concerned with continuing terrorist activity in mostly in Muslim countries rather than launching mass casualty attacks in the West.⁶⁰

Second, it is not the case that there has been no single terrorism attempt in US and the West since 9/11. Al Qaeda Central and branch groups have actually attempted several terrorist attacks against the US.

The 2006 transatlantic aircraft plot against seven American and Canadian air planes might have been the most destructive Al Qaeda attack since 9/11, if it had not been foiled by British police before it could be carried out.⁶¹ The plotter's handler, Rashid Rauf, was known to have worked closely with al Qaeda.⁶² The airlines plot represent Al Qaeda Central's capability. Moreover, the year 2006 was the year Al Qaeda Central was believed to be severely degraded and incapable of targeting commercial aviation which requires much more complicated cooperation and professional skills. The US government managed to kill two key commanders of Al Qaeda, Abu Farajal-Libi and Hamza Rabia, in 2005 in drone attacks. Despite the significant damage Al Qaeda Central would have suffered from loss of key members, the group was able to proceed onto the American and Canadian air plane plot the next year.⁶³

That being said, from the Bojinka plot in 1995(a plan to bomb 11 airliners flying from Asia to the United States) to the transatlantic aircraft plot in 2006, Al Qaeda leadership revealed a strange obsession for attacking the civilian aviation industry.⁶⁴ Even shortly after the 9/11 attack, the time when airport security was tightest and various technical security programs were introduced by airlines, the group tasked two terrorists Richard Reid and Saajid Badat to bomb airplanes with improvised explosive hidden their shoes.⁶⁵ In November 2002, an Al Qaeda cell attempted to shoot down an Israeli airplane nearby Mombasa airport with two surface-to-air missiles.

Alongside their obsession with attacking aircraft, Al Qaeda also attempts terrorism against other types of target. These targets were tasked to Najibullah Zazi, the terrorist who plotted multiple suicide attacks against the subway system in New York in 2009. He confessed his connection to Al Qaeda Central and testified that 3 members including himself

⁵⁹ Gayathri, Amrutha: "Al-Qaeda Chief Urges Pakistanis to Revolt Against Government", *International Business Times*, 17 March 2012, at <http://www.ibtimes.com/al-qaeda-chief-urges-pakistanis-revolt-against-government-426506>.

⁶⁰ Joscelyn, Thomas: "Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan: An enduring threat", *The Long War Journal* (May 2014), at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/05/al_qaeda_in_afghanis.php.

⁶¹ Silber, Mitchell D. (2011): *The Al Qaeda Factor: Plots Against the West*, New York, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 36.

⁶² Bergen, Peter (2011): *Talibanistan: Negotiating the Borders Between Terror, Politics, and Religion*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 208.

⁶³ Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 637.

⁶⁴ Mazzetti, Mark: "Portrait of 9/11 'Jackal' Emerges as He Awaits Trial", *The New York Times*, 15 November 2009, at http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/us/15ksm.html?_r=0.

⁶⁵ Moghadam, Assaf: "How Al Qaeda Innovates", *Security Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3 (August 2013), pp. 466-497.



had trained at an Al Qaeda camp in Pakistan.⁶⁶ Three senior Core Al Qaeda commanders, the late Rashid Rauf and Saleh al-Somali, who were respectively killed in U.S. drone strikes in 2008 and 2009, together with Adnan al-Shukrijumah, who is still at large, had overseen and directed the plot, which was also linked to two other ambitious sets of planned attacks.⁶⁷

In May 2010, two street vendors found car bombs in New York City's Times Square, that could have caused mass casualties if they had not been detected. The bomb had been ignited, but failed to explode, and was disarmed before it caused any casualties.⁶⁸ The mastermind behind this operation, Faisal Shahzad, a US citizen of Pakistani origin, was recruited and trained by Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) at a camp in North Waziristan.⁶⁹ As noted above, TTP is a close ally of al Qaeda. Al Qaeda Central has supported TTP including teaching members terrorism skills.

Al Qaeda's closest franchise group has also attempted terrorist attacks against the West on an air plane. Targeting aviation is clearly al Qaeda's preferred tactic, as well as other affiliates such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as this group dispatched an operation on Christmas Day 2009 against a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam. Omar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a member of AQAP attempted to blow up aircraft using plastic explosive hidden in his underwear. (Less than a year later on October 29, 2010, two 300 to 400 grams of plastic explosives hidden in a package were discovered on two different cargo planes. (one at East Midlands Airport in the UK and one in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.) Each package contained a desktop laser printer. Inside each printer's toner cartridge was a sophisticated bomb. The bomb could have exploded on both planes if Saudi Arabian intelligence had not informed the authorities about the bombs a day earlier.⁷⁰

Along with plots against civilian aviation, most of al Qaeda's terrorism has been aimed to cause massive casualties and destruction. This trend may represent al Qaeda's eagerness to demonstrate the group is still functioning and is skilful compared to other terrorist groups.

When we talk about al Qaeda's demise, it should be remembered that there have always been the same arguments about the demise of al Qaeda. As a matter of fact, the US government has already declared victory in the war on terror. In 2003, President George Bush stated that 'the battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror', but less than two years later, Bush told reporters that the United States would never achieve a clear victory in the war.⁷¹ This inconsistency is not surprising because it is extremely hard to judge terrorist groups' capability especially when there are no clear metrics available to measure it. Meanwhile, Al Qaeda Central has continued to plot significant major terrorist attacks that are aimed at large scale destruction while fighting US forces in Afghanistan. This brings into question the most fundamental assumptions about Core Al Qaeda's capabilities. Such assessments sound a cautionary note with regard to the similarly optimistic claims made in many contemporary analyses of Al Qaeda Core's longevity and supposed irrelevance.⁷²

⁶⁶ Silber, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

⁶⁷ Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 638.

⁶⁸ Baker, Al: "Police Find Car Bomb in Times Square", *The New York Times*, 1 May 2010, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/02/nyregion/02timessquare.html>.

⁶⁹ Markey, Daniel S (2013): *No Exit from Pakistan: America's Tortured Relationship with Islamabad*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 13.

⁷⁰ Schmitt, Eric: "Saudis Warned U.S. of Attack Before Parcel Bomb Plot", *The New York Times*, 6 November 2010, at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/06/world/middleeast/06terror.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

⁷¹ Schmid, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁷² Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 638.



Overall, it is true that Al Qaeda experienced significant damage and has been severely weakened operationally. This has become evidence of al Qaeda's demise. However, al Qaeda's demise must be measured not by the number of operations alone (many of which have a loose evidence base), but by the organization's influence over the conflict zone in Afghanistan and Pakistan. My findings from this chapter indicate that despite its structural damage, Al Qaeda Central seems resilient in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, cooperating with fellow jihad group to build up their mutual interests. In fact, if the deterioration of the security situation is the result of a growing number of terrorist attacks carried out by close allies such as, TTP and Haqqanis, then Al Qaeda Central has a role to play. In addition to this, Al Qaeda has been consistently involved in external operations against US. Therefore Al Qaeda Central's operational capability has not been neutralized.

4. Al Qaeda Central vs. Affiliates

In this chapter, I will attempt to answer two main questions. Namely, what is the relationship between Al Qaeda Central and its affiliates? And, do affiliates matter to Al Qaeda Central's resilient and longevity? To answer those questions, this chapter will analyse what affiliates and franchise groups refer to and what scholars' views are on this matter. Then I will highlight the misconceptions held about Al Qaeda Central and affiliates. Finally, this chapter will attempt to analyse how Al Qaeda Central influences or sometimes commands its affiliate groups.

The so-called affiliates that use al Qaeda's name are probably one of the most confusing aspects of AL Qaeda. After war on terrorism began, the US' Al Qaeda strategy was to focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan. This strategy was based on the notion that Al Qaeda is only one single group somewhere in Afghanistan or Pakistan. However, a few years later, the Al Qaeda franchise and affiliates came forward pronouncing allegiance to al Qaeda. In 2003, Al Qaeda launched terrorist attacks and insurgency in Saudi Arabia, and the group that led the Saudi operation was the original Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), before it merged with the Yemeni Jihad group. In 2005, Abu Musab al Zarqawi announced a merger with Al Qaeda, swearing allegiance to bin Laden and established Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Around this time, the CIA began using the term 'AQCore,' for Al Qaeda Central, to distinguish bin Laden's Pakistan-based group from such offshoots.⁷³ In 2006, the Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria changed its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), this was the subsequent action of Zawahiri's pledge al Qaeda's formal merge with GSPC. In 2012, Al Qaeda merged with the Somali insurgent group al-Shabab.

All of these merged terrorist groups swore an oath to Al Qaeda Central. These actions distinguish between friendly cooperative groups and affiliates. These affiliates are Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al Shabaab, Jabhat al Nusra, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus.⁷⁴ However, we should know that Al Qaeda affiliates are not equal to the Al Qaeda network. These affiliates are just a small part of the entire Al Qaeda terrorism-network. The Al Qaeda terrorism-network is much bigger than the Al Qaeda franchise because it includes cooperative jihad groups across the world. As matter of fact, sometimes an affiliates' formal merger with Al Qaeda does not seem to define their relationship. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba has never announced a formal

⁷³ McCormick, Ty: "Al Qaeda Core: A Short History", *Foreign Policy* (March 2014), at <http://www.english.rfi.fr/node/130954>.

⁷⁴ Kagan, Frederick W: "Testimony: The Continued Expansion of Al Qaeda Affiliates and their Capabilities", *AEI Critical* (July 2013), at <http://www.criticalthreats.org/al-qaeda/kagan-continued-expansion-al-qaeda-affiliates-capabilities-july-18-2013>.



merger with Al Qaeda but there is no doubt Al Qaeda Central has been much closer to these groups than Al Qaeda affiliates.⁷⁵ On the other hand, we should remember that Al Qaeda in Iraq, now ISIS, swore an oath to al Qaeda, but ISIS have never overcome a dispute with Al Qaeda Central over the Syrian problem. Although, this does not mean Central and its affiliates have a pointless relationship but it may trigger misconceptions about Al Qaeda Central's capability.

In this sense, questioning Al Qaeda Central's relationship with its affiliates connotes much of importance, especially when we talk about al Qaeda's capability because as noted above, these Al Qaeda affiliates have expanded since 2008, approximately the same year the US government started drone campaigns against Al Qaeda Central. It is true that whether the core group is still operating or not, today's terrorism issues in Middle East and Africa indicate that the brand of Al Qaeda is bigger than ever. Al Qaeda in 2014 controls territory that stretches more than 400 miles across the heart of the Middle East except for ISIS's territory in Iraq.⁷⁶ Indeed, Al Qaeda appears to control more territory in the Arab world than it has done at any time before in its history. Al Qaeda Central might be the mastermind of this expansion or just a free-rider taking advantage of it. Either way it seems no one can say that Al Qaeda Central is no longer relevant.

However, scholars' opinion is split as to whether Al Qaeda Central is alive or not but also about what is behind the rise of Al Qaeda affiliation in recent years, if Al Qaeda Central has really been decimated. There are different points of view on this issue although the notion of a fragmented and powerless central leadership has prevailed in recent times. This view has been buttressed, especially after US forces drove Al Qaeda Central out of their safe haven in Afghanistan in 2001. For example, Douglas Frantz claims the group had become "*more of an ideology than an organization.*"⁷⁷ And Dell Dailey sees al Qaeda's top leadership as isolated, saying that they have "*much, much less central authority and much, much less capability to reach out.*" In July 2007, Stratfor's Peter Zeihan argued that "*the real Al Qaeda does not exercise any control over them. . . . The United States is now waging a war against jihadism as a phenomenon, rather than against any specific transnational jihadist movement.*"⁷⁸

By contrast, Hoffman believes Al Qaeda's continued survival has been facilitated in large measure by a loose organizational structure that uniquely embodies both top down and bottom up approaches. Unlike most other terrorist groups, which tend to be organized hierarchically—in a rigid pyramid fashion with a commander at the top, issuing orders to the individual cells below—from its beginning, Al Qaeda was conceived to function as a flatter and more linear-type of network.⁷⁹ Katherine Zimmerman and Thomas Joscelyn promote a simpler concept as to how Al Qaeda Central deals with its affiliates. They argue that Bin Laden envisioned Al Qaeda as the 'general command' of a global scale of terrorist group that direct the jihad movement against the United States. Therefore, the rising number of Al Qaeda franchises is just part of plan. Al Qaeda consistently pushed its policy to support, promote and

⁷⁵ Bergen, Peter (2011): *Talibanistan: Negotiating the Borders Between Terror, Politics, and Religion*, New York, Oxford University Press.

⁷⁶ Bergen, Peter: "Al Qaeda controls more territory than ever in Middle East", *CNN*, 7 January 2014, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/01/07/opinion/bergen-al-qaeda-terrority-gains/>.

⁷⁷ Frantz, Douglas; Meyer, Josh; Rotella, Sebastian; Stack, Megan K: "The New Face Of Al Qaeda: Al Qaeda Seen As Wider Threat", *The Los Angeles Times*, 26 September 2004, at <http://www.globalissues.org/article/512/the-new-face-of-al-qaeda>.

⁷⁸ Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed; Dabruzzi, Kyle: "Is Al-Qaeda's Central Leadership Still Relevant?", *The Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Spring 2008), at http://www.meforum.org/1875/is-al-qaedas-central-leadership-still-relevant#_ftn2.

⁷⁹ Hoffman, Bruce: "Al Qaeda's Strategy", *Combating Terrorism Exchange*, vol. 1, no. 1 (August 2011), at <https://globalecco.org/documents/10180/507287/CTXVol1No1.pdf/12b11709-248c-4d9d-bd1b-8c12e7b96c6e>.



coordinate like-minded fellow terrorist groups. Joscelyn's definition of Al Qaeda clearly demonstrates the characteristic of Al Qaeda as the general command, "*Al Qaeda as an international network that is comprised of a general command, regional branches, as well as various other organizations and personalities*"⁸⁰

These two different views of Al Qaeda Central provide a clue as to how we should analyse Al Qaeda Central. If Al Qaeda Central is merely a single specific organization in Afghanistan or Pakistan and there is no single connection with affiliates then we can say their organization has been decimated. However, if Al Qaeda Central acts as the central command for affiliations, then we can say Al Qaeda Central is far from being defeated because there are many groups that carry out terrorism under the banner of Al Qaeda in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Syria.

Some analysts argue that the Al Qaeda network is too decentralized to follow the general command. Indeed, affiliates only focus on regional activity rather than targeting the US - which has been the long term agenda of Al Qaeda Central. However, we must understand that a decentralized terrorist organization does not necessarily mean that there is no clear line of command. Such a network might seem decentralized but as long as it maintains a flow of streamlined communication and information process within the network then it should not be that difficult to command other affiliates. Assaf Moghadam argues that as a result, this structure enables both top-down and bottom-up operations. Indeed, the role of senior leadership may often be restricted to provide spiritual or strategic guidance rather than operational support but affiliates can still serve the main goals of Central.⁸¹ David Sedney, former deputy assistant secretary of defence for Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, also believes decentralization does not mean weakness, "...All we've been able to do is suppress some of its tactical abilities. But strategically, we have never had an effective way of taking it on. That's why it continues to mutate, adapt and evolve to get stronger," he says.⁸²

Actually, a franchise group's independent activity is not so rare for such a big enterprise group. For example, in the relationship between a parent company and subsidiary, subsidiaries have their own leadership and decision-making structures in the short term, but at the same time are compliant to the mother-company's policy in the longer term. Al Qaeda affiliates are very similar to those subsidiaries. The affiliates are not puppets of the central organization, they have their own business, even strategy, they are on their own but they serve Central's broader goals and operate as one when necessary. As Tomas Joscelyn points out, 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 freedom in deciding how to run their day-to-day operations.⁸³

For example, according to Camille Tawil, Al Qaeda Central only requested AQIM to a play greater role in North Africa rather than control every detail. Al Qaeda Central never intervened in AQIM's 'kidnap-for-ransom' strategy. The group has just executed attacks with no previous approval from the core leadership.⁸⁴ This is not surprising considering the physical distance between both regions. However, AQIM was very cooperative to bin Laden's order or request. According to documents seized from Abbottabad, AQIM was consistently

⁸⁰ Joscelyn, Thomas: "Global al Qaeda: Affiliates, objectives, and future challenges", *The long war Journal* (July 2013), at

http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/07/global_al_qaeda_affi.php#ixzz39BEXKT8a.

⁸¹ Moghadam, *op. cit.*, p. 481.

⁸² Riechmann, *op. cit.*

⁸³ Joscelyn, *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ Tawil, Camille (2011): *The Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb: Expansion in the Sahel and Challenges from Within Jihadist Circles*, Washington DC, Jamestown Foundation, p. 4.



reporting the situation in Maghreb to Al Qaeda Central, which makes bin Laden seemed quite influential with AQIM. For example, this influence can be seen in AQIM's dealings with French hostages in 2011. Bin Laden wrote a letter to AQIM saying he wanted to spare French hostages until the Presidential election, and AQIM duly followed bin Laden's advice.⁸⁵ In this case, decisions were not centralized, but were made quickly and communicated laterally across the organization. Such a structure, then, also raises the likelihood of innovation being stimulated from multiple directions within the network.⁸⁶

On this matter, bin Laden's documents seized by the US after the Abbottabad raid, probably contain the most controversial and crucial evidence which allows scholars to shed light on this relationship. After bin Laden's personal documents were discovered, including diaries and letters to fellow affiliates, many analysts argued that Al Qaeda had lost control over its affiliates. For example, in bin Laden's letter to the leader of the al-Shabaab militia in Somalia, bin Laden advised the leader of Al-Shabaab not to identify his group as a formally merged franchise of Al Qaeda as it would draw attention from the US and may lead to the loss of financial donors overseas. But despite bin Laden's advice, al Shabaab pledged a formal merge with al Qaeda.⁸⁷ Ahmed Sheikh Hussein, a political analyst and expert on Islamist movements in Somalia, says the letter reveals the uncomfortable relationship between the two groups. "*These documents draw a picture that bin Laden was not enamoured with al-Shabaab and they also reveal the strained relations between al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda during bin Laden's time with regard to al-Shabaab joining al-Qaeda,*"⁸⁸

However, none of Al Qaeda's remarks actually suggest fracture between Al Qaeda and its affiliates. Another document clearly shows that Zawahiri wanted to merge with al Shabaab, as he suggested bin Laden approve the merger.⁸⁹ Considering Zawahiri is second in command at Al Qaeda Central, bin Laden's worry about al Shabaab does not mean Al Qaeda had uncomfortable relations with al Shabaab.

Besides, as Hoffman argues, Bin Laden complained about having too many franchises and obviously he was struggling to manage all of the affiliates. Elongated, delayed communication is a common problem for a manager who has to deal with many franchise groups in abroad. Inevitably, this causes uneven relations with some of Al Qaeda's affiliates.⁹⁰ However, All of these groups already existed before choosing to align themselves with Al Qaeda; hence, as independent entities, it is unreasonable to assume that they would necessarily follow all of the wishes of bin Laden.

What we can learn from bin Laden's documents for certain is that he was aggressively trying to communicate to all of the franchises as much as he could. According to the document from Abbottabad, bin Laden and franchise groups can both be described as very responsive to each other. Some of these documents indicate AQIM had in-depth discussions with bin Laden with regard to operational and strategic movements over four years. In terms of the relationship with AQAP, bin Laden seemed more controlling with them. For example

⁸⁵ "Bin Laden wanted French hostages spared until after presidential poll", *RFI*, 4 May 2012, at <http://www.english.rfi.fr/node/130954>.

⁸⁶ Moghadam, *op. cit.*, p. 494.

⁸⁷ Frantz, Ashley: "Bin Laden's letters reveal a terrorist losing control", *CNN*, 3 May 2012, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/05/03/us/bin-laden-documents/>.

⁸⁸ Mohamed, Mahmoud: "Bin Laden letter reveals strained relations between al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab" *Sabah Online*, 6 May 2012, at http://sabahionline.com/en_GB/articles/hoa/articles/features/2012/05/07/feature-01.

⁸⁹ Cruickshank, Paul: "Bin Laden documents: Competing vision of al Qaeda's top two", *CNN*, 7 May 2012, at <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/07/bin-laden-documents-the-sometimes-competing-vision-of-al-qaedas-top-two/>.

⁹⁰ Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 639.



in one letter written in 2010, bin Laden asked four senior leaders of AQAP to write analysis of the mistakes they had made.⁹¹

All of these evidences demonstrate the terrorist group adopted network structures which may have promoted innovation from the bottom. Within this structure they can launch terrorist attacks alone or they can ask for some assistance or guidance from Central. It seems scattered and fragmented but if affiliates or other groups are capable of acting by themselves, as long as they maintain a little bit communication with Central, then Central can manage the whole franchise - though this process is extremely slow.

The second misconception is that Al Qaeda Central is incapable of exerting control over affiliates. However, what we have to understand about Al Qaeda and its affiliates is that their motivation is not funding or any form of support from Al Qaeda Central. It is true Al Qaeda supported fellow jihad group during the 1990s, as that was the way it gained trust and respect from other terrorist groups, however, after the war against terrorism most of their funding source were confiscated or shut down. (Even worse, generous donations from Arabic countries were severely decreased as Al Qaeda lost its popularity in the mid-2000s⁹² Meanwhile, Al Qaeda offshoots are self-sufficient, raising their own funds and providing support themselves to the next generation of violent groups.⁹³ Clearly these affiliates do not need to rely on Al Qaeda Central for any reason. Nevertheless, evidence shows that affiliates are quite loyal to Al Qaeda Central. As Hoffman emphasized, Central never created any of these affiliates but they chose the brand of Al Qaeda and showed their respect to central command.⁹⁴

However, ISIS's recent confrontation with Al Qaeda Central brought some doubt upon Al Qaeda Central's influence over its affiliates. In 2013, after several disputes over the jihad movement in Syria, Al Qaeda Central announced that it was disowning ISIS, saying "*Al-Qaeda announces it is not linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, as it was not informed of its creation [and] did not accept it,*" Al Qaeda criticised ISIS's mode of operations. ISIS "*is not a branch of al-Qaeda, has no links to it, and the [al-Qaeda] group is not responsible for its acts,*" it added. "*We affirm our disavowal from the sedition that is occurring in Syria between factions of jihadists, and from the blood that was shed by any party,*"⁹⁵

Many analysts believe this is evidence of Al Qaeda Central's failure to manage Al Qaeda affiliates. William McCants argues that Zawahiri created much of the problem himself by trying to expand Al Qaeda too broadly.⁹⁶ Robin Simcox agrees, saying al-Qaeda has not just gained affiliates since May 2011; it has also lost them. Its Iraqi offshoot, ISIS disavowed Al Qaeda Central, and refused to take any orders or guidance from them, and advanced to Syria even they knew it was counter to Al Qaeda Central's policy. Now ISIS has become al Qaeda's regional rival as the jihad movement in Iraq and Syria.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Rassler, *op. cit.*

⁹² Frantz, Ashley, *op. cit.*

⁹³ Walcott, John: "Al-Qaeda Affiliates Getting Stronger, Says U.S. Official", *Bloomberg News*, 6 October 2012, at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-10-05/al-qaeda-affiliates-getting-stronger-says-u-s-official.html>.

⁹⁴ "Understanding Al Qaeda and its Affiliates: A Global Threat or JV Squad?", *Defend Democracy*, at <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/events/understanding-al-qaeda-and-its-affiliates-a-global-threat-or-jv-squad/#sthash.o1Du5J9K.dpuf>.

⁹⁵ Saleem, Fahad: "We have nothing to do with ISIS: Al-Qaeda", *The Eastern Tribune*, 4 February 2014, at <http://www.theeasterntribune.com/story/2315/we-have-nothing-to-do-with-isis-al-qaeda/#sthash.H57pforl.dpbs>.

⁹⁶ McCants, William: "How Zawahiri Lost al Qaeda", *Foreign Affairs*, 13 September 2013, at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140273/william-mccants/how-zawahiri-lost-al-qaeda>.

⁹⁷ Simcox, Robin: "Analyzing the Bin Laden Documents", *World Affairs*, at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/analyzing-bin-laden-documents>.



However, this is a premature conclusion. First, this is not the first time ISIS has defied Al Qaeda Central's suggestion. Similar debates have taken place within Al Qaeda during the Iraq war. In 2005, after Abu musab al Zarqawi's Al Qaeda in Iraq swore loyalty to bin Laden, Al Qaeda Central tried to refrain from AQI's ruthless slaughter of Shia people in region. However, Zarqawi ignored this and instead, he argued that Al Qaeda Central must work with Sunnis and confront Shia.⁹⁸ It means AQI, ISIS nowadays, was out of control to begin with, although bin Laden and Zawahiri tried to reduce its excessive violent activity. There is no evidence that Al Qaeda Central maintained its alliance to AQI after the death of Zarqawi.

Second, this level of defiance was never witnessed by other Al Qaeda affiliates before. As a matter of fact, the dispute has underlined other affiliates' loyalty to Al Qaeda Central. In April 2013, the leader of ISIS, Al-Baghdadi declared that the ISIS and al Nusra front were officially merging under the control of ISIS.⁹⁹ However, the al Nusra front rejected ISIS's declaration and reaffirmed its group's loyalty to Al Qaeda Central. A similar event was witnessed in 2014, shortly after ISIS declared a caliphate in Iraq and Syria, as AQIM immediately released an announcement rejecting ISIS's caliphate and reaffirmed their allegiance to Al Zawahiri. "*We confirm that we still adhere to our pledge of allegiance to our sheikh and emir, Al Zawahiri, since it is a Sharia-accorded pledge of allegiance that remains hanging on our necks, and we do not see what requires use to break it,*"¹⁰⁰ Leaders from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) also released two messages in early July 2014. The first, from the AQAP emir Nasir al Wuhayshi, heaps praise on Al Zawahiri, calling him the 'sheikh father' of the mujahadeen. Al Qaeda members online view these messages as a sign of the groups' rejection.

These cases clearly show affiliates are loyal to Al Qaeda Central even when they do not have to be. Therefore, the only factors that can determine al Qaeda's centralization are affiliates' loyalty, compliance, their cooperative attitude to Central and some level of communication. Now, this article will analyse how Al Qaeda Central influences or sometimes commands its affiliates. To analyse the relationship between Al Qaeda Central and affiliates, we must carefully consult how al Qaeda's main policies or guidance have played out among Al Qaeda affiliates. If Al Qaeda affiliates are compliant with policy or advice from Al Qaeda Central, and there is certain level of communication inside of the network, then it would mean Al Qaeda and its affiliates is more than just a fragmented and disconnected network. This article poses the following three questions in order to evaluate Al Qaeda Central's influence over its affiliates. Firstly, are affiliates compliant or respectful to Central guidance or policies; secondly, do affiliates co-operate with Central; and finally is a certain level of communication taking place?

Are affiliates compliant with Central guidance or policies?

Al Qaeda's leadership does not often publicize its rules, but in September 2013, Zawahiri announced guidelines for its franchises and fellow jihad groups, based on al Qaeda's basic moral code. According to these guidelines, Al Qaeda affiliates are to: avoid fighting the deviant sects such as Rawafidh, Ismailis, Qadianis, and Sufis, except if they fight the Ahl as Sunnah; avoid meddling with Christian, Sikh and Hindu communities living in Muslim lands;

⁹⁸ Gerges, Fawaz A. (2011): *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*, New York, Oxford University Press.

⁹⁹ "ISI Confirms That Jabhat Al-Nusra Is Its Extension In Syria, Declares 'Islamic State Of Iraq And Al-Sham' As New Name Of Merged Group", *MEMRI*, 8 April 2013, at <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/7119.htm>.

¹⁰⁰ Joscelyn Thomas: "AQIM rejects Islamic State's caliphate, reaffirms allegiance to Zawahiri", *The Long War Journal*, 4 July 2014, at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/aqim_rejects_islamic.php?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=aqim-rejects-islamic-states-caliphate-reaffirms-allegiance-to-zawahiri#ixzz39GdPuiRT.



refrain from killing and fighting against non-combatant women and children, and even if they are relatives of those fighting against them, refrain from targeting them as much as possible; refrain from harming Muslims by explosions, killing, kidnapping or destroying their wealth or property; and refrain from targeting enemies in mosques, markets and gatherings where they mix with Muslims or with those who do not fight them.¹⁰¹ As we can see, these rules are not new. Bin Laden consistently argued the same idea to Abu musab al Zarqawi, chastising his excessive violence towards civilians. These guidelines highlight that Al Qaeda Central is very cautious of its reputation amongst Muslim society and the group wants to encourage affiliates to follow guidelines as long as they work under the banner of al Qaeda.

Two recent events demonstrate how compliant affiliates are at following these guidelines. Subsequent to Zawahiri's announcement, on December 21, 2013, one of AQAP's leaders, Qasim al Raymi released a statement about recent terrorist operations against hospitals, which killed innocent civilians. In this message, he apologized for killing medics and patients in the hospital. "*The attack was on the Ministry of Defence, it was not on the hospital... We offer our apology and condolences to the victims' families. We accept full responsibility for what happened in the hospital and will pay blood money to the victims' families.*"¹⁰²

On March 7, 2014, Abdullah Azzam Brigades also apologized for civilian deaths caused by the group's suicide terrorist attack in February. The group claimed there had been a 'technical fault' in the second of the two bombs used in the operation. From the statement, Abdullah Azzam Brigades clearly said that, "*The military operations of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades do not target Shiites, or other sects,*"¹⁰³

Although it is unclear whether their moderate apologies are led by Zawahiri's guidelines, it is the case that both groups are aware of their public image. Both of these examples demonstrate that Al Qaeda affiliates are taking notice of Central guidance and actively attempting to be more mature and pragmatic actors in some aspects.

Do affiliates co-operate with Central?

This is probably the most controversial issue to analyse. Obviously we are lacking some evidence to figure out which terrorist attacks Al Qaeda Central have been involved in, because as noted above, Al Qaeda's unique operation strategy largely relies on its terrorism network, which causes much of the confusion around Central's involvement.

However, there is a case to indicate at least, that these affiliates are very co-operative towards Central's operation Bin Laden's letter from Abbottabad regarding Yunis al-Mauritani and his operation indicates that along with bin Laden himself, AQAP and AQIM were also involved in this global terrorism operation. The letter, sent from bin Laden to leaders of AQAP and AQIM in June 2010, requested both group's support to one man Yunis al Mauritani (and Shaykh Yunis). In this letter, bin Laden asked both leaders of AQAP and AQIM to listen "*whatever he asks of him*". Bin Laden particularly asked for them to provide

¹⁰¹ Macdonald, Myra: "Al Qaeda leader urges restraint in first 'guidelines for jihad'", *Reuters*, 16 September 2013, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/16/us-security-qaeda-idUSBRE98F0I920130916>.

¹⁰² Al Moshki, Ali Ibrahim: "Aqap apologizes for hospital attack in Ministry of Defence operation", *Yemen Times*, 24 December 2013, at <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1740/news/3270/AQAP-apologizes-for-hospital-attack-in-Ministry-of-Defense-operation.htm>.

¹⁰³ "Abdullah Azzam Brigades apologizes for civilian deaths", *The Daily Star*, 8 March 2014, at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Mar-08/249674-abdullah-azzam-brigades-apologizes-for-civilian-deaths.ashx#axzz39GgQ0udx>.



financial support of around 200,000EU should he need it during his travels. Bin Laden emphasized that Yunis and his operation must be kept absolutely secret. He even called Mauritani a different name so that he would not blow his cover. According to this letter, Atiyya was also involved in setting up a line of communication among groups to effectively coordinate their actions.¹⁰⁴

Al Mauritani was a key player in the 2010 European terror plot that was supposed to be a large 'commando style' operation against Europe especially the United Kingdom and France.¹⁰⁵ This plot is thought to have been ordered by Bin Laden himself the plot and there is no doubt this plot can be traced back to the top of Al Qaeda Central, AQAP and AQIM - bin Laden's most trusted affiliates.

Is there a certain level of communications?

Communication is a very important method of maintaining general control over affiliates. Although nothing much is known about the communication channels between Al Qaeda Central and its affiliates, some evidence suggests that Al Qaeda had or still has some difficulties in keeping up communications with affiliates due to the interception of communications by the US or the death of key members whose job was to communicate with affiliates.

Bin Laden was concerned with possible wiretapping by the CIA, so he always preferred communication by paper letters. His documents indicate that he gave one more piece of advice: don't speak on the phone or through the Internet.¹⁰⁶ This security measure seems to have caused much delay to the communication process. For example, AQIM kept reporting back to Al Qaeda Central using paper letters, but due to the physical distance between two groups, there has been a lack of communication.

An inner dispute at AQIM over Mokhtar Belmokhtar's break away with the leadership of AQIM provides some clues about AQIM's communication with Al Qaeda Central. In the letters from the AQIM leadership to Belmokhtar, AQIM criticised Belmokhtar for his attempt to establish his own communication channel to Al Qaeda Central:

"Our dear brothers, we find it a strange contradiction in your message, that idea of separating from the leadership of the Islamic Maghreb and instead connecting with the leadership in Khorasan [Afghanistan/Pakistan].... For example, since we vowed our allegiance up until this very day, we have only gotten a few messages from our emirs in Khorasan... From time to time, we also received messages from the two sheikhs Attiyat Ullah (Attiyah) and Abu Yahia al-Libi (God rest their souls). All this, despite our multiple letters to them for them to deal with us effectively in managing jihad here".¹⁰⁷

This letter clearly highlights that there has not been frequent communication between both groups or anything like a structured communication process. However, as we can see from the letter above, this lack of communication might guarantee freedom intended for the effective management of jihad groups.

¹⁰⁴ Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed: "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Al Qaeda's Senior Leadership", *Gunpowder & Lead*, 20 January 2013, at <http://gunpowderandlead.org/2013/01/al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb-and-al-qaedas-senior-leadership/>.

¹⁰⁵ Miller, Greg: "CIA acts on fear of al-Qaeda plot to hit in Europe", *The Washington Post*, 28 September 2010, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/28/AR2010092806935.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Frantz, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁷ "Al-Qaida Belmokhtar Letters", at http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-belmokhtar-letter-english.pdf.



Meanwhile, Al Qaeda Central seems more communicative with AQAP. In 2013, the secret communication between Al Zawahiri and Nasser al Wuhayshi, the leader of AQAP, was intercepted by US intelligence, and their conversation alluded to impending terrorist operations against unidentified US targets (which led to the US shut down of embassies in 19 countries). This means Al Qaeda Central communicated with AQAP using electronic channels, which are much faster and more effective to a structured management process.

Aki Peritz, a former CIA counter-terrorism analyst argues that Al Qaeda Central has been perceived as being merely symbolic, however *"It shows that there are active lines of communications between the centre and the franchises and appears to demonstrate that al-Qaeda core has some a level of control over AQAP."*¹⁰⁸

Al Qaeda Central's uneven attitude toward different affiliates (especially AQAP) in terms of communication, is not surprising. We have to remember that members inside of AQAP previously served alongside original Al Qaeda members and are relatively geographically closer than AQIM in Algeria. However, this does not necessarily mean Al Qaeda lost control over AQIM as AQIM called Al Qaeda Central, 'leadership in Khorasan' with respect. Even though, it appears that frequent communications do mean more influence and command exists. Al Qaeda Central has never intervened in AQIM's internal affairs whereas bin Laden blocked one of AQAP's key members, Ansar al Awlaki's promotion, and Zawahiri appointed Naser al Wuhayshi, the emir of AQAP to be al Qaeda's general manager.

It is true there are many things we do not know about Al Qaeda Central and its relationship with its affiliates, although the concept of an ineffective and decentralized core leadership has been the overarching view. However, this chapter reveals that the most important factor is not Al Qaeda Central's capability to maintain these affiliates' cooperation to the core command, but their declarations of loyalty. The several examples analysed above indicate there has not been any sign of internal conflict, defiance or confrontation between Al Qaeda Central and affiliates except for ISIS. Most affiliates demonstrate respect to Al Qaeda Central and some level of compliancy to common policy delivered from Central's command. What we can learn from Al Qaeda Central and affiliates' interaction inside of the network is that there is a trend for jihad movements to coordinate with the central leadership. Therefore, even if Al Qaeda Central has been degraded and is deemed less influential, as long as affiliates' loyalty is solid, Al Qaeda Central will be resilient and continue operating.

5. Case study: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsular

This chapter will focus on the branch of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which is identified as one of most active Al Qaeda affiliates. AQAP used to be a loose organization that mainly operates in Yemen and sometimes Saudi Arabia. Indeed, AQAP's main target was the Yemeni government or rival militant. However, in the past several years AQAP has become active in targeting Western countries, both in Yemen and in the West. This development occurred after al Wuhaysh, the man who has a long history with both Zawahiri and bin Laden, reinstated AQAP as the most powerful terrorist group in Yemen. This chapter will be devoted to understanding AQAP's connection to Al Qaeda Central and their intention of plotting operations against US, via an analysis of their terrorist activity and support for other affiliates.

¹⁰⁸ Sanchez, Raf: "US embassy closures sparked by Ayman al-Zawahiri message", *The Telegraph*, 5 August 2013, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/10224477/US-embassy-closures-sparked-by-Ayman-al-Zawahiri-message.html>.



Yemen is considered to be one of the most unstable countries in the Middle East. The United States, al Qaeda's long-time enemy and Saudi Arabia, neighbouring country of Yemen, both have growing concerns that AQAP might be expanding its power and influence all over Yemen - where people suffer from high levels of poverty and unemployment.¹⁰⁹ Al Qaeda exploits the desperate problems that Yemeni society faces by creating their own shelters, recruiting poor people, and training them as AQAP terrorists. AQAP internally keep targeting the Yemeni government using both terrorism and guerrilla attacks, oppressing them from the local area where tribes are friendly to AQAP, and externally keeping on planning to strike directly against the US and Europe. In the Yemen security is weak and there is an ineffective central government which is not capable of dealing with long-standing separatist concerns in the south and truce negotiations to complete with Shi'arebels in the north. Moreover, in addition to the growing relationship between Al Qaeda Central and AQAP, AQAP has become one of the most competent terrorist groups in the world. Indeed, the recent movements of AQAP, launching terrorist attacks on the US, communicating with other jihad group and recruiting foreign fighters all indicate that the group is walking along the same path of al Qaeda's original group.¹¹⁰

AQAP is the result of a formal merger of Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni Jihad organization. In 2003, Al Qaeda launched a large scale terrorist attack and insurgency against the Saudi Arabian government. This led Saudi law enforcement to suppress the group's activities. After a couple of years, many Saudi Al Qaeda members fled to Yemen evading surveillance from the Saudi government. The Yemeni jihad welcomed foreign jihadists from not just Saudi Arabia, but also from Iraq, Somalia, and Pakistan.¹¹¹ After all of these jihadists united in one place, they felt necessity of merge all jihad members with Yemeni jihad group on their own merit. In addition to this, in 2006, 23 Al Qaeda members escaped from a Yemeni prison. These prisoners included al Wuhayshi, who also joined the Yemeni jihad group and in 2009, headed by al Wuhayshi, these Al Qaeda members and Yemenis declared the official foundation of Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula.¹¹² This method of coalescing human and funding resources into bigger organizations is similar to the way other Al Qaeda affiliates have formed. For instance, AQIM was formulated by integrating small North African Al Qaeda groups with the GSPC in Algeria. AQAP has established itself as the primary regional organization with far greater capacity and stature within the larger al-Qaeda movement.

As noted above, Al Qaeda Central's capability and resilience largely depend on a larger network that consists of many affiliates. While the role of AQAP is growing in importance among affiliates, Al Qaeda Central has been continuously oppressed by the US. According to Katherine Zimmerman, the most significant point occurred in 2009 when al Qaeda's Yemen-based affiliate, AQAP established a new model for the role of groups in the Al Qaeda network.¹¹³

AQAP not only runs both internal and external operations against Yemen's government and the US, but also looks after other affiliates as a surrogate of Al Qaeda Central. In Yemen, AQAP's continuous attack the Saleh government, their aggressive movement led seizing

¹⁰⁹ Brehony, Noel (2011): *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South*, London, Arabia I.B. Tauris, p. 69.

¹¹⁰ Boucek, Christopher; Ottaway, Marina (2010): *Yemen on the Brink*, Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 84.

¹¹¹ Zimmerman, Katherine: "AQAP's Role in the Al Qaeda Network", *Critical Threats* (September 2014), at <http://www.criticalthreats.org/al-qaeda/zimmerman-testimony-aqaps-role-al-qaeda-network-september-18-2013>.

¹¹² Attwater, Charles G., Benton, Curtis (2013): *Yemen and the Challenge of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula*, New York, Nova Science Pub.

¹¹³ Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p. 1.



control of some of south eastern province of Hadramawt in 2013.¹¹⁴ Although occupation didn't last so long, this was first time AQAP advanced to government control area out of their historical territory.

Zimmerman argues that the assassination of bin Laden, who was leader of Al Qaeda for a long time, brought immense change to the terrorism network. These changes encouraged other groups to adopt AQAP's model which is more integration and cooperation inside the network. The connections and exchanges among groups facilitate both the growth of the network and the resiliency of Al Qaeda Central as each group can compensate for another group's defect. For that same reason, AQAP does Al Qaeda Central a favour by fostering other affiliates.

In the face of AQAP's expansion, the US government also identified AQAP as a huge threat. The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton formally designated al-Qaeda in Yemen as a terrorist organization on December 14, 2009.¹¹⁵ On August 24, 2010, The Washington Post reported that the CIA assumes that AQAP has already outperformed Al Qaeda Central as Al Qaeda's most dangerous threat to the U.S. homeland.¹¹⁶

AQAP's external operation has two points of focus. The first one is plotting direct attacks on the US that aims to cause maximum damage using members and resources. The second one is an indirect strategy to inspire domestic home-grown attacks in the West with their online magazine Inspire or direct contact from Al Qaeda cleric such as Anwar al Awlaki.

For example, an external operation was actually carried out in December 2009. A terrorist plot targeting Northwest Airlines Flight 253 was AQAP's first operation against the US. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, was dispatched by AQAP and tried to set off plastic explosives sewn into his underwear while 290 people were on board the aircraft.¹¹⁷ Bin Laden mentioned the AQAP attack in a message directed at President Barack Obama and AQAP's deputy leader, Said al Shihri, claiming credit for the attack in February 2010.¹¹⁸

In same year Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad shot at soldiers in front of a United States military recruiting office in Little Rock, Arkansas. His gun rampage caused 1 dead 1 injured. The shooter later revealed his connection to AQAP¹¹⁹

In 2010 AQAP launched another terrorist plot against two civilian cargo planes that were supposed to fly to the US and UK.¹²⁰ However, their terrorist plots ended up failures due to a prior warning from Saudi intelligence. All of these attacks reveal AQAP's clear intention

¹¹⁴ "Al-Qaeda seizes territory in Yemen's Hadramawt", *The Daily Star*, 24 May 2013, at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/May-24/218212-al-qaeda-seizes-territory-in-yemens-hadramawt.ashx#axzz39cSKx98K>.

¹¹⁵ Gerstein-Ross, Daveed: "Clinton named Al-Qaeda Yemen as terror group a month ago," *Politico*, 18 January 2010, at http://www.politico.com/blogs/joshgerstein/0110/Clinton_named_AlQaeda_Yemen_as_terror_group_a_month_ago.html.

¹¹⁶ Miller, Greg: "CIA sees increased threat in Yemen", *The Washington Post*, 24 August 2010, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/24/AR2010082406763.html>.

¹¹⁷ Johnsen, Gregory D: "Tracking Yemen's 23 Escaped Jihadi Operatives", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 5 no. 19 (October 2007), at http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4466#.U94HvfldX4Y.

¹¹⁸ "Bin Laden warns US of more attacks", *Aljazeera*, 25 January 2010, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2010/01/201012415287209336.html>.

¹¹⁹ Jsparro, Chris: "Lone wolf - The threat from independent jihadists", *Jane's Intelligence Review* (Dec 2010), at http://www.wikileaks.org/gifiles/attach/168/168290_Osac-jir1209.pdf.

¹²⁰ Gallagher, James: "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in 2010: The Intensification of the Near War", *AEI Critical Threats*, 8 March 2011, at <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/aqap-2010-intensification-near-war-march-8-2011>.



to launch an attack directly against the US, which is Al Qaeda Central's main goal as stated on this jihadist website:

*"We will continue to strike blows against American interests and the interest of America's allies...since both operations were successful, we intend to spread the idea to our mujahedeen brothers in the world and enlarge the circle of its application to include civilian aircraft in the West as well as cargo aircraft."*¹²¹

As the second strategy against US, AQAP also encourages lone wolf terrorism spreading radical material to potential terrorists in US and Europe. Lone wolf terrorism is a modus operandi that Al Qaeda Central also undoubtedly wants to promote as a new strategy to launch terrorist attacks against the West.¹²² For example, Zawahiri urged lone wolf style attacks on the US from his audio message marking the 12th anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks. Zawahiri advocated *"continuing the drain of military and security expenditures so that we keep America in a state of tension and anticipation, [wondering] when and where the next blow will come"*.¹²³ Al Qaeda seems to regard 'lone wolves' as individuals outside of the normal chain of command, inspired by 'borderless idea' and their strategy is to empower and motivate individuals to commit violence¹²⁴ Based on this notion, Al Qaeda Central also utilizes the media as a tool to provoke lone wolves in cyber space. The As-Sahab Foundation for Islamic Media Publication, the media production house of al-Qaeda since 2002, produces documentary-quality films and uploads them to jihad web forums many of their video clips are radical speeches from clerics or Al Qaeda leaders, and instructions to make bomb or makeshift weapons. In 2014, Al Qaeda Central presented the publication of an English written magazine titled 'Resurgence'. This video also has been produced by as Sahab and in a video, after a speech by Malcolm X announcing the need to *"learn to speak the language they [al-Qaeda's enemies] understand"* overlaid on a clip of a massive Improvised Explosive Device (IED) detonation.¹²⁵

AQAP's lone wolf strategy has been influenced by the original al Qaeda group. Al Qaeda has already tried to spread the concept of fighting alone without support or approval at an organizational level, a notion very similar to the idea of lone wolf terrorism. In 2003, an article entitled Sada al Jihad (Echoes of Jihad) was published to inspire Al Qaeda sympathizers and encourage them to carry out self-act jihad. In 2006, Abu Jihad al-Masri, the head of media and propaganda for al-Qaeda, authored the article labelled 'How to fight alone' which contains basic tips for a self-active terrorist. Another prominent Salafi writer, Abu Musab al-Suri, also advocated that acts of terrorism be carried out by small, autonomous cells or individuals.¹²⁶ Al-Suri anticipated that resistance by individual or small groups of terrorists with minimum links to bigger organizations, will be a crucial strategy against the larger

¹²¹ "Al Qaeda claims responsibility for cargo bombs", *NBC*, 20 May 2011, at http://www.nbcnews.com/id/40031838/ns/world_news-mideastn_africa/#.U-XI0vldX4Y.

¹²² Briggs, Rachel: "The Changing Face of Al Qaeda" *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, (January 2012), at <http://www.strategicdialogue.org/The%20Changing%20Face%20of%20Al%20Qaeda.pdf>.

¹²³ Corera, Gordon: "Al-Qaeda chief Zawahiri urges 'lone-wolf' attacks on US", *BBC*, 13 September 2013, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24083314>.

¹²⁴ Briggs, *op. cit.*

¹²⁵ Geller, J; Burdette Jeff: "Inspired by Inspire: Al-Qaeda Central's Latest Foray into Western Recruitment", *George Town Security Studies* (April 2014), at <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2014/04/08/inspired-by-inspire-al-qaeda-centrals-latest-foray-into-western-recruitment/>.

¹²⁶ Weimann, Gabriel: "Lone Wolves in Cyberspace", *The centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Autumn 2012), at <http://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/jtr/article/view/405>, p. 81.



enemy to global jihad, the West. His articles are published in AQAP's online English-language magazine 'Inspire'. In the magazine, he clearly promotes individual jihad; thus, the Fall 2010 edition editorialized:

*"Spontaneous operations performed by individuals and cells here and there over the whole world, without connections between them, have put the local and international intelligence apparatus in a state of confusion, as arresting the members of aborted cells does not influence the operational activities of others who are not connected with them."*¹²⁷

AQAP's lone wolf strategy is well represented in Inspire magazine, which is an important tool to promote 'open source jihad' for attracting young Muslim would-be jihadists. Inspire has featured articles attributed to two prominent violent jihadist propagandists. Al Awlaki was born in US and Samir Khan was Saudi-born American citizen. But both were killed by a US drone attack in Yemen in 2011.¹²⁸

Al Awlaki, one of the spiritual leaders of AQAP and alleged senior al-Qaeda recruiter and spokesman, was deeply involved in AQAP's lone wolf strategy. He spread his radical word through the internet and sometimes he was directly communicated with lone wolves. The Fort Hood shooter Hassan Nidal Malik's case demonstrates how al Awlaki promoted lone wolves. He fatally shot 13 people and injured more than 30 others in the Fort Hood mass shooting on November 5, 2009. An FBI investigation has revealed Hassan's regular communication to al Awlaki at least 18 times through e-mails almost a year before the rampage.¹²⁹ Al Awlaki used his mother language, English to inspire potential lone wolves in the West who did not speak Arabic and Hasan seemed to be one of his biggest fans. In one of the e-mails, Hasan wrote al-Awlaki: "*I can't wait to join you*" in the afterlife. Hasan also asked al-Awlaki when jihad is appropriate, and whether it is permissible if innocents are killed in a suicide attack.¹³⁰ In the months before the shooting, Hasan increased his contact with al Awlaki to discuss how to transfer funds abroad without coming to the attention of law authorities.

Following the Fort Hood shooting, Hoffman commented "*I used to argue it was only terrorism if it were part of some identifiable, organized conspiracy...*" but he was changing his definition because, "*This new strategy of al-Qaeda is to empower and motivate individuals to commit acts of violence completely outside any terrorist chain of command.*"¹³¹

The number of lone wolf cases clearly suggest the impact of al Qaeda's strategy towards lone wolves. These cases include Jose Pimentel, Naser Jason Abdo, Hakan Ertarkan, arrested in London on April 12, The Germans Christian Emde and Robert Baum, arrested July 15, 201, Zahid Iqbal, Mohammed Sharfaraz Ahmed, Umar Arshad, and Syed Farhan Hussain,

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.82

¹²⁸ Sivek, Susan Currie: "Packaging Inspiration: Al Qaeda's Digital Magazine Inspire in the Self-Radicalization Process", *International Journal of Communication* (May 2012), at http://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=mscmfac_pubs, pp. 584–606.

¹²⁹ Vidino, Lorenzo: "The Homegrown Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland" *CS Monitor* (December 2009), at <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2011/0729/Accused-Fort-Hood-plotter-got-bombmaking-recipe-from-Al-Qaeda>, p. 2.

¹³⁰ Ross, Brian; Schwartz, Rhonda: "Major Hasan's E-Mail: 'I Can't Wait to Join You' in Afterlife", *ABC News*, 19 November 2009, at <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/major-hasans-mail-wait-join-afterlife/story?id=9130339>.

¹³¹ Thompson, Mark: "Fort Hood Highlights a Threat of Homegrown Jihad", *The Time*, 11 November 2009, at <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1937912,00.html>.



arrested in Britain on April 24, 2012.¹³² All of these lone wolves possessed radical resources released by Al Qaeda and affiliates.¹³³ The Boston Marathon bombers who killed 3 people and injured 264 others, Tsarnaev and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, were inspired by Al Qaeda and had downloaded the Inspire magazine written by al-Awlaki, according to the indictment against him. Tsarnaev also downloaded the first issue of Inspire magazine.¹³⁴

While AQAP indisputably maintains a close relationship with Al Qaeda Central, it arguable to say Al Qaeda Central has full control over AQAP's activity. Sageman denies such a view, arguing the majority of AQAP operations (over 90%) are domestic, targeting government, Shi'a, and enemy tribal targets, which runs counter to the various requests by Al Qaeda Central.¹³⁵ However, we must understand that AQAP operates in a different environment to the original al Qaeda. Back in the 1990s, Al Qaeda in Afghanistan enjoyed a safe haven provided by Taliban, so they never worried about losing their stronghold, confronting hostile governments or rival militia.¹³⁶ Al Qaeda in those times was able concentrate on plotting terrorism against the US and managing terrorist network. Meanwhile, AQAP has been confronting the Yemeni government along with rival Shia militant group over the control of Yemen. For AQAP, fighting the Yemeni government requires daily attention, rather than a focus on attacking US targets far away from Yemen that require long-term plan with patience and more professional skills. Therefore, it is not surprising that AQAP's operations are regional. The point is that AQAP launches terrorist attacks against the US while they are fighting the Yemeni government.

Amongst the leadership of AQAP, approximately 7 out of 9 members have reportedly deepened their connection to Al Qaeda Central. Most of those members used to work for the original Al Qaeda or have fought together back in the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s. Al Wuhaysh served Bin Laden as his personal secretary for a long time and there was a rumour that al Wuhayshi would be the next leader of the group after the death of Osama bin Laden.¹³⁷ Fahd al Quso and Saeed al Shehri are Yemeni senior commanders whose responsibility are managing largely internal military operations, were also involved in both the 2000 USS Cole and 9/11 attacks.¹³⁸ Mohammad Al Awfi, used to train Al Qaeda linked terrorist groups back in the 1990s, and during the battle of Tora Bora in 2001, he was one of Al Qaeda's fighters. Othman al Ghamdi and Ibrahim Al Rubaish, a senior AQAP leader, was also trained at al Farouq camp in late 2001. Anwar Al Awlaki, the English-speaking AQAP radical, was killed by a US drone in 2011, and was also believed to have some connection to bin Laden as he blocked Awlaki's promotion.¹³⁹ Some of these members have been arrested or killed but

¹³² Richey, Warren: "Accused Fort Hood plotter got bomb-making recipe from Al Qaeda", *The Christian science monitor*, 29 July 2011, at <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2011/0729/Accused-Fort-Hood-plotter-got-bombmaking-recipe-from-Al-Qaeda>.

¹³³ Weimann, Gabriel: "Lone Wolves in Cyberspace", *The centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Autumn 2012), at <http://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/jtr/article/view/405>, p. 85.

¹³⁴ Serrano, Richard: "Boston bombing indictment: Dzhokhar Tsarnaev inspired by Al Qaeda", *Los Angeles Times*, 27 June 2013, at <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/27/nation/la-na-nn-boston-marathon-bombing-suspect-indictment-20130627>.

¹³⁵ Sageman, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

¹³⁶ Gunaratna, Rohan, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹³⁷ Johnsen, Gregory D.: "Al-Qa'ida in Yemen's 2008 Campaign", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 1, no. 5 (April 2008), at <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida-in-yemen%E2%80%99s-2008-campaign-2>.

¹³⁸ Bergen, Peter (2011): *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and Al-Qaeda*, New York, New York Free Press, p. 416.

¹³⁹ Institute for the Study of Violent Groups (ISVG): "Al Qaeda vs. AQAP: A Visual Analysis" (June 2011), at <http://www.isvg.org/follow/blog/2011/06/27/al-qaeda-vs-aqap-a-visual-analysis/>.



many current high ranked members of AQAP undoubtedly have some acquaintance with Al Qaeda Central.

In the sense, Al Zawahiri's appointment of al Wuhayshi as 'general manager' of the Al Qaeda network holds much significance. This promotion seems to recognise al Wuhayshi's contribution to the Al Qaeda network as he is the one who renewed AQAP in 2009 and fostered the organization's aggressive growth. After al Wuhayshi became general manager, the US intelligence community picked up suspicious communications between Zawahiri and al Wuhayshi that alluded to large scale impending terrorist attacks against targets in the US. Although the plans were never uncovered in detail, due to the high credibility of the information, this suspicion caused the closure of US embassies in 19 countries.

Al Qaeda Central and AQAP's distinctive relationship compared to other affiliates could indicate that Al Qaeda Central has largely transferred its authority to AQAP. And AQAP's aggressive moves towards striking the US and managing Al Qaeda network, give some credit to this assumption.

Before AQAP came forward, the Al Qaeda network was only managed by Al Qaeda Central in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most Al Qaeda affiliates were just subordinate to the Central group. Al Qaeda Central maintained the network and commanded the operation targeting US. AQAP is the first affiliate that seems to be performing as a substitute for Central's main operation. AQAP's contribution to other affiliates is very important in this sense. AQAP also looks after other groups in the franchise by providing tactical and strategic training, and sharing resources in a manner characteristic of bin Laden's group in the 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁴⁰

AQAP maintains a close relationship with al Shabaab. AQAP reportedly supported the purchase of a large amount of weapons including explosives, possibly PETN (Pentaerythritol tetranitrate), and terrorist training for al Shabaab's operations between 2010 and 2011. AQAP appeared to have assisted in hand letter communications between al Shabaab and Al Qaeda Central.¹⁴¹ AQAP also was involved in establishing the Muhammad Jamal Network (MJN) for the jihad movement in Egypt. Several indications tell us this was at the request of Al Zawahiri, who has prior history engaging jihad against the Egyptian government. Jamal noted in his letters to Zawahiri that he received finance and other support from AQAP, which also helped funnel fighters to Jamal's camps in Egypt and Libya and built its own training camps in post-Qaddafi Libya.¹⁴²

AQIM is also AQAP's closest ally. Both leaders of these groups have a direct line of communication to each other. Two letters written by al Wuhayshi and AQIM's leader Abdelmalek Droukdel, discovered in Mali, highlighted that Droukdel was taking advice from Wuhayshi.¹⁴³ In the letters sent to Droukdel in 2012, Wuhayshi advised how to manage AQIM's branch group in Mali by suggesting support in terms of more resource; water and food. And in other letters written that same year, Wuhayshi shared his lessons from AQAP's failure in south Yemen, and advised Droukdel to be cautious of proclaiming an emirate when his organization is not capable of governing people.

¹⁴⁰ Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁴¹ Bennett, Brian: "Al Qaeda's Yemen branch has aided Somalia militants, U.S. says", *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 2011, at <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jul/18/world/la-fg-bin-laden-somalia-20110718>.

¹⁴² *Jamal Network (MJN)*, at <http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/jamal-network-mjn>.

¹⁴³ Callimachi, Rukmini: "Yemen Terror Boss Left Blueprint For Waging Jihad", *Associated Press*, 9 August 2013, at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/yemen-terror-boss-left-blueprint-waging-jihad>.



In the September 11, 2012, attacks on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya aroused suspicions that AQAP was involved in orchestrating it as a joint operation with other affiliates. As documented in a bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee investigation into the terrorist attacks in Benghazi, the CIA reported that AQAP, MJN and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) “*have conducted training, built communication networks, and facilitated extremist travel across North Africa from their safe haven in parts of eastern Libya.*” That same report found that terrorists ‘affiliated’ with each of these groups participated in the Benghazi attacks. CNN previously reported that Yemenis from AQAP had been involved in the Benghazi attack.¹⁴⁴

Today, AQAP has elevated its importance over the global jihad movement, consistently seeking to strike the US and incorporate other affiliates into the wider terrorism network. AQAP’s distinct movement compared to other affiliates indicates that AQAP is following in the footsteps of the original Al Qaeda group in the 1990s. As noted above, Al Qaeda gained its leadership by supporting fellow jihad groups while persistently launching strikes against the US and West, and AQAP is proceeding on same path of al Qaeda. This clearly suggests oppressing Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan is less likely to lead to the decimation of Al Qaeda Central as long as AQAP keeps a cooperative relationship with Al Qaeda Central.

Several findings are evident of this, as AQAP became interested in striking the US after al Wuhaysh became leader of the group and al Wuhaysh is closely connected to Al Qaeda core. Al awlaki was also an Al Qaeda core member since 1993 and was in charge of AQAP’s media strategy that provoked lone wolf terrorism in US and caused attacks that killed 13 people in 2009. Moreover, AQAP also fosters other affiliates by supporting weapons and tactical training. Although it is unclear if AQAP has totally taken over Al Qaeda Central’s job, it is true AQAP’s role is crucial within the Al Qaeda network. Al Qaeda Central seems supportive of AQAP’s rise to be the general managing group of Al Qaeda as al Wuhayshi’s appointment indicates.

6. Conclusion

After 9/11 in 2001, Al Qaeda Central was indisputably weakened by the US and has experienced much damage. This damage was mostly caused by the US invasion of Afghanistan and drone campaign, along with the death of bin Laden. Many scholars including Sageman argue that a consistent counter terrorism policy against Al Qaeda finally led to the decimation of Al Qaeda Central. Scholars also point to the fact that over the past few years there has been a clear decrease in the number of terrorist attacks that Al Qaeda Central has been involved in. It is also the case that probably all of the key Al Qaeda members including Bin Laden have been arrested or killed. Al Qaeda Central now seems struggling to regain control of territory in Afghanistan and Pakistan supporting regional jihadist from behind rather than engaging terrorist attacks or they might have engaged terrorist attacks without claiming responsibility. This trend reinforces idea that Central leadership has been declined. However, while Al Qaeda Central is believed to have been decimated, security has been severely degraded in many countries where Al Qaeda still exerts a strong influence through its terrorist activity.

Yet the argument of the demise of al Qaeda has two main problems. Firstly, there is a lack of information surrounding Al Qaeda and its affiliates. The US government has never

¹⁴⁴ Joscelyn, Thomas: “New Senate Report: Al Qaeda Network Attacked in Benghazi”, *The Weekly Standard*, 15 January 2014, at http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/al-qaeda-network-attacked-benghazi_774703.html.



understood what Al Qaeda is and how to define it. As Habeck pointed out, the US only suggested a vague definition of Al Qaeda and declared victory against an enemy that has not been clearly identified yet. Moreover, as we can see from the Benghazi attack, it is extremely difficult to judge which terrorist operations Al Qaeda has been involved in. And for that same reason, measuring al Qaeda's operational capability purely by the number of attacks is not the best idea.

Regarding Al Qaeda's affiliates, nobody is sure if Al Qaeda Central has a close relationship with affiliates or not, but bin Laden's documents clearly reveal there have been significant communications between Al Qaeda Central and both AQAP and AQIM. Sageman also argues that AQAP's external operations against the US could easily be disrupted by the killing of two key members, al-Awlaki and al-Asiri.¹⁴⁵ However, even after al-Awlaki were killed, Al Qaeda Central and AQAP plotted an attack on a US facility that led to the shutdown of US embassies in 19 countries in 2013. The point is that there are too many things that remain uncovered about Al Qaeda and therefore, assuming al Qaeda's demise could be a premature conclusion.

The second problem is that the argument outlined above is based on the notion that Al Qaeda is the only one single group in Afghanistan and Pakistan - yet many scholars argue that Al Qaeda is not a single group. These different views on Al Qaeda represent the debate of old Vs new terrorism.

Peter R. Neumann argues that many scholars and governments still do not think outside the persistent assumption that most terrorist organizations behave in accordance with the paradigm of the "old terrorism." This view holds that terrorist groups are, by and large, structured in a hierarchical and centralized fashion, with leaders exerting virtually full, uncontested control of all activities within their organizations.¹⁴⁶ (Neumann, 2009:78)

Meanwhile, new terrorism and new terrorist groups, according to this view, tend to be motivated by religious ideologies. The terrorist groups that typify the new terrorism are often labeled "networks" as opposed to "organizations," and they are described as being more horizontal in terms of their command and control structures than groups characteristic of the old terrorism. Therefore, as a new terrorist group, an evaluation of Al Qaeda Central requires a different method to measure its capability.

Misidentifying and defining Al Qaeda caused immense ramifications for counter terrorism strategy. US policy has been regarding only Al Qaeda Central is real threat which can be easily disrupted by consistent oppression with armed crack down and targeted killing activity. Meanwhile, AQAP and AQIM, much more well-funded and well-organized Al Qaeda franchises for now, are being identified less significant or not relevant to anti Al Qaeda policy.

However, this misconception about Al Qaeda brand has caused failure to notice rising of Al Qaeda brand in Maghreb, Yemen after war on terror. And same mistakes tackled US policy to suppress Al Qaeda franchise from expanding during Arab Spring revolution especially in Syria. US government has largely supported for Syrian rebels despite concerns that the resources could end up in Al Qaeda related terrorist group's hand. And The Syrian

¹⁴⁵ Sageman, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

¹⁴⁶ Neumann, Peter R.: "Old & New Terrorism", *Late Modernity, Globalization and the Transformation of Political Violence*, vol. 3, no. 2 (May 2009), at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/69/html>, p. 78.



Revolutionaries Front, one of US backed armed group, increased their coordination with al Qaeda's largest faction in Syria, the Nusra Front.¹⁴⁷

US already spent large amount of resources to disrupt al Qaeda central, on the notion that Al Qaeda is merely small group of extremists hiding out in the mountains. And 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. However, if Al Qaeda was the group just as US government expected it would be, then the killing of bin Laden and demise of key members should have led group's collapse. Al Qaeda's numerous failures to directly strike US and cause massive casualties should have disrupted group's operational capability. Above all, it should have damaged the al Qaeda brand severely. Al Qaeda should have been no longer relevant.

Therefore, in conclusion, this article argues that Al Qaeda Central's operational capability still remains intact in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al Qaeda central's presence in Pakistan, where the bulk of the group's core leadership and many of its fighters fled from Afghanistan in 2001, is even stronger because Al Qaeda Central's closest allies, the TTP and Haqqanis have conducted a number of terrorist attacks in both countries. Furthermore, TTP's attempt to attack New York City's Times Square in 2009 indicates that Al Qaeda Central still seeks to directly strike the US.

The Al Qaeda network may seem decentralized, but it is more structured than it appears. All of the affiliates have sworn an oath to Al Qaeda Central. Although conflict with ISIS makes the central authority look weak, the author's analysis indicates that Al Qaeda Central gets along with other affiliates quite well. Most of the affiliates demonstrate a high level of respect to Al Qaeda Central and some level of compliancy to common policy from central command - which means Al Qaeda Central still controls or influences these affiliates, thus facilitating Central's resiliency.

There have been a significant number of direct attack and lone wolf plots against the US in recent times. And although many of them have failed, it does not make Central's capability any weaker. Moreover, the cooperative relationship of Al Qaeda Central with affiliates also indicates possible joint operations against the US in the future.

AQAP seems to be not a mere affiliate but acts on behalf of the weakened central authority. AQAP has launched terrorist attacks against both the Yemeni government and the US, and fosters other affiliates in the Al Qaeda network through supporting them with various resources. The fact that Al Zawahiri appointed the leader of AQAP, al Wuhayshi as the general manager of the overall Al Qaeda network, thus clearly suggests that Al Qaeda Central backs AQAP to lead Al Qaeda affiliates.

Over the past decades, many of the assumptions made about al-Qaeda have been misleading or entirely wrong. Even prior to Usama bin Laden's death, observers were eager to label al-Qaeda an ideology, not an organization. In reality, however, it is far too soon to declare victory over "al-Qaeda Central" --even in the wake of bin Laden's passing, the U.S. government should be cautious with regard to conventional wisdom on the group.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Abi-Habib, Maria: "One U.S.-Backed Rebel Group Cooperates with Al-Qaeda in Syria", *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 May 2014, at <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304431104579547183675484314>.

¹⁴⁸ Hoffman, Bruce; Habeck, Mary; Y. Zelin, Aaron: "Levitt Is al-Qaeda Central Still Relevant?", *The Washington Institute* (September 2012), at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/is-al-qaeda-central-still-relevant>.



Now, as Al-Qaeda's vitality approaches pre-9-11 levels, many analysts still do not have their eye on the central network and fewer yet understand how it regained its strength after losing Afghanistan. Even after 9/11 when US devoted all of their resource to defeat Al Qaeda, the group was still able to stage a number of significant attacks merging and coordinating with al Qaeda affiliates. It is hardly say al Qaeda central controls all of these affiliates. However, it is true that al Qaeda has given lot of efforts to increase influence on affiliates and this efforts have shown especially in a relations with AQAP and AQIM. Moreover, affiliates' strong tendency of co-operation creates perfect condition that al Qaeda central can regain a power and possibility of establishing general command. Loyalty from affiliates as well as cooperative jihad group in Pakistan such as TTP and the Haqqanis may facilitate organizing large scale of coordinated attack against the US in the future. The senior leadership will likely play a greater role in future plots while attempting to conceptualize and carry out an attack that will surpass 911. A strong central leadership makes the group more formidable and its attacks more deadly.