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THE PRESENT STATE OF AL QAEDA: STRATEGIES, TACTICS AND FUTURE THREATS

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Introduction

Today's terrorist threats have changed, and terrorist groups are now more geographically dispersed and their tactics more diversified.¹

Al Qaeda is a transnational Sunni Islamist militant organisation whose emergence in the late 20th century has significantly shaped the dynamics of global security. The group's primary goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate governed by its interpretation of Sharia law and to combat what it perceives as Western hegemony and influence in the Muslim world. Al Qaeda's network is organised around its core leadership and various affiliates spread across multiple regions, and each group operates independently but shares the ideological commitment to violent jihad and global Islamist revolution.²

Ever since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, there has been considerable debate on the strength of Al Qaeda's central and international threat. The United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team reported that Al Qaeda Central is rebuilding operational capability in Afghanistan, a "safe haven" for recruitment and planning efforts. The organisation has quietly developed its infrastructure in the country, establishing training and housing facilities in eastern and southern areas. Estimated at 30 to 60 operatives, Al Qaeda's core cohort in Afghanistan is currently unable to project sophisticated attacks at long range but remains a threat in the region and potentially beyond. However, U.S. officials criticised some U.N. reporting that Al Qaeda has not reconstituted a presence in Afghanistan since the U.S. departure in August 2021. The U.S. intelligence estimates that Al Qaeda is at an all-time low point in Afghanistan, losing target access, leadership talent, group cohesion, rank-and-file commitment, and an accommodating local environment.³

¹ Forbes, C. T. (2020). *The future of asymmetric threats: Al Qaeda and ISIS*. *Joint Force Quarterly*, 96, 84–89. https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-96/JFQ-96_84-89_Forbes.pdf

² Congressional Research Service. (n.d.). *Al Qaeda: Background, impact, and U.S. policy* (IF11854). Retrieved from <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11854>

³ Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. (n.d.). *The state of al-Qaida central*. Retrieved from <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-state-of-al-qaida-central/>

The Current State of Al Qaeda

In the last few years, Al Qaeda has adopted a decentralized system and used regional affiliates to continue its activities. After Osama Bin Laden's death in 2011 and subsequent disappearance of the central command's presence, Al Qaeda has begun to use franchises like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Qaeda Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Shabaab in Somalia, and Jabhat al-Nusra, the official Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria. These groups have pursued local conflicts, taking advantage of instability in regions such as the Sahel, Yemen, and Afghanistan to establish safe havens and expand their networks. While overshadowed by the rise and fall of ISIS, Al Qaeda has deliberately taken a more patient and pragmatic approach, avoiding high-profile attacks in favour of embedding itself within local communities and insurgencies.⁴ The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021 may have given a boost to Al Qaeda's operational capacity, but this is offset by international counterterrorism efforts. This group still uses cyber propaganda for recruitment and dissemination of ideology.⁵

Al Qaeda's short-term goal aims to gain some levers and regions into the chaos it brings due to regional instability, mainly across Yemen, Somalia, or Sahel states. Through this aspect, it builds connections to other local insurgents inside areas under ongoing fighting activities to expand a tight spot. Regionally, Al Qaeda targets Western interests such as embassies, military bases, and corporations. Attacks on a large scale attract global crackdowns. It also actively recruits people, especially youth and marginalised communities, to its fold by using cyber propaganda and ideological messaging, thereby expanding its base. In the long term, Al Qaeda aims to set up a global Islamic caliphate by sharia law, which continues to remain its ultimate objective. It seeks to dislodge Western influences and military presence in Muslim-majority countries because it perceives such interventions as barriers to its goals. Another critical objective is to unify the fractured jihadist movements under its leadership and thus consolidate its ideological and operational dominance over global jihad. Second, Al Qaeda also seeks to destroy what it views as

⁴ Institute for the Study of War. (n.d.). *Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria*. Retrieved from <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/jabhat-al-nusra-syria>

⁵ Congressional Research Service. (n.d.). *Al Qaeda: Background, impact, and U.S. policy* (IF11854). Retrieved from <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11854>

an apostate government, establishing a theocracy based on its extreme version of Islam.⁶ All these goals underline the adaptability of this group and the capacity for them to make both local and global dynamics function in order to keep its relevance in place. Although weakened compared to its peak, Al Qaeda remains a resilient and adaptive threat, capable of exploiting geopolitical shifts and fragile states to maintain its relevance.

Operational Strategies and Tactics

Al Qaeda uses a variety of operational tactics to achieve its goals, such as decentralisation with regional affiliates, blending within local conflicts, avoiding high-visibility attacks to avoid the international crackdown, using cyber propaganda warfare for recruitment purposes, maintaining operational security in clandestine operations, offering training to operatives, executing asymmetric warfare tactics, forming diversified financial networks, leveraging refugee movements for infiltration purposes, and strategically adapting itself to counterterrorism measures. These strategies allow Al Qaeda to maintain its global network while working towards its long-term objective, which is the establishment of a global Islamic caliphate.⁷

Al Qaeda has demonstrated a deep understanding of digital platforms as a means to disseminate its philosophies and recruit new members. It targets unhappy youths and vulnerable individuals, espousing jihad as a reaction to perceived injustices. Its messaging strategy is that of patience and ideological purity. It is very different from ISIS, which uses more aggressive and shocking methods.⁸

Al Qaeda uses asymmetrical warfare in its operations and aims for a strong attack on civilians, government buildings, and important economic centres, unlike other groups that often claim responsibility for their actions. Al Qaeda often refrains from doing so to shield its members from possible consequences. A clear example of its ability to operate is the Dustin D2 Commercial

⁶ Byman, D. (n.d.). *Comparing al Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets*. Brookings Institution. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/comparing-al-qaeda-and-isis-different-goals-different-targets/>

⁷ Author(s). (2024). *[Contemporary terrorism challenges and response in the Indo-Pacific]*. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 18(1), [page range]. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2024.2346474>

⁸ Hess, M. (2021). *Al Qaeda: Past, present, and future challenges*. United States Department of Defense. <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jun/03/2002733839/-1/-1/0/HESS2.PDF>

Centre in Kenya. Gunmen with the al-Shabaab terrorist group, who were armed with explosives, automatic weapons, and grenades, attacked the complex, which caused the death of 21 people, including one U.S. citizen, showing it can still plan a coordinated attack effectively.^{9,10}

Financially, Al Qaeda operates from various sources. The sources include extortion and smuggling in areas of conflict, contributions from supportive people and groups, and illegal trading of drugs, weapons, and other valuable items like gold. Additionally, the connection between Al Qaeda and other extremist groups is marked both by rivalry and strategic cooperation. Even though it has such a vital idea different from ISIS, the decline of ISIS has been aiding Al Qaeda to develop its network to form alliances with local militant groups, thereby strengthening the top jihadist groups.¹¹

Terrorist groups are becoming increasingly affiliated with the crypto space, exploiting developments in blockchain technology, including collecting funds and trying to stay undetected by law enforcement. Even large terrorist groups like Al Qaeda, Hama' al Qassam Brigades, and the Islamic State have found crypto assets valuable for diverse purposes, such as sanctions, cybercrime, extortion, investment trading, public fundraising, and internal value transfers. Over 30 crypto assets are involved in terrorist financing, including governance tokens in stablecoins. Significantly, terrorist organisations supported the use of bitcoin; thus, law enforcement authorities needed access to multi-asset tracing tools.¹²

The Future of Al Qaeda

As discussed in the future of Al Qaeda, it concludes that its key challenge would be to keep itself afloat and sustainable by being within the news, by pushing terrorist competitors out of the

⁹ Hess, J. (2021). *[Al- Qaeda's Keys to Success]*. Department of Defense. Retrieved from <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jun/03/2002733839/-1/-1/0/HESS2.PDF>

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State. (2020, January 15). *Rewards for Justice: Reward offer for information on Mohamoud Abdi Aden and others responsible for the 2019 attack on DusitD2 hotel complex in Nairobi, Kenya*. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/rewards-for-justice-reward-offer-for-information-on-mohamoud-abdi-aden-and-others-responsible-for-the-2019-attack-on-dusitd2-hotel-complex-in-nairobi-kenya/#:~:text=On%20the%20afternoon%20of%20January,were%20killed%20in%20the%20assault.>

¹¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). *Al Qaeda*. In *Britannica*. Retrieved December 5, 2024, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/al-Qaeda>

¹² Elliptic. (n.d.). *How terrorist organizations are exploiting crypto to raise funds and evade detection*. Retrieved from <https://www.elliptic.co/blog/how-terrorist-organizations-are-exploiting-crypto-to-raise-funds-and-evade-detection>

spotlight, and through attacks that highlight its continued applicability towards Muslim affairs. Moreover, sure enough, violence, including against soft targets, shall still be the way forward and ensure it remains a dominant international power. Chances are that attacks will primarily aim at the American forces and interests within the Middle Eastern region.¹³

Al Qaeda members have continued to threaten regional and global security in the world. Its declining attacks in 2022 have changed in 2023, and the increasing number of attacks in Pakistan, Africa, and the Middle East have been carried out by its members. In particular, Al Qaeda affiliates in Africa have been spreading their operational abilities to their neighbours of their home countries. For instance, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin has intensified its attack in Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo, and Benin. At the same time, Al Shabaab has induced Kenya and Ethiopia into its list of terrorist attacks, these regions' vulnerabilities, including limited counterterrorism capacity, socio-political instability, and economic challenges, provide fertile ground for Al Qaeda's growth.¹⁴ If these issues remain unaddressed, the next few years are likely to witness a significant increase in the group's operational capacity, enabling it to consolidate power, expand networks, and further destabilise these nations.¹⁵

Conclusion

Al Qaeda has demonstrated adaptability and strategic patience as a relevant entity within the global jihadist movement by enduring so long. As it was overshadowed by the rise and fall of ISIS, this group exploited the prevailing instability and weakness in governance and social and economic causes to sink into local conflicts, expanding their networks. Its decentralised structure, reliance on regional affiliates, and focus on long-term goals have helped it survive significant pressure of counterterrorism and the loss of leadership. In that respect, Al Qaeda remains unique compared to other extreme groups, and its position is well maintained as a global threat.

¹³ Program on Extremism at George Washington University. (n.d.). *Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the future of U.S. counterterrorism*. Retrieved from <https://extremism.gwu.edu/al-qaeda-the-taliban-and-future-of-us-counterterrorism>

¹⁴ National Counterterrorism Center. (n.d.). *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)*. Retrieved from https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/jnim_fto.html

¹⁵ Canadian Security Intelligence Service. (n.d.). *The future of Al Qaeda*. Government of Canada. Retrieved December 5, 2024, from <https://www.canada.ca/en/security-intelligence-service/corporate/publications/the-future-of-al-qaeda.html>

Currently, Al Qaeda focuses on becoming an organisational entity that can deeply penetrate geographical areas like Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. The areas of Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East have political instabilities, which give room for recruits and operations. Its use of cyber propaganda and asymmetric warfare shows the ability to follow the latest technology changes, and getting financial sources will keep the operations running. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan further enhances Al Qaeda's strategic depth, providing potential safe havens and recruitment opportunities despite global scrutiny.

Looking forward, Al Qaeda's future threat lies in its capacity to exploit fragile states, escalate regional conflicts, and inspire lone-wolf attacks. African affiliates are rapidly expanding their influence, with implications for regional and international security. As the group evolves and adapts to new challenges, counterterrorism efforts must also change in response to its decentralised structure, ideological appeal, and technological capabilities. Even weakened from its peak, Al Qaeda is still a robust and adaptive adversary. Its ability to exploit emerging opportunities ensures that it will persist as a significant security challenge in the years to come, necessitating sustained and coordinated international efforts to mitigate the threat.