

# Is Al-Qaeda Capable of Global Terrorism Any More?



By Kyle Orton

Report n. 35, February 2023

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## **About the author:**

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## **Cover image credit:**

Robert Clark, *The Associated Press*: The second plane hitting the South Tower of the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001

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# Contents Page

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	<i>Page</i>
Introduction .....	4
<i>Al-Qaeda's Announcement on Afghanistan</i> .....	4
<i>The Questions This Raises</i> .....	5
Al-Qaeda's Terrorism Record: 1992 – 2011 .....	6
Categorising Terror .....	9
Al-Qaeda's Terrorism Record: 2011 – 2022 .....	10
Usama Bin Laden's Strategic and Ideological Evolution .....	14
Ayman Al-Zawahiri's Al-Qaeda: Building on Bin Laden, Challenged By the Islamic State .....	18
A Sham in Syria? .....	21
The Threat From Al-Qaeda Now .....	24



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## Introduction

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Al-Qaeda will always be most infamous for the atrocities in the United States on 11 September 2001. That event, of epochal magnitude and horror, which has now been reduced to the moniker “9/11”, was conceived, planned, and ordered from Taliban- and Al-Qaeda-ruled Afghanistan. U.S. President [Joe Biden’s decision to hand Afghanistan back](#) to the Taliban-Qaeda forces in 2021, and the consequent [destruction of intelligence streams](#), has led to concerns that history will repeat itself. Al-Qaeda has now put out a statement claiming it will *not* use Afghanistan as a launchpad for attacks on the West. There is, of course, little reason to believe Al-Qaeda or any other jihadist group. It does, however, constitute a milestone—this is the first “official”, public limitation Al-Qaeda Central (AQC) has put on its external operations—and it provides an opportunity, two decades on from that awful Tuesday morning, to assess Al-Qaeda’s intentions and capabilities when it comes to global terrorism.

### *Al-Qaeda’s Announcement on Afghanistan*

As part of [Al-Qaeda’s media releases for the 9/11 anniversary](#) in September 2022, it put out [an English translation](#) of the sixth issue of *Ummah Wahidah* (“One Ummah”), the group’s flagship magazine, which had been published in Arabic seven months earlier.<sup>1</sup>

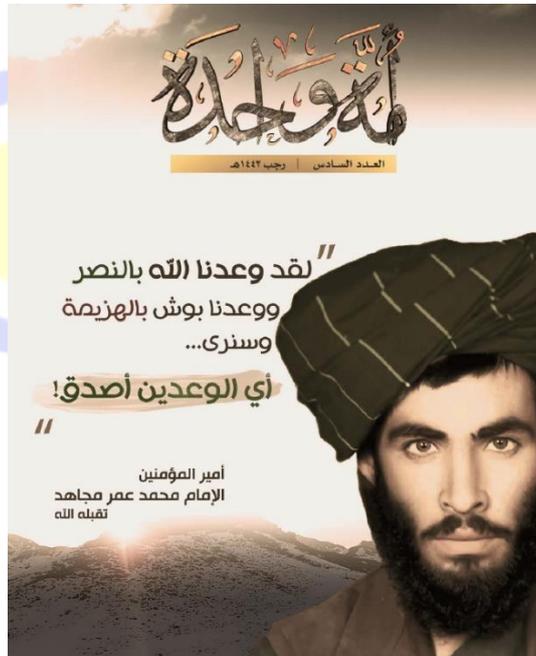


Figure 1: Issue Six of *Ummah Wahidah*, 19 February 2022

Within the sixth issue of *Ummah Wahidah*, there was an article celebrating the re-jihadization of Afghanistan, something Al-Qaeda was sure to [praise in real time](#). The article begins by expressing its satisfaction at the “purification” of Afghanistan from “the abomination of the Crusaders”, saying this shows that jihad is the cause supported by God—it will always succeed, it merely needs patience for the delivery of “the divine promise”. A “special congratulations” is extended to Hibatullah Akhundzada, the emir of the Taliban, who is larded with titles, among them “*Emir al-Mu’mineen*” (Commander of the Faithful).

Pakistan’s people are thanked by *Ummah Wahidah* for assisting the Taliban-Qaeda forces return to power and the Pakistani government pointedly is not, which is rather ungrateful to the [Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence](#) (ISI) agency and the rest of the [military establishment in Pakistan](#) that made the jihadists’ victory possible.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “One Ummah” (issue six), Al-Qaeda General Command, 19 February 2022. [Available here](#).

<sup>2</sup> Oved Lobel (2021, August), ‘The Graveyard of Empires: The Causes and Consequences of American Withdrawal from Afghanistan’, *European Eye on Radicalization*. [Available here](#).

Al-Qaeda has advice for “the honourable imams of jihad in the Islamic Emirate”, as the Taliban calls its regime. *Ummah Wahidah* itemises these: (1) build a “strong” army, thoroughly indoctrinated in jihadism, using the “abundant war spoils” left behind by NATO, that can become an influence in the region; (2) create “a modern educational system capable of graduating qualified specialists” from all over Afghanistan and in all disciplines, “especially religious-legal, scientific, medical, and technological”; and (3) create an economy that is in line with the shari’a: free of usury, spreads the wealth from Afghanistan’s minerals widely, and imposes *zakat* on the population. By Al-Qaeda’s reckoning, this should alleviate poverty and hunger among all “communities (*tawayif*), minorities (*aqaliyaat*), and races (*a’raq*)”.

Al-Qaeda has a broader piece of advice in *Ummah Wahidah*, aimed at those Muslims “who are still convinced that democracy is the way to bring Islam into power”: there is “nothing to be gained” by going this route; “the only way Islam can be brought to rule is via armed force, jihad in the cause of God”, as was proven in Afghanistan.

Then comes the important bit:

*In conclusion, after the return of Afghanistan to the bosom of Islam, we reassure our dear umma that our jihadist attacks against Zionist-Crusader America, even as they cease from the territory of Afghanistan, ... will continue from the rest of God’s lands. God has promised us many blessings and abundance, and we will always begin [with jihad] from the lands of Islam that are under attack by the Crusader enemy, asking God’s help to accomplish our jihadist duties in achieving justice and inflicting pain on America and its allies until they stop oppressing the Islamic world.*

The wording in the Al-Qaeda-issued English translation is slightly different, but the substance is the same.<sup>3</sup>

*Ummah Wahidah*, of course, namechecks Palestine and Guantanamo as places where oppression should be lifted first, and concludes with praise for Muhammad Umar, the founder of the Taliban (he is the man on the front cover, see Fig. 1 above). Unsurprisingly, the article makes no allusion to the Taliban being compelled to admit in the summer of 2015 that Mullah Umar had been dead for more than two years—and thus, inter alia, Al-Qaeda had been [trying to set up a dead man](#) as their “[counter-caliph](#)” to stave off the ideological challenge from the Islamic State (IS).

## ***The Questions This Raises***

Two obvious things: there is no particular reason to believe anything Al-Qaeda says, and something that is true now is not eternally so. Even ideological policies react to circumstance and opportunity.

It might also be said that this is an off-hand remark in one article, and reading anything about Al-Qaeda’s general policy is to get things out of proportion. The reason for resisting this argument, at least in its entirety, is that this is a first for Al-Qaeda: there has not previously been a public statement *from AQC* (we’ll get there) that Al-Qaeda would not attack America from a particular location. Moreover, the comments in *Ummah Wahidah* occur in the context of shifts within Al-Qaeda, ideological and strategic-operational, that we can document.

The question the *Ummah Wahidah* article reopens, and which this report will try to answer, is: What is Al-Qaeda’s approach to global terrorism at this stage—what does it *want* to do and what *can* it do?

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<sup>3</sup> The English version reads: “we would like to reassure the Islamic Ummah that even though attacks directed at the bastion of Zionism-America [sic] have ceased from the soil of Afghanistan, this blessed jihad against the Empire of Evil will continue from other parts of the world.”

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## Al-Qaeda's Terrorism Record: 1992 – 2011

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Al-Qaeda had [tried](#) to attack U.S. troops in Yemen on their way to help alleviate famine for (Muslim) Somalis in December 1992; tried to knock one tower of the World Trade Centre into the other in February 1993; killed five American soldiers, among others, in an attack on a base in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in November 1995; massacred hundreds of people, mostly Africans, in attacks on two U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998; and killed seventeen U.S. sailors in an attack on the U.S.S. *Cole* off the coast of Aden in October 2000. It is notable that these attacks got more sophisticated over time, not coincidentally as [Al-Qaeda's relationship with Iran deepened](#).

\* \* \*

In the shadow of 9/11, Al-Qaeda rather struggled to repeat the feat. Al-Qaeda's external operations chief, Khaled Shaykh Muhammad (KSM), the architect of the 9/11 massacre,<sup>4</sup> selected several candidates as perpetrators of another “[big wedding](#)”, but the British “shoe bomber” Richard Reid and the American would-be “dirty bomber” José Padilla (Abdullah al-Muhajir) were highly public let-downs. These and other episodes were considered so embarrassing by Al-Qaeda's military commander, the Iran-based Muhammad Saladin Zaydan (Sayf al-Adel)—the man who might already be serving as Al-Qaeda's leader since Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in July<sup>5</sup>—that he [asked KSM to resign](#) in June 2002.

KSM refused to quit, however. He already had gruesome “successes” he could point to, such as the beheading on video of the Jewish *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl in February 2002, though even that was partly botched.<sup>6</sup> (Interesting to note this is more than two years before Ahmad al-Khalayleh, the infamous Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of the IS movement, would behead his first hostage on video in Iraq and be ‘rewarded’ with the nickname, “Shaykh of the Slaughterers”.) And KSM was sure he could get it right. So it proved.

From April to November 2002, KSM's operatives struck a synagogue in Tunisia, American Marines on Faylaka Island in Kuwait, Australian and other holidaymakers on the island of Bali in Indonesia, and an Israeli-owned hotel in Kenya. Even after KSM was arrested in March 2003—in Rawalpindi, the headquarters of the Pakistani Army<sup>7</sup>—Al-Qaeda continued, with serious terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Indonesia, and Turkey in 2003. In March 2004, the public transport system in Spain's capital was bombed, slaughtering 200 people, and there were similar [attacks in July 2005 in Britain](#), murdering fifty-two people.

The half-decade after 9/11 was Al-Qaeda's high-water mark for external operations. As well as the attacks that came off, there were any number of near-misses. The same month as the Madrid bombings, for example, an Al-Qaeda network answering to the man who had led Al-Qaeda's troops alongside the Taliban against the Northern Alliance, Nashwan Abdulbaqi (Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi), had plotted to blow up the British Parliament, synagogues, and the Ministry of Sound nightclub near Elephant and Castle tube station because,<sup>8</sup> as [one of the conspirators explained](#), with “all those slags dancing around”, the people in the building cannot be considered “innocent”.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘The 9/11 Commission Report’ (2004), pp. 148-50. [Available here](#)

<sup>5</sup> The United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team [reported](#) on 13 February 2023: “Member States’ predominant view is that Sayf al-Adl is now the de facto leader of Al-Qaida”. Two days later, the U.S. State Department [confirmed](#) that its “assessment aligns with that of the U.N.—that Al-Qaeda's new de facto leader Sayf al-Adel is based in Iran”.

<sup>6</sup> The appalling story of how KSM murdered Daniel Pearl—with the help of a British citizen, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, and one of the favourite terrorist assets of Pakistan's ISI, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi—is told by Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark in their [excellent](#) 2017 book, *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight* (pp. 111-12).

<sup>7</sup> Pakistan's ISI and police nominally cooperated in KSM's arrest, but their [hand had been forced](#): the U.S. had not only signals intelligence, but (for once) human intelligence, supplied by one of KSM's relatives, who collected the reward money and resettled in America. The ISI, [once said](#) to maintain an “office of hedging your bets”, decided it was better to try to reap the rewards of cooperating with the Americans, who would move against KSM anyway, and just hope nobody asked why the 9/11 architect was at General Headquarters—which turned out to be a good bet, since hardly anyone even remarked on it as an odd coincidence, let alone asked any deeper questions. As with all things related to the ISI, there are yet further complexities: KSM was arrested at the home of Dr. Abdul Quddus Khan, an elderly, retired microbiologist, whose [son was subsequently “disappeared”](#) by the ISI; what KSM was doing there, and why the son was taken, remain mysterious.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell Silber (2011), *The Al Qaeda Factor: Plots Against the West*, pp. 83-106.

The most important thwarted Al-Qaeda plot was the one unravelled in Britain on 9 August 2006: [directed entirely](#) by AQIC, [at least six planes](#) heading from Britain to the U.S. and Canada were to be brought down by suicide bombers using liquid explosives in drinks bottles, causing murder on “[an unprecedented scale](#)”. Al-Qaeda’s external operations notably tailed off after this, and it was not just a matter of better Western security; the attempts slowed and then virtually stopped.

\* \* \*

There was essentially a three-year hiatus from mid-2006 to mid-2009 of Al-Qaeda attacks against the West. Some caveats. Al-Qaeda’s [affiliates](#) continued their insurgent-terrorist operations,<sup>9</sup> and it was in this period that there was a notable trickle of Westerners joining affiliates other than the one in Iraq (what is now IS), particularly in Yemen and Somalia, sowing seeds of a problem that only became visible later.<sup>10</sup> And there were several attacks on Western *interests* and *citizens*, but they tended to be in or near Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> But the overall trendline was of Al-Qaeda turning inwards to the Muslim world.

\* \* \*

There was a brief renewed wave of Al-Qaeda attacks in 2009-10 that was almost entirely the work of AQAP from Yemen and even the exceptions were usually connected to Anwar al-Awlaki, a then-senior official in AQAP and the most influential jihadist on domestic terrorists in the English-speaking world, a position he retained after death.<sup>12</sup>

The first attempted attack of the new wave was broken up in Britain on 8 April 2009, with the arrest of Abid Naseer, a Pakistani citizen with a student visa, who had planned to blow himself up in a crowded shopping centre in Manchester on Easter Sunday (12 April). Due to the [inadequacies](#) of the British legal system, Naseer was subsequently extradited to the U.S. after he was connected to a counterpart cell in New York—containing Adis Medunjanin, Najibullah Zazi, and Zarein Ahmedzay—that was rolled up in September 2009 as it planned an attack on the subway system. U.S. investigators discovered that this transcontinental plot was “directed by senior Al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan”.<sup>13</sup> Zazi was a [devotee](#) of the lectures Al-Awlaki (and [Abdullah al-Faisal](#)). In court, Zazi testified against Naseer, claiming the “unscrupulous” Al-Awlaki had taken advantage of him, a “gullible” and “uneducated” man. Naseer and Zazi had been to Peshawar,<sup>14</sup> where they connected with Al-Qaeda’s then-head of external operations [Abdirizaq Abdi Saleh](#) (Saleh al-Somali), and received training in weapons and explosives. Documents taken from the Abbottabad compound show Usama bin Laden was intimately involved in this operation.<sup>15</sup>

Carlos Bledsoe, who called himself “Abdulahakim Mujahid Muhammad” after converting to Islam, carried out the first “successful” attack of the new wave on 1 June 2009, a drive-by shooting in front of a military recruitment office in Little Rock, Arkansas, murdering Private William Long and wounding Private Quinton Ezeagwula. In court, Bledsoe [claimed](#) he was a “member” of AQAP and acted at the

<sup>9</sup> Al-Qaeda’s affiliates up to 2009 included ([in a complicated way](#)) the IS movement, then-known as Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (AQIC); [Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb](#) (AQIC); Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and ([secretly until 2012](#)) Al-Shabab in Somalia. Probably the most notable attack by one of these affiliates in the 2006-09 period, because [it was so bizarre](#), was the attempt by AQAP operative Abdullah al-Asiri to assassinate Muhammad bin Nayef, the Deputy Interior Minister of Saudi Arabia, on 27 August 2009.

<sup>10</sup> One Westerner who tried to join Al-Shabab during this time-period was [Mohammed Emwazi](#) (“Jihadi John”). A number of jihadists who went on to either join IS’s “caliphate” or conduct or facilitate IS terrorist attacks within Western states were involved in the late 2000s/early 2010s movement of jihadists to AQAP and Al-Shabab in particular.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the June 2008 [attack on the Danish Embassy](#) in “revenge” for the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons of Islam’s Prophet Muhammad, and the September 2008 [attack on the Marriott Hotel](#) frequented by foreigners, were both *in* Pakistan, and the December 2009 counter-intelligence disaster that led to seven Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officers being murdered at Camp Chapman in Afghanistan was *by* Pakistan, [specifically the ISI](#), using an Al-Qaeda suicide bomber.

<sup>12</sup> For the definitive account of Al-Awlaki’s role in the jihad, see: Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens (2020), *Incitement: Anwar al-Awlaki’s Western Jihad*.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Al-Qaeda Operative Sentenced To 40 Years For Role In International Terrorism Plot That Targeted The United States And Europe’, *U.S. Department of Justice*, 24 November 2015. [Available here](#).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

organisation's behest.<sup>16</sup> Bledsoe *had* been to Yemen in 2007,<sup>17</sup> meaning he very likely had direct contact with AQAP, and he looked to Al-Awlaki as his "Shaykh", i.e. at least a spiritual guide. Ultimately, it was much less clear than it initially appeared how much direction AQAP gave Bledsoe for the attack, and it seems he did *not* communicate with Al-Awlaki.<sup>18</sup>

On 5 November 2009 at Fort Hood, in Texas, where U.S. Major Nidal Hasan murdered thirteen of his colleagues. Hasan had certainly communicated with Al-Awlaki. But it transpired that this link was not as tight as it [first appeared](#): Al-Awlaki had not been operationally involved in the attack.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Awlaki was more involved,<sup>20</sup> as [adviser](#) as well as inspirer, of the "underwear bomber" Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who tried to bring down a plane over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. Luckily, the young Nigerian mishandled [the bomb AQAP gave him](#) and succeeded only in starting a "[small](#)", doubtless painful, fire.

A mix-up over AM and PM on the alarm clocks prevented a car bomb detonating in Times Square in New York on 1 May 2010.<sup>21</sup> Faisal Shahzad, an American born in Pakistan, had been to Waziristan,<sup>22</sup> receiving explosives training and money from the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) or "Pakistani Taliban", a highly problematic label for an entity that—as this operation demonstrated—is in no serious sense separate from the "Afghan" Taliban or Al-Qaeda.<sup>23</sup> The TTP, which many analysts had regarded as a locally-focused group distinct from Al-Qaeda, [claimed](#) "full responsibility" for Shahzad's attempt. Shahzad [confessed](#) Al-Awlaki moved him to jihad.

British Labour MP Stephen Timms was "[extremely fortunate](#)" to survive a stabbing at his constituency surgery by a 21-year-old woman, Roshonara Choudhry, on 14 May 2010. Choudhry, a top student at King's College London, had [begun listening](#) to Al-Awlaki's sermons in November 2009, and was convinced within six months to murder Timms for supporting the invasion that deposed Saddam Husayn and get herself killed in the process. "I wanted to be a martyr", [Choudhry later said](#).

Another [Al-Awlaki-linked plot](#) was next: on 29 October 2010, two planes—one in Dubai and the other in Britain's East Midlands Airport—were [discovered](#) with "packages [on board] addressed to synagogues in Chicago containing the hard-to-detect explosive PETN hidden in printer ink cartridges". One of the targets seems to have been [Congregation Or Chadash](#), a synagogue for homosexuals. AQAP [explained how it carried out](#) this operation in *Inspire*, boasting of its modest cost (\$4,200).

\* \* \*

2010 was the last year that a concerted Al-Qaeda terrorism campaign against the West was detectable. The U.S. Navy SEALs finally caught up with Bin Laden on 2 May 2011,<sup>24</sup> and Al-Awlaki was struck down in Yemen by a drone about five months later, on 30 September.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Bledsoe [wrote a letter](#), dated 12 January 2010, to the U.S. court asking complaining that his lawyer had failed to follow his instructions. Bledsoe in the letter asked that he not receive funds for his defence, insisted he had acted "according to Islamic laws and the Islamic religion", confessed that the shooting was a "jihadi attack on infidel forces", and added: "I plead guilty to capital murder, attempt [sic] capital murder, and the other 10 counts ... I wasn't insane of post-traumatic, nor was I forced to do this act". Most interestingly, Bledsoe said: "I'm affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Member of Abu Basir's army." Abu Basir is the *kunya* of [Nasser al-Wuhayshi](#), the Yemeni jihadist who led AQAP from its founding in 2009 until he was killed in June 2015, and who was the overall deputy in Al-Qaeda's global network.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens (2020), 'As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad', *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence* (ICSR), p. 86. [Available here](#).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> Katherine Poppe (2018, October), 'Nidal Hasan: A Case Study in Lone-Actor Terrorism', *Program on Extremism at the George Washington University Report*, p. 14. [Available here](#).

<sup>20</sup> 'Treasury Designates Anwar Al-Aulaqi, Key Leader of Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula', *U.S. Department of Treasury*, 16 July 2010. [Available here](#).

<sup>21</sup> 'Alarm Clocks from 2010 Times Square Bombing Attempt', *Federal Bureau of Investigation* (FBI). [Available here](#).

<sup>22</sup> 'Faisal Shahzad Indicted for Attempted Car Bombing in Times Square', *U.S. Department of Justice*, 17 June 2010. [Available here](#).

<sup>23</sup> Lobel, 'The Graveyard of Empires', p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> The raid on Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad [began](#) at 1 AM local time in Pakistan, which is 4 PM East Coast time on 1 May in America.

<sup>25</sup> President Barack Obama's decision to kill Al-Awlaki proved rather controversial in the U.S., especially with his Left-wing supporters and among civil libertarians, because Al-Awlaki had American citizenship. The [legal situation](#)—the reliance on the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) passed after 9/11—and the precedent back to the Civil War of killing Americans who war against their own country were solid enough, but Obama was put in the slightly odd situation in the public debate of being defended not only by Right-wingers, but [some](#) of the [Bush administration officials](#) that had been most demonised as "torturers", "war criminals", and all the rest of it.

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## Categorising Terror

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Building on the ideas of Mitchell Silber, jihadist attacks in the West can be divided into four categories:<sup>26</sup>

1. **Controlled:** operatives are trained by the terrorist organisation, then dispatched to the West with resources and specific instructions, while remaining in close contact with the centre. In the old days this meant in Al-Qaeda's camps in Afghanistan during the Taliban years or in Pakistan after 9/11, and for IS in later years it meant those sent from the "caliphate", notably the perpetrators of the November 2015 atrocities in Paris.
2. **Guided:** operatives have often travelled to jihadist hotspots—Afghanistan-Pakistan for Al-Qaeda or Syria-Iraq for IS—where they have received training and broad instructions for a plot, as well as some resources, while the details of target and timing are generally left to the individual operative, who has a lower level of communications with the centre once back in his home country. This operative might then lead a cell of people who have not themselves had direct contact with the terrorist organisation. There was sometimes a slight variance, even early on in the 2000s, where someone would formulate a plot and then seek Al-Qaeda's prior approval (and perhaps money). Later, IS would build on this by having dedicated [terrorism guides](#) to use the communications technology of the 2010s to secure a [higher level of communications](#) with volunteers and [walk them through attacks](#) in Western countries without any need for them to attend jihadist-controlled territory.
3. **Networked:** Individual(s) who act without prior instructions or endorsement from the centre to carry out an attack, even if they have among their number people who trained with, or have been in contact with, a jihadist group.
4. **Lone Wolf:** A single person who formulates and carries out an attack without assistance from a jihadist organisation or any other person. These attacks are sometimes called "inspired", which already begins eroding the idea that those in this category are truly "lone" actors, and, [when examined](#) operationally, "lone wolves" are found to be bordering on mythical.<sup>27</sup>

Crudely, then, categories (1) and (2) are "proper" terrorist attacks. With Al-Qaeda, the attacks leading up to and including 9/11, plus most of those in the wave up to 2006, were in category (1), while the 2009-10 wave was a mix of categories (1) and (2). Using this schema, since 2011 there has been at most one "proper" attack on the West.

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<sup>26</sup> Silber, *The Al Qaeda Factor*, pp. 3-5.

<sup>27</sup> Bart Schuurman, Lasse Lindeskilde, Stefan Malthaner, Francis O'Connor, Paul Gill, and Noémie Bouhana (2017, December), 'End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology that Should Not Have Been', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. [Available here](#).

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## Al-Qaeda's Terrorism Record: 2011 – 2022

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There have been a number of apparent efforts, and even some apparent “successes”, by Al-Qaeda against the West from 2011 to 2022, but, when these cases are looked at closely, they become much less clear-cut and in some cases evaporate entirely.

\* \* \*

In [Germany](#), on 2 March 2011, a 21-year-old citizen of Kosovo, Arid Uka, murdered two American soldiers and injured two more on a bus outside Frankfurt airport.

Uka, resident in Germany since he was four-years-old and [apparently integrated](#), [transpired](#) to be “radicalised” online, [motivated](#) by a fictional scene, which he mistakenly believed to be real, of U.S. soldiers raping an Iraqi woman from the (truly atrocious) 2007 “anti-war” film, *Redacted*. Uka was not really a “lone wolf”: he was involved in an ecosystem of forums that encouraged his ideological evolution and pushed him towards terrorism—it is where he [found](#) the *Redacted* clip—and he [was Facebook “friends”](#) with “a number of known Islamist extremists”. And Uka [admired](#) “Abu Maleeq” or “Deso Dogg”, the German-Ghanian convert to Islam born Denis Cuspert, later a prominent propagandist-recruiter for IS.

For all this, Uka has no known direct link to Al-Qaeda.

\* \* \*

In France, in March 2012, Mohammed Merah, the 23-year-old son of Algerian immigrants and a [habitual criminal](#), undertook a terrorist rampage over more than a week that murdered seven people, three of them young children.

Merah [assassinated](#) a French paratrooper in southern Toulouse and then, while shouting, “Allahu Akbar”, [murdered two more soldiers](#) and injured another at a shopping centre in Montauban, north of Toulouse. All these members of the military were Muslims.

Finally, Merah carried out a grisly massacre at the Ozar Hatorah Jewish school in Toulouse, [murdering](#) rabbi-teacher Jonathan Sandler and his two toddlers outside, before proceeding inside and carrying out the targeted murder of a seven-year-old girl, Myriam Monsonogo: she was “grabbed by the hair and shot in the head”. A seventeen-year-old boy, Bryan Bijaoui, was [horribly wounded](#) trying to protect Myriam.

Merah [would have gone on killing](#) if he was not “martyred”, after a thirty-hour siege, on 22 March. During the [siege negotiations](#), Merah claimed he was acting at the instruction of the “brothers” of AQC in Pakistan, and that he had outwardly adopted a libertine lifestyle as “part of the trick” while living among infidels. It is known is that Merah [went twice](#) to [Pakistan and Afghanistan](#), that he has been [involved in a violent altercation](#) two years earlier that ended with him chanting “Al-Qaeda! Al-Qaeda!” while waving a sword, and the nature of the 2012 attacks [suggested](#) a measure of training.

The available evidence, however, simply does not allow any confidence in categorising the attack.

\* \* \*

It was [announced](#) on 7 May 2012 that the reason Fahd al-Quso, an Al-Qaeda veteran involved in the *Cole* attack and AQAP’s external operations chief since Al-Awlaki’s demise eight months earlier, had been killed in a drone strike in Yemen by the U.S. a day earlier was because he had been involved in a plot in April 2012 to get a suicide bomber on an American plane, a plot foiled by Saudi intelligence. That the CIA was able to [announce](#) there was never any danger, since they and the Saudis had been “carefully

monitoring this from early on”, suggested there had been a spy in AQAP,<sup>28</sup> but there turned out to be more—and less—to the story than that.

The Saudi spy had initiated the operation: he was *sent* to join AQAP, not recruited from within its ranks, and he had *proposed* the plot to AQAP’s leadership, [offering himself](#) as the suicide bomber. AQAP, specifically its notorious bomb-maker Ibrahim al-Asiri, [then](#) “fitted the man with a new version of a nonmetallic ‘underwear bomb’,” which the man [duly turned over](#) to his Saudi handler, who in turn passed it to the Americans.

\* \* \*

The Boston marathon bombing on 15 April 2013, which murdered three people, one of them an eight-year-old boy, and wounded over 250, was carried out by two brothers with Chechen background, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and Tamerlan Tsarnaev.

Tamerlan had taken up jihadism no later than 2011—on the anniversary of 9/11 that year, he [murdered](#) a close friend and two other people, robbing them as an “act of jihad”, in line with Al-Awlaki’s teachings about exploiting non-believers—and he had [travelled](#) back to his Russian homeland from January to July 2012, specifically Chechnya and Dagestan, where a jihadist insurgency was active. Tamerlan had [clearly connected](#) with the Caucasus jihadists, some of them with [links to Al-Zawahiri](#) (who made a [trip of his own to Russia](#) in 1996-97 that remains one of the strangest episodes in jihadist history). Russia, as usual, knew more than they told the Americans. AQAP’s magazine *Inspire* was [found](#) on Tamerlan’s computer, and the pressure cooker bombs had been built [using instructions](#) in the magazine.

Ultimately, however, neither AQC, nor any of the affiliates, claimed responsibility, and—despite numerous visible threads and connections—there is no evidence Al-Qaeda orchestrated the Boston attack. By the model above, it would be category (3), a “networked” attack.

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Just over a month later, on 22 May 2013, in Woolwich, London, an off-duty British soldier, Lee Rigby, was murdered by two men of Nigerian descent who had both converted to Islam from Christianity, Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale. Adebolajo had [tried](#) to join Al-Qaeda in Somalia in 2010, and he and Adebowale had both been brought to jihadi-Salafism by [Al-Awlaki’s teachings](#).

On 25 May 2013, a 23-year-old French soldier, Cedric Cordier, was [stabbed](#) in the throat at Paris’ Arche de La Defence, though thankfully survived. Cordier’s assailant, 21-year-old Alexandre Dhaussy, was another convert from Christianity, leading to [speculation](#) this was a copycat of the Woolwich attack.

In the end, no link between the two attacks and no direct links to AQC were established. Rigby was the victim of a networked attack, while Cordier was, on the available evidence, attacked by that rarest of things, a genuine “lone wolf”, possibly motivated to ‘avenge’ the French intervention against Al-Qaeda in Mali a few months earlier.

What could be seen in the two May 2013 attacks was the beginning of the kinds of attacks, in format, that IS was about to take all over the world, albeit at a tempo Al-Qaeda had never even aspired to, and guided by their [Amn al-Kharji](#). Indeed, the overt schism between IS and Al-Qaeda in Syria had [begun a month earlier](#), initiating the process that would see IS [expelled](#) from Al-Qaeda in February 2014, [proclaim its caliphate](#) in June 2014, and [declare war on the entire world](#) in September 2014.

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Now we come to perhaps the most infamous apparent Al-Qaeda atrocity of the post-9/11 period: the massacre of the staff at *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris on 7 January 2015. This attack was claimed by AQAP, but

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<sup>28</sup> AQAP had such a problem with spies by 2019 that, rather than rooting them out and executing them, it [offered an amnesty](#) to those who confessed and repented.

from the get-go the operational details were extremely strange. One possibility that would make sense of the fact pattern is that [it was really an IS attack](#).

\* \* \*

Another strange case is that of Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, a naturalised citizen of Somali extraction arrested in the U.S. in February 2015 on [charges of planning](#) to attack a military base and murder soldiers “execution style”.

Mohamud had been in Syria between April and June 2014 and joined the jihadists—he is the only case so far of a returnee from Syria with instructions to carry out an attack in America.<sup>29</sup> The strange part was that Mohamud had joined Jabhat al-Nusra, originally IS’s covert front in Syria which had [defected to Al-Qaeda](#) in early 2013. Al-Nusra’s primary mission had always been to [embed itself](#) within the Syrian rebellion and ultimately co-opt the cause to entrench itself so deeply in local dynamics that it could not be expelled and could create an Islamic state with a popular base. Inviting Western retaliation by plotting external operations clearly runs counter to that interest. The time-period when Mohamud was in Syria was when Al-Nusra was [fighting for its life](#) after [IS ripped away](#) much of its membership and initiated a war on the remnant; it is an odd moment for Al-Nusra to have been plotting external operations, and, as will be discussed below, there were explicit AQC instructions for Al-Nusra to refrain from such activity.

That said, those instructions to Al-Nusra were given in [early 2015](#): before that, in late 2014 and the spring of 2015, as Al-Nusra recovered its footing, its “real” face had been showing, as it [aggressively dismantled](#) Western-backed rebel groups and implemented harsh shari’a ordinances. Perhaps Al-Nusra had tried to implement the “full” Al-Qaeda program in this period, including foreign attacks, or thought an attack in the U.S. would burnish its credentials in the intra-jihadist war with IS? Or perhaps one of the [“Khorasan Group”](#), the [AQC figures](#) sent into Syria initially to mediate between Al-Nusra and IS, sent Mohamud on a freelance mission, without the knowledge of Al-Nusra emir [Ahmad al-Shara](#) (Abu Muhammad al-Jolani).

In all the evidence amassed about Mohamud’s activities once back in the U.S., it remains unclear exactly who he maintained contact with in Syria and on whose authority they were instructing him.<sup>30</sup>

\* \* \*

Something to flag up here, just for the sake of completeness: the Russian government claims that the 3 April 2017 bombing of the Saint Petersburg metro was orchestrated by an Al-Qaeda group in Syria, but the [evidence from Moscow’s own carefully choreographed trial](#) raises [so many questions](#) about what really happened that it would be analytical malpractice even to include it in the dataset, let alone to draw any conclusions from it.

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The most recent ostensible Al-Qaeda attack took place on 6 December 2019 at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida: a 21-year-old Saudi Air Force officer, Muhammad Saeed al-Shamrani, who was training at the base, shot and killed three American sailors.

Mercifully, the any-motive-except-jihadism phase of the media coverage never really got going—even [The New York Times noted](#) that there was “nothing to suggest” Al-Shamrani’s resentment at being called “Porn Stash” by American instructors led to the attack.

In February 2020, an [audio statement](#) was released from AQAP’s emir Qassem al-Raymi (who was [dead by then](#)) in which he claimed “adoption” of the attack for AQAP;<sup>31</sup> the speech played over a picture purporting to be Al-Shamrani’s will, subsequently [authenticated](#) and presumably sent to AQAP beforehand, though the document does not mention AQAP. Al-Shamrani, killed during the attack, was a

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford (2018, February), ‘The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq’, *Program on Extremism at George Washington University*, p. 74. [Available here](#).

<sup>30</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, ‘The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq’, *Program on Extremism at George Washington University*, pp. 73-5.

<sup>31</sup> Colin Clarke (2020, March), ‘The Pensacola Terrorist Attack: The Enduring Influence of al-Qa’ida and its Affiliates’, *CTC Sentinel*. [Available here](#).

[consumer of Al-Awlaki's lectures](#); one of his [last tweets quoted](#) (without citation) Al-Awlaki and Bin Laden; and when his mobile telephones were eventually accessed it was discovered that Al-Shamrani had “significant ties to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), not only before the attack, but before he even arrived in the United States”.<sup>32</sup> Al-Shamrani was in contact with AQAP from 2015 and this attack was “the brutal culmination of years of planning”, [according to the FBI](#), which said Al-Shamrani’s attack was “certainly more than just inspired” by Al-Qaeda, though, crucially, the Bureau [stopped short](#) of saying the attack was *directed* by Al-Qaeda. Thus, it remains unclear if AQAP initiated the attack, or gave after-the-fact approval to someone who offered an attack that was already planned to them—a narrow but deep distinction.

Al-Qaeda released a rather strange statement in December 2022 celebrating its attacks and attempted attacks near Christmas that was full of praise for Al-Shamrani—indeed, the statement contended that no expression of praise would ever be enough—and said his act of “revenge” against America was deserved and should be emulated, but there was, conspicuously, no direct claim Al-Shamrani had acted on Al-Qaeda’s instructions.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, on the available evidence—even if Al-Shamrani formulated his plot independently, rather than carrying out a plan devised by AQAP—it looks like Al-Shamrani sought (and received) approval from AQAP to go ahead with it, which would make it a category (2), i.e. “proper”, attack, the first by Al-Qaeda in the U.S. since 9/11.

The ambiguities in how AQAP handled Pensacola might well be deliberate,<sup>34</sup> since Al-Qaeda has been trying to project a non-threatening image to the West—in effect, a non-aggression pact: we leave them alone to do as they will in Islamdom and they will leave us alone on our own streets—yet Al-Qaeda knows that to the jihadists it wants to recruit there is significant ideological capital to be reaped from an attack in the West.

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Attorney General William P. Barr Announces Updates to the Findings of the Investigation into the December 2019 Shooting at Pensacola Naval Air Station’, *U.S. Department of Justice*, 18 May 2020. [Available here](#).

<sup>33</sup> The attack that got the most coverage in the statement was the suicide attack on Camp Chapman in December 2009 by Humam al-Balawi (Abu Dujana al-Khorasani), whom the author claims to have met, which killed seven CIA officers, a CIA agent, and a Jordanian intelligence officer. The Pensacola section in the English translation opens in the passive voice, saying, “Interestingly enough”, this attack was among the Christmastime operations, suggesting Al-Qaeda was not in control of the timing. In Arabic, the statement is even more vague, just saying Pensacola happened in December 2019. See: “Did Santa Claus Join Al-Qaeda?”, Al-Qaeda Statement, 31 December 2022. [Available here](#).

<sup>34</sup> For a version of this argument, see: Katherine Zimmerman (2020, May), ‘Al Qaeda’s Role in the Pensacola Shooting and What It Means’, *American Enterprise Institute*. [Available here](#).

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## Usama Bin Laden's Strategic and Ideological Evolution

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The record of Al-Qaeda's terrorism campaign can seem to create a puzzle. Bin Laden was known to be obsessed at the end of his life with attacking America, for the ten-year anniversary of 9/11 if possible, and Ayman al-Zawahiri [took over](#) an Al-Qaeda in June 2011 that had a stature and global reach Bin Laden could only have dreamed of when he created his special forces-type outfit in Afghanistan in the spring of 1987.<sup>35</sup> Yet, under the custodianship of this man who allegedly "encouraged" Bin Laden down the road of targeting the "far enemy" that led to 9/11,<sup>36</sup> Al-Qaeda has seemingly not tried to hit the West on its own soil for a dozen years—even the Pensacola attack looks opportunistic; the initiative does not seem to have come from Al-Qaeda's side. Why is that?

The answer is partly that while Bin Laden wanted another "spectacular" anti-American attack, what he had in mind was *not* another 9/11. One plan we know Bin Laden had, devised in the spring of 2010, was to try to kill President Barack Obama by shooting down his plane if he visited Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup> Another [plan was to strike](#) "supertankers carrying oil [from the Gulf] to the United States..., thus producing an economic meltdown and public protests" that would lead to the U.S. withdrawing from the Middle East. What will be noticed is that these are plots for attacks on Americans *within* the region, and this gets at a key change that had come about in the thinking of Al-Qaeda's leader after September 11.

The distinction between the "far enemy" (the West) and "near enemy" (the local regimes) in Al-Qaeda's paradigm was never so sharp as the popular understanding of it after 9/11 suggested, and the notion of Al-Qaeda having a "far-enemy-first" strategy was always more complicated.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, these ideas got at a truth. Al-Qaeda was set on attacking America to drive it out of the region, removing what Al-Qaeda saw as the obstacle to Islamist revolutions in Arab states and creating a unified Islamic caliphate. 9/11 was conceived as a short-cut: a single decisive blow that made the decadent and effeminate Americans, as Bin Laden saw them, decide the game wasn't worth the candle. "Hit them and they will run", Bin Laden had intoned to his followers all through the 1990s, citing the withdrawals from Vietnam and Somalia, and the feeble responses to the first World Trade Centre attack and the East African Embassy bombings.<sup>39</sup> Instead, Al-Qaeda had been met with a ferocious American-led response that brought the Americans more deeply into the region, depriving Al-Qaeda of their safe-haven in Afghanistan and then striking into the heart of Islamdom to settle accounts with Saddam.

Forced to reassess his assumptions about the Americans, Bin Laden came to understand that the jihadists [lacked the numbers](#) to confront the West directly: there would be no all-at-once American withdrawal that left the Arab despotisms defenceless against "elitist" top-down Al-Qaeda revolutions. America would have to be driven out by a "[strategy of a thousand cuts](#)", with a particular focus on economic warfare after the 2008 financial crash, and within the Muslim world a more bottom-up approach would be needed to create a popular base that prepared the way for a caliphate. This necessitated that Al-Qaeda "avoid wasting our energy [fighting] with these [Arab] regimes at this stage",<sup>40</sup> and turn in a more "populist" direction—for Al-Qaeda to begin meeting local needs as a way to integrate into populations and gradually bringing them towards its understanding of Islam, rather than going into their midst and trying to get them to

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<sup>35</sup> Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall (2015), *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan*, p. 111.

<sup>36</sup> Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark (2017), *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight*, p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> "Letter from UBL to 'Atiyatullah Al-Libi 4'", document [SOCOM-2012-0000019](#) in the Harmony Documents collection released in 2012. This is a letter from Bin Laden, shortly after the deaths of "our dear brothers", Hamid al-Zawi (Abu Umar al-Baghdadi) and Abd al-Munim al-Badawi (Abu Hamza al-Muhajir), the leader and deputy of the IS movement, killed on 18 April 2010, and just after Bin Laden's "chief of staff", Mustafa Abu al-Yazid (Saeed al-Masri), has been killed on 21 May 2010. The letter is written to Jamal al-Misrati (Atiya Abd al-Rahman or Atiyatullah al-Libi), informing him that he has been appointed to replace Abu al-Yazid. (Obama did [make a secret visit](#) to Afghanistan in December 2010.) Inter alia, in the letter, Bin Laden instructs his deputies to be sure they do *not* harm then-Vice President Biden. Bin Laden regarded Biden becoming President if Obama was killed as advantageous to Al-Qaeda because "Biden is totally unprepared" to be President, so him inheriting the office "will lead the U.S. into a crisis". In August 2021, after the catastrophe Biden had orchestrated in Afghanistan, this part of the letter was [dug up](#) by [the press](#).

<sup>38</sup> The degree to which there was a distinction between the "far enemy" and "near enemy" in Al-Qaeda's strategic thinking is often overdone. Throughout the 1990s, for example, Al-Qaeda had [trained up to 20,000 jihadists](#) in the camps in Afghanistan for local wars and insurgencies, including in Algeria, [Bosnia](#) (where Al-Qaeda had [help from Iran](#)), and Chechnya. And the 9/11 attack was, in effect, an "off the books" operation that Bin Laden and KSM carried out in defiance of most of Al-Qaeda's leadership. See: Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark (2017), *The Exile: The Flight of Osama bin Laden*, pp. 46-7.

<sup>39</sup> Bernard Lewis (2004), *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East*, pp. 376-77.

<sup>40</sup> [SOCOM-2012-0000019](#).

immediately accept its “purist” vision.<sup>41</sup> This strategic insight is the background to the creation of the “affiliates” in West Africa, Somalia, and Yemen from the mid-2000s, and Bin Laden’s writings from 2010 onwards show Al-Qaeda’s strategy reorienting towards a model that in its fundamentals continues to operate to this day.

Around late May 2010, when appointing his new chief of staff,<sup>42</sup> Bin Laden declared that Al-Qaeda was in a “new phase” of “jihad activities”, particularly in the military and media spheres. The challenges and adaptations as Bin Laden saw them can be summarised as:<sup>43</sup>

- A need for force preservation and a specialisation and differentiation in terms of mission for the “affiliates”. Bin Laden warned against opening new fronts; those currently active were “sufficient”. Bin Laden was especially concerned about “halting the escalation in Yemen”, a state he saw as an important “reserve force for the mujahideen” that would be disrupted by war.
- Not declaring an Islamic emirate, let alone a caliphate, any time soon, because Al-Qaeda lacked the foundations to sustain it. Bin Laden went so far as to advise AQAP to stay out of the melee if Ali Saleh’s government fell because Al-Qaeda did not have its ducks in a row. (AQAP would ignore this advice when Saleh was actually deposed in February 2012.) There was nowhere that Al-Qaeda had done enough preparation for an emirate, Bin Laden said, with three “exceptions”: Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq.
- Working towards creating the foundations—troop numbers, ideological purity, and economic capacity—for sustainable emirates. To do this, Bin Laden wanted the jihadists to step away from attacks on local regimes, and use the space this opened up to spread Al-Qaeda’s ideology, particularly among the tribes. In Yemen or anywhere else, Al-Qaeda’s forces must have the administrative and financial resources “to provide the basic life support services” to any territory before it was captured. And the military focus had to be on “bleeding the American enemy” so it left the region. Once America was gone, *then* “comes the phase in which the . . . rulers who have abandoned Islamic law are toppled”, and this can be done more easily having built up recruits through the *da’wa* (proselytism) work.
- In terms of media messaging, Bin Laden was aware that the changes he had set out to Al-Qaeda’s “general line” risked alienating his own ranks and popular sentiment in the Muslim world, but Bin Laden hoped that Al-Qaeda would be credited on the one side, for retaining anti-Americanism as its core message and taking such care not to endanger Muslim lives by fighting needlessly within Muslim-majority countries, and that Al-Qaeda’s enemies would be damaged. Bin Laden specifically hoped that Arab governments would accept his “friendly” gesture—and, when they then did not use the freedom from the internal Al-Qaeda threat to send troops to fight the U.S. in Iraq or to fight Israel, this would damage their popularity even further and make spreading Al-Qaeda’s ideology easier.

A telling aspect here is Bin Laden’s concern about Al-Qaeda being blamed for causing unnecessary Muslim deaths: this is clearly driven by the Iraq experience, where the IS movement—Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (AQM), as it had been—had created such carnage it led to Al-Qaeda’s leadership considering a name

<sup>41</sup> Mohammed Hafez (2020, September), ‘The Crisis Within Jihadism: The Islamic State’s Puritanism vs. al-Qa’ida’s Populism’, *CTC Sentinel*. [Available here](#).

<sup>42</sup> Al-Qaeda’s “chief of staff” had been killed on 21 May 2010 and his replacement, the man Bin Laden was writing to, was a Libyan jihadist named **Jamal al-Misrati** (Atiya Abd al-Rahman) [appointed in the letter [SOCOM-2012-0000019](#)]. Al-Misrati was also Al-Qaeda’s “general manager”, the vaunted “Al-Qaeda’s number three” position, which is to say the operational day-to-day coordinator of the network. **KSM** had been essentially in the “number three” role, as well as the external operations chief, until his arrest in Pakistan in March 2003. **KSM** was succeeded by **Mustafa Faraj al-Uzaybi** (Abu Faraj al-Libi), who it seems had shared some of the “number three” tasks with **KSM**, at least on the internal administration side. Al-Uzaybi was arrested in Abbottabad, Pakistan—where Bin Laden would later die—in May 2005. Next was **Mustafa Abu al-Yazid** (Saeed al-Masri), from whom Al-Misrati took over. Al-Misrati was killed in August 2011 and replaced by **Mohamed Hassan Qaid** (Abu Yahya al-Libi): by this point, with Bin Laden dead and Al-Zawahiri in office, the general manager role was effectively Al-Qaeda’s deputy. Qaid was killed in a drone strike in June 2012. The AQAP emir, **Nasser al-Wuhayshi** (Abu Basir), was [reported by some](#) to have been given the job next, though the [U.S. State Department reports](#) that **Muhammad Abbatay** (Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi) took over directly after Qaid in 2012. Whatever the truth of the 2012-15 period—an analogous period of murk to 2001-03 with **KSM** and Al-Uzaybi—Al-Wuhayshi was killed in June 2015, and Abbatay has had the role since then. Abbatay, a Moroccan national, is a [son-in-law](#) of Al-Zawahiri’s, based in Iran, though seemingly making regular trips to Pakistan. Abbatay is also the [head](#) of Al-Qaeda’s propaganda apparatus, including its main media channel, Al-Sahab.

<sup>43</sup> [SOCOM-2012-0000019](#).

change to escape the stench of association.<sup>44</sup> AQM had become the [dominant force](#) in much of the Iraqi Sunni Arab heartland by August 2006 and was able to [declare](#) its “fledgling [Islamic] state” two months later, before [being mostly defeated](#) in [under-one-year](#), partly because IS/AQM had immediately imposed total jihadi shari’a. AQC had, in its view, warned AQM this would happen. In 2005, [Al-Zawahiri](#), as Bin Laden’s deputy, and [another senior Al-Qaeda official](#), had written to Zarqawi to criticise him for not taking public opinion seriously: Al-Zawahiri scolded Zarqawi for revelling in the barbarous violence and the adulation this brought him of “zealous young men” on the internet, while the “general view” of ordinary Muslims was horror at this carry-on, and the other official was especially worried that Zarqawi was not treating the tribes appropriately: the tribal leaders have “the public behind them”, so “we [must] demonstrate respect and reverence for them” and “win them over by keeping quiet” about their religious shortcomings. Bin Laden wanted the “affiliates” to learn from what AQM/IS had done. Long before the formal schism in 2014 and the evolutions since, Al-Qaeda was in a sense defining itself against IS.

In an internal strategy document from late 2010, Bin Laden echoed what had been said in real time, writing that among AQM’s “mistakes” were being “hasty” and paying no “attention to the overall public taste and opinions”, plus, crucially, needlessly attacking Anbar tribesmen, who should only have been killed—even those in the security forces—if they were in the midst of a “direct attack” on the jihadists to avoid trespassing honour codes and incurring a backlash that reduces the jihadists’ space to operate. (IS itself concluded it had [mishandled the tribes](#) around the same time.) Since the jihadists lack the numbers to get to a caliphate, they cannot afford to be creating further divisions among Muslims like this. Muslims “must be united first before the preparation for building a Muslim state begins”, Bin Laden argued, meaning “it is rather urgent” to organise Muslims and “unify their efforts and resources”.<sup>45</sup>

Bin Laden allowed that jihadists could “*begin* the work toward building our Muslim state” [italics added] by fighting “in areas where we can gain points toward the creation of the caliphate”, but recognising that “jihad is a duty” does not obligate Muslims “to launch jihad battles everywhere and anytime ... [and] does not require Muslims to fight in areas where the conditions are obviously not in their favour.” The West and local governments “are good at ... [getting jihadists] to step into a fight which is beyond its strength”, Bin Laden went on: the jihadists must stop falling into this trap. Bin Laden gives historical examples—Spain dismantling the Moroccan Rif republic of “Shaykh Khitabi” or Abd al-Karim (1920s), the Muslim Brotherhood revolt in Syria (1970s), and [Algeria \(1990s\)](#)—and the contemporary examples of America demolishing the Taliban regime and Saddam’s government, despite being “weakened, perhaps tremendously”, by 9/11. If a transnational caliphate was created in current circumstances, “the West ... and regional countries will likely band together to defeat” it, Bin Laden predicted (correctly, as it turned out), and the liquidation of a caliphate in “its infancy” would make things more difficult in terms of trying again because “the public does not like losers”. Bin Laden points to the fact that Islamists “lost an entire generation” in Syria, with even the Islamists themselves becoming quiescent, after the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion was buried under fire and rubble at Hama. Jihadists must not pull a population into such an unequal struggle ever again, Bin Laden contends: jihadism cannot succeed by getting lost in a “dream world” and “ask[ing] people to bear more than what they can handle”.<sup>46</sup>

“It is extremely important to pay close attention to timing”, Bin Laden wrote in the same document. “Timing is everything.” Bin Laden could see that any caliphate would be born amid war, isolated under sanctions (“one of the enemy’s favourite nonconventional weapons”), and enduring “constant enemy air bombardments”—which he concedes “frankly” had “exhausted” Al-Qaeda in Waziristan—so it had to have strong enough foundations to resist. Building the popular and economic basis for a caliphate that could resist this onslaught—that could provide basic services, medicine, and food to the mass of the people who will rebel against the jihadists if they are starving—takes time. Even the Qur’an, “complete

<sup>44</sup> “A Suggestion to Change the Name of Al-Qa’ida”, document [SOCOM-2012-0000009](#) in the Harmony collection.

<sup>45</sup> The quotations are from a document likely written by Bin Laden, probably in the spring of 2010, that lays out his strategic thinking (Harmony Documents: [SOCOM-2012-0000017](#)). Passages from this document are then included in a letter that gets sent to AQAP emir Nasser al-Wuhayshi, probably in the late summer of 2010 ([SOCOM-2012-0000016](#)).

<sup>46</sup> [SOCOM-2012-0000017](#).

in Heaven” as it was, was not revealed to the Prophet Muhammad all at once, says Bin Laden. Likewise, “God has ordered us to be clever about planning for our future”: the jihadists had to take things in stages. Before any caliphate could be proclaimed, Al-Qaeda “first need[ed] to ... deplete America of its power”:<sup>47</sup>

*The enemy can be described as a wicked tree. ... The trunk of the tree represents America. The branches of the tree represent countries, like NATO members, and countries in the Arab World. We, on the other hand, represent a person who wants to cut down that tree. Our abilities and resources, however, are limited, thus we cannot do the job quickly enough. The only option we are left with is to slowly cut that tree down ... Our intention is to saw the trunk of that tree, and never to stop until that tree falls down.*

In other correspondence in this period, Bin Laden would reiterate the same points: Al-Qaeda’s “affiliates” should be told “not to insist on the establishment of an Islamic state right now”; attacks on American diplomatic and commercial facilities or NATO troops in West Africa were fine—this would contribute to “uprooting the malicious tree by focusing on ... its American trunk”—but Al-Qaeda should only act in “direct self-defence” against local security forces; and, “The sequencing in the establishment of a state begins by exhausting the head of global infidelity, which was able to ... bring down the Islamic Emirate [in Afghanistan] and [topple Saddam’s regime] in Iraq, despite being greatly depleted [by the 9/11 attacks] ... We have to continue to deplete and exhaust [America] until it becomes so weak it is unable to overthrow any state we establish. ... [To do] otherwise, it appears to me, is to put the cart before the horse”.<sup>48</sup>

In the last months of his life, Bin Laden was [leaning further](#) into [this strategy](#) of “populism” and limited direct confrontation with the U.S. as the “Arab spring” broke upon the Middle East, with a particular focus (again) on Yemen. The Arab uprisings were “the most important events that the *umma* has witnessed for centuries”, Bin Laden argued, and Al-Qaeda had to seize on them. This meant encouraging the turmoil—launching a massive media campaign to convince those who had not yet rebelled that it was “a religious duty and a logical necessity” to do so. (That Al-Qaeda could be a major mobilising force was attested to by one of Bin Laden’s wives, Khairiya Saber or “Um Hamza”, who [reassured](#) the leader that a speech he made in 2004 was the cause of the Arab uprisings.) It also meant trying to capitalise on the rebellions politically, fostering a sense that Al-Qaeda was on the side of the revolutionaries and was assisting them; this was to be done by framing Al-Qaeda’s continued “bleeding” of NATO in Afghanistan as protection for the revolutionaries, making America and its allies too weak to overthrow any Islamist states that emerged from these revolutions. Interestingly, Bin Laden’s “populism” extended to an equanimity about the Muslim Brotherhood triumphing in Egypt and elsewhere, since he believed many of them were drifting towards Salafism anyway.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> [SOCOM-2012-0000017](#).

<sup>48</sup> “Letter Addressed to Atiyah”, released by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence in 2015 ([Arabic](#), [English](#)). Atiya/Al-Misrati is sometimes referred to as “Shaykh Mahmud” in the letters. The letter is undated, but from context it is from late 2010.

<sup>49</sup> “Letter from UBL to ‘Atiyatullah Al-Libi 2”, document [SOCOM-2012-0000010](#) in the Harmony set.

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## Ayman Al-Zawahiri's Al-Qaeda: Building on Bin Laden, Challenged By the Islamic State

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It was amid these shifts in Bin Laden's thinking after 2010 and the "Arab spring" earthquake that Al-Zawahiri ascended to the helm. Contrary to what might be expected, given [the widespread idea](#) that it was Al-Zawahiri who "supplied that crucial distinction" between "near enemy" and "far enemy" and set Bin Laden on the path to regarding it as "obligatory to strike at the far enemy", Al-Zawahiri was not inclined to change direction. The reality, as Sajjan Gohe explains, is that Al-Zawahiri's role in pushing for Al-Qaeda to target the "far enemy" has been overstated.<sup>50</sup> Al-Zawahiri's origins are in Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) and a program of domestic revolution in Cairo, and even after Al-Zawahiri was forced to go on the road after the assassination of Egypt's ruler, Anwar al-Sadat, in 1981, joining with the "Afghan-Arabs" in Afghanistan, he [clashed with the other great ideologue](#) of the jihad, Abdullah Azzam, precisely on the point of where the jihadist energies should be directed after the Soviets were out. Azzam wanted to avoid all Muslim-on-Muslim violence and looked to zones where Muslims confronted non-believers: as a Palestinian, it is perhaps unsurprising the primary target Azzam had in mind was Israel. Al-Zawahiri pointed to the Arab autocracies, above all the regime that had imprisoned and tortured him in Egypt, arguing that they were not really Muslim, but creatures of foreign infidels.

When Al-Zawahiri issued his "[General Guidelines](#)" for jihad in September 2013, as the conflict with IS was reaching a boiling point, he reiterated this point: while echoing Bin Laden in calling for Al-Qaeda to "avoid entering into armed combat with the local regimes unless forced to do so", he outlined unavoidable exceptions where "America's local agents" forced the conflict upon the jihadists. The Guidelines' demand to avoid killing civilians, even those from the "deviant sects" (Shi'is, Ahmadis, etc.) and, indeed, "anyone who has not openly raised arms against us", was, again, clearly influenced by the Iraq experience and following where Bin Laden led, only now it was being used not only for strategic guidance but as a subtle polemical weapon. The Guidelines set a pattern that Al-Zawahiri would [follow throughout his tenure ruling](#) Al-Qaeda: he rhetorically foregrounded "attacks on the interests of the Western Crusader-Zionist alliance anywhere in the world" as the "foremost duty" of jihadists, reiterating Bin Laden's argument that "the purpose of targeting America is to exhaust and deplete it" so it retrenches in the short-term, giving Al-Qaeda more room to move, and ultimately collapses. But this was accompanied by a tacit acknowledgment attacking America *in* America was *not* the priority at this point because Al-Qaeda—having lost its Afghan base and been [battered by the Global War on Terrorism \(GWOT\)](#)—was in no position to deal with the retribution. "Our struggle is a long one", Al-Zawahiri's Guidelines said, "and jihad needs secure bases". Al-Zawahiri, once more echoing Bin Laden, encouraged Al-Qaeda to seize any opportunity to "de-escalate conflict with the local rulers" to allow the jihadists space to rebuild their ranks, recruit, and secure financial flows. Al-Qaeda had rather more than a non-aggression pact in Pakistan, where the military apparatus that controls the country [inter alia betrayed U.S. secrets](#) to Al-Qaeda, and a truce was [attempted in Mauritania](#).

In short, Al-Zawahiri was trying to ensure Al-Qaeda's rank-and-file stayed onside by rhetorically framing their jihad as one against the American-led West—and he did *ultimately* intend to wage war on the West<sup>51</sup>—but he had extended Bin Laden's logic to almost invert the "far-enemy-first" strategy, judging that Al-Qaeda needed to establish secure footholds in the Muslim world before it was in a position to withstand the counter-blows in a final showdown with the West. This meant the priority was increasing the operational space for Al-Qaeda in local theatres like West Africa and Yemen so they could conduct *da'wa* work, converting more people to jihadist ideology, and training and equipping recruits, building local emirates from the bottom-up. Theoretically, these emirates would eventually become provinces in a future centralised caliphal state, but operationally, in the here and now, it meant Al-Qaeda needed to

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<sup>50</sup> Sajjan M. Gohel, (2017, February), 'Deciphering Ayman al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda's Strategic and Ideological Imperatives', *Perspectives on Terrorism*. [Available here](#).

<sup>51</sup> After Pensacola, [the FBI Director said](#), "Al-Qaeda maintains its desire for large-scale, spectacular attacks", and in an ultimate sense that is surely true.

*decentralise*—to devolve responsibilities to regional emirs to make rapid, context-dependent decisions that allowed Al-Qaeda to entrench and, importantly, to ensure that if one node is wiped out the organisation as a whole survives because the other nodes are autonomous.

Taking lessons from the 2012 emirate-building efforts in [Mali](#) and [Yemen](#), Syria became the testing ground of this new approach. Charles Lister puts it this way: Al-Qaeda’s branch, Jabhat al-Nusra, embedded itself within the popular rebellion against the Bashar al-Asad regime “to demonstrate its military value to Syria’s mainstream opposition” and gradually built up “a relationship of interdependence through which it could slowly socialize communities into accepting the presence of a ... jihadist movement”.<sup>52</sup> Al-Nusra deliberately did not advertise its Al-Qaeda affiliation initially, wanting to show the group’s worth to Syrians, then tell them: “The Al-Qaeda that was smeared in the media? This is it. We are it.”<sup>53</sup> Al-Qaeda was assisted in this by the West choosing to stand aside as the Asad regime, aided by Iran and Russia, waged an [exterminationist war](#) against the Syrian population. Al-Qaeda was [able to claim](#), essentially truthfully, that only it had come to Syrians’ aid in their hour of need, raising the jihadists’ status and legitimacy within a population that would otherwise have seen them as zealot outsiders. The Western decision when it *did* intervene in Syria to pursue a “counter-terrorism” policy, as if that could be separated from the wider war, leaving the Asad/Iran system alone and [targeting Al-Qaeda leaders](#)—including some of those involved in the highly emotional effort to break the siege of Aleppo during the last stand of the rebellion in late 2016—only [made things worse](#).

What catalysed, sharpened—and threatened—Al-Qaeda’s approach was IS emerging as an overt enemy and competitor after 2014. In strict ideological terms, the desired end-state of the two groups differed little, but their strategies radically differed. Al-Qaeda’s effort to take account of its contemporary weakness in the face of a superpower by switching to a long-term strategy, while retaining the rhetorical commitment to war with America, introduced contradictions in Al-Qaeda’s messaging, and IS exploited this, casting Al-Qaeda not only as confused and compromising, but ideologically “deviant”.

IS cut through Al-Qaeda’s intricacies: it [proclaimed a caliphate](#) and [went to war](#) with infidels everywhere. This absolved IS from the need to, for example, collaborate with the Iranian theocracy, [as Al-Qaeda does](#): direct attacks could be [launched within Iran](#) and Shi’is could be genocidally purged from Islamdom without the fear that supply lines and shelter would be revoked by Tehran. There would be no hesitancy about implementing the shari’a—the Law of God did not wait for, or depend on, popular approval. Muslim societies had been too corrupted [by Western ideas](#) like secularism and liberalism to be converted to jihadism *before* an Islamic state was created, IS believed: “They have to be forced at first”, and over time people would come to accept the project.<sup>54</sup> IS’s message—simple, short-term, action-oriented—had an appeal Al-Qaeda simply could not compete with.

The strategic separation between IS and Al-Qaeda is now absolute: each believes their own strategy is working and that the other’s is utter folly. In the aftermath of [the caliphate’s destruction](#) in March 2019, IS took the lesson: it is possible. In stark opposition to Bin Laden’s view that creating a caliphate and having it quickly destroyed would make it harder to repeat the attempt, IS’s ideological pitch is the memory of the caliphate—they have done it once, and can do it again. Where Bin Laden had seen IS’s setback a decade earlier as evidence their strategy was defective, IS had [come to the reverse conclusion](#): there had been tactical errors, especially with the tribes, but the essentials of their theological-strategic vision were correct, and with adjustments they could recover and prevail; now they had their proof. As IS saw it, having been [left for dead](#) in 2007-08, they were [able to revive](#) by [keeping their ideology](#) pure and then do what all other Islamists claim to want to do. IS believes this time will be no different; even after their statelet has been swept away, they are far more powerful than at their height in the mid-2000s, and after the next round they will be more powerful still. For IS, the [holding of territory](#) is [hardly a metric](#)

<sup>52</sup> Charles Lister (2016, September), ‘The Dawn of Mass Jihad: Success in Syria Fuels al-Qa’ida’s Evolution’, *CTC Sentinel*. [Available here](#).

<sup>53</sup> Rania Abouzeid (2014, June), ‘The Jihad Next Door: The Syrian Roots of Iraq’s Newest Civil War’, *Politico*. [Available here](#).

<sup>54</sup> Hassan Hassan (2016, June), ‘The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. [Available here](#).

worth considering; the [hardships endured](#) out in [the desert](#) are [merely part](#) of [the cycle](#) of [trials God sends](#) His believers to [cleanse the ranks](#) of those whose belief is not sincere enough and who do not deserve to be in the victorious army when the day comes. More practically, IS is relying on the abusive sectarian behaviour towards Sunnis by the forces that have displaced them—Iran’s Shi’a militias in Iraq and the Kurdish PKK in Syria—to induce nostalgia for their rule.

Al-Qaeda’s message after the caliphate went down was, in effect, “we told you so”: rushing into the venture with little popular support and trying to take on the whole world at the same time was only ever going to end in failure. It had seemed that the demise of the caliphate presented an opportunity for Al-Qaeda to seize back the mantle of leadership in the jihadist movement. That has not really happened, at least not yet and not in a visible way, for two main reasons. First, IS was certainly not out, but in many ways it was not even down. In Africa, since at least the time that the emir of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), [Abd al-Malek Drukdal](#) (Abu Musab Abd al-Wadud), was killed in June 2020, [IS has been on the march](#), and in Afghanistan—the great Al-Qaeda safe-haven, [given back to them](#) in 2021 by President Biden—IS has [gone from strength to strength](#). Second, unless Al-Qaeda was going to tweak its strategy, the nature of it—quietly building up supporters and sympathisers—made the kind of “showy” triumph that could visibly catapult it back into the leadership position in the jihadist world impossible.



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## A Sham in Syria?

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Shortly after the caliphate collapsed, [I thought I could see](#) signs of such a tweak in progress within Al-Qaeda, with a tilt back towards at least preparing for foreign terrorist attacks, at least regionally. [I was not alone](#) in this, and Pensacola did happen some months later. But, given the details of the Pensacola attack, as explained above, extrapolations from it are dubious, and we are three years later without a repetition. Perhaps the most interesting data point between the final elimination of IS's caliphate and Pensacola was a [U.S. airstrike in northern Syria](#), on 30 June 2019, which targeted the "Al-Qaeda in Syria (AQ-S) leadership at a training facility near Aleppo Province", specifically "operatives responsible for plotting external attacks threatening U.S. citizens, our partners, and innocent civilians". Syria has been the fulcrum of Al-Qaeda's changing strategy, and with a significant amount of Al-Qaeda's assets moved from South Asia to the Levant over the last decade, this episode has the potential to elucidate where things stand.

The U.S. had begun [targeted assassinations against Al-Qaeda](#) veterans embedded within Al-Nusra in Syria in late 2014 and had launched a particularly intense wave of airstrikes in the half-year from September 2016 to March 2017, before halting entirely—with a single exception in December 2018—until June 2019. In the meanwhile, there had been rapid developments on the jihadist scene in Syria. Al-Nusra renamed itself "Jabhat Fatah al-Sham" (JFS) after [declaring its separation](#) from Al-Qaeda's command structure in the summer of 2016 and, with the Syrian rebellion decisively strategically defeated at Aleppo in November-December 2016,<sup>55</sup> Al-Nusra [moved to violently assert itself](#) over the remaining insurgent landscape in late January 2017, annexing some other groups and rebranding a second time, as "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" (HTS). At the end of 2017, [there were](#) some [public cross words](#) between HTS and Al-Zawahiri, and [some skirmishes](#) between HTS and overt Al-Qaeda loyalists within Syria. In February 2018, the pro-Al-Qaeda HTS dissidents reformed a public branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria, named [Tanzim Hurras al-Deen](#); the scale of the war of words and kinetic clashes have simmered down, but there are still [occasional flare-ups](#).

Something like the above version of events has now been accepted by most analysts, but there are holes in the narrative. For a start, Al-Nusra was lying in 2016—that part is beyond dispute. Al-Zawahiri had [signalled](#) his approval of the "split" between Al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda if it helped Al-Nusra integrate with the insurgency—the emir was prepared to give up the name (Al-Qaeda) for the sake of the thing (a populist Islamic emirate)—and the AQC agents on the ground [approved](#) the formation of JFS, creating a situation [analogous](#) to that with the IS movement [from 2006 to 2013-14](#). "The disengagement [from Al-Qaeda] was for the media", as a senior Al-Nusra official [confessed](#).

The fact that the JFS ruse—[hardly difficult to see](#), even in real time—is known to have happened should induce *some* scepticism about Al-Qaeda's and Al-Nusra's claims in Syria, especially since it is equally clear that there was deceptiveness *again* around the second rebrand that created HTS: far from a catastrophic rupture, contact between Al-Nusra's leadership and Al-Zawahiri demonstrably continued up to late 2017,<sup>56</sup> at which point a compact was worked out to terminate the regular rhetorical sniping and open the way for the formal announcement of Hurras. What reason, on this record, do we have for believing the claim that communications and relations have ended now?

Given the way Al-Qaeda operates—with AQC setting down broad strategic guidelines and local "affiliates" translating those into the quick-fire decisions responding to local conditions—how exactly does HTS look different from, say, AQAP? Has HTS broken its *bay'a* to Al-Zawahiri or not?<sup>57</sup> If it has, why has Al-Zawahiri not condemned this as he did with IS? Why is it that, though [IS has made takfir against Hurras](#), neither HTS nor Hurras have come close to anything like this level of ideological rejection of one-another?

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<sup>55</sup> Maksymilian Czuperski, Faysal Itani, Ben Nimmo, Eliot Higgins, and Emma Beals (2017, February), 'Breaking Aleppo', *The Atlantic Council*. [Available here](#).

<sup>56</sup> Hassan Hassan (2018, October), 'Two Houses Divided: How Conflict in Syria Shaped the Future of Jihadism', *CTC Sentinel*. [Available here](#).

<sup>57</sup> The United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team [concluded](#) in February 2023 that HTS "remains the predominant Al-Qaida affiliate" in Syria, "[d]espite the group's attempts to portray a disassociation from Al-Qaida", while HTS is "[t]he *other* major Al-Qaida branch" [italics added].

Hurras continues to grouse occasionally about this or that HTS decision, and HTS continues to make an occasional show of arresting Hurras officials, but usually releases them quickly. Amusingly, [HTS tells anyone](#) who will listen that this is only done “on condition that [the Hurras jihadists] not carry out [foreign terrorist] attacks”; doubtless this is convincing to some. Underlying it all, as a simple practical matter, [Hurras is materially dependent on HTS](#), and if HTS wished to eliminate Hurras, it could, making the fact that it does not rather glaring.

It all adds up to a deep unease: What is actually going between HTS and Hurras? What is Hurras? Basically, there are three options, as [I wrote for EER last year](#). First, Hurras is as presented: a schism from HTS, displeased by HTS breaking away from Al-Qaeda. Second,

*it is possible [that b]y keeping Hurras around, it positions HTS as more “moderate”, and Hurras’ sometimes-public criticism of HTS engaging with Turkey and of HTS’s other theological-political and diplomatic maneuverers reinforces the idea that HTS is drifting from its jihadi-Salafist origins. This allows HTS to present itself, to Syrians and the outside world, as Syria-focused—and to that extent, less of a threat; certainly not one whose annihilation is a Western priority. On the other side of this set-up, Hurras absorbs those jihadists who dislike the HTS approach; keeps them from undertaking genuinely destructive actions against HTS; and keeps them available for when they are needed in joint efforts, such as the HTS and Hurras attempt to hold back the regime coalition offensive into Idlib in early 2020.*

*If this or something like it is the contours of the relationship, it makes the two groups complementary rather than antagonistic and means that, as [\[Hassan\] Hassan has suggested](#), Hurras is to HTS what “[Black September](#)” was to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO): a deniable front intended to absorb the opprobrium for doing the group’s dirty work, while the group itself makes inroads in legitimising itself in the international system.*

*A third possibility, of course, is that what started as the second scenario has, over time, become the first.*

With this in mind, one final element has to be added to the mix. I mentioned above that the recent statement in *Ummah Wahidah* was the first time Al-Qaeda Central had said it would not use one of its theatres of operations for global terrorism, but Al-Nusra—as a declared Al-Qaeda branch—made such a statement nearly eight years ago. Jabhat al-Nusra had no plans or directives to target the West, its emir, Ahmad al-Shara, [told Al-Jazeera in May 2015](#): “We have received clear orders not to use Syria [as a launch pad] to attack the United States, or Europe, to avoid getting in the way of our true mission against the [Asad] regime. Al-Qaeda itself might [launch such attacks], but not here in Syria.” The “orders” mentioned by Al-Shara referred to a letter sent by Al-Zawahiri a few months earlier in 2015 “that outlined a new and comprehensive strategy” to embed Al-Nusra in the Syrian revolution and its supportive populations.<sup>58</sup>

Which brings us back to the June 2019 U.S. airstrikes on external-plotting by “AQS”, i.e. Hurras, operatives in Syria—and the follow-on strikes in [August 2019](#) and [October 2020](#) that CENTCOM justified in similar terms.

At one level, the U.S. avoiding publicly targeting “Al-Nusra” (or “HTS”) is nothing new. The Americans understand the success Al-Nusra has had in gaining local legitimacy in Syria. This is what was behind the “Khorasan Group” concept back in 2014, which [played off](#) a local reality—that the AQC veterans who had begun arriving in Syria were referred to as “Khorassanites”—to fabricate a narrative wherein airstrikes had been directed at a separate organisation to Al-Nusra. If Hurras is something like HTS’s “Black September”, it would mean the U.S. policy had remained continuous in the fiction of its approach to Al-Nusra/HTS—and that Al-Nusra remains quite happy to collaborate in the enterprise, since it does not want to be linked to the detected foreign attack plotting that it is claimed triggered these American strikes.

<sup>58</sup> The existence of this letter was first revealed by the Middle East Institute’s Charles Lister in a May 2015 article: ‘An Internal Struggle: Al Qaeda’s Syrian Affiliate is Grappling with its Identity’, *Huffington Post*. [Available here](#).

It is, however, rather important what is *true* about this. Was Hurras actively engaged in plotting terrorism against the West, or did the U.S. act preventatively (or opportunistically, having located a known, dangerous person)? And is Hurras acting as an extension of HTS, or as an autonomous entity? Did Al-Zawahiri’s prohibition on Al-Nusra engaging in foreign attacks carry over to HTS? Does Al-Zawahiri’s prohibition bind Hurras, too? Was it a lie from the beginning? Did it die with Al-Zawahiri? We cannot really know the answers to the questions, and the more one looks at it the more the uncertainty itself—as with the identity of Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud’s handler(s) and the decision-making process over Pensacola—becomes troubling. Al-Qaeda in the last decade always has enough deniability that it is never *quite* on the hook for retaliation. Indeed, there is always some doubt about exactly *who* would be the right target to retaliate against. It looks like a deliberate obfuscation that conforms with a strategic picture in the jihadist world that one analyst described this way: “IS wants the world to believe that it is everywhere, and . . . Al-Qaeda wants the world to believe that it is nowhere”.<sup>59</sup>



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<sup>59</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross (2015, March), ‘The Islamic State’s African Long Con’, *Foreign Policy*. [Available here](#).

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## The Threat From Al-Qaeda Now

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It is fair to say that Ayman al-Zawahiri's alleged 2015 cease-and-desist letter concerning foreign attacks by Al-Qaeda in Syria did not provide much reassurance to the U.S.: the main wave of anti-Qaeda airstrikes in the country began about sixteen months after this purported letter was made public, and half-a-decade later the strikes continued. By implication, this notice in *Ummah Wahidah* that foreswears Afghanistan as a launchpad for global terrorism will—one hopes—not buy Al-Qaeda any leeway with Western policymakers. The killing of Al-Zawahiri himself in July 2022 is a positive indicator in this respect.

Policymakers should interpret the evidence to make the worst assumptions of our enemies. Analysts are allowed to be more dispassionate. Shortly after Al-Zawahiri's demise, one analyst gave this blunt summary:<sup>60</sup>

*Al-Qaeda as a whole has been out of the transnational terrorism game for over a decade, and that is also unlikely to change, both because of the success of U.S. and allied counterterrorism operations, as well as tactical decisions made by the group. They currently have no external operations capability and there's little reason to believe they can develop one. ... [Al-Qaeda] may be able ... here and there to conduct a small attack, but its ability to centrally plan and execute attacks like 9/11 is likely gone for good.*

Just to unpack this a little.

As we have seen, in the waning days of his life, Bin Laden was reorienting Al-Qaeda away from the foreign terrorism mission towards a more local focus, on attacking Western forces and interests within the Middle East, and spreading jihadist ideology and capturing territory in the region. This policy has been continued and extended by Bin Laden's successor, Al-Zawahiri. The change of direction was not “voluntary”, however. The [unexpectedly robust response](#) of the Americans in the Global War on Terror evicted Al-Qaeda from its safe-haven in Afghanistan, shattered its network, and instituted a global monitoring regime, with a reach, in terms of surveillance and lethality, the jihadists could not cope with. Up to 2006, Al-Qaeda tried and tried to repeat the “success” of 9/11, and it could not. In 2009-10, the Awlakist wave tested out the proposition of below-9/11-scale but still “serious” terrorist attacks directed from outside, and failed. Bin Laden began to change strategy because he *could not* continue in the old way.

Having been blunted by GWOT, and in the midst of trying to hold its ideological ground while shifting its strategy, Al-Qaeda was rocked by the second great challenge, the IS movement transitioning from what [Cole Bunzel once called](#) a “problem child” within Al-Qaeda's camp to an open challenger for the leadership of the global jihadist movement. It is difficult to imagine IS being able to bid for supremacy while Bin Laden was alive, but Bin Laden's death destabilised Al-Qaeda in many ways: the network had been held together by his charisma (and earlier by his money), and this did not transfer to Al-Zawahiri, who had no notable military or scholarly credentials, was a notoriously uncharismatic speaker, and because the transfer itself was done “without a doctrine for succession”: “Al-Zawahiri's authority was limited to being the pick of Bin Laden”.<sup>61</sup> The contrast with IS—which has [such a well-developed system](#) for choosing leaders that they can afford to be anonymous—could not be more blatant, and that was *before* Al-Zawahiri was killed and Al-Qaeda left its emir position vacant for six months and counting.<sup>62</sup> Add to

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<sup>60</sup> The quote is from the Australia Israel & Jewish Affairs Council's (AIJAC) Oved Lobel, see: James Snell (2022, August), ‘Ayman al-Zawahiri's Killing: What Next for Al-Qaeda?’, *The New Arab*. [Available here](#).

<sup>61</sup> Haroro Ingram and Craig Whiteside (2022, August), ‘Generation Killed: The Challenges of Routinizing Global Jihad’, *War on the Rocks*. [Available here](#).

<sup>62</sup> One explanation for this delay is that Al-Qaeda was asked by the Taliban not to admit that Al-Zawahiri had been killed by the Americans in Kabul. Allegedly, Al-Qaeda asked for the equivalent of a state funeral for Al-Zawahiri and was denied. The Taliban, in this version of events, does not want to incur the political and potential military consequences of harbouring Al-Qaeda's leader. “We once sacrificed our regime for Al-Qaeda”, says one jihadist, and the Taliban is not keen on a repeat. According to some jihadists, Al-Qaeda has been releasing pre-recorded media since Al-Zawahiri's death, which have been presented as new materials, to keep up the charade that he is alive, and in due course Al-Qaeda will announce that Al-Zawahiri died of natural causes. See: Sami Yousafzai (2023, January), ‘Al-Qaeda Is Planning to Fake the Death of Its Dead Leader’, *The Daily Beast*. [Available here](#). The U.S. State Department [responded to this on Twitter](#) on 12 January 2023: “Al-Qa'ida is publishing videos of Ayman Al-Zawahiri as if he were still alive. That's a lie; he is dead. Here are the facts.”

that the lasting damage done to Al-Qaeda by the fact that [for two years](#) it swore its ultimate allegiance to a dead man, the Taliban's Mullah Umar.

When the war broke out in earnest between Al-Qaeda and its rebellious Iraqi branch, the IS movement was able to attack Al-Qaeda's ideological pillars, and Al-Qaeda had little defence, because Al-Qaeda had always incorporated a series of ambiguities—strategic and jurisprudential, on issues as basic as when and how it envisioned the restoration of the caliphate—as part of its effort to be the vanguard for the whole *umma*, and these very foundational facts were now being turned against Al-Qaeda.<sup>63</sup> Where once splitting the difference had allowed Al-Qaeda to reach multiple audiences, now it seemed to repel everyone. IS had a clear, understandable message, and it made Al-Qaeda and its leader look compromising and simply confused, as well as ineffective.

In late 2014, after IS had [declared the caliphate](#), it began [inciting](#) and [directing](#) terrorist attacks all around the world, with the infamous call by IS's spokesman, Taha Falaha (Abu Muhammad al-Adnani), for Muslims in the West to “smash [an infidel's] head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car . . . If you are unable to do so, then [at least] spit in his face.” By early 2015, IS's foreign attacks campaign had showed there were a lot of Muslims in the West prepared to answer this call to murder their neighbours.<sup>64</sup> Al-Qaeda, therefore, had a choice: its 2001-06 attempt to redo 9/11 had failed and its 2009-10 campaign had also run into the new Western security wall; IS, however, had found a way through. Would Al-Qaeda embrace it? It decidedly would not. Perhaps it was partially a reflection of the class element at play in Al-Qaeda's rivalry with IS—the aristocratic backgrounds of Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri versus the street thug from Zarqa—but there was a visceral edge to Al-Qaeda's rejection: it did not just disagree on the tactical utility of a rash of unsophisticated attacks; the perpetrators of 9/11 would not sully themselves with a bunch of car-rammings and random stabbings.

It was in this situation that Al-Zawahiri tried something quite clever: rather than try to outcompete IS on the brazen ideological terrain it had staked out, Al-Qaeda would do the exact reverse.<sup>65</sup> Al-Qaeda would take IS's accusations—that it had effectively called off attacks against the West; that it was prepared to work with regional governments; that it was weak and unthreatening; that it was incremental in its approach to building a caliphate; that it was more concerned to keep on the side of popular opinion than to implement Islamic law to the letter—and it would embrace them. IS famously tried to shut down the “grey zone”,<sup>66</sup> to make every issue a binary, and Al-Qaeda saw an opportunity: it would be the anti-IS on all things. IS would be the foil for Al-Qaeda to redefine itself, to rebrand in a way that finally freed Al-Qaeda of [any lingering associations](#) with IS's mid-2000s excesses, and even to reap the benefits—as other terrorists have—of being seen as an actual or tacit or potential “anti-IS” partner.<sup>67</sup> Al-Zawahiri would cast Al-Qaeda as the “moderate” and grown-up jihadist organisation, tactically flexible and pragmatic, in touch with the realities of power in the region and the world, and possessed of a serious plan for gradualist progress towards a caliphate—as against the reckless, brutal child that was IS, crashing about the place and fighting with everyone, a danger to itself, everyone around it, and the cause it claimed to represent. Al-Qaeda was quite content to hide behind IS, metaphorically in the sense that IS's lurid cruelty got all the attention, so nobody was any longer scrutinising Al-Qaeda's “makeover”,<sup>68</sup> and more practically, with the concentration of Western firepower on IS.

In effect, IS's ideological assault on Al-Qaeda reinforced the direction of change that had already begun within Al-Qaeda because of the pressure on the organisation from GWOT: all the incentives, the push *and* the pull factors, now pointed the same way—towards localism, populism, and avoiding direct combat with the superpower wherever possible. There has been a lot of debate about whether a lack of external

<sup>63</sup> Ingram and Whiteside, ‘Generation Killed: The Challenges of Routinizing Global Jihad’.

<sup>64</sup> Kyle Orton (2017, March), ‘Foreign Terrorist Attacks by the Islamic State, 2002-2016’, *The Henry Jackson Society*. [Available here](#).

<sup>65</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr (2015, September), ‘Extreme Makeover, Jihadist Edition: Al-Qaeda's Rebranding Campaign’, *War on the Rocks*. [Available here](#).

<sup>66</sup> The phrase comes from the seventh edition of IS's English language magazine, *Dabiq*, published on 13 February 2015, entitled, ‘From Hypocrisy to Apostasy’.

<sup>67</sup> Kyle Orton (2017, August), ‘The Forgotten Foreign Fighters: The PKK in Syria’, *The Henry Jackson Society*. [Available here](#).

<sup>68</sup> Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, ‘Extreme Makeover, Jihadist Edition: Al-Qaeda's Rebranding Campaign’.

operations capacity has induced a lack of desire from Al-Qaeda, or whether the lack of desire is responsible for atrophying capacity: in my view, roughly speaking, it was the former from around 2010, when it was accepted that the capacity was gone, and both from no later than 2015 onwards, when Al-Qaeda turned towards trying to attain benefits from forswearing something it could not do anyway. Taking all the evidence together, then, including Al-Zawahiri's [distribution of his "Guidelines" throughout the entire organisation](#) (including IS at that time), it seems very likely that Al-Shara did receive a letter in early 2015 telling him not use Syria for foreign terrorism plots, and that this reflected the codification of a de facto organisation-wide shift in policy that had been in place from no later than 2013.

So, to bring this back to where we started: What does this all this tell us about the *Ummah Wahidah* article in February 2022 "officially" claiming that Al-Qaeda's foreign terrorism against the West will "cease from the territory of Afghanistan"? A key part of the answer was in the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team [report in July 2022](#), which said: "Al-Qaeda is not viewed as posing an immediate international threat from its safe haven in Afghanistan" for both political reasons (it "does not currently wish to cause the Taliban international difficulty or embarrassment") and practical reasons ("because it lacks an external operational capability"). In other words, this is Al-Qaeda, as an integral component of the Taliban "emirate",<sup>69</sup> politically positioning itself to allow the jihadist regime the maximum flexibility in negotiations with the "international community" over aid, sanctions, and the rest of it; possibly gaining directly some measure of legitimacy or at least toleration as a "responsible actor"; and, in fact, giving up nothing, since there is nothing AQC can actually do by way of external operations from Afghanistan at this moment.

Al-Qaeda will continue to direct insurgencies, try to capture and govern territory, and work to spread jihadist ideology in Yemen, Somalia, West Africa, Afghanistan, and the Subcontinent. It might be many years before we have any reliable sense of what Al-Qaeda is doing in Syria, but it clearly remains present and important. In terms of the non-insurgent *terrorist* threat, Al-Qaeda is currently a regional threat: cross-border attacks from Al-Shabab into Uganda and Ethiopia and attacks on NATO troops in West Africa are among the things to be expected, plus kidnappings for profit and possible attacks on Western commercial facilities—like oil rigs or mines—and diplomatic institutions. The kind of opportunism seen in Pensacola is probably the limit of the exceptions we can expect in *global* terrorism terms, namely Al-Qaeda accepting and perhaps providing some forms of marginal assistance to highly self-motivated loyalists. Pensacola is also likely to be a harbinger in that Al-Qaeda does *not* seem to have initiated the attack and has obfuscated exactly what it did to try to avoid creating a political situation that forces the U.S. to respond.

While there are grave doubts about how much Al-Zawahiri has mattered practically for a long time, it should be noted that the same was said of Bin Laden, and it is now clear he was a [micromanager to the end](#). Regardless, to the extent Al-Qaeda's leader does matter, in at least setting the tone and directing resources, if the next one is, as most Western governments believe,<sup>70</sup> Sayf al-Adel, he is likely to harden the logic of the last decade or so: he was against the 9/11 attacks and it was not just KSM's competency Sayf was objecting to when he told him to rein it in and resign in 2002,<sup>71</sup> while at the same time Sayf has worked closely with Tehran and been intimately involved in regional terrorism, from Saudi Arabia to Morocco.

There is a caveat here. Bismarck said that in every treaty has an unwritten provision that its terms stand so long as things remain the same;<sup>72</sup> something similar might be said of analysis. The U.N. Monitoring Team noted that Al-Qaeda had a "favourable" international environment, and if the trajectory held Al-Qaeda "may ultimately become a greater source of directed threat". Ideology does not develop in a vacuum; it reacts to events and incentives. To put it at its most extreme: if Al-Qaeda were to succeed in

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<sup>69</sup> Lobel, 'The Graveyard of Empires'.

<sup>70</sup> United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Report, 13 February 2023, p. 3. [Available here](#).

<sup>71</sup> Gohel, 'Deciphering Ayman al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda's Strategic and Ideological Imperatives'.

<sup>72</sup> Alfred Zimmern (1938, January), 'The Decline of International Standards', *International Affairs*. [Available here](#).

creating an archipelago of Islamic emirates in Islamdom, let alone becoming powerful enough to fuse them together into a caliphate, the war against the West would surely recommence, from the “Afghan province”, as well as all the others. Al-Qaeda’s view that 9/11 would get them what they want was developed over many years, watching feeble Western responses to escalating provocations, and it has taken a relentless effort since 2001 to bring about an ideological-strategic shift in Al-Qaeda’s thinking. The difference now is that, even with the return to [an eerily pre-9/11-like situation](#), it is difficult to imagine a recurrence: Al-Qaeda (nor its Pakistani patrons) want to lose the Afghan safe-haven again, and neither Al-Qaeda’s capacity nor the Western vulnerabilities that led to 9/11 seem likely to be available again any time soon. That said, a failure of imagination was a key enabler of 9/11 last time.<sup>73</sup>



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<sup>73</sup> ‘The 9/11 Commission Report’, p. 336.