Violent Non-State Actors in World Politics

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Al Qaeda

From the Near to the Far Enemy and Back (1988–2008)

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All hopes to the contrary notwithstanding, it seems as though the one argument that the Arabs are incapable of understanding is force.

– Hannah Arendt*

By the mid-to-late 2000s, Al Qaeda had essentially completed the mission it set out to achieve twenty years earlier. For all practical purposes and against all odds, the subsequent phases that have been discerned in the conflict with its foes were in effect just additional opportunities for the group's existing global gains; it has outlived the George W. Bush administration, has engineered further political decrepitude in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and threatens to conduct potential new attacks on Western targets. The conventional wisdom, rehearsed from 2004 on, held that it was the transformation of Al Qaeda that had been the key reason for its survival and resurgence. Close examination of the group's history reveals that the strength of Al Qaeda lies, in point of fact, not so much in its post-September 11 mutation—a logical evasive step which many other terrorist or insurgent groups had enacted

* 'Peace or Armistice in the Near East', *Review of Politics*, January 1950, p. 56.

previously—but more in its inherent adaptability and its faculty to innovate constantly. In contrast to its state adversaries who profess to be on the offensive in the 'war on terror' but are more often than not confined to a structurally defensive position, not knowing how, where, when, and under what guise to expect an assault, this transnational non-state armed group has been writing its own story.

The staying power and uniqueness of the group cannot be overstated. But almost two decades since its creation and several years into its stalemated conflict with the world's most powerful nation. Al Qaeda reached a paradoxical milestone in that narrative. By virtue of its very ability to escape defeat at the hands of the United States, and in spite of the constant increase in its global impact, the organization has found itself immersed increasingly in the local management of conflicts with states. Since the September 11 attacks it conducted on the United States, this strategic about-face and proactive design have played out on evolving parallel tracks with a common and urgent concern, namely the avoidance of predictability. Whereas the fourfold *ghazzou* (raid) on New York and Washington endowed Al Qaeda overnight with global notoriety status, the group's leaders, Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al Dhawahiri (Zawahiri),[1] did not seek reflexively to replicate those strikes by immediately engineering further attacks on the United States. Expectations of a second wave were high in the United States during the autumn of 2001 and throughout 2002, and the country braced itself for such a follow-up assault. Instead, blurring the picture, the group opted to shift its attention to Europe where it targeted those states—Spain on 11 March 2004 and the United Kingdom on 7 July 2005—which had actively assisted the United States in its war in Iraq.

When that pattern proved successful, putting on high alert other European states (Italy, Norway, and France notably) that had been warned by the group about their military activity in Iraq and Afghanistan or their perceived hostility to Muslim populations,[2] Al Qaeda did not expand it. Ushering in a third phase in its post-September 11 strategy, it proceeded, instead, to concentrate on the conflict in Iraq, where it had been dealing blows to the US and coalition forces since mid-2003. After spearheading the insurgency in that country

[1] The common 'Zawahiri' spelling in English is due to the use of an Egyptian colloquial mispronunciation of the Arabic letter 'dha' as 'za'. Al Dhawahiri is an Egyptian national.

[2] France did not join the United States in Iraq, but, in a taped message aired on 24 February 2004 it was threatened by Ayman al Dhawahiri following its adoption of legislation banning Islamic headscarves in public schools.

and setting it in motion dramatically under the local leadership of Abu Musab Al Zarqawi—notably with an *uptempo* series of attacks in 2004–the organization in essence took a back seat in relation to that battlefront and moved on, in 2006, to support the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. By 2008, reports of Al Qaeda-supported Taliban units in near-total control of parts of Afghanistan as well as the Tribal Areas in Pakistan (known officially as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas) and the upheaval in that country following the 27 December 2007 killing of the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto indicated the organization's revitalization in that region.

However, there has been an unexpected twist, illustrated by the return of Al Qaeda to its initial ground and to the very aim it had originally sought to steer away from: engaging local rulers. The historical implications of this development for the countries of the Middle East and North Africa and that region's interaction with its neighbours are profound.

Rebellion as export: the emergence of Al Qaeda

If, by the late 2000s, the group led by Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al Dhawahiri had mutated into a *sui generis* powerful global private entity, the transnational war inaugurated by Al Qaeda in the late 1980s represented initially merely a change of scale in the post-colonial struggle in the Arab and Muslim region. This ethnogenesis owed much to an original displacement of the focus of opposition of several Islamist groups from battling local regimes, denounced as authoritarian, corrupt, and repressive, to fighting the United States directly for its support of those regimes. Such a change—described as a move from *al adou al qareeb* (the near enemy) to *al adou al ba'eed* (the far enemy), in the literature of the Islamist groups—represented a conscious choice on the part of a number of Islamist leaders who had gathered in Afghanistan during the period of the Soviet invasion of that country. The strategic shift was also the objective result of the stalemated and at times counterproductive results of the campaigns which many of these Islamist groups had led in their respective countries, notably in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, and Algeria.

Historically, from the early 1950s to the mid-1990s, the majority of Arab and Muslim states had been faced, to varying degrees, with steadily mounting Islamist opposition. The context of these conflicts was fourfold. First, in many of these places, the post-colonial governments that had inherited power following the countries' respective independence had often simply imposed their policies over existing religious options put forth by alternative (Islamist)

groups. Consequently, the initial contest fought around the founding of the state persisted beyond the time of the induction of the nationalistic regimes: an often violent engagement playing out at times underground, at other times on the front pages of newspapers.

Second, the new regimes rapidly, if not immediately, displayed authoritarian tendencies of which the Islamist groups, by virtue of their oppositional nature and their threatening potential, bore, first and foremost, the full brunt. Egypt, in particular, was the theatre of a violent struggle between the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Muslim Brotherhood. The writings of one of the figures of that movement, Sayyid Qutb, executed in August 1966, would in time become a leading ideological reference for Al Qaeda and an influence on many of its actors, Ayman al Dhawahiri in particular.

Third, those regimes' failed political performance and poor socioeconomic record pushed many segments within these societies into the open arms of the Islamists. From being a peripheral option, the alternative choice (and social services) offered by the groups therefore gained ground, ultimately reaching mainstream appeal in many Muslim theatres. In Algeria, for instance, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), better organized and more committed than the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN), earned the support of many Algerians in the period 1988–91, leading to a thwarted electoral victory in December 1991. Finally, the multifaceted links—political, economic, military, and of a security type—that most of these governments came to enjoy with the United States allowed the Islamist groups, insofar as that country provided support to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, to denounce the 'corruption' and 'crimes' both against their specific countries and against the *umma* (Islamic community) at large.

Underlying this tapestry were accusations levelled by the Islamist groups against unmet expectations and ineffective state-building by the post-colonial regimes. Religious considerations aside, the arguments centred on the fact that in failing to resist the influence of the United States (and the West generally), the various successive governments in the region had defrauded their people. Consequently, it was argued, these states were illegitimate and had to be removed, by means including force. It is important to recognize this often overlooked motivation of most Islamist groups, including Al Qaeda, which, as it were, claim much legitimacy from the very illegitimacy that resulted from the post-colonial state's performance and behaviour. This state-building dimension should not—particularly in the aftermath of the 2003 United States war on Iraq—be confused with the state fragmentation scenario. In

practice, the latter occurs when claims of particular actors to exercise legitimate governmental authority remain fundamentally disputed, both in principle and in practice, and there are no clearly agreed procedures for resolving such disputes.[3] When the contemporary Islamist movements were set in motion, such procedures did exist and the differences concerned merely the identity of those who would be allowed to capture the state to conduct the 'building' work. In a situation like that in Iraq after the American and British invasion, or indeed in Afghanistan for most of the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st, the contest was far more primal and encompassed wider ethnic, tribal, and sectarian dimensions.

In contrast, state-building is an exercise that cannot be posited in a vacuum.[4] It is also neither finite state-formation (concretization of statehood) nor the looser nation-building (the process by which the national consciousness appears and becomes institutionalized in the structures of society). State-building is an open-ended set of tasks. To the extent that the state itself is an abstract, continuous, survival-seeking, resource-gathering entity, and policy is the process that flows from its very existence, state-building has to be a political activity. There is, too, a radical difference between state-building as an internal mission (even when assisted from abroad) and external state-building resulting from intervention (even when triggered by a mechanism like the 'responsibility to protect'). The difference lies in the nature of the order built and the ability of that construct to stay the course.

Classically, the Weberian state (sovereignty, territory, population, monopoly on the legitimate exercise of violence) comes into existence after it brings preexisting modes of domination (patriarchy, feudalism, tribalism) to an end. Its birth marks the end of patrimonialism as the state becomes a distinct, *primus inter pares*, institution within society. Yet there is a vision different from the Weberian one, namely one that places emphasis on the historical changing dynamics and societal actors that affect the state. Indeed, there are places where such independent forces did not disappear, (re)gained strength and sometimes sought forceful ways to accommodate their alternative vision in the state polity. In many parts of the non-Western world, what still provides direction and impetus to the political process is not what merely represents it formally but what shapes the building of that state. An example, among

[3] Eric Herring and Glen Rangwala, *Iraq in Fragments: The Occupation and its Legacy*, London: Hurst & Company, 2006, p. 50. See also Herring's Chapter 9 in this volume.

[4] See Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, *Iraq and the Second Gulf War: State-Building and Regime Security*, San Francisco: Austin and Winfield, 2001.

others, of this is the evolution that the Lebanese state has followed of late. Following years of war, it seemed the country was back on its feet in the mid-1990s only, in the mid-2000s, to again become the terrain of both domestic and international struggles, involving a powerful Islamist group, and lapsing anew into strife. Hence, it is often the sedimentation of cumulative historical pathologies and the instrumentalization of these states' building processes that account primarily—maybe more than the familiar theories of ethnic and sectarian conflict—for their weakness and vulnerability.

In such a general context of Arab and Islamic world state-building or lack thereof, Al Qaeda sprang forth as a politico-religious project built on (i) the relocation of authority, (ii) the circumventing of the state, and (iii) the militaristic empowerment of a non-state actor. Capitalizing on waves of riots and uprisings (notably in Cairo, Casablanca and Algiers in the 1980s), which had sealed the historical failure of the post-colonial Arab state—painting a compelling picture of resentment, alienation, and anomie—a modern-day Islamist movement came to be born from the very factor alternatively enabling state-building, namely the reinvention of the political sphere. In that sense, Al Qaeda's action was something akin to a statement that there is nothing inevitable about the vulnerabilities of states; that their conditions are but products of a history and as such can be remedied similarly; and, a more revolutionary notion, that violence—including offensive international force—is not solely a state prerogative. Thus, usurping authority that traditionally accrued to the state and offering a prescriptive agenda unacceptable internationally, Al Qaeda was from the very beginning immune to statist deterrence.

The movement's assertiveness sprang as well from its battle-hardened status. Starting in the early 1980s, a number of Islamist militants began migrating to Afghanistan to take part in the resistance against the Soviet occupation of that country. Later known as the 'Arab Afghans', these operators rapidly formed a relatively contiguous group which achieved both regional notoriety and substantial success in its *jihad* against the Soviets. In particular, while liaising with the local Afghan Islamist factions—in time building an alliance with the Taliban (who would take over the country in 1996) and leaders such as Gulbuddin Hekmatayar and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf—these Arab fighters came to be organized under the umbrella of a coordinating office known as the *Maktab al Khadamat lil Mujahideen* (office of work for the combatants). The office was led initially by Abdallah Youssef 'Azzam, who was replaced in mid-1988 by Osama Bin Laden in association with Ayman al Dhawahiri. Azzam and his two sons were assassinated on 24 November 1989 in Peshawar in Afghanistan.

Started in May 1988 and completed in February 1989, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was a watershed moment—more so, in a sense, for the nascent international Islamist movement than for the country itself. If the full nature of their military contribution to the Soviet defeat[5] remains imperfectly known—a realistic assessment is that it was substantial but not decisive—the 'Afghan Arabs' (many of whom were not, in fact, ethnic Arabs) nonetheless yielded maximum dividends from their involvement in this conflict. Yet for all the mythology that developed around them, attracting in turn additional recruits and worldwide funding, like any victorious army with time and energy on its hands this newly-gathered population was in need of a mission—and a mission that would up its own ante. Hence, in a further flight from their respective domestic terrains, the leadership of these men decided on the creation of an international army of Islamist fighters that would concentrate its forces on targeting the one party that, they argued, had long been weakening the Arab and Islamic world, notably through its support of Israel: the United States. Thus was Al Qaeda born.

How the group went on subsequently to assemble a force of several thousand foot soldiers, trained in a dozen or so camps throughout Afghanistan, supported by a guild of senior operators (Abu Ubaida al Banshiri, Abu Hafs al Masri, Abu Zubaydah), headed by a charismatic leader (Osama Bin Laden) and his authoritative deputy (Ayman al Dhawahiri), and paralleled by several secret transnational cells implanted in Europe and the United States, is what came to constitute the *differentia specifica* of Al Qaeda, and the culmination of that design in the September 2001 attacks on the United States.[6]

To the extent that the 'Arab Afghans' were indeed the core membership of Al Qaeda and that their role was instrumental in subsequently establishing Al Qaeda as a successful venture throughout the 1990s and more so in the 2000s, it is important to note that we can, in retrospect, identify three such successive

[5] The Soviet Union lost the war in Afghanistan because of a classical pattern that has long plagued conventional armies battling insurgencies. Unable to significantly break a stalemate that settled rapidly after the 1979 invasion, the Soviets were faced with lack of control of territories beyond Kabul, difficult mountainous terrain, an agile resistance movement supported by the population and by international fighters, large-scale sabotage operations, and, ultimately, mounting casualties and the heavy domestic political and financial toll of an unpopular war.

[6] For a history of Al Qaeda see, notably, Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Secret History of Al Qaeda*, London: Saqi Books, 2006; and François Burgat, *L'Islamisme à l'heure d'Al Qaida*, Paris: La Découverte, 2005.

waves of 'Arab Afghans'. A first group establishing itself as early as 1980, following Abdullah Azzam's *fatwa* declaring it was a '*fard ayn*' (personal) obligation on all Muslims to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan,[7] comprised ready-made Islamists, in their majority from the Gulf states, who had already gone through significant struggles with the local governments during the 1970s. While these individuals brought in a seasoned dimension to their militancy, they also looked upon the migration to Afghanistan as relief from the stalemated fight against their 'near enemy'. The coming of a second contingent, largely North African, was clustered in mid-1986 in the aftermath of the successes of the original group in the insurgency against the Soviets, and ahead of the increasing prospect of the latter's withdrawal. Following the formal establishment of Al Qaeda in 1988–89, a third layer, including arrivals from Europe and the United States, added strength to the organization and was instrumental, in particular, as preparations proceeded for a series of assaults on US targets round the world. Moreover, with the departure of a number of first and second wave fighters (either to their home countries, notably Algeria where the Islamic Salvation Front was becoming engaged in a violent conflict with the government, or to take part in the conflict in Bosnia), there was a measure of natural filtering among the fighters of the new generation. Whereas the first group brought in commitment and energy, and the second added numbers and dedication, the third group injected renewal and focus at a crucial phase.

Arising from these specific antecedents, by the mid-1990s, without the knowledge of most observers including intelligence services, Al Qaeda was well on its way to becoming a transnational non-state armed group of a new calibre. As such, the organization had become an entity that could attack within and across state boundaries, based on sophisticated networks of communication and information, and empowered by globalization and information-age technologies. Asymmetrically, such clandestine and information technology-based operations can bypass superior military power of nation-states to attack political, economic, and other high-value targets.[8] In fact the

[7] Azzam had declared that: 'Whoever can, from among the Arabs, fight jihad in Palestine, then he must start there. And, if he is not capable, then he must set out for Afghanistan.' See Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, *Defense of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Iman* [belief], 1984. Audio footage of Azzam making the same point was integrated in a 4 July 2007 message by Ayman al Dhawahiri.

[8] See Andrea J. Dew and Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, *Empowered Groups, Tested Laws, and Policy Options: The Challenges of Transnational and Non-State Actors*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2007, available at www.tagsproject.org/_data/global/images/Report_Empowered_Groups_Nov2007.pdf.

novelty goes beyond the transnationality element; it triggered, arguably, new types of terrorism as well as novel forms of insurgency.[9]

This protean sophistication was husbanded with one main objective in mind, to attack the United States in an unprecedented and unexpected way: first through the targeting of US assets in different parts of the world (particularly those regions, like East Africa, where Al Qaeda was in the process of establishing solid operational networks) and, subsequently, through attacks on US soil itself. As it was setting this plan in motion, Al Qaeda paid close attention to the public perception of its activities and its martial logic. Accordingly, on 23 August 1996, Al Qaeda issued a declaration of war on the United States entitled 'Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places' (meaning Saudi Arabia. Mecca and Medina being the two main holy cities of Islam). Subsequently, on 23 February 1998, a second declaration of hostilities was released similarly by the group, 'Jihad against Jews and Crusaders'. The original declaration (reproduced in the London-based Arabic language newspaper *Al Qods al Arabi*) was issued by Osama Bin Laden himself. The second was released on the occasion of a meeting of Al Jabha al Islamiya al Alamiya li Qital al Yahud wa al Salibiyin (the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders), at a joint conference in Afghanistan with Bin Laden, Ayman al Dhawahiri, and three other Islamist leaders—Abu Yasir al Rifai Ahmad Taha (Egypt), Sheikh Mir Hamza (Pakistan), and Fazlul Rahman (Bangladesh)—in attendance.

Although these statements have not been taken seriously by the United States, and are often derided by commentators who insist on their illegitimacy and insincerity, the singular *casus belli* articulated by Al Qaeda in those two founding texts has remained cogent and consistent, unacceptable as that may be to the US. An expert—Thomas Joscelyn of the Claremont Institute—remarks that Bin Laden's 'explanations make no rational sense'.[10] More observant analysis is provided by another who remarks that: 'To this day, we do not know quite how much relative weight Osama Bin Laden attributes to his religious and his political goals. The manner in which he has altered the listing

[9] See David Tucker, 'What is New about the New Terrorism and How Dangerous Is it?', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 13, Autumn 2001, pp. 1–14; and David Kilcullen, 'Countering Global Insurgency', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4, August 2005, pp. 597–617.

[10] 'Symposium: Al Qaeda: What Next?', frontpagemagazine.com, 15 June 2007.

of his various aspirations in his various statements suggests that the political is primary and religion a tool.'[11] Indeed, the three reasons named by Al Qaeda as its justification for going to war against the United States—the presence of US troops in the Middle East, the country's support for Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, and its support for repressive Arab and Muslim regimes—have remained the group's focal political reference. In their respective messages (some sixty altogether) sent since the September 2001 attacks, Bin Laden and al Dhawahiri have systematically made references to parts or the whole of this oppositional narrative.

Ten years after the first declaration, Al Qaeda released on 29 May 2007 a videotaped message, delivered by one of its senior officers, the American-born Adam Gadahn, in which these three main components of the *casus belli* were restated almost verbatim. Entitled 'Legitimate Demands', the message rehearsed the familiar three elements and added another three demands: ceasing 'interference in the religion, society, politics, and governance of the Muslims world'; putting 'an end to all forms of interference in the educational curricula and information media of the Islamic world'; and freeing 'all Muslim captives from your prisons, detention facilities, and concentration camps, regardless of whether they have been recipients of what you call a fair trial or not'. The new demands emerged as a reaction to developments since the September 11, 2001 attacks, in particular the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the launching of a number of media outlets aimed at the region (such as the news channel *Al Hurra*), and the incarceration of Islamist militants in a number of places round the world, notably the prisons in Bagram, Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay and secret locations in Europe.[12]

Retreat and advance: managing the post-9/11 period

The September 2001 attacks on the United States marked the culmination of a tactical battleplan set in motion since 1996. That plan was part of a strategy of '*jihad* displacement' in which Al Qaeda's very creation was anchored. Al Qaeda advanced, then, throughout the 1990s with an eye cast mostly on its

[11] Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat*, New York: Random House, 2006, p. 63.

[12] On the secret prisons in Europe (notably in Poland and Romania), see Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, *Secret Detentions and Illegal Transfers of Detainees Involving Council of Europe Member States: Second Report*, available at http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc07/edoc11302.pdf., 11 June 2007.

operational and logistical preparations. Acquiring capacity—following the gathering of experience through the Afghanistan conflict—was the order of the day. As a series of spectacular operations in the period 1995–2000 demonstrated, the group was proving adept at this new form of war. These were the 13 November 1995 bombing of a Saudi-American base in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; the 25 June 1996 attack on the Al Khobar towers near Dhahran in Saudi Arabia (the living quarters of the crews enforcing the no-fly zones over Iraq); the simultaneous bombings of the US embassies in Nairobi in Kenya and Dar es-Salaam in Tanzania on 7 August 1998; and the speedboat attack against the USS Cole off the coast of Aden in Yemen on 12 October 2000.

Ostensibly, the 2001 attacks marked a clear phase of geographical expansion of the group's mission. From a military ambition—Al Qaeda al 'Askaria (the Military Base) and al Jaysh al Islami (the Islamic Army) were early appellations of Al Qaeda, which was also created in the immediate aftermath of a war—it was moving to a strategic design meant to channel and cross-pollinate the experience, capacity, and energy henceforth gathered into a direct push on the United States. That progression persisted in the post-September 11 phase, and with the dramatic acceleration due to the lethal character of the attacks, as well as the United States' reaction in Afghanistan and Iraq, took on a political ambition on a far larger scale. Yet that evolution did not take Al Qaeda by surprise. The group was by design transnational and its aim all along had been precisely to lure the United States into battling it on its deterritorialized terms—a result which, strategically, would endow Al Qaeda with preeminent status among Islamist groups and, tactically, more engagement options to choose from. In that sense, Al Qaeda's advantage over the correlation of forces arraigned against it is that it has remained always proactive—seldom, if ever, reactive.

Specifically, such evasive and forward-looking planning played out on three fronts in the 2002–5 period. First, with the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, even though the group had forecast some major reaction by the United States and had prepared for it (as attested to by the rapid disbandment of units previously housed in the training camps in Afghanistan), Al Qaeda nonetheless found itself on the defensive. Indeed, it was forced to abandon important terrain it controlled and retreat into the areas on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Yet for all the talk of Al Qaeda being defeated by the US military in Afghanistan in 2002, no such picture emerged unambiguously. Indeed, arguably most of those detained by the United States during those engagements were either Taliban militants or non-Al Qaeda Islamists to whom Afghanistan had become home over the past years.

Certainly a number of Al Qaeda operatives were either killed, notably the military chief Mohammed Atef (Abu Hafs al Masri), hit during a US airstrike near Kabul on 16 November 2001, or arrested—in particular Ramzi Bin al Shaiba and Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, respectively coordinator and organizer of the September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, who were detained on 11 September 2002 in Karachi and on 1 March 2003 in Rawalpindi in Pakistan, and Zein al Abidin Mohammad Hussein (Abu Zubaydah), senior chief of operations, captured in Faisalabad in Pakistan on 28 March 2002. However, none of these setbacks contributed significantly, much less lastingly, to the weakening of an Al Qaeda leadership which had mostly moved away already and by the time of the December 2001 Tora Bora battle was essentially unreachable. In dissolving its physical, pinpointable presence, Al Qaeda rendered its centre of gravity fluid and itself evanescent. In so doing, it also frustrated the advancing US Special Forces bracing for a fight, luring them into a cat-and-mouse game which remained undecided several years later.

Second, rather than attempting a repeat of the attacks on the United States (not necessarily in the form of another aircraft hijacking operation), Al Qaeda opted to forestall and relocate its attacks on that country's allies round the world. Accordingly, the group conducted eight medium-scale operations in Karachi in May and June 2002; in Sana'a in October 2002; in Riyadh in May and November 2003; in Casablanca in May 2003; in Istanbul in November 2003; and in Amman in November 2005. In parallel there were two major operations in Madrid on 11 March 2004 and in London on 7 July 2005.

Finally, following the American and British invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and the rise of a multifaceted insurgency dominated by the Jordanian Islamist Ahmad al Nazal al Khalaylah (Abu Musab al Zarqawi), Al Qaeda actively supported the fight against US and coalition troops in that country and agreed subsequently to the opening of a local branch, Al Qaeda fi Bilad al Rafidayn (Al Qaeda in the Land of Mesopotamia).

These three synchronized steps, in particular the latter, went along with an accelerated decentralization strategy which eventually saw the organization embrace rapidly the international appeal and influence it had come to exert over other Islamist groups. Accordingly, in a span of two years (2004–6), it established six official branches: Al Qaeda in the Gulf, Al Qaeda in Europe, Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Qaeda in Egypt, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan (led by Mustapha Abu Al Yazid who pledged allegiance to Bin laden and al Dhawahiri in a 23 May 2007 videotape).

Akin to franchises and with some differences, these operationally-independent regional organizations followed the methods and signature of the central organization, a 'mother' Al Qaeda or Al Qaeda al Oum. Announced formally in audio- or videotaped messages by Ayman al Dhawahiri, the creation of these units was in itself a telling sign of the group's global reach and the coalescence of its design. In Europe, the Jamaat al Tandhim al Sirri li Munadhamat Qaedat al Jihad fi Europa (Group of the Secret Organization of Al Qaeda in Europe) claimed within hours the 7 July 2005 multiple bombings in London. Posted on a site (www.qal3ati.com) now closed down, its online release declared: "As retaliation for the massacres which the British commit in Iraq and Afghanistan, the mujahideen have successfully done it this time in London. And this is Britain now burning from fear and panic from the north to the south, from the east to the west. We have warned the British government and British nation several times. And, here we are. We have done what we have promised. We have done a military operation after heavy work and planning, which the mujahideen have carried out, and it has taken a long time to ensure the success of this operation." The language used was strongly reminiscent of that of Bin Laden in the aftermath of the September 11 attack ("There is America, full of fear from its north to its south, from its west to its east", 7 October 2001 message). A year later, on 7 July 2006, Al Dhawahiri confirmed that the attacks were the work of Al Qaeda and that two of its perpetrators (Shehzad Tanweer and Mohammad Sidique Khan) had met the organization's leadership in Pakistan.

In Saudi Arabia, the group went on to actively challenge the local House of Saud rulers with a series of high-profile and unprecedented attacks in the country, including attacks on oil facilities (May 2004), the Ministry of the Interior (December 2004), and the US Consulate in Jeddah (December 2004). Following the killing of the branch's original leaders (Abdelaziz al Moqrin and Salah al Oofi), the group adopted a lower profile, indicating both operational challenges and semi-successful police work in the country, but also the migration of many operators to Iraq, where, according to one estimate, Saudi nationals came to represent close to 45 per cent of the foreign insurgents.[13]

[13] Ned Parker, 'Saudis' role in Iraq insurgency outlined', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 July 2007. Also see Dan Murphy, 'All-out war between Al Qaeda and the House of Saud under way', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 June 2004; and Jefferson Morley, 'Is Al Qaeda winning in Saudi Arabia?', *Washington Post*, 18 June 2004. In Iraq, the local antipathy towards Al Qaeda-related Saudis was expressed by a number of Shiite factions, which often decried in their statements the 'Wahhabi invasion'.

The case of the Iraqi branch illustrates Al Qaeda's deployment strategy particularly well. Although, as noted, Al Qaeda al Oum had supported the Iraqi insurgency (in its statements) from the very beginning, and was seen as a rising menace in that theatre,[14] it was not formally present in the country until, on 28 October 2004, Abu Musab al Zarqawi—who had rapidly emerged as the most lethal threat to US and coalition forces in Iraq, notably following his 2003 back-to-back attacks on the Jordanian embassy on 7 August, the United Nations offices in Iraq on 19 August, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on 27 October—sent a public letter to Osama Bin Laden praising his leadership and requesting that his own organization (Al Tawhid wa al Jihad) should receive Al Qaeda's imprimatur. A sign of the times, such a modern-day merger of a successful local start-up with an established and recognizable global brand was also equally in line with age-old *bay'a* ceremonials among Arab tribes whereby one swears an oath of allegiance to a leader and receives the latter's blessing. In an equally public message, Bin Laden responded the following 27 December welcoming this initiative as 'an important step in unifying the fighters in establishing the state of righteousness and ending the state of injustice.' Two days after the killing of al Zarqawi in June 2006, his replacement, Abu Hamza al Muhajir, confirmed the *bay'a* addressing Bin Laden thus: 'We are at your disposal, ready for your command.'

This jigsaw matrix was replayed on 5 August 2006 with an announcement by Ayman al Dhawahiri that the Egyptian Islamic Group (Al Jama'a al Islamiyya) had joined Al Qaeda to form a branch in Egypt under the leadership of Mohammad Khalil al Hukayma. Appearing in the video to support the claim, the latter was indeed a member of the Jama'a but of junior rank. The Group subsequently denied al Dhawahiri's allegation[15] but the purpose was already achieved, namely the external empowerment of an internal officer with a view to bringing into Al Qaeda's fold one of the most important and (considering the Jama'a as an offshoot of the older Muslim Brotherhood) longest-established Islamist organizations. The move in Egypt was particularly adroit, representing a sort of long-distance coup d'état conducted by Al Qaeda against the prominent, decades-old Islamist organization which had renounced violence in the 1970s. Al Qaeda accomplished this by drafting a lesser member of the Muslim Brotherhood and, in effect, painting its older

[14] Richard C. Paddock, Alissa J. Rubin, and Greg Miller, 'Iraq seen as Al Qaeda's top battlefield', *Los Angeles Times*, 9 November 2003, p. 1.

[15] Interview of Najih Ibrahim with *Al Sharq Al Awsat* (London), 13 August 2006, p. 1.

figures either as obsolete or incapable of leadership (partly as their own followers were apparently joining Al Qaeda).[16]

Such tactical manoeuvring was not needed in the case of another leading North African Islamist group. The following month, al Dhawahiri announced, on 11 September, that the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, from its commonly-used French appellation, Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat) was also joining Al Qaeda to lead the fight in the wider Maghreb. Accordingly, the GSPC altered its name and, on 11 January 2007, became Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Al Qaeda fi Bilad al Maghrib Al Islami). Subsequently, in a videotaped message aired on 3 November 2007, al Dhawahiri announced that a Libyan group, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group,[17] had joined Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and urged the *mujahideen* in North Africa to topple the leaders of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. The fifth Maghrebi country, Mauritania, was conspicuously absent though, paradoxically, it had been the target of a GSPC attack on a Mauritanian military base (in the northeastern area of Lemgheity) in June 2005. In the aftermath of al Dhawahiri's call, four French tourists were murdered in southern Mauritania and, two days later, three Mauritanian soldiers were killed in an ambush in the northern area bordering Algeria. The attacks were claimed by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

The November 2007 announcement might also have been prompted by the increasing perception that, for all its regional mission, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb had remained up to that point mostly an Algerian affair. In Morocco, besides the 16 May 2003 operation in Casablanca against several Western-related buildings (before creation of the new entity),[18] there had indeed been recent Al Qaeda activity as illustrated by the death of suspected kamikazes

[16] Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, 'The Dividends of Asymmetry: Al Qaeda's Evolving Strategy', opendemocracy.net, 18 December 2006, www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-terrorism/asymmetry_4195.jsp.

[17] The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group is a little-known Libyan organization which first appeared in 1995, vowing to overthrow the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

[18] The Moroccan Islamist Combatant Group, whose leader (Abdelaziz Benyaich) was arrested after the 2003 Casablanca attacks, as well as the Salafiya Jihadia in Morocco, had not been so active. Similarly in Tunisia, the Tunisian Combatant Group has kept a low profile. In late December 2006–early January 2007, a group of 23 Tunisian Islamists, mostly Tunisians coming from Algeria where they had been crossing since 2005 and led by a former Tunisian security forces officer, Lassaad Sassi Al Muritani, was apprehended by the Tunisian authorities. Al Muritani was killed on 3 January 2007 by Tunisian police.

(Mohammed Mentalla and Mohammed Rachidi) about to be arrested by the Moroccan police on 10 April 2007. A month later, another kamikaze (Abdelfateh Raydi) was killed in a Casablanca cybercafé, and an alleged accomplice (Youssef Khoudri) was injured. Yet besides these developments and *ad hoc* statements by individual Islamists in Mauritania,[19] the North African Al Qaeda scene remained dominated by the former, now reformed GSPC. In a sense the GSPC had unilaterally pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda in September 2003, and had also shared a long-distance anti-French strategy with al Zarqawi after the latter threatened France on 18 May 2005 for its treatment of Muslims. In a confidential memorandum dated 16 December 2005, the French Anti-Terrorist Struggle Coordination Unit (Unité de Coordination de la Lutte Antiterroriste, UCLAT)—which oversees liaison between French intelligence, the police force, and the Homeland Security-like Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire (DST)—estimated subsequently that the Al Qaeda threat against France was 'particularly elevated' as a result of these pronouncements.

In many ways the regionalization of the GCSP was but a replay of Al Qaeda Al Oum's own expansion strategy. The GSPC had been set up in 1998 by Hassan Hattab, who led the group until he was replaced by Nabil al Sahraoui in August 2003; al Sahraoui, in turn, was killed by the Algerian army in June 2004 and replaced by Abdelmalek Droukdel (also known as Abou Moussab Abdelweddoud) as 'national emir'. The resurgence of the GSPC then began in earnest in 2003 when its southern region leader, Amari Saidi (subsequently arrested by the Algerian authorities), kidnapped 32 European tourists and released them after the German government agreed to pay a ransom of five million euros. The group was then divided into six sectors, the most active being the ones headed respectively by Abderrezaq 'El Para' and Mokhtar Ben Mokhtar. The attraction that Al Qaeda had for the North African group was first expressed through public correspondence that Droukdel maintained with al Zarqawi, each congratulating the other on respective actions. Bin Laden and al Dhawahiri, however, had long been in close ties with the area's militant Islamists. A first contact was established through the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (Groupe Islamique Armé, GIA) and its regional head in Europe, Abu Qotada al Filistini. A Yemeni Islamist (Abdelwahab al Wani) visited Algeria in 2000 on behalf of Bin Laden, and was killed there in September near the

[19] Five individuals had been arrested in Nouakchott, capital of Mauritania, on 19 October 2007 and accused of links with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

city of Batna. It was reported that al Wani had discussions with his local contacts—in particular 'El Para', who moved further south in Algeria[20]—about the establishment of an Al Qaeda fi Bilad al Berbar (Al Qaeda in the land of the Berbers).

The constant radicalization of Al Qaeda's branch in the Maghreb is certainly cause for concern among the states of the region as it aims to target the wider region.[21] From islands of connection but no full picture of regional and intercontinental cooperation, the move has increasingly been towards more formal expansion underscored by the renewed local preoccupations of the 'mother Al Qaeda'. In June 2007, there was even a spin-off from the new (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) spin-off: Ansar al Islam fil Sahra (the Partisans of Islam in the Sahara). In a video message aired online that month, the previously-unknown group threatened to attack North African and Western European countries as well as the United States.

Control over the offshoots—whether spun (Iraq), attracted (Algeria), or inspired (Somalia)—was also evidenced by the fact that these new branches rapidly displayed Al Qaeda's *modus operandi*, in particular (i) high-profile and coordinated attacks against symbolic targets, (ii) active use of the media and the Internet, and (iii) investment in lengthy preparations and timing. Thus the Al Qaeda in the Maghreb-led twin bombings in Algiers on 11 April 2007 targeted a government building (an explosive-packed vehicle ran through the gate of the six-storey prime minister's office) and the Bab Ezzouar police station housing special police forces. Much like the operations conducted by the Hamburg or Madrid cells, the attacks were the work of a small commando, in this case three individuals—known by their *noms de guerre* Al Zubair Abu Sajeda, Mu'az Ben Jabal, and Abou Dejna—whose videotaped wills were circulated immediately by the group. (An earlier attack by the group had resulted in six deaths in Algiers on 13 February 2007.) Furthering that pattern and echoing Al Qaeda in Iraq's own 2003 attacks on the UN and the ICRC, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb struck anew on 11 December 2007 with near-simultaneous twin bombings in Algiers targeting buildings housing the United Nations representation and the Algerian Constitutional Council. The same day, the group announced that the attacks

[20] See Salima Mellah and Jean-Baptiste Rivoire, 'El Para, the Maghreb's Bin Laden', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (English edition), February 2005, p. 1, http://mondediplo.com/2005/02/04algeria.

[21] Craig S. Smith, 'North Africa feared as staging ground for terror', *The New York Times*, 20 February 2007, p. A1 and A6.

had been conducted by two of its members, Ibrahim Abu Othman and Abdulrahman al Asimi.

Even in the context of a violence-beset country such as Algeria, the difference in scale and method used by the new entity was noticeable. No such spectacular bombings had been resorted to by the various factions at war during the 1990s civil war in the country. With the exception of the 26 August 1992 bombing at the Algiers airport, the violence had taken the form of targeted assassinations and large-scale reprisal massacres (notably in the villages of Rais and Bentalha in August and September 1997),[22] not regular bombings, nor indeed anything to confirm worrying reports that the GSPC had, possibly, access to chemical weapons.[23]

At the end of this phase, Al Qaeda had been able to advance globally, cumulatively, and against important odds. During this period, for each tactical loss, Al Qaeda won a strategic gain: retreat in Afghanistan but advance in Iraq; confined leadership but proliferating cells; curtailed physical movement but global, transnational impact; additional enemies but expanding recruitment.[24] Similarly, its leadership embraced a loose approach to influence with the bicephalous Bin Laden-al Dhawahiri leadership morphing into a meta-command now issuing directives, now welcoming initiatives, and regularly offering politico-religious and militaro-strategic commentary.

In parallel, Al Qaeda's official media branch, Moussassat al Sihab (the clouds' organization) increased both the quantity and quality of its output. No longer merely releasing semi-annual static videos of Bin Laden or al Dhawahiri delivering lengthy statements in the form of tapes sent to the Doha-based Arabic all news channel Al Jazeera, it added a variety of formats (including hour-long online documentaries with graphs and computer simulation) and articulate speakers (such as Adam Gadahn[25]) to its releases (up to 58

[22] Although attributed to Islamist factions, the two massacres may in fact have been conducted by other actors, and accusations have been pointed towards governmental circles. See Nesroulah Yous, *Qui a tué a Bentalha: chronique d'un massacre annoncé*, Paris: La Découverte, 2000.

[23] Faycal Oukaci, 'Mutations logistiques du terrorisme au Maghreb: des produits tetatogènes dans l'arsenal du GSPC Al Qaida', *L'Expression* (Algiers), 26 March 2007, p. 6.

[24] Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, 'Towards the Real Al Qaeda', *opendemocracy.net*, 10 September 2007, available at www.opendemocracy.net/article/democracy_terror/real_al_qaida.

[25] Among those that have had particular prominence in the upper echelons of the post-September 11 Al Qaeda is Adam Yahiye Gadahn, known as Azzam al Amriki or Azzam

in 2006 and 67 in 2007). In late 2007, the group innovated further through an open interview with al Dhawahiri. In a 16 December release by Moussassat al Sihab, private individuals, journalists, and organizations were invited to submit, within a month-long frame, questions sent to specific Islamist websites to which al Dhawahiri would subsequently respond.

While al Dhawahiri increased his output, Bin Laden, in contrast, released fewer messages after 2004. None in 2005, four in 2006–a truce offer to the United States (19 January), a message to Americans about their 'complicity' in their government's actions (23 April), a clarification about non-involvement of Zacarias Moussaoui in the September 2001 plot (24 May), and a eulogy of al Zarqawi (1 July)—and five in 2007. The 2007 messages were a homage to the members of the September 11, 2001 commando (11 September), messages to the Pakistanis (20 September), to the Iraqis (23 October) and to the Europeans (29 November), and a commentary on the US presence in Iraq (29 December).[26] The absence of video footage was particularly important. On 16 July 2007, however, Mouassassat al Sihab released a video on the group's fighters which included previously unseen and undated footage of Bin Laden, discussing the value of martyrdom; although that did not constitute a new appearance as such, the short footage in the forty-minute video created media stir and political rumblings.

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the American (*'azzam* means courageous in Arabic). Oregon-born, California-raised, Gadahn is a thirty-year-old American sought by the FBI since May 2004 and indicted since October 2005 (following the airing of a videotaped message in which he threatened attacks against the United States) for material support to Al Qaeda, and, in October 2006, for treason. He is currently on the US government's most-wanted terrorist list with a million dollar bounty for his capture. Of a Jewish-Protestant father and a Pennsylvanian mother, Gadahn converted to Islam in November 1995 and travelled in late 1997 to Pakistan, where he allegedly linked up with Abu Zubaydah. See Raffi Khatchadourian, 'Azzam the American: The Making of an Al Qaeda Homegrown', *The New Yorker*, 22 January 2007, pp. 50–63.

[26] This author has reservations as to the authenticity of the tape released on 7 September 2007 allegedly featuring Bin Laden. In important ways, it does not conform to Al Qaeda's previous releases. The form of this release (a pre-announced posting, copy obtained by US authorities though an advocacy anti-terrorism research site and subsequently leaked to Reuters) and the video's poor quality (showing the leader in an almost identical outfit as in the October 2004 tape, with an inexplicably darker beard) cast doubts on it. More importantly, the film features minimal motion, and is a still image from minute 2 to minute 12:30 and from minute 14 to the final minute 26. It is hardly conceivable that Al Qaeda would spend the previous years dramatically improving its visuals only to mark the (video) comeback of its leader with the most amateurish tape it had yet produced.

An important anomaly and an indication that Al Qaeda's network—or at least its distribution circuit—could be penetrated took place in September 2006 when the unedited outtakes of the filmed wills (*wasiyyat*) of Mohammad Atta and Ziad Jarrah were leaked to the London-based British newspaper *The Sunday Times*.[27] The hour-long raw footage dated 18 January 2000 depicting the two men, together and in separate filming sessions, bearded and sitting next to an AK-47, was allegedly made available to the newspaper 'through a previously tested channel'. The recording features no sound track and footage from the same tape, dated 8 January 2000, depicts a meeting with Bin Laden and about a hundred men in the open air, presumably at one of the camps in Afghanistan, possibly the Tarnak Farm on the outskirts of Kandahar.

All in all, the routinization of messages, their customization, integration of external footage about Al Qaeda, and addressing of different audiences spoke, first and foremost, to a strategy of diversification and decoupling. In that sense, Al Qaeda's ability to persuade local groups to link their struggles with a broader, pan-Islamist campaign is arguably the organization's signal achievement.[28] It also unveiled a desire on the part of Al Qaeda to establish the 'normality' of such long-term process whereby these activities on the part of the organization are to be expected regularly ('this year, next year, the year after that, and so on' as Gadahn stated in May 2007). To the extent that the release of a message was no longer an event in and of itself (as was the case in 2001–2), it became important to distinguish the specific purpose of each release; hence the use of titling (e.g. 'Message of One Concerned', 'The Power of Truth', 'The Wills of the Heroes of the Raids on New York and Washington', 'One Row', 'Legitimate Demands'—the latter, noted one analyst, being a 'supremely confident presentation... studded with contemporary [English-language] slang and catch-phrases' characterized by an 'almost complete lack of Islamic terminology and allusions'[29]). Paradoxically, this controlled proliferation effort also rendered obsolete the United States' attempt to play down the impact of each new message coming from Al Qaeda.

[27] Yosri Fouda, 'The Laughing 9/11 Bombers: Exclusive Film of Suicide Pilots at Bin Laden's HQ', *The Sunday Times*, 1 October 2006, p. 1.

[28] Angel Rabasa *et al.*, *Beyond Al Qaeda: Part One: The Global Jihadist Movement*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Project Air Force, 2006, p. xxv.

[29] Michael Scheuer, 'Al Qaeda's American Recruit Releases Something Entirely New', *Terrorism Focus*, IV, 17, 5 June 2007, p. 6.

Discontinuity and continuity: back to the future

For all practical purposes, Al Qaeda had handed the United States a defeat in Iraq within three years of the parties' encounter in that country. Certainly the fiasco there was hardly the result of actions engineered solely by Al Qaeda; most of it had to do with the United States' self-undermining choices. The Islamist group was, however, instrumental in manifold ways in the US rout and capitalized on that situation. With all the envisioned strategic mishaps forewarned from September 11, 2001 to March 19, 2003 about an invasion of Iraq having come to pass—civil war, factionalism, ethnic cleansing, empowerment of armed groups, regional instability, authoritarianism, militarization[30]—Al Qaeda did not need further arguments to make the point about the United States' miscalculation. Yet adding insult to injury, the organization recognized that it was ahead of its foe, stated it resoundingly, and moved on: both physically (on to Afghanistan and North Africa) and conceptually (regrouping and organizing). On 10 November 2006, two days after the Republican Party had lost control of both houses of the US Congress to the Democrats, Abu Hamza al Muhajir (also known as Abu Ayub al Masri)—al Zarqawi's replacement as head of Al Qaeda in Iraq—announced 'victory' over the United States, claimed to be at the helm of a 12,000-strong force, and invited the United States to remain in the country so that his organization would enjoy more opportunities to kill American soldiers.

Al Muhajir's taunting assessment was only partly sarcastic. Indeed, Al Qaeda had done much to secure this 'victory' after taking charge of the embryonic insurgency in Iraq with contacts as early as May-June 2003. By December 2006, Al Qaeda had managed to offset the United States' plans, outpace the other insurgent groups (in effect setting standards of both type and ferocity of attacks against the foreign troops and other local actors), and throw off any plans of establishing normalcy in that country (declaring that his fighters in Iraq had 'broken the back of America', al Dhawahiri made mention, in May 2006, of eight hundred attacks led by Al Qaeda in the country.) When al Zarqawi made the tactical mistake of declaring war on the Shia, the 'headquarters' in Afghanistan was able to pull him back from that strategy and, following his death, gradually retreated from it through an agreement to operate under the banner of a multi-party Islamist entity known as Al Dawla al Islamiya fil Iraq (the Islamic State in Iraq). Possibly as preparation for such a

[30] On the barbarization of Iraq, see Nir Rosen's vivid account, 'Anatomy of a Civil War: Iraq's Descent Into Chaos', *Boston Review*, 31, 6, November/December 2006, pp. 7–21.

change, Al Zarqawi had been, in effect, noticeably absent from the Iraqi operation scene from the late autumn of 2005 to the early spring of 2006, only reemerging in late April, six weeks before his death on 7 June, with a discourse and behaviour closer to Bin Laden's and al Dhawahiri's demeanour than at any time before.

Attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan aside, Al Qaeda did not conduct any major international operation between mid-2005 and early 2008. The absence of such assaults was hardly fortuitous. Neither was it due to the impossibility of conducting such attacks, or to the—limited—success of counter-terrorism policies. Given the group's assertive approach to strategy making, if Al Qaeda had broken a well-established pattern, surely it was deliberately. A July 2007 estimate by the United States National Intelligence Council (summarizing the conclusions of sixteen US intelligence agencies) concluded: 'Al Qaeda is and will remain the most serious terrorist threat to the Homeland, as its central leadership continues to plan high-impact plots... Al Qaeda will continue to enhance its capabilities to attack [the United States] through greater cooperation with regional terrorist groups... [P]lotting is likely to continue to focus on prominent political, economic, and infrastructure targets with the goal of producing mass casualties, visually dramatic destruction, significant economic aftershocks, and/or fear among the US population.'[31] The lack of operations was also a conscious choice meant to keep its enemy in a constantly defensive position by, in effect, rebooting international terrorism. Honed in Iraq, the terror tactics were being exported to the Levant, the Gulf, North Africa, and Europe, and the strategy was moving from 'wait-and-wait-and-attack' to 'wait-and-wait-and-deceive-and-attack'.

The two years during which Al Qaeda had been relatively silent internationally were those when its leadership (i) asserted greater control of its activities and (ii) developed greater speed in responding to key international developments.[32] On a more secure footing about its own safety, Al Qaeda's central leadership reestablished core functions in Pakistan's tribal areas. A

[31] National Intelligence Council, 'The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland', National Intelligence Estimate, July 2007. Also see Peter Grier, 'Why US sees Al Qaeda as a growing threat', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 17 July 2007; Mark Mazzetti and David E. Sanger, 'Al Qaeda threatens, US frets', *The New York Times*, 22 July 2007; and Michael Moss and Souad Mekhennet, 'Militants widen reach as terror seeps out of Iraq: start of trend is seen', *The New York Times*, 28 May 2007, pp. A1 and A8.

[32] See Paul Haven, 'Al Qaeda ops show leadership in control', Associated Press, 13 July 2007.

reaction period of about five weeks was reduced to an average ten days needed to release fully-produced videotaped messages—eleven after Hamas' takeover of Gaza in May 2007 or eight after the Red Mosque siege in Pakistan, a few weeks later. Similarly, the leadership (iii) oversaw the emergence of a new generation of leaders (such as Abdelhadi al Iraqi), under the direct control of the 'mother Al Qaeda'. This consolidation of power was also recognized by US authorities.[33] Al Qaeda's self-control and choice to regroup deeper are important in light of the fact that, as a former inspector general of the US Department of Homeland Security noted in 2007, 'it is only marginally harder for terrorists to enter the United States now than it was before September 11, and once they're inside our borders the potential targets are infinite.'[34] In many ways, one of Al Qaeda's greatest strength is indeed its human resource management. It scores high on programme management as relating specifically to the uniqueness, temporariness, and predefined goals of its projects.[35]

Yet in this context, another dimension was emerging slowly: Al Qaeda had in effect, through premature and amplified success, reached the limit of what a transnational non-state armed group could realistically achieve in opposing (powerful) states. Only naturally, it then turned its attention to its old nemeses, the weak and weakened regimes of the Arab and Islamic world. In a 20 September 2007 audiotaped message, Osama Bin Laden called on the Pakistanis to overthrow President Pervez Musharraf. A month later, on 22 October Bin Laden spoke to the Iraqis urging them to unite and avoid factional infighting. Ten days later, on 2 November, Ayman al Dhawahiri called for the removal of the leaders of Libya, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

Conclusions

The impact of Al Qaeda on global politics is an affair of long standing. Its inception goes back two decades to the contemporary emergence and transformation of a non-state armed group which has sought to create original

[33] Mark Mazzetti, 'New leadership is seen on rise within Al Qaeda', *The New York Times*, 2 April 2007, pp. A1 and A11.

[34] Clark Kent Ervin, 'Answering Al Qaeda', *The New York Times*, 8 May 2007, p. A23.

[35] See Ofer Zwikael, 'Al Qaeda's Operations: Project Management Analysis', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 30, 2007, pp. 267–80. Zwikael concludes that 'unlike Western organizations, Al Qaeda's project management strengths in human resources and communications management are aligned with the areas that are most valuable to project success' (p. 280).

regional and international dynamics anchored in a privatized use of force for a political purpose. Beyond solely triggering domestic or foreign crises, this organization has aimed, in particular, to adapt, achieve, and prosper open-endedly as it pursued such a novel strategy. It is in that sense that the metamorphosis of Al Qaeda was planned in advance. From the very beginning, this was an inevitable way to ensure its continuation and set it apart from previous and subsequent Islamist groups.

This central characteristic of Al Qaeda, its transformation and continued mutation, is what makes counter-terrorism measures against it so difficult, almost doomed to failure in the face of an evanescent organization.[36] The strength of Al Qaeda has lain, too, in its proactive, secure, and dedicated approach. Whereas the most established analysts, too often indulging an emotional reading, misread the complex nature of the movement, Al Qaeda has invariably been ahead maintaining ideological consistency and displaying constant operational novelty. By 2007, and mostly because of the failure in Iraq, policy thinking in the United States started recognizing in retrospect that 'just a year after the start of the war on terror, the terrorist threat started to evolve'.[37] Even such a late assessment is, however, faulty. This 'threat' never ceased to evolve and was largely resilient in facing what came to be known as the 'war on terror', namely the US' own tardy response to Al Qaeda.

Paradoxically, twenty years into this design, the dominant narrative about Al Qaeda almost systematically tends towards awkward scientific resistance to registering the success and innovation, indeed the visionary quality of Al Qaeda's project. From hatred, barbarity, and irrationality, we are merely being presented with a brew of elements rooted in denial, reductionism, and personalization of martial revolution. Martin Van Creveld, for instance, tells us that: 'All [the men of the 9/11 commando]... had been driven to that position by their experience of living in the West and trying, vainly, to assimilate'.[38] (In point of fact, fifteen of the nineteen men arrived in the

[36] For a discussion of these type of challenges, particularly as regards Al Qaeda's activities in the Gulf and in Iraq, see Bruce Hoffman, 'The Changing Face of Al Qaeda and the Global War on Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 27, No. 6, December 2004, pp. 549–60.

[37] Peter Brookes and Julianne Smith, 'Course Correction in America's War on Terror', Bridging the Foreign Policy Divide Project, Muscatine, Iowa: The Stanley Foundation, May 2007, p. 2.

[38] Martin Van Creveld, *The Changing Face of War: Lessons of Combat from the Marne to Iraq*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2007. Van Creveld presents the case of the British army against the Irish Republican Army and the Syrian army against the Islamist rebellion in Hama in 1982 as successful approaches to tackling such asymmetrical threats. The analogies are misleading militarily—the British exercised some restraint in Ireland and little is known about what really transpired in Hamas—but it is his conclusions that are astonishing: 'There are situations in which it is necessary to resort to cruelty' and 'once you have made up your mind to strike, you cannot strike hard enough' (p. 241). The distinguished scholar writes: 'Let there be no apologies, no kvetching [sic] about collateral damage caused by mistake, innocent lives regrettably lost, 'excesses' that will be investigated and brought to trial, and similar signs of weakness. Instead, make sure that as many people as possible can hear, smell, and touch the results; if they can also taste them, such as by inhaling the smoke from a burning city, then so much the better. Invite journalists to admire the headless corpses rolling in the streets, film them, and write about them to their hearts' content. Do, however, make sure they do not talk to any of the survivors so as not to arouse sympathy.' (p. 245) Referring to the 'developed world', Van Creveld concludes his book by remarking that 'the choice, as always, is ours'. In fact, that may not be the case here. In bringing down the pillars of such blinding certainty, Al Qaeda has done nothing less than displace the strategic locus of offence. A constantly mutating group of a few thousand men has been keeping the 'developed world' on its toes for the past decade facing an enemy which no one knows how to defeat. For once, the choice, it seems, is theirs.

United States between May and July 2001. The other four, who included a *summa cum laude* PhD graduate and a polyglot playboy, had led successful lives in Europe before going to the United States.[39]) Some attempt to discern the mechanics of what would make Al Qaeda disappear, thus bypassing the lasting impact of a group which has already reached the status of being emulated (in Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq, etc.).[40] Others acknowledge the potential value of non-military engagement with armed Islamist groups, but de-emphasize the importance of Al Qaeda as a consequential actor, arguing instead, in pursuit of the safety of the familiar, that peripheral engagement with secondary groups might prove more fertile.[41]

All along, the dominant framework of thinking is that 'terrorist groups move along the same path—sustaining their ideology, objectives, and tactics—until some outside force causes them to shift'[42] and that 'terrorist organiza-

[39] For a detailed account of the men's lives, see Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, *Contre-croisade: Origines et conséquences du 11 septembre*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004.

[40] See, in particular, Audrey Kurth Cronin, 'How Al Qaeda Ends—The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups', *International Security*, 31, 1, Summer 2006, pp. 7–48.

[41] Ram Manikkalingam and Pablo Policzer, 'Al Qaeda, Armed Groups, and the Paradox of Engagement', March 2007, available at www.tagsproject.org/_data/global/images/Policzer%20and%20Manikkalingam.pdf.

[42] Angel Rabasa, Cheryl Benard, Peter Chalk, R. Kim Cragin, Sara A. Daly, Heather S. Gregg, Theodore W. Karasik, Kevin a. O'Brien and William Rosenau, *Beyond Al*

tions such as Al Qaeda face difficulties in almost any operational environment, particularly in terms of maintaining situational awareness'.[43] Hence 'attacking the ideology', 'breaking links', 'denying sanctuary', or indeed 'engaging peripherally' remained analytical lines that held sway among many. These analyses share a common emphasis on locating the initiative on the states' side, painting the misleading portrait of a reactive Al Qaeda only moving about along gaps created by these states' actions and inactions, when it is precisely the opposite that has often proved true.

Although there has been an increasing recognition of 'structural' reasons that allowed for Al Qaeda to blossom—'thanks to a series of organizational technological innovations, guerrilla insurgencies are increasingly able to take on and defeat nation-states' writes one analyst in a mainstream forum[44]—the overall perception persists that this 'superempowered competition'[45] is a reality guided by the centre. Whereas it can be argued that by forcing its enemy to allocate attention and resources (including political capital and military matériel) in areas unforeseen originally in this conflict,[46] Al Qaeda is impacting events more from the periphery inward.

In the post-September 11, 2001 period, Al Qaeda has remained a security threat of the first order to many Muslim and Western states for at least seven reasons. First, the group designed and implemented a successful battle plan. It forecast most of the reactions of its enemy and dealt adroitly with a large-scale global counterattack by the world's superpower and its strong allies. Most important, it set its struggle on a long-term track from the beginning. A philosophy borrowed, to be sure, from earlier movements, as summarized thus:

> The guiding principle of the strategy of our whole resistance must be to prolong the war. To protract the war is the key to victory. Why must the war be protracted? ... If we throw the whole of our forces into a few battles to try to decide the outcome, we shall certainly be defeated and the enemy will win. On the other hand, if while fighting we maintain our forces, expand them, train our army and people, learn military tactics... and at the same time wear down the enemy forces, we shall weary and discourage them in such a way that, strong as they are, they will become weak and will meet defeat instead of victory.[47]

Second, in the face of a massive invasion of the country that had sheltered it for several years (an attack supported by a key force in that country, namely the Northern Alliance), Al Qaeda implemented successfully a layered tactical retreat instead of succumbing to the cut-and-run syndrome that has often marked the end of less organized terrorist groups. Focusing on evading, regrouping and downsizing, the changing organization multiplied attacks across the globe in places where the United States did not expect it to strike, and refrained from attacking America anew. Al Qaeda's inaction during that period confused its enemies who oscillated between expectations of imminent attacks and totemic conclusions that there were no longer any terrorists: 'Why have they not been sniping at people in shopping centers, collapsing tunnels, poisoning the food supply, cutting electrical lines, derailing trains, blowing up pipelines, causing massive traffic jams, or exploiting the countless other vulnerabilities.'[48]

Third, its losses during this phase were minimal and, for a group of this sort, strategically acceptable. Some setbacks took place but few significant leaders were killed or arrested. A new generation of leaders was brought forth and the ultimate disappearance of the bicephalous Bin Laden-al Dhawahiri leadership prepared for. By early 2007, that new generation was apparently in control of operational levels (about which little is known), including those in the tribal regions near the Afghan border.[49] (Only one known leader from among the new Al Qaeda generation—Abdelhadi al Iraqi, detained in Turkey—has been captured.)

Fourth, Al Qaeda's main leadership remained intact (and 'if you can't find, you can't fight'[50]), acquiring instant global visibility for its cause after the

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Qaeda: Part Two: The Outer Rings of the Terrorist Universe, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Project Air Force, 2006, p. 2.

[43] Combating Terrorism Center, *Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting Al Qaeda's Organizational Vulnerabilities*, United States Military Academy, Department of Social Sciences, 14 February 2006, p. 2.

[44] David Brooks, 'The insurgent advantage', *The New York Times*, 18 May 2007, p. A25.

[45] As John Robb calls it. See his *Brave New War: The Next Stage of Terrorism and the End of Globalization*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2007.

[46] That is the case for instance with the Sahel. See Lawrence Cline, 'Counterterrorism Strategy in the Sahel', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 30, 2007, pp. 889–99.

[47] Dang Xuan Khu, *Primer for Revolt*, New York: Praeger, 1963, pp. 11–12. Khu was a leading Vietnamese Communist leader and theoretician.

[48] John Mueller, 'Is there Still a Terrorist Threat?', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2006.

[49] Mark Mazzetti and David Rohde, 'Terror officials see Qaeda chiefs regaining power', *The New York Times*, 19 February 2007, pp. A1 and A7. Cited in the assessment, former Director of National Intelligence John D. Negroponte declared that 'Al Qaeda's core elements are resilient. [The organization] is cultivating stronger operational connections and relationships that radiate outward from their leaders' secure hideout in Pakistan to affiliates throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe.'

[50] John Arquilla, 'The War on Terror: How to Win', *Foreign Policy* 160, May-June 2007,

attacks on New York and Washington. That elevation was capitalized on for several years and, through the nurturing of a certain 'nobility' associated with battle going back centuries in Arab mythology,[51] a prototype of the young Muslim fighting for his ancestral religion and identity in the modern world was reinvigorated in both the centre of the Western metropoles and the outer rings of the Islamic lands—not least, paradoxically, by way of ultra-modern technological tactics bridging these two worlds. Such new mythology was framed around the contemporary actions of the '*murabitoun ulama* warriors' as Ayman al Dhawahiri refers to them (such as Abd al Rashid al Ghazi, Abdullah 'Azzam, Mullah Daddulah, Abu Omar al Sayf, Abdallahi al Rashood, Hamoud Al 'Uqla, himself implicitly and, of course, Bin Laden). In addition, with its truce offers to Europe (April 2004) and the United States (January 2006), Bin Laden positioned himself as having 'given peace a chance', an argument he could come back to in the rationalization of potential further violence. Hence, to the 'bureaucratized and professionalized warfare'[52] of the West, Al Qaeda responded with a throwback to ancestral Islamic martial values coupled with modern-day technology. As Richard Shultz and Andrea Dew remark: 'When policymakers send soldiers to fight warriors, they must be aware that, for warriors, traditional concepts of war remain highly relevant. What is more, these traditional concepts will invariably take protracted, irregular, and unconventional forms of combat 'on the ground'."[53]

Fifth, Al Qaeda turned its enemies' strategic miscalculations against them. The war in Iraq, in particular, was used opportunistically as a battleground to defeat the United States through a spearheading of the local resistance movement. Yet Al Qaeda, here, sought ultimately not to enjoy local decision-making but to provide decisive support and oversight.[54] The dialectic between

p. 45. Arquilla notes that 'there has been hardly a hint that the pursuit of Al Qaeda and its allies is guided by any serious thinking about the new types of problems posed by adversaries who operate in small, interconnected bands with minimal central control.'

[51] See Michael Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War: Studies in the Jihad and the Arab-Byzantine Frontier*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997; and, for the larger narrative, John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford University Press, 1978.

[52] David Kennedy, *Of War and Law*, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 165.

[53] Richard H. Shultz Jr. and Andrea J. Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias: The Warriors of Contemporary Combat*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, pp. 269–71.

[54] In that sense, at the height of a mid-2007 US-supported Sunni push on Al Qaeda, Harith

jihad export as necessity and as improvised design was, here, quite fertile. As one analyst remarks:

> Wilderness Ghazi groups like Al Qaeda have only one path open to them: to aspire to eventual political leadership. They must use their symbolic authority to assert a supranational political authority. As a result all fighter groups begin locally but then shake off their small town roots. Only by leaving Arabia could Al Qaeda announce a bigger vision. So the wilderness framework not only plays to piety by tracing the steps of Muhammad. It also plays to deep chords of Muslim universalism. Nevertheless, Al Qaeda shows that playing to the world, or even creating a physically international network does not necessarily lead to Pan-Muslim political authority, and so their franchises tend to express the local identity of the places where they do business.[55]

Sixth, an international strategy of decentralization was pursued successfully. Assembling, as it were, 'near' and 'far' all-volunteer allies in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Gulf, the Levant, East Africa, North Africa, Europe, and possibly the United States, the leaders of Al Qaeda have extended the reach of their virtual dominion.[56] An impact captured by Shakir Al Abssi, leader of the Lebanese Fatah al Islam (a group which, emulating Al Qaeda's asymmetrical tactics, had in May-June 2007 dealt serious blows to the Lebanese army[57]):

al Dari, Secretary-General of the Union of Islamic Ulama in Iraq, stated revealingly: 'We do not accept Al Qaeda's activities, and we have rejected Al Qaeda's actions. However, Al Qaeda remains part of us and we are part of it. The majority of Al Qaeda are Iraqis and are not foreigners coming from abroad. Ninety per cent of Al Qaeda today are Iraqis. We can enter in discussions with them... That we would fight them, however, next to the occupation forces is unthinkable.' Interview with Al Jazeera, 5 October 2007.

[55] Michael Vlahos, 'Two Enemies: Non-State Actors and Change in the Muslim World', Strategic Assessments Office, National Security Analysis Department, Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, January 2005, p. 13. Also see by the same author, 'Fighting Identity: Why We Are Losing Our Wars', *The Military Review*, November/December 2007, pp. 2–12

[56] We should also note the accusations of collaboration with Hezbollah (see Bilal Y. Saab and Bruce O. Riedel, 'Hezbollah and Al Qaeda', *International Herald Tribune*, 9 April 2007, who note several strategic and behavioural differences between the two groups and call for more discernment) and the alleged links with the Palestinian Jaysh al Islam, which kidnapped the BBC journalist Alan Johnston in May 2004 (the announcement of the kidnapping was posted on www.alhesbah.org, a site often associated with Al Qaeda).

[57] Hassan M. Fatah and Nada Bakri, 'Lebanese troops fight Islamists; dozens are slain—sympathizers of Al Qaeda', *The New York Times*, 21 May 2007, pp. A1 and A10. The Fatah al Islam fighters in Nahr al Bared were led by operators originating from the Iraq battle zone. See Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam among Palestinians in Lebanon*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

'Osama Bin Laden does make the fatwas. Should his fatwas follow the Sunnah, we will carry them out.'[58] Such exaltation led US intelligence to conclude that the challenge of defeating Al Qaeda has become more complex than it was in 2001, and that the organization is a more dangerous enemy today than it has ever been before.[59] Consequently, the focus is not on the end of the conflict but on the end of the organization itself—an exercise at times centred merely on the quantitative disruption of cells.[60]

Seventh, in all these steps and in its conscious engineering of its own self-sustaining *Al Qaedaism* mythology, Al Qaeda remained consistently ahead of its enemies and made innovative use of time and space as regards its martial strategies. While maintaining cogency and consistency in its political message, it introduced improvisations (such as geographical indeterminacy of theatre of operations, concurrent acceleration and deceleration of engagement, weaponization of civilian assets) which were novel by fourth generation warfare standards.

In the final analysis, Al Qaeda's war of detachment vis-à-vis its 'near' Muslim enemies, which had prompted it at birth to orient its energy abroad, might have entered a new phase as a result of these manifold developments. The group is today an intensely complex global network, with a decentralized, flexible structure that enables it to spread in all directions across the Arab world, Africa, Asia, and Europe.[61] Yet by repatriating its energy 'prematurely', Al Qaeda may in fact have given in to reaction for the first time in its history. For once, it seemed to be following developments independent of its design, which give at least three reasons for its return to the region: (i) a desire to fight on a territory where it can move about and inflict direct losses on the United States; (ii) the renewed activism of the authoritarian regimes, which, if structurally weak, used the opportunity of the 'war on terror' to extend their

[58] Michael Moss and Souad Mekhennet, 'Jihad leader in Lebanon may be alive', *The New York Times*, 11 September 2007, p. A14.

[59] Bruce Riedel, 'Al Qaeda Strikes Back', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 3 May/June 2007, pp. 24–40.

[60] See Jonathan David Farley, 'Breaking Al Qaeda Cells: A Mathematical Analysis of Counterterrorism Operations (A Guide for Risk Assessment and Decision Making)', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 26, No. 6, November/December 2003, pp. 399–411.

[61] Soumaya Ghannoushi, 'The West has created fertile ground for Al Qaeda's growth', *The Guardian*, 21 June 2007. Also see by the same author, 'The Erosion of the Arab State', 24 September 2006, aljazeera.net. Ghannoushi notes: '[S]ome Arab states are unable to respond to ever-mounting external threats, and...the burden of homeland protection is increasingly shifting from the standard political order to non-state actors.'

leases on their countries; and (iii) the difficult conditions in penetrating Western metropoles to conduct complex operations. In 'The Evolution of a Revolt', a 1920 essay he published in the British *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal* after his return from his campaigns in Arabia, T.E. Lawrence remarked that the virtue of irregulars lay in depth, not in face, and that it was the threat of attack by them that in effect paralyzed their enemies. Such depth of engagement is precisely what Al Qaeda achieved ultimately in the course of its meta-strategy towards both its 'near' and 'far' enemies.