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Exercise Solo Flight

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AL QAEDA – IS IT THRIVING OR DYING?

By Lieutenant Colonel Andy Gilks

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“If there is a one percent chance that they can, you have to pursue them as if they will”.

Dick Cheney’s ‘One Percent Doctrine’¹

On the night of the 2nd of May 2011, in a dark compound in the mountainous region of Abbottabad Pakistan, a US Special Forces team finally completed a task that had been originally set for them almost 10 years previous.² Achieving the elimination of Osama Bin Laden, figurehead of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda and director of the infamous attacks on New York’s World Trade Centre in September 2001, became one of President George W Bush’s primary objectives. The initial strategy adopted by the US in response to the attacks of 9/11 in which 2977 innocent civilians and 19 airline hijackers died, was to attack the leadership of the growing global terrorist group Al-Qaeda, eradicate their training grounds and remove their sanctuary in Afghanistan. Early historical analysis has judged this approach to have been an effective initial strategy despite the fact that Bin Laden was not immediately captured.³ In response, Al-Qaeda was forced to adapt in order to survive. When Bin Laden was eventually killed, Al-Qaeda had evolved from the monolithic hierarchically structured group that had declared war on the United States in 1996, into a network of semi-autonomous regional groupings that no longer required central coordination from one man.⁴ As a result, the death of Bin Laden did not prove to be the death knell for Al-Qaeda in the way that the US strategists had originally hoped it would be. In

¹ John Mueller, "The Atomic Terrorist?" in *Nuclear Proliferation and International Order*, ed. Olav Njolstad (New York: Routledge, 2011), 146.

² Valentina Soria, "Bin Laden's Death, One Year on: Has the Threat Receded?" *RUSI Analysis* (02 May 2012, 2012), 1.

³ Raphael Perl, "US Anti Terror Strategy and the 9/11 Commission Report," *CRS Report for Congress* RL 32522 (4 February 2005, 2005), 9.

⁴ Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al-Qaeda* (Ottawa: CSIS-SCRS, [2013]), 31.

this essay, the status of Al-Qaeda will be analyzed to assess why this was the case and demonstrate the thesis that although Al-Qaeda's ability to centrally co-ordinate transnational terrorist attacks may have been largely neutralized by the US' post 9/11 counter terrorism strategy, this does not necessarily mean that the organization as a whole is close to defeat. To achieve this, the origins of Al-Qaeda will be briefly explained. The essay will then consider in what ways has the US' strategy has proven effective, before considering how Al-Qaeda evolved in response. Finally it will explain why Al-Qaeda continues to flourish and pose a future threat, despite the apparent effectiveness of the US strategy.

The foundations of Al Qaeda

The origins of today's Al-Qaeda can be traced back almost 25 years to the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan. After deciding to use some of his personal wealth to support the mujahedin, the 29 year old Bin Laden moved to the border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan and established a network of fundraising and recruiting offices that could harness Islamic volunteers from the Arab world for the fight against the Soviets, as well as attracting volunteers from Europe and the United States. This network became known as Al Khalifah, or the Services Office,⁵ and was the foundation for what is now known as Al-Qaeda. By the end of the Soviet occupation the potential threat posed by Al Khalifah was barely recognized in the United States, largely because both factions had up to that point shared broadly aligned goals. During this period both were focused on either defeating the Soviets or making their campaign in the country as expensive and politically embarrassing as possible. This alignment did not last. The end of

⁵ John Rollins, "Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for US Policy," *Congressional Research Service* Report for Congress R41070 (25 January 2011, 2011), 5.

the conflict in Afghanistan led to an internal debate between Bin Laden and the other Al Khalifa founders⁶ that centered upon how they should reorganize following their perceived victory against the Soviets. Some favored the formation of a pseudo Islamic Regional Intervention force capable of rising up to support threatened Muslims anywhere across the globe, while others wanted to use their existing arms and experience to fight directly against secular⁷ anti-Muslim Arab states. The debate was influenced heavily by the Egyptian membership, among them Bin Laden's present day successor Ayman al-Zawahiri, who favored direct action against pro-Western secular Arab states – which at the time included Egypt.⁸ When Iraq invaded Kuwait soon afterwards, the level of support provided to Saudi Arabia by the United States highlighted to Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri and the other founders that overthrowing these secular states was going to be near impossible while they enjoyed such powerful external support from the West. From this revelation they determined that the *'only way to bring Islamic regimes to power was to oust from the region the perceived backer of secular regional regimes, the United States'*.⁹ This provides ones of the early examples of a defining characteristic of Al-Qaeda, and one that would prove to be essential to the groups survival in the post 9/11 era – its ability to adapt in response to unfolding global events. This period determined the future focus of the group which the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service summarized as:

'attriting and enervating America so that a weakened US would be forced out of Muslim lands and therefore have neither the will nor the capability to intervene, taking over and controlling territory to create the physical sanctuaries that are Al Qaeda's lifeblood and declaring 'emirates'

⁶ There were eight founding members of which Sayeed al Masri, Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri, Sayyed Imam Al-Sharif and Ayman al-Zawahiri were Egyptian.

⁷ The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term secular as *'not subject to or bound by religious rule; not belonging to or living in a monastic or other order.'*

⁸ Hosni Mubarak became President of Egypt in 1981. He was heavily dependent upon US aid through his tenure and pursued an anti-Islamist, pro-Israeli agenda.

⁹ Raymond Ibrahim, *The Al-Qaeda Reader* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007).

in these liberated lands that would be safe from US and Western intervention because of their collective enfeeblement'.¹⁰

In 1992 the group began its campaign against Western interests, conducting a series of increasingly ambitious and effective attacks throughout the decade of the nineties.¹¹ This phase in Al-Qaeda's history culminated with ferocity and success, from the terrorists perspective, in the 9/11 attacks on New York in 2001. However, from this point on the US sought retribution. The era of relative US complacency during which the group had been able to grow and develop¹² ended abruptly and Al-Qaeda became the target of a concerted counterterrorism campaign that would span the globe and cost, according to the more conservative estimates of the Pentagon, around \$1 Trillion.¹³ In the post 9/11 era, and in the face of the might of the US military and her allies, the group had little choice but to change or face rapid extinction.

The US Counter Terrorism Strategy Against Al-Qaeda

The purpose of this essay is not to study how the US responded to the threat of Al-Qaeda in detail, but instead to examine the effect that their counter terrorism strategy has had upon it. However, it is still useful to refresh the key areas of their approach. The US Strategy Combatting Terrorism, published in 2003 and refreshed in 2005 and 2008, was built upon 4 pillars – defeating, denying, diminishing and defending against the threat Al-Qaeda posed.¹⁴ The defeating element built upon the previous administration's existing strategy of using targeted strikes against known targets and individuals, but expanded it geographically into Pakistan and

¹⁰ Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al-Qaeda* (Ottawa: CSIS-SCRS, 2013), 5.

¹¹ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/knew/etc/cron.html>

¹² U.S.-Sudanese Tensions Finally Erupt Into Open Warfare, <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/world/africa/082198attack-sudan.html> dated 21 August 1998.

¹³ <http://nation.time.com/2011/06/29/the-5-trillion-war-on-terror/>

¹⁴ <http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/wh/71803.htm>

Africa. It also vastly increased the use of Special Forces and intelligence agencies to attack the leadership network of the group. The next pillar saw terrorist groups denied sanctuary. This manifested itself in the early phase of operations in Afghanistan¹⁵ and subsequently the invasion of Iraq, as well as more discreet operations in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. The strategy then sought to diminish the underlying conditions that terrorists could exploit by fostering economic, social and political development in these fragile regions.¹⁶ This pillar of the strategy led to some of the more ill-conceived elements of the US' response, particularly in post invasion Iraq and during the less controversial but equally ambitious expansion of the mission in Afghanistan from 2006 onwards. Finally, the US sought to defend US citizens and their interests inside the mainland United States. To achieve this, the US Congress passed the Patriot act and created the Department of Homeland Security.¹⁷ These actions greatly improved the ability of the State to prevent terrorism, by legally authorizing measures which aided intelligence gathering, allowed more intrusive surveillance procedures and streamlined investigative regulation in the domains of cyber and finance.¹⁸

A key part of the 'defeat' pillar within the American strategy was the philosophy of directly targeting the leadership of Al-Qaeda through either killing or capturing them. This was not in itself new; in 1998 the Clinton administration had launched Tomahawk missile attacks on a training camp in Afghanistan where Bin Laden was believed to be following a truck bombing in

¹⁵ The operation became known as Enduring Freedom.

¹⁶ Perl, *US Anti Terror Strategy and the 9/11 Commission Report*, Vol. RL 32522, 2005), 4.

¹⁷ <http://www.dhs.gov/> Patriot Act and Homeland Security

¹⁸ Raphael Perl, "US Anti Terror Strategy and the 9/11 Commission Report," *CRS Report for Congress* RL 32522 (4 February 2005, 2005), 5.

Kenya that killed 224 civilians including 12 Americans.¹⁹ The strike was ineffective, largely because of the inaccuracy of the intelligence and the time delay inherent in using stand-off cruise missiles. Post 9/11 the targeting of the leadership of Al-Qaeda became a much more efficient and almost industrialized process – networked fusion centers were created that could merge together disparate intelligence from captured combatants, human informants, electronic and communication sources in order to cue the near continuous surveillance coverage of potential targets. Once corroborated as a target of interest, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV's), surveillance aircraft and signals intelligence infrastructure enabled targets to be monitored until the opportunity to kill or capture them arose. This would either be done using UAV missile strikes, manned aircraft raids or by inserting small teams of Special Forces. Once prosecuted, the target, his belongings and his electronic devices would be scoured for further actionable intelligence allowing the targeting cycle to begin again, this time aimed at the next tier of organizational leadership. In this cyclical manner the leadership structure of Al Qaeda was quickly degraded. When this attritional methodology was employed beyond the direct conflict zones of Afghanistan and Iraq into Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia the freedom of movement of Al-Qaeda became greatly constrained. In addition to degrading the group's organizational structure, the strategy also dissuaded potential recruits from travelling to these regions which eventually led to Al-Qaeda ceasing to provide centralized training in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus the leadership capability at the top of the organization was reduced while the supply of available replacements to repopulate the ranks at the bottom of the organization was also constrained. In this manner, the US expected their counter terrorism strategy to lead inexorably to the defeat of Al-Qaeda, and in many respects this has proven to be effective. Estimates vary, but several sources tend to agree that the number of drone strikes carried out by the US across its

¹⁹ <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/attack/2001/11/12/clinton-usatcov.htm>

current theatres of operation exceed 1200²⁰ since 2001. At least 34 key Al-Qaeda leaders have been removed from the battlefield by UAV strikes under the Obama administration alone.²¹ According to US Secretary of State for Defence Leon Panetta, the attritional campaign waged by drones and Special Forces has pressurized Al-Qaeda in their places of refuge, and removed their leadership more quickly than they have been able to promote replacements, placing the group on what he believes is a '*path of decline that will be difficult to reverse*'.²² Other sources corroborated Panetta's view; in 2009 the senior leadership of Al-Qaeda's core in Pakistan was thought to have been reduced to around 8 individuals, supported by around 200 senior operatives in its regional groupings.²³ Other evidence can be found that is equally compelling. In the results of a detailed network analysis of the communications between senior members of Al-Qaeda and UK recruits from 1999 to 2010, the Danish academic Jytte Klausen found that the strong links that had existed between those planning to execute plots within the UK and those orchestrating them from overseas had broken down in the years since 2005. She concluded that in the UK and Europe at least, although inspiration was still taken from the core of Al-Qaeda, the amount of technical, financial and logistical support provided had reduced since reaching its 2005 peak.²⁴ This supports the assertion that Al-Qaeda is becoming increasingly unable to centrally coordinate terrorist activity in a transnational context.

²⁰ <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2012/12/04/revealed-us-and-britain-launched-1200-drone-strikes-in-recent-wars/>

²¹ Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al-Qaeda* (Ottawa: CSIS-SCRS, 2013), 21.

²² Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al-Qaeda* (Ottawa: CSIS-SCRS,[2013]), 21.

²³ Ian Black and Richard Norton-Taylor, "Al Qaeda Faces a Recruitment Crisis, Anti-Terrorism Experts Say," *The Guardian* 10 September 2009.

²⁴ <http://www.strategicdialogue.org/The%20Changing%20Face%20of%20Al%20Qaeda.pdf>

This view was further reinforced in the immediate aftermath of Bin Laden's death in 2011. The US administration used elements of his diary seized in the Abbottabad raid to portray him as the central hub of all Al-Qaeda decision making and demonstrate how he had remained involved in 'every recent Al-Qaeda threat.....and was down in the weeds as far as best operatives, best targets and best timing'.²⁵ Since 2005, outside of Iraq and Afghanistan, there have been several foiled plots but no successful attacks. In terms of the threat towards the US and Europe, these foiled attacks appear to be becoming less complex and less frequent, largely because the organizational structure of Al-Qaeda has become fragmented. The drawing of conclusions like this from the evidence captured in Abbottabad was to be expected given the methodology that the US has sought to employ in the 'defeat' pillar of its counter terrorism strategy. Since 9/11 the US has framed the threat that the group poses by likening Al Qaeda to a pseudo military force with an understandable, and targetable, organizational structure and a hierarchy of leadership and infrastructure that could be destroyed by conventional US military power. Against this image of Al Qaeda, the killing of Bin Laden should have represented a major tipping point in the campaign to defeat the group. However, a more nuanced view would also recognize that in Al Qaeda, a set of ideas and beliefs concerning the creation of an Islamic state, the imposition of Islamic laws and a return to Islamic customs is also represented. These ideas and beliefs are a much less tangible target for the US military forces to destroy through an attritional based approach.

²⁵ Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al-Qaeda* (Ottawa: CSIS-SCRS, 2013), 21.

How has Al-Qaeda evolved in the face of the US Counter Terrorism Strategy?

The most obvious evolution of Al-Qaeda in response to the US counter terrorism campaign was its move from being a hierarchical organization with centralized command and control into a flat networked structure of several regional affiliates.²⁶ As early as December 2001, Al Zawahiri published an article in a London based Arabic newspaper that explained how “*small groups ‘could frighten the Americans and their allies’* and how *‘the jihad movement must patiently build up its structure until it is well established. It must pool enough resources and supporters and devise enough plans to fight the battle at the time and in the arena it chooses.’*”²⁷ Thus, Al-Qaeda was able to disperse into North Africa (AQ in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM), East Africa (AQEA) and into the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).²⁸ These groupings shared a close affiliation with Al-Qaeda’s core while it was able to remain hidden in Pakistan, but were encouraged to act as franchises with the freedom to develop their own structures, strategies and campaigns under their own regional leadership. This re-organization may have altered the structure of the group as a whole, which in turn led to the diversification of the US’s campaigns into Somalia and Yemen, but the ideas and beliefs behind Al-Qaeda’s struggle with the West remained constant.

By regionalizing their struggle, or Jihad,²⁹ Al-Qaeda was able to fuse their original transnational themes with relevant local grievances. During this same period, other members of Al Qaeda pushed for even greater decentralization. In the underground publication *Inspire*, reportedly

²⁶ Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al-Qaeda* (Ottawa: CSIS-SCRS,[2013]), 31.

²⁷ Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al-Qaeda* (Ottawa: CSIS-SCRS,[2013]).

²⁸ Which subsumed the remnants of AQ in Iraq in 2012.

²⁹ Jihad is derived from a verb that means ‘to struggle, strive or exert oneself’. It is taken from the Koran in the context of striving to advance the cause of Islam and make a personal commitment to struggle ‘in the cause of god’. Overtime this has most frequently evolved into an understanding of religiously approved fighting on behalf of Muslims and Islam. [Rollins, 2011].

produced by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's media organization Al-Malahem, the Syrian Jihadist Abu Musab al-Suri encouraged Muslims to become involved in '*individual jihad*' and '*small cell terrorism*'.³⁰ The combined effect of this evolutionary dispersion has been to spread the message and influence of Al-Qaeda far beyond the footprint that its members and leadership can directly control. The process of decentralization, together with the extremely effective use of social media, has boosted the membership of its regional affiliates and harnessed many of the largely disaffected youth demographic within the failing states affected by the 'Arab Spring.' Thus, as the threat posed by Al-Qaeda's core in Pakistan and its traditional leadership represented by Bin Laden has slowly receded as a result of US strikes, a new and much more dispersed set of relative safe havens have developed in Yemen, Somalia and to a lesser extent North Africa. The effect of this process has seen the Al Qaeda of today under Al Zawahiri survive by embedding itself in local insurgencies. The group is now a beneficiary of political violence rather than its instigator. It is a fair to conclude that by the time of his death, Bin Laden was increasingly unable to influence the actual actions of each of these regional affiliates. This lack of centralized control had also reduced the ability of Al Qaeda to effectively execute attacks on US and Western interests. But, this same lack of centralized control can be attributed to the trade-off Bin Laden was forced to accept when he devolved power to each of the regional franchises in order to ensure the survival and longevity of his organization and its ideology. The examination thus far demonstrates that although Al-Qaeda's ability to centrally co-ordinate transnational terrorist attacks may have been largely neutralized by the US' post 9/11 counter terrorism strategy, their adoption of a decentralized structure now represents a different threat to the one that the US originally set out to eliminate.

³⁰ Abu Musab Al Suri, "The Jihadi Experiences: The Schools of Jihad", *Inspire*, Summer 1431, 2010, 49.

Why does Al-Qaeda continue to represent a threat despite the apparent success of the US strategy?

While the death of Bin Laden and the reported effectiveness of the US drone campaign are used by some observers as evidence to support the claim that Al-Qaeda is in terminal decline, others remain more skeptical. In 2003 the reported number 3 in Al-Qaeda at the time, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, was captured. The then sitting chairman of the US House of Representatives Intelligence Committee, former CIA officer and its future director Porter J Goss, responded to this news with the bold statement “*I believe the tide has turned in terms of Al-Qaeda*”.³¹ Less than a year later the train bombings in Madrid killed 191 and injured 1800 morning commuters. More significantly, the attack negatively influenced Spanish public opinion away from supporting US foreign policy and contributed to the decision to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq shortly afterwards. Similar proclamations were made in 2005 and 2010, prior to the London bombings and the unsuccessful airliner bomb plot that emanated from AQAP in Yemen.³² A pattern of decline followed by brutal resurgence has therefore been seen before, which has led some to fear that Al-Qaeda’s recent decentralization strategy could be indicative of an organization encouraging its affiliates and individual followers to undertake small scale attacks in order to divert international attention away from the planning and preparation of larger, more catastrophic, so called spectacular terrorist plots.³³ While this essay has already drawn the conclusion that Al-Qaeda’s organizational capacity for such ‘spectacular’ plots has probably

³¹ Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al-Qaeda* (Ottawa: CSIS-SCRS,[2013]), 22.

³² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cargo_planes_bomb_plot

³³ Rollins, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for US Policy*, Vol. Report for Congress R41070, 2011), 2.

diminished over recent years, there has been a concurrent resurgence in the group's influence in regional conflicts.

Despite appearing relatively successful in tackling Al-Qaeda's coordination abilities, the US' counter terrorism strategy to date has not achieved the same effect in reducing the groups influence amongst disaffected Islamist³⁴ youths in the troubled areas of the Middle East and Africa. One reason for this is that, partly for the reasons explained above, the US' approach has been much more effective at targeting the physical organization of the group, rather than addressing the ideology upon which it is based. To explain this notion it is worth noting that in the aftermath of 9/11 it was pre-existing regional terrorist groups that approached Bin Laden seeking affiliation with Al-Qaeda rather than the other way around.³⁵ This was how Bin Laden achieved de-centralization out of Afghanistan; by granting such requests only to groups that shared his goals of opposing the influence of the West while furthering a specific interpretation of Islam. Documents seized from Abbottabad show how Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda core resisted repeated affiliation requests from the Al-Shabaab group in Somalia,³⁶ highlighting that despite being under significant pressure militarily, furthering the ideology behind the group remained as important to Al-Qaeda as its physical survival. Even if requests for affiliation were not granted, the actions of Al-Qaeda represented a rallying cry to smaller groups that were engaged in Jihadi activity around the world. Thus, other groups that only partially shared in the

³⁴ Islamist – groups or individuals who support a formal political role for Islam through the implementation of Islamic law (sharia) by the state, political action, through religious party or the creation of a religious system by governance. This definition implies that there can be different theological and political priorities between Islamists and different local, national or transnational agendas using violent or nonviolent strategies are possible. [Rollins, 2011].

³⁵ Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al-Qaeda* (Ottawa: CSIS-SCRS, 2013), 27

³⁶ *Ibid*, 27.

ideology of Al-Qaeda still sought to be associated with them in order to increase their own standing in their own regional and domestic struggles. Al-Qaeda nurtured this type of symbiotic relationship by using its ability to wage highly effective information campaigns. At times their actions in this arena bore a striking resemblance to the way Western forces approach their own hearts and minds strategies. Letters captured from Bin Laden's residence show how he expressed concern in 2010 for the safety of his fighters in Pakistan *'not because they might be arrested or detained by the authorities, but because of the torrential rains and flooding that afflicted the country'*.³⁷ This approach from Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda's core has also influenced the behavior and strategies in Al-Qaeda regional affiliates. In Yemen AQAP pay local resident's compensation when their property is damaged in drones strikes, sending a powerfully contrasting message to that of the US, which currently does not officially claim responsibility for such strikes.³⁸ And in December 2012 the head of Jabhat al-Nasra, an officially affiliated Syrian based group that subsumed Al-Qaeda's followers in Iraq in 2012, published a carefully worded message to his followers that highlights how pernicious the indirect spreading of Al Qaeda's influence is becoming:

*'I call on all of you because we are striving in earnest for convergence, cooperation and mutual understanding to heal the Muslim community and turn the page of injustice and tyranny to the radiant pages of justice and charity. Beware, beware my dear brothers not to disappoint the hopes of Muslims who have put their faith in us all.....the collapse of authority fills a vacuum best filled by you'*³⁹

In ways like this, Al-Qaeda fosters relationships with capable terrorist groupings across the globe to further its own strategic aims while continuing to cultivate fundamentalist notions in many

³⁷ Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al-Qaeda* (Ottawa: CSIS-SCRS,[2013]), 28.

³⁸ Jeremy M. Sharp, *Yemen: Background and US Relations* (Washington: Congressional Research Service,[2012]), 24.

³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRC1vTtcF51>

disaffected Islamic based societies. It is important to recognize that propaganda like this does not reflect a softening of Al-Qaeda's core beliefs. Bin Laden proved his willingness to change the external image of the group in 2003 when he first mused with rebranding Al-Qaeda due to the success the US had achieved in painting it as a purely violent organization while ignoring its political aims.⁴⁰ More recently al Zawahiri has recognized that in order to influence the potentially fertile future recruiting grounds of Arab Spring affected countries the approach must again change. This is why the statements like those emanating from Jabhat al-Nasra are becoming more frequent. The disaffected youth demographic in countries like Egypt want economic growth, employment and a secure future. The majority of such populations would traditionally be beyond the reach of Al-Qaeda because its rhetoric and goals extend beyond what many Muslims view as religiously legitimate and practically desirable.⁴¹ However, when the environment is more febrile and the potential for sectarian violence exists, this might not always remain the case.⁴² Through this type of activity, be it forming alliances, attracting followers or influencing populations, Al-Qaeda has been able to maintain its presence and spread its ideology into several weak and failing states across the Middle East and Asia. As a result, and despite the targeting of its core leadership by the US, Al-Qaeda has established new sanctuaries in Yemen,⁴³ seized the city of Fallujah and orchestrated the 'Breaking of the Walls' campaign that saw attacks on 8 prisons and 500 experienced fighters released in Iraq,⁴⁴ and the drawing of revenue

⁴⁰ Canadian Security Intelligence Service, *The Future of Al-Qaeda* (Ottawa: CSIS-SCRS, 2013), 28.

⁴¹ Rollins, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for US Policy*, Vol. Report for Congress R41070, 2011), 30.

⁴² Egypt's Sisi vows Muslim Brotherhood 'will not exist' <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27285846>.

⁴³ Sharp, *Yemen: Background and US Relations* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2012), 31.

⁴⁴ Patrick Cockburn, "Al Qa'ida, the Second Act: Why the Global War on Terror Went Wrong," *Independent* 16th March 2014, 2014c, 3.

from several oil wells in Syria.⁴⁵ Therefore despite the fact that the threat posed by the core of Al-Qaeda has receded and their ability to conduct transnational attacks has been reduced, the group has not yet been defeated. The ideology that acts as the foundation for the organization continues to find an audience and it continues to motivate and influence the actions of each of the affiliated regional groupings of AQIM, AQEA and AQAP. As a result of these associations, Al-Qaeda's core has been able to maintain its legacy and many aspirational but less cable fundamentalist groups continue to find their ideology inspirational. There therefore exists a spectrum which extends from the hardline affiliates at one end to the lone potential home grown Western jihadist at the other. While it might be hard to disentangle the true extent and influence of Al Qaeda amongst this myriad of potential threats, in reality it ceases to matter. Irrespective of the root of their actual beliefs, or the precise affiliations that exist between groupings, cells and individuals, the continued influence of Al-Qaeda does nothing to promote stability in any of the regions where fundamentalist Islamic terrorism represents an attractive option to some. And while the ideology of Al-Qaeda continues to exist, so too does the risk that the group could become transnationally resurgent once again.

As things stand today, Al-Qaeda continues to pose a threat to the West. Despite the attritional nature of the US counter terrorism campaign; there is a dangerous paradox at the heart of tackling the entirety of Al-Qaeda that has still not been fully addressed. Al-Qaeda's beliefs are based around the Sunni interpretation of Islam, which is also the official ideology in Saudi Arabia and several other Arab states. Al-Qaeda's Sunni ideology regards Shiites as heretics. This

⁴⁵ Patrick Cockburn, "Al-Qa'ida, the Second Act: Syria's Secular Uprising has been Hijacked by Jihadists," *Independent* 20 March 2014, 2014b, 3.

sectarian difference was exploited by the group in Iraq when the US assisted Nouri al Malaki's Shia government into power in 2006.⁴⁶ This was the first time that a Shia administration had taken over from a Sunni power in the entire region since 1171AD,⁴⁷ stoking paranoia amongst Sunni's that a long feared Shiite conspiracy to destroy Islam and resuscitate Persian imperial rule over the Middle East was gathering momentum.⁴⁸ Whether paranoid or not, the citizens of Saudi Arabia were generally more supportive of Sunni Jihadist's in Iraq than they were of the Iraqi government. Al-Qaeda was able to exploit this sectarianism and use it to extract support and funding at a time when it was under considerable pressure from the US. Today, a similar situation is unfolding in Syria. The regime of Syria's current President, Bashar al-Assad, is Shia and the rebels who oppose him attract support from Sunni groups including the Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat-Al-Nasri. In this sectarian confusion Al-Qaeda has the opportunity to thrive just as it did in Iraq. Its efforts will not only attract resource support from Sunni supporters in Saudi Arabia one again, but unlike previously in Iraq, the circumstances in Syria make it extremely difficult for the US to act against them for fear of assisting the equally undesirable regime of Assad.

The quandary that the US faces in this situation is likely to be exacerbated by the fact that the Arab Spring has caused several partners in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Jordan and Bahrain, to become focused on their own internal domestic situation and less concerned with assisting in the constant task of containing the threat of transnational terrorism. With less effective support

⁴⁶ Iraq officials: Shiite-led alliance wins election.

<http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/01/20/iraq.main/index.html?eref=sitesearch> last accessed on 8 May 14.

⁴⁷ Patrick Cockburn, "Al-Qa'ida, the Second Act: Is Saudi Arabia Regretting its Support for Terrorism?" *Independent* 17 March 2014, 2014a, 3.

⁴⁸ American Foreign Policy Council, "Al-Qaeda," *World Almanac of Islamism*, 2011, 4.

from Middle Eastern Intelligence and Security partners, coupled with the fragmentation of the threat resulting from the Al-Qaeda's decentralization into regional affiliates, the task of determining where the limited resources of the US intelligence collection effort should be focused becomes much more challenging. Against this backdrop are further exacerbating domestic political factors within the US itself. On the one hand, fiscal constraints are for the first time being felt by the US counterterrorism apparatus, with a 2.5% budget reduction imposed on the National Intelligence Program in 2013 after twelve years of consistent growth.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the US is under increasing pressure to scale back some of the intelligence gathering activities in relation to communications monitoring capabilities operated through the National Security Agency.⁵⁰ These potential limitations to the patrolling of cyberspace come at a time when global internet protocol traffic is forecast to continue expanding at an annual rate of 32%.⁵¹ With more information to sift for incriminating intelligence, and less freedom and technological investment with which to do it, it seems likely that there will be an increasing need for the US to prioritize its counter terrorism efforts onto the plots, groups and individuals that are perceived to represent the greatest threat in terms of will, capability and opportunity. However, the process of prioritization requires human judgment and therefore cannot be perfect. This will lead to an increasing risk that viable threats to western interests will be missed in future.

⁴⁹<http://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/96-press-releases-2012/756-dni-releases-fy-2012-appropriated-budget-figure>

⁵⁰ Charlie Savage, "Obama to Call for End to N.S.A.'s Bulk Data Collection," *New York Times* 24 March, 2014.

⁵¹ Seth Jones, "The Future of Irregular Warfare," *Rand Corporation Testimony* CT-374 (March 2012), 5.

Conclusion

This essay has tried to highlight the two sides of Al-Qaeda and the affect that the US' counterterrorism strategy has had on the group in the years since 9/11. Looking at it through the lens that is most often presented to the US public and her allies, Al-Qaeda is an organization with an anti-western agenda and a logical and hierarchical command structure. In the minds of the citizens it is therefore a targetable entity that can be defeated and contained by Western military power. This view suits the US administration as it reinforces the perception that its actions are safeguarding its citizens at home. There is no doubt that the targeted capture and killing of the Al-Qaeda's leadership hierarchy has had a detrimental effect on the organization, and that the lack of successful transnational terrorist attacks on mainland America and Europe since 2005 vindicates this current approach to some degree. However, the essay has also explained why the death of Bin Laden in 2011 did not prove to be a pivotal point in the fight against Al-Qaeda. When viewed from an ideological perspective instead of the organizational viewpoint, the challenge of defeating Al-Qaeda appears much more difficult. Al-Qaeda's evolution since 2001 has ensured that its influence remains widespread, making it unlikely that the group can be entirely eradicated through precisely targeted military operations alone. The decentralization and the dispersion of its core beliefs into a variety of regional and sectarian disputes across the Middle East and Africa may have led to a reduction in its transnational terrorist capabilities since 9/11, but it has also made it much harder to track, contain and defeat. This decentralization into regional affiliates has also fuelled a proliferation of diverse Islamic based terrorist organizations in several troubled regions around the globe. It will remain a long term challenge for the intelligence agencies to understand the potential threat posed by this myriad of groups, their associates and their radicalized individual followers. What seems beyond doubt is that unless an

effective way of countering the ideological strength of Al-Qaeda is identified to compliment the aggressive approach taken against its physical presence, the current US counter terrorism strategy will at best only be able to contain the threat that Al Qaeda poses, but never entirely eradicate it.

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