3

THE EVOLUTION OF AL-QAIDA

1988 to present day

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Nearly three decades after the establishment of al-Qaida, a fiery Ayman al-Zawahiri addressed rebel fighters in Syria in 2017. “You are those who have taken up the path of jihad in the way of Allah to raise the flag of Islam and jihad,” the al-Qaida leader said. “Unite and close your ranks with your Muslim brothers and *mujahidin* not just in [Greater Syria], but the entire world, for it is a single crusader campaign being waged against Muslims the world over.”¹ For al-Qaida’s leaders, the war in Syria was part of a broad campaign across multiple regions designed to institute an extreme version of *Sharia* (Islamic law) and overthrow existing ruling regimes.

Al-Qaida’s push into Syria, which started in earnest in 2011, was the fourth in a series of historical waves of activity by the group since its establishment in 1988. These waves have been characterized by surges in terrorist violence, along with “reverse waves” distinguished by decreases in terrorist activity.² As political scientist David Rapoport explained, a wave

is a cycle of activity in a given time period—a cycle characterized by expansion and contraction phases. A crucial feature is its international character; similar activities occur in several countries, driven by a common predominant energy that shapes the participating groups’ characteristics and mutual relationships.³

Using Rapoport’s “wave” theory, this chapter reviews the evolution of al-Qaida, beginning with its formation in 1988. It finds that despite some key successes along the way, al-Qaida is no closer to achieving its ambitious goal of a pan-Islamic caliphate three decades after its creation. In addition, al-Qaida has been unable to successfully perpetrate a major terrorist attack in the United States since 9/11.

At least two major challenges plagued al-Qaida’s leaders. First, al-Qaida failed to hold territory because of poor leadership, incompetent governance, excessive violence, and internal tensions. Second, al-Qaida suffered from little popular support in the Muslim world, which hampered its ability to recruit fighters, secure funding, conduct operations, and inspire attacks in the West.

Al-Qaida’s four waves of activity

Fatality data provides a useful measure of al-Qaida activity. Figure 3.1 illustrates al-Qaida’s major activity waves, using the number of fatalities from attacks perpetrated by al-Qaida across the globe. The data includes total attacks per year from the core al-Qaida organization and its formal affiliates.

Figure 3.1 Al-Qaida waves of activity measured by fatalities, 2000–2017.⁴

Source: The data is from the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland. Retrieved on May 15, 2018, from www.start.umd.edu/gtd/.

These affiliates included al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), which became a formal member in 2004 and then left the organization in 2014; al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), based in Algeria and neighboring countries, which became a formal member in 2006; al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), based in Yemen, which became a formal member in 2009; al-Shabaab, based in Somalia, which became a formal member in 2012; Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front) and successor groups based in Syria, such as Hurras al-Din, which became a formal member in 2013; and al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which became a formal member in September 2014.⁵ What distinguishes affiliates from other types of jihadi groups is the decision by their *amirs* (leaders) to swear *baya* (oath of loyalty) to al-Qaida, which was then accepted by al-Qaida's leaders.

The data in Figure 3.1 includes those attacks each year between 2000 and 2017 by al-Qaida core and affiliates. Most of these attacks occurred in countries or regions where al-Qaida had sanctuaries—such as Iraq, Yemen, and Somalia—rather than in the West. After 9/11, al-Qaida's leaders failed to orchestrate a major attack on U.S. soil despite numerous attempts, such as the foiled plot to bomb the New York subway by Najibullah Zazi in 2009.

The first wave began in the late 1980s as Usama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and other jihadi leaders established al-Qaida in Pakistan during the anti-Soviet war. It peaked in 2001 following the 9/11 attacks and was followed by a reversal as al-Qaida leaders and operatives were captured or killed in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States, and across the globe.

A second wave emerged in 2003 after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and was characterized by spectacular attacks across Iraq and in Casablanca, Madrid, London, and other major cities. Yet it was followed by a reverse wave by 2006 as AQI suffered major setbacks in Iraq, British and American intelligence agencies foiled several plots, and U.S. drone strikes killed senior al-Qaida operatives in Pakistan.

A third wave surged from 2007 to 2009 following the rise of AQAP but was followed by a reverse wave with the death of Bin Ladin in 2011 and the loss of other senior leaders.

Finally, the Arab Spring helped create the conditions for a fourth wave of activity as al-Qaida affiliates established a foothold—or expanded their presence—in countries such as Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Somalia.

First wave

Al-Qaida's first wave of terrorist activity began in the late 1980s along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. In August 1988, a group of foreign fighters, who had trekked to the region to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, gathered in Peshawar, Pakistan, to form a new organization. Initially called al-Qaida al-Askariyya (the military base), the group included an advisory council and membership requirements for those interested in joining.⁶ Among the participants were Bin Ladin, Abu Hasan al-Madani, and Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri.

According to notes taken during the meeting by one of the participants, the group decided that "al-Qaida is basically an organized Islamic faction, its goal is to live the word of God, to make His religion victorious." Al-Qaida's leaders divided recruits into two factions: 1) "limited duration" fighters, who would receive training and then fight in Afghanistan; and 2) "open duration" fighters, who would become full members of al-Qaida and would eventually deploy across the globe to conduct violent jihad.⁷

By the early 1990s, Afghanistan deteriorated into a civil war following the departure of Soviet forces and the end of U.S. support to the Afghan *mujahidin* (Islamic resistance fighters). Pakistan also arrested foreign fighters—including al-Qaida operatives—who stayed behind. Some fighters dispersed to countries such as Bosnia, Algeria, Sudan, and Egypt, where they attempted to transform domestic conflict into the armed jihad that Bin Ladin and other al-Qaida leaders had urged them to do.⁸ Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other countries established border controls to capture those who tried to enter, as well as to deter others from even trying.⁹

Al-Qaida leaders such as Bin Ladin and al-Zawahiri were strongly influenced by Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian who argued that fighting in Afghanistan against the Soviets was a requirement for all good Muslims.¹⁰ Another influential figure was Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian and a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In his book *Milestones*, Qutb argued that Western values hindered humanity's progress. Modern-day Islam had become corrupt, he wrote, and he compared the contemporary modern Muslim states with *jahiliyya*. As used in the Quran, *jahiliyya* describes the age of ignorance in which Arabs were supposed to have lived before the revelation of Islam to the Prophet Muhammad at the beginning of the 7th century.¹¹ Qutb urged Muslims to build a new Islamic community, much like the Prophet Muhammad had done a thousand years earlier.¹² Qutb argued that the only legitimate ruler is one who establishes Islamic law "without any question and rejects all other laws in any shape or form."¹³ He also sanctioned offensive jihad against governments that stand in the way of Islam.¹⁴

Inspired by the writings and examples of individuals like Azzam and Qutb, al-Qaida's leaders aimed to overthrow successive regimes in the Middle East (the near enemy) to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate, as well as to fight the United States and its allies (the far enemy) who supported them.¹⁵ As al-Zawahiri wrote, the "establishment of a Muslim state in the heart of the Islamic world is not an easy or close target. However, it is the hope of the Muslim nation to restore its fallen caliphate and regain its lost glory."¹⁶ Figure 3.2 highlights the envisioned caliphate, which ranged from West Africa through the Middle East and South Asia to the Asia-Pacific region.

For al-Qaida, the United States was the most significant far enemy. Al-Qaida's leaders argued that the United States was a corrupting influence due to its Christian roots, aid to Arab regimes, support to Israel, and predilection toward democratic governance rather than Islamic law. To reestablish a caliphate, al-Qaida had to target the supporters of Muslim regimes. The conflict with the United States, then, was a "battle of ideologies, a struggle for survival, and a war with no truce."¹⁷

In February 1998, Bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri, and others published a *fatwa* (religious ruling) to kill Americans: "The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for

Figure 3.2 Al-Qaida's envisioned caliphate.

every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.”¹⁸ The *fatwa* cited three main grievances against the United States: the presence of U.S. troops in the Arabian Peninsula, America’s intention to destroy the Muslim people of Iraq through sanctions, and the U.S. goal of incapacitating the Arab states and propping up Israel. Bin Ladin accused the United States of plundering the Muslim world’s riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, and terrorizing its neighbors.

Following a decade of preparation and organization, al-Qaida launched its first wave of violence in earnest in 1998. At 5:35 AM on August 7, 1998, National Security Advisor Sandy Berger woke President Bill Clinton to inform him that there were simultaneous attacks against the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

The destruction was horrific. In Nairobi, the blast leveled a three-story building, gutted the rear half of the U.S. Embassy, and incinerated dozens of people in their seats in nearby buses. The al-Qaida operatives had packed 400 to 500 cylinders of TNT (each about the size of a soda can), aluminum nitrate, and aluminum powder into specially designed wooden crates that were sealed and placed in the bed of a truck. The area around the U.S. Embassy was a maze of narrow streets and alleys, which trapped and intensified the blast. Shards of flying concrete, steel, glass, furniture, and other debris battered pedestrians, motorists, and embassy workers from multiple directions.¹⁹

On August 20, 1988, President Clinton ordered cruise missile strikes against al-Qaida targets in Afghanistan and Sudan in what was codenamed Operation Infinite Reach. As one of Bin Ladin’s sons explained following the U.S. strikes in Afghanistan, “The air was suddenly full of menace, with bright flashes and crashes so loud that their eardrums were bursting. . . . Wherever the missiles hit, life was obliterated. Buildings evaporated and large craters opened the earth.”²⁰

Although U.S. missiles struck their intended targets in Afghanistan, neither Bin Ladin nor any other senior terrorist leader was killed.²¹ Two years later, al-Qaida operatives bombed the guided-missile destroyer USS *Cole* on October 12, 2000, while it was refueling in Yemen. The attack killed 17 U.S. soldiers and injured 39 others.²²

On September 11, 2001, al-Qaida executed its most audacious terrorist attack when 19 operatives hijacked four airplanes in the United States: United Airlines Flight 175, American Airlines Flight 11, American Airlines Flight 77, and United Airlines Flight 93. Al-Qaida operatives called the attacks the “blessed double raid” since they targeted sites in New York City and Washington, DC.²³

Al-Qaida terrorists flew one of the planes into the Pentagon and two others into the World Trade Center towers in New York City, which caused both of the nearly 1,400-foot-high buildings to collapse. The fourth plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after passengers stormed the cockpit. The September 11 attacks killed nearly 3,000 people and wounded thousands more.²⁴

In response, U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) forces took aim at al-Qaida and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which had provided sanctuary to Bin Ladin and other al-Qaida leaders.²⁵ It was a remarkably effective campaign. Approximately 100 CIA officers, 350 Special Operations Forces, and some 15,000 Afghans—running as many as 100 combat sorties per day—defeated a Taliban army estimated at 50,000 to 60,000 soldiers plus several thousand al-Qaida fighters.²⁶

Al-Qaida was severely weakened. The United States seized more than 20 terrorist training camps, killed thousands of enemy fighters, and forced hundreds of al-Qaida members and thousands of Taliban to flee across the borders of Pakistan and Iran. By December 2001, three months after the attacks, al-Qaida was in disarray. One quarter of Bin Ladin’s top commanders had been killed or captured.²⁷ Al-Qaida’s first wave was on the wane.

Second wave

By 2003, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the subsequent insurgency that developed gave al-Qaida new life. America’s invasion galvanized al-Qaida sympathizers and helped launch al-Qaida’s second wave. One

of al-Qaida's strongest allies in Iraq was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who had arrived in northern Iraq in 2002. He was not a member of al-Qaida but was the leader of a jihadi group called Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (Organization of Monotheism and Jihad).

Nationalist groups led by former regime officers, Sunni religious figures, and Baathists dominated the insurgency after the U.S. invasion. Yet al-Zarqawi and his group orchestrated a lethal campaign of car bombs and gruesome beheadings. On August 8, 2003, a cell allied with al-Zarqawi helped plan and carry out a car bombing at the Jordanian Embassy in the al-Andalus district of Baghdad, which killed 17 people.

On August 19, al-Zarqawi's organization bombed the United Nations headquarters in Iraq, which killed United Nations Special Representative Sergio Vieira de Mello.²⁸ On August 29, al-Zarqawi's network exploded a car bomb outside the Imam Ali mosque in Najaf, killing the Shia chairman of the Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim.

On October 17, 2004, al-Zarqawi swore allegiance to Bin Ladin, and he was accepted into al-Qaida. Al-Zarqawi's terrorist campaign was intense, widespread, and effective.²⁹ He advocated the subjugation of Shia Muslims—whom he considered apostates (those who have abandoned religion)—and the creation of a worldwide caliphate governed by *Sharia*. He called for a “total war” against Shia in hopes of rallying Sunni Muslims to his side and countering the growing role of Iran and Shia militias in Iraq. Shia were increasingly dominating the new Iraqi Army, al-Zarqawi contended, and Shia power would continue to grow if they were not opposed.

By this time, al-Zarqawi's organization, which he renamed AQI, had roughly 15 brigades operating under its banner, including two “martyrs” brigades dedicated to suicide operations. The group released daily communiqués, ran two official websites, and published two magazines.³⁰ Bin Ladin welcomed al-Zarqawi into al-Qaida and identified Iraq as al-Qaida's central battleground against the United States.³¹ Al-Zarqawi's organization brought in foreign fighters at unprecedented levels, mostly through Syria.³² According to documents captured in a raid near Sinjar, along Iraq's border with Syria, AQI's foreign contingent came primarily from Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, and Syria.³³ Al-Qaida's second wave of terrorism was underway.

In May 2003, a group with ties to al-Qaida killed 45 people in Casablanca during a series of suicide bombings. The same week, al-Qaida operatives conducted multiple attacks in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, killing 34 people. In August, a suicide car bomber detonated explosives in front of a Marriott hotel in Jakarta, Indonesia, killing 12. In November, there were multiple attacks in Istanbul, which killed more than 40 people.

Then, in 2004, a potentially al-Qaida-linked terrorist attack shook Europe. North African terrorists brought 13 improvised explosive devices concealed in blue sports bags into the Alcalá train station in Madrid, Spain, on March 11. They placed the bombs in the luggage and seating areas in four trains. The first train left Alcalá de Henares station on the C-1 track at 7:01 AM, headed for downtown Madrid. The other three followed shortly thereafter. After placing the bombs and setting the timers, the terrorists exited the trains.

The Madrid attacks left 191 dead and 1,755 injured, up to that point the largest number of casualties from an attack in continental Europe since World War II. The operatives were not members of al-Qaida, but they were inspired by its ideology and activities. In addition, some of the Madrid attackers had connections to al-Qaida operatives like Hamza Rabia, al-Qaida's head of operations in Europe and North America.³⁴

The following year, al-Qaida attacked London. Beginning at 8:50 AM on July 7, 2005, four suicide bombers trained by al-Qaida operatives in Pakistan conducted attacks in central London. Three bombers targeted London's subway system, the Underground, and one bomber detonated explosives on the #30 double-decker bus traveling east from Marble Arch. The attacks killed 56 people, including the four suicide bombers. The ringleader, Mohammad Siddique Khan, had trained in al-Qaida-affiliated camps in Pakistan.³⁵

By this time, UK security agencies, such as the country's domestic intelligence agency MI5, were overwhelmed due to threats from al-Qaida and other terrorist networks. According to MI5's estimates, the spy agency could cover 6% of its targets fairly well (but with gaps), 33% fairly (with even bigger gaps), and 42% inadequately, and 19% had no coverage at all.³⁶

To make matters worse, the terrorist threat appeared to be growing more serious. In 2001, MI5 knew of approximately 250 primary investigative targets within the United Kingdom. There were more than 500 targets by July 2004 and 800 by July 2005. To deal with the threat, UK government agencies increased their coverage of Islamic extremists. Roughly 56% of MI5's resources went to Islamic groups in July 2005, up from 23% in 2002.³⁷

Much like during the first wave, however, the tide eventually began to turn. Al-Zarqawi's brutality in Iraq was too much even for some al-Qaida leaders. In 2005, al-Qaida second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri sent a note to al-Zarqawi criticizing him for conducting a ruthless campaign of violence that was undermining al-Qaida's support among local Iraqis. "In the absence of this popular support," argued al-Zawahiri, "the Islamic mujahid movement would be crushed in the shadows."³⁸

By 2006, AQI's violence had triggered a revolt among Anbar Province's tribal sheikhs.³⁹ Members of the U.S. Army's 1st Brigade of the 1st Armored Division, Marines from the I and II Marine Expeditionary Force, CIA operatives, U.S. Special Operations Forces, and a host of agencies provided intelligence, firepower, and ultimately trust in local Iraqis to defend themselves. The widespread Sunni Arab Iraqi revolt against AQI became known as the Sunni Arab Awakening, or *sahwa* in Arabic.

The Awakening, which punctuated the end of al-Qaida's second wave, resulted from a complex range of factors such as egregious al-Qaida abuses against the Sunni population, tribal infighting, criminal disputes, U.S. engagement, elite payoffs, and the surge of U.S. military forces.⁴⁰ Sunni Arabs joined anti-al-Qaida militia groups and helped identify al-Qaida leaders for targeting. The *sahwa's* results were clear: al-Qaida lost control of the Sunni population in Iraq, and it was forced into internal exile in the most remote areas of the country.⁴¹

Third wave

Al-Qaida, however, began to mount a comeback—a third wave. Al-Qaida established a new front in Yemen, and a charismatic Yemeni-American operative named Anwar al-Awlaqi aided the group. He was born on April 22, 1971, in Las Cruces, New Mexico, where his father was studying on a Fulbright scholarship.⁴² Al-Awlaqi spent much of his childhood in Yemen and eventually moved to the United States.

Fluent in English and adept at giving eloquent talks on Islam, al-Awlaqi's stirring lectures earned him a growing cadre of followers. Perhaps most importantly, he understood the intricacies of the internet, using it to broadcast his messages well before the Islamic State began to dominate this medium beginning in 2014. Al-Awlaqi's fluency in vernacular English, support for al-Qaida, unabashed advocacy of jihad, and web-savvy approach were a powerful combination. His lectures could be accessed on the internet, and Islamic bookstores around the world sold his compact discs.

Al-Awlaqi operated his own blog and was active on several social networking sites. His supporters established sites on Facebook and MySpace devoted to proselytizing his sermons and praising him. Al-Awlaqi envisioned himself as a vanguard figure among English-speaking Muslims. It was his mission to spread the word.

Most of al-Awlaqi's online English lectures were non-violent and centered on traditional religious themes, but some of his most stirring sermons blended the former Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb's rigid dogmatism with al-Qaida's sweeping ambition to overthrow Arab regimes and weaken their Western supporters. Al-Awlaqi's sermon, "The Constants of Jihad," mesmerized would-be radicals. He urged listeners: "Jihad will . . . carry on until the Day of Judgment since we are told to wipe out [non-Muslims] from the world."⁴³

Al-Awlaqi was not the only influential jihadi. A growing number of would-be jihadis were also inspired by Abu Musab al-Suri's online publication, "The Global Islamic Resistance Call." Al-Suri was a naturalized Spanish engineer who argued that Muslims should encourage a civil war in the West, including in Europe.

In January 2009, al-Qaida publicly announced that Saudi and Yemeni operatives had unified under the banner of a single group in Yemen, which they named AQAP. Al-Awlaqi pledged *baya*, or loyalty, to the group's *amir* (leader).⁴⁴ Al-Awlaqi settled in Shabwa Governorate of Yemen and ran his global jihadi enterprise.⁴⁵ He developed an online blog, which was later shut down. He also improved his Facebook and MySpace pages, as well as adding postings on YouTube and other social media forums to proselytize his jihadi message. "The internet has become a great medium for spreading the call of jihad and following the news of the *mujahidin*," al-Awlaqi wrote.⁴⁶

By 2009, al-Qaida—with operatives inspired by individuals such as al-Awlaqi—was plotting attacks in the United States. In June 2009, Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, who changed his name from Carlos Bledsoe, opened fire with a semi-automatic rifle on a military recruiting center in Little Rock, Arkansas, killing one soldier and wounding another. He had listened to al-Awlaqi's sermons and spent time in Yemen.⁴⁷

On November 5, 2009, a U.S. Army major, Nidal Malik Hasan, gunned down 13 people and wounded 43 others at Fort Hood, Texas. Hasan had first met al-Awlaqi in 2001 at the Dar al-Hijra mosque in Falls Church, Virginia, where al-Awlaqi was the imam.⁴⁸ Hasan and al-Awlaqi exchanged at least 18 e-mails that discussed the afterlife, the appropriate time for violent jihad, and how to transfer funds abroad without triggering law enforcement attention.⁴⁹

Hasan was then promoted to the rank of major in the U.S. Army and received deployment orders to Afghanistan. That served as a catalyst. At approximately 1:30 PM on November 5, Hasan walked into the Soldier Readiness Center at Fort Hood, a facility that processed soldiers before and after deployment. He bowed his head for several seconds and then stood up and opened fire, shouting "Allahu Akbar!"⁵⁰

In December 2009, al-Qaida struck again. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who was born in Nigeria, met with al-Awlaqi several times and attended a training camp in the Shabwa region of Yemen. In late 2009, Abdulmutallab met again with al-Awlaqi. The cleric asked if the young Nigerian would conduct a suicide mission. Abdulmutallab agreed.⁵¹

Al-Awlaqi revealed that the mission would take place in the United States and provided some basic guidance. He requested that Abdulmutallab conduct the attack on a U.S. airline, carry out the attack only when he was ready, travel through an African country to avoid suspicion, and detonate the bomb over U.S. airspace. In early December, Abdulmutallab prepared a *wasia*, or last will and testament, in a hand-written letter addressed to his parents. A video later released by AQAP's media arm showed Abdulmutallab engaged in training in the Yemeni desert.

On December 24, 2009, Abdulmutallab boarded Northwest Airlines Flight 253 in Amsterdam, Netherlands, which was scheduled to arrive in Detroit, Michigan, the next day on December 25. The flight carried 279 passengers and 11 crew members.⁵² Abdulmutallab wore a bomb in his underwear. The main explosive charge consisted of pentaerythritol tetranitrate (also known as PETN), although forensic analysis also found traces of triacetone triperoxide (also known as TATP).⁵³ The initiator consisted of a plastic syringe, possibly filled with ethylene glycol, which was supposed to be inserted into a chemical mixture stored in a cloth pouch in Abdulmutallab's underwear.⁵⁴ The flame produced by the reaction was designed to be sufficient to initiate the TATP a few seconds later, which would initiate the PETN main charge.

The explosion, al-Qaida's leaders hoped, would bring down the airplane. The bomb did not include large pieces of metal, such as wires and batteries, making it difficult for airport screeners to detect. In the end, the bomb ignited, injuring Abdulmutallab and two other passengers. The main charge, however, failed to ignite and the airplane landed safely at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. It was a close call.

The failure did not deter al-Qaida. In August 2008, Najibullah Zazi, a U.S. citizen from New York, met with senior al-Qaida operatives in Pakistan. Zazi agreed to execute one of al-Qaida's boldest plots since

9/11: a suicide attack on the New York City subway modeled, in part, on the successful 2005 attack in London. The plot involved two other Americans: Adis Medunjanin and Zarein Ahmedzay. Zazi conducted training at al-Qaida camps in Pakistan.⁵⁵

Zazi's training was critical for several reasons. It provided him technical expertise necessary to assemble a bomb, which would have been more difficult had he only used internet-based instructions. Zazi was trained in peroxide-based detonators and explosives. He also received two or three days of classroom training on firearms, followed by hands-on training that involved weapons assembly, cleaning, and handling of handguns, rifles, and other weapons. Due to the efforts of UK and U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies, Zazi's plot was thwarted. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrested Zazi on September 19, 2009. On January 10, 2010, the FBI arrested Medunjanin and Ahmedzay.

By late 2010, however, al-Qaida's third wave of terrorism began to decline because of persistent U.S. action across the globe. U.S. strikes killed a number of al-Qaida leaders: external operations chief Saleh al-Somali in Pakistan in December 2009, general manager Sheikh Said al-Masri in Pakistan in May 2010, senior al-Qaida operations officer Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Najdi in Pakistan in September 2010, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir in Iraq in April 2010, and Anwar al-Awlaqi in Yemen in September 2011.

The pace of U.S. drone strikes had increased under the Obama administration and involved multiple U.S. intelligence agencies that recruited human assets, intercepted electronic communications, and analyzed satellite and other imagery. The drone strikes, however, were controversial.⁵⁶

On May 2, 2011, U.S. military and intelligence operatives killed al-Qaida chief Usama bin Ladin in Pakistan.⁵⁷ Shortly after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Bin Ladin had trekked through the Afghan mountains near Tora Bora and entered Pakistan in December 2001. He then moved among a number of homes in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. In 2005, he settled into his safe house in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where U.S. operatives would eventually find and kill him. Ayman al-Zawahiri replaced Bin Ladin as the new leader of al-Qaida.

The third wave was over. The United States implemented a light-footprint approach in countries such as Yemen and Pakistan, where it effectively targeted al-Qaida's leaders. The United States increased drone strikes, which severely disrupted al-Qaida's command-and-control by killing most of its senior leaders, hampered communications, decreased morale, limited freedom of movement, and delayed the planning cycle of terrorist operations.⁵⁸

Fourth wave

Beginning around 2012, a fourth wave began as al-Qaida attempted to take advantage of the Arab Spring uprisings and escalating wars in countries such as Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Al-Qaida also found itself in competition with the Islamic State. By the fourth wave, core al-Qaida had been severely weakened from persistent U.S. drone strikes. Ayman al-Zawahiri remained al-Qaida's leader, and a small number of al-Qaida leaders were located in nearby Iran with ties to the leadership, including Saif al-Adel.⁵⁹

The core leaders, however, had limited legitimacy and power over al-Qaida's affiliates in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Most of al-Qaida's power and influence had trickled down to its affiliates.⁶⁰ Al-Qaida's core also suffered several major losses. In August 2020, for example, Israel's spy agency, the Mossad, allegedly assassinated Abu Muhammad al-Masri in Tehran in cooperation with the United States.⁶¹

In Syria, al-Qaida's main allies were Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Tanzim Hurras al-Din, which were primarily located in northwestern Syria. These groups—particularly Tanzim Hurras al-Din—plotted external attacks against Western targets, although they failed to perpetrate any major attacks against the United States. The United States killed several al-Qaida veterans in Syria, including Abu Mohammed al-Sudani in October 2020.⁶²

In Yemen, AQAP tried to expand its foothold in such governorates as Abyan, Marib, and Shabwa as a civil war raged in the country. In April 2017, for example, former AQAP leader Qasim al-Raymi—who

was killed in January 2020 by a U.S. airstrike—outlined his strategy of fighting the Houthis and building broad and deep support among Sunni groups and tribes in Yemen.

Outside of Yemen, AQAP's leaders also called for "easy and simple" attacks against the United States and other Western countries, such as small-arms attacks.⁶³ In December 2019, Second Lieutenant Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani, a Saudi air force cadet training with the American military in Pensacola, Florida, killed three U.S. sailors and injured three others in a shooting attack. He was inspired by al-Qaida's ideology, communicated with leaders of AQAP up until the attack, and joined the Saudi military in part to carry out a "special operation" for al-Qaida.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, AQAP still struggled to orchestrate attacks against the United States and other Western countries.

In South Asia, al-Zawahiri announced the creation of al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in September 2014 as a regional affiliate, taking advantage of sanctuaries in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. By 2020, AQIS boasted several hundred members and had cells in the southern and eastern provinces in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaida's overall size and presence in Afghanistan was almost certainly larger and more expansive than five or even 10 years before.⁶⁵ This expansion was due, in part, to Taliban advances in Afghanistan. As a U.S. Department of Defense assessment concluded in 2020, "Despite recent progress in the peace process, AQIS maintains close ties to the Taliban in Afghanistan, likely for protection and training."⁶⁶ Contacts between al-Qaida and the Haqqani Network—including the Taliban's deputy leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani—remain particularly close. They shared long-standing personal relationships, intermarriage, a shared history of struggle, and sympathetic ideologies.⁶⁷

Al-Qaida was also active in other regions. In West Africa, for example, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wa al Muslimeen was one of al-Qaida's most active affiliates, controlling territory and conducting attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and other countries. In East Africa, al-Shabaab conducted attacks in Somalia and neighboring countries, especially Kenya, despite military operations led by the United States and the African Union Mission in Somalia. Al-Qaida also suffered notable losses, such as the death of Abdelmalek Droukdel, the longtime head of AQIM, in June 2020.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Following its establishment in 1988, al-Qaida evolved during four major waves of activity from a small network of individuals in Pakistan to a pan-Islamic movement that would eventually try to compete with the Islamic State for legitimacy and the resources of violent jihadis across the globe. Over three decades after its establishment, al-Qaida included four main tiers.

The first tier was a weak leadership structure based mostly in Pakistan and Afghanistan that was decimated by U.S. and partner attacks. Core al-Qaida had little power over its affiliates but attempted to provide overall guidance about the group's goals, which included respect the *tawhid*, or oneness of God; support governance by Islamic law; unite Muslims across the world around the *tawhid*; revive the duty of armed jihad to "liberate" countries across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia and target their supporters, including the United States; and strive to build a caliphate.⁶⁹

The second tier included formal affiliates. These affiliates swore *baya* to al-Qaida's leader who, in turn, accepted their loyalty pledge. Examples included AQIM, AQAP, al-Shabaab, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wa al Muslimeen, Hurras al-Din, and AQIS.

The third tier involved allied violent jihadi groups that established a relationship with al-Qaida, such as the Afghan Taliban. They were not created by core al-Qaida, they did not become formal members, and their leaders did not swear *baya* to al-Qaida. This arrangement allowed the groups to remain independent and pursue their own goals but still work with al-Qaida for specific operations or training purposes when their interests converged. There were a number of allied groups across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus.

The fourth tier comprised individuals and networks that had no direct contact with core al-Qaida but who were inspired by al-Qaida's ideology and outraged by perceived oppression of Muslims across the globe. They were often motivated by a hatred of the West and its "apostate" regimes in the Muslim world. Without direct support, these individuals and networks tended to be amateurish.⁷⁰

The existence of these tiers made it difficult for al-Qaida or any other violent jihadi group, including the Islamic State, to establish command-and-control over all Muslim extremists. Indeed, al-Qaida was plagued by several challenges. One was a repeated failure to hold territory where the group or its allies could impose their extreme interpretation of Islamic law and ultimately its hoped-for caliphate. Al-Qaida's leaders developed a close relationship with Mullah Omar's Taliban in the 1990s and established a sanctuary in Afghanistan, only to lose it after the 9/11 attacks.

Al-Qaida affiliates in Yemen, Syria, Somalia, and African countries like Algeria and Mali also consistently failed to hold territory because of poor leadership, incompetent governance, limited support from local populations, excessive violence, internal tensions, and other factors—including aggressive targeting by the United States and its local and international allies.

Another problem was a lack of support. In a brusque letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri remarked that "we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds" of Muslims.⁷¹ Yet Bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri, and other al-Qaida leaders consistently failed to translate this statement into practice. Public opinion polls showed that Muslim views of al-Qaida were consistently negative. "Strong majorities in most countries have unfavorable opinions of the group," concluded one poll conducted in 14 Muslim countries in 2014.⁷² Another survey found that Bin Ladin had been "largely discredited" and there was "little support for the al-Qaida leader."⁷³

Al-Qaida's lack of popular support has been a chronic problem for the group. Over three decades after its establishment, al-Qaida is no closer to fulfilling its grandiose vision of a pan-Islamic caliphate, and there is little prospect that this trend will change.

Notes

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- 4 The data is from the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland, accessed May 15, 2017, www.start.umd.edu/gtd/.
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- 14 See, for example, Kepel, *Jihad*, 25–27.
- 15 On the establishment of a caliphate, see, for example, Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Ummah Will Pass*, trans. John M. Olin (Cambridge, MA: Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, May 23, 2006).
- 16 Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, trans. Laura Mansfield (Old Tappan, NJ: TLG, 2002), 201.
- 17 Ibid., 111.
- 18 The text is the second *fatwa* to declare a holy war, or jihad, against the West and Israel. Usama bin Ladin et al., “Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders,” February 23, 1998, www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm.
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- 20 Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Jean Sasson, *Growing Up Bin Laden: Osama's Wife and Son Take Us Inside Their Secret World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 240.
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- 33 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al Qaeda's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).
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