

Summary of *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eric V. Thompson', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Dr. Eric V. Thompson, Director and VP
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Abstract

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.” The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment. This document presents a summary of the results of that assessment.

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Executive Summary

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.” The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment. Section 1228 specified that the independent assessment should include these topics:

1. An assessment of Al-Qaeda core’s current relationship with affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.
2. An assessment of the current objectives, capabilities, and overall strategy of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how they have changed over time.
3. An assessment of the operational and organizational structure of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.
4. An analysis of the activities that have proven to be most effective and least effective at disrupting and dismantling Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.
5. Recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.

The NDAA mandated that the results of this assessment be provided to select congressional committees via an unclassified report. In August 2017, CNA published a report that fulfilled this requirement.¹ This document presents a summary of the results of CNA’s assessment of these topics. Of note, given the wide scope and long

¹ Julia McQuaid, et al. *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

timeframe of these topics, we had to carefully bound our assessment approach. A list of specific scoping caveats can be found in the body of this document.

Assessment results

Findings on Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates

Nearly 16 years after September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda is a very different organization in a very different world. It has suffered setbacks and periods of weakening, but it has also made gains and expanded in the face of international efforts against it. With respect to the first three topics required by the NDAA, we arrived at these findings:

- **Al-Qaeda is still pursuing the core goals that it had in 2001, the most notable of which is the establishment of a global caliphate.** Over time, the organization has added goals and adjusted its strategy in response to counterterrorism actions against it and changes in the environments in which it operates, but its primary objectives remain unchanged. Al-Qaeda's leadership continues to advocate for a long-term, patient campaign utilizing terrorist and insurgent tactics against both the "near enemy" (apostate Muslim regimes) and the "far enemy" (the United States and the West).
- **Al-Qaeda today is larger, more agile, and more resilient than it was in 2001.** Sixteen years ago, the core of Al-Qaeda was in Afghanistan and the organization had a nominal presence in a handful of other countries. Today, in addition to what remains of core Al-Qaeda, there are five Al-Qaeda affiliates: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Syria (AQS), Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and al-Shebab (in Somalia). In addition, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), once the most virulent of Al-Qaeda's affiliates, evolved into what we now know as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).
- **In 2001, Al-Qaeda was a rigidly hierarchical organization. Today, Al-Qaeda is a flat, decentralized, and geographically dispersed organization.** The notion of "core" Al-Qaeda sitting at the center of the group's affiliates is waning in utility, as many of the original members of Al-Qaeda and its other leaders have moved out of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and co-located themselves with some of the group's affiliates (most notably AQAP and AQS). The group's affiliates, which are now active in over 10 Muslim-majority countries, have more autonomy than in the past, and most of the affiliates have connections with other affiliates (the possible exception being AQIS).

- **Al-Qaeda is a learning and adaptive organization, and this contributes to the group’s resilience.** Al-Qaeda has shown that it can weather severe setbacks (e.g., AQI’s near defeat in Iraq), learn from its mistakes, and evolve its approach over time. In recent years, Al-Qaeda has been able to adapt its approach to make new gains. In particular, the group’s affiliates have become more adept at pursuing local goals via the provision of governance attuned to local contexts.
- **The threat from Al-Qaeda to the United States homeland remains, but does not appear to be the foremost goal of every part of the organization.** While Al-Qaeda’s leadership continues to advocate for attacks against the United States directly and some of its affiliates (e.g., AQAP and AQS) have at times acted in accordance with these wishes, Al-Qaeda’s affiliates today seem more focused on achieving success in local and regional conflicts against the organization’s “near enemies.”
- **The emergence of ISIS (an Al-Qaeda offshoot), presents both obstacles and opportunities for Al-Qaeda.** ISIS is arguably the vanguard of global jihad today and the group has amassed an impressive following and significant resources in only a few years. However, ISIS has also drawn the bulk of the attention and resources of the United States-led global counterterrorism effort in recent years, which has reduced the pressure on Al-Qaeda in other areas.
- **Al-Qaeda may be biding its time to regroup, regenerate, and regain the mantle of global jihad.** While the world has been focused on ISIS in recent years, Al-Qaeda has been learning, adapting its approach, and grooming the next generation of its leadership via the jihad in Syria, Yemen, and other locations. Notable among these due to his lineage is Hamza Bin Laden, one of Osama Bin Laden’s sons.

Findings on local and regional security environments

The trajectory of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates has been shaped by the organization’s own actions and decisions, but also by external forces. Actions by the United States and its partners are one such external force, but shifts in local and regional security conditions have also impacted how the group has changed and evolved. Shifts in these conditions have also impacted the United States’ ability to pursue its objectives against Al-Qaeda, often in negative ways.

With the specific questions from the NDAA in mind, we offer the following findings concerning the evolution of local and regional security environments and the associated impact on Al-Qaeda and the United States:

- **In the years since 2001, many of the countries in the Middle East and Africa have become increasingly politically, socially, and economically unstable.** The worsening conditions in many of these countries have led to a host of vulnerabilities in their security environments, such as internal conflicts, government corruption and illegitimacy, collapse of governing regimes, and neighboring states in crisis.
- **Al-Qaeda routinely exploits deteriorating security conditions, or vulnerabilities, in the security environments of weak and failing countries in order to maneuver and expand.** Key examples include Syria, Yemen, the Sahel region of Africa (especially Mali), Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Southeast Asia. In these countries and many others, security vulnerabilities have emerged or become more widespread within the past decade.
- **Al-Qaeda can exploit security vulnerabilities in weak or failing states, though its success in doing so still requires skillful approaches on the part of the organization’s affiliates.** Al-Qaeda’s ability to take advantage of these conditions is enhanced when it has a pre-existing presence or relationships with disaffected populations or groups in a country, or when it is able to quickly establish such relationships.
- **Al-Qaeda has benefitted from slow, negative trends in the security conditions in countries across much of the Middle East and Africa, but its largest gains have occurred when there were sharp and rapid deteriorations.** For example, Al-Qaeda’s strongest affiliates today are AQAP and AQS, which exist in the midst of the civil wars in Yemen and Syria, respectively. Additionally, AQI instigated a civil war in Iraq and its strength increased considerably as that civil war increased in intensity.
- **Worsening trends in security conditions not only help Al-Qaeda but can significantly hinder U.S. government efforts to counter the group.** This has been the case for the United States’ “by, with, and through” approaches (in which we lose local partners), unilateral counterterrorism actions (in which we lose bases for such operations), and diplomatic and development activities (in which our civilian personnel lose the ability to engage at-risk communities).

Findings on the U.S. government’s effectiveness against Al-Qaeda

With respect to the fourth topic required by the NDAA, the table on the next page presents a summary of broad observations from our assessment of U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda, at institutional and operational levels.

Table. Summary of assessment of U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda

	Successes	Failures
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. has made significant progress moving from a “stove-piped” approach to a comprehensive “whole-of-government” approach to countering Al-Qaeda, and countering terrorism in general The U.S. has established key partnerships and worked cooperatively with countries around the world to counter Al-Qaeda The U.S. has developed a highly effective and efficient set of counterterrorism forces which operate through a combination of intelligence and special operations forces (SOF), coupled with continued innovation and improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. has failed to learn that regime change without effective stabilization operations creates enormous opportunities for Al-Qaeda in both the targeted country and neighboring ones The U.S. has failed to develop a proactive, consistent, and compelling narrative that can effectively compete with the narrative that Al-Qaeda uses to advance its cause and to gain new recruits and followers The U.S. has failed to adequately and consistently align its approaches in ways that address the full spectrum of challenges that Al-Qaeda poses to the U.S. and the security vulnerabilities that Al-Qaeda exploits in countries where it currently operates or seeks to expand The U.S. has failed to fundamentally appreciate the resilience of Al-Qaeda as an organization, as a brand, and as a movement
Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There has not been another terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland anywhere near the scale of the attacks of 9/11 In the early years of the war in Afghanistan, U.S. forces were effective at disrupting core Al-Qaeda, driving its leadership into hiding, and depriving the organization of what had been its main base of operations in Afghanistan In Iraq in the 2006-2008 timeframe, U.S. forces were able to almost completely dismantle AQI The Department of Defense (DOD) has had success building counterterrorism capacity in some partner nation security forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. has not effectively consolidated gains in the few instances where it has had success against Al-Qaeda in order to prevent the group from resurging The U.S. has failed to stop the spread of Al-Qaeda The U.S. has been unable to replicate the conditions that allowed it to almost completely dismantle AQI in its fight against any of the other Al-Qaeda affiliates

Discussion

The NDAA states the U.S. policy goals for Al-Qaeda as disrupt, dismantle, and defeat, and calls for recommendations to achieve those goals. However, it does not define those terms—nor are there commonly accepted definitions for them across the U.S. government. As such, we reviewed a number of sources and established the following definitions:

- **Disrupt:** Al-Qaeda is unable to conduct attacks against the U.S. homeland or U.S. interests abroad.
- **Dismantle:** Al-Qaeda has been reduced to a point where it is no longer a coherent, functioning entity operationally and tactically.
- **Defeat:** Al-Qaeda does not have the capability and will to fight the United States and its partners.

With respect to these definitions, we assess that:

- **The United States has primarily emphasized approaches that aim to disrupt Al-Qaeda (especially since 2011) and has been generally effective at doing so.**
- **The U.S. has had some successes in dismantling Al-Qaeda, but none has been sustained.** This has mostly been due to a lack of, or the ineffectiveness of, efforts to address underlying local and regional security vulnerabilities that Al-Qaeda exploits to maintain and expand its presence.
- **The United States has not defeated Al-Qaeda core or any of its affiliates, and it is not clear that the United States—at the strategic level—has a vision for what that defeat would look like or how to bring it about.**
- **The United States’ assumption that “disrupt, dismantle, defeat” represents a linear set of goals that build upon each other is flawed and should be revisited.** In particular, we assess that the goal of *disrupting* Al-Qaeda is distinct from (and potentially contradictory to) the goals of *dismantling* and *defeating* the group.

With these assessments in mind, we conclude that the U.S. government needs to decide which goal it wants to pursue: continued disruption; dismantling of some or all of the Al-Qaeda affiliates; complete defeat of the Al-Qaeda organization; or something else.

Below, in accordance with the fifth NDAA topic, we identify what the U.S. government would need to do in order to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda. But we do so

with the understanding that these are not the only policy goals available to the U.S. government.

Requirements for disrupting Al-Qaeda

We assess that the degree of the Al-Qaeda problem is likely to increase in the near-term future as a result of existing (and in some cases, growing) vulnerabilities in the security environments in the regions of the world where Al-Qaeda operates and seeks to operate. If the U.S. continues to pursue a strategy that emphasizes *disrupting* Al-Qaeda in order to reduce the short-term risk of an attack on the U.S. homeland and its interests abroad, we assess that the level of U.S. resources required will also likely continue to increase. If the U.S. government decides to pursue this goal, we assess that it would need to:

- Largely continue its current approaches to Al-Qaeda, but prepare itself—and the American public—for the likelihood of increased costs in both blood and treasure to maintain Al-Qaeda in a disrupted state over time.
- Conduct additional analysis to determine how much further it can expand its current approaches to countering terrorism before the forces tasked with these missions reach a breaking point.

Requirements for dismantling Al-Qaeda

If the U.S. government decides to shift its strategy to pursue the goal of fully *dismantling* Al-Qaeda, we assess that the U.S. government would need to:

- Create an operational plan focused on Al-Qaeda with a goal of isolating each affiliate and conducting high-tempo counterterrorism operations to dismantle each part of the organization. This plan should be tailored to address the operational differences between the affiliates and the contextual nuances that accompany each one. To enable these operations, the United States would need to:
 - “Surge” resources to reinforce on-going counterterrorism efforts focused on Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. This would likely entail greater use of conventional U.S. military forces to bolster U.S. SOF and greater use of the civilian agencies, to include the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Office of Transition Initiatives, and the Department of the Treasury’s Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence.
 - Establish well-defined rules of engagement and limits for collateral damage, and push authorities for military action within those guidelines down to the lowest politically acceptable levels within the DOD.

- Establish a combined joint inter-agency task force to focus on severing the linkages between Al-Qaeda's affiliates (i.e., personnel movement, money transfers, and communications).
- Strive to establish and maintain counterterrorism operating bases that are as close to the areas in which Al-Qaeda is operating as possible. In some instances (e.g., Yemen, Syria, Pakistan), this may entail revisiting U.S. policies regarding "boots on the ground" and/or require strong diplomatic efforts to regain access.
- Reconsider the balance of emphasis that has been placed on "kill" missions relative to "capture" missions. This necessarily entails working through how the United States would legally handle increased numbers of Al-Qaeda detainees.
- Design a new, proactive messaging campaign that considers how to amplify the values and ideas shared by the West and much of the Muslim world, relying in part on local Islamic voices, in an effort to counter Al-Qaeda's ideological narratives. The United States would need to designate and resource a single entity (e.g., the State Department's Global Engagement Center) to serve as the focal point for these efforts, with robust funding and support from all relevant U.S. government agencies.
- Conduct thorough interagency reviews of the security vulnerabilities of the countries where Al-Qaeda currently has a presence, along with those countries most likely to be targeted by Al-Qaeda for future expansion. These reviews would need to identify those countries' most pressing security vulnerabilities, and work with each country to identify proactive measures that the United States could take to assist in addressing them, so as to consolidate any successes gained from the actions recommended above or prevent Al-Qaeda's expansion into new areas.
- Invest in maintaining and strengthening our international alliances and partnerships, most notably those with governments, international organizations, and non-government organizations that share U.S. interests and goals with respect to Al-Qaeda.

Requirements for defeating Al-Qaeda

If the U.S. government decides to pursue the complete *defeat* of Al-Qaeda, we assess that it would need to:

- Devise a vision for what *defeat* of the group would look like, both politically and practically, and then ensure that this vision is promulgated and pursued by the entirety of the U.S. government, so that all U.S. entities are synchronized

and aligned in their mission against Al-Qaeda. The United States would also need to share this vision with its partner nations and organizations, and use it as a lens to identify common and divergent interests among these entities.

- Create and resource a strategy to bring about the vision for Al-Qaeda’s defeat. As part of this strategic planning process, the United States would need to critically examine its current assumptions that the DOD should be the lead agency for this effort, and that the three goals articulated by the NDAA—disrupt, dismantle, and defeat—are a linear process. Additionally, the United States would need to clearly address how to defeat both Al-Qaeda’s capability and its will to fight. The requirements for dismantling Al-Qaeda that we identify above largely address its capability, but the United States would need to think much more deeply about how to effectively address Al-Qaeda’s will.
- Prepare for a protracted fight against Al-Qaeda and like-organizations. While the objective of dismantling Al-Qaeda could conceivably be achieved on a timescale of years, the U.S. experience with Al-Qaeda over the past two decades suggests that defeat of the group is likely to take decades more. The U.S. government would need to be realistic in both its own plans and programs—taking a long-term and persistent approach to the challenges that Al-Qaeda poses—and its communications with the America public.

Conclusion

Having assessed the threat that Al-Qaeda poses to the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests abroad, the impact of changing security environments across much of Africa and the Middle East on Al-Qaeda and U.S. efforts to counter the group, and the effectiveness of U.S. government approaches against Al-Qaeda, we conclude the following:

- **Current U.S. efforts are more aligned with the direct threat that Al-Qaeda poses to the United States and less to the security conditions, or vulnerabilities, that Al-Qaeda exploits to survive and expand.**
- **U.S. government efforts to date have not defeated Al-Qaeda. The current U.S. strategy—centered on military approaches and anchored in the assumed linear goals of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating the organization—is unlikely to do so.**
- **Dismantling Al-Qaeda would entail a commitment of U.S. resources well beyond those committed today.**

- **Continued disruption of Al-Qaeda is likely to require increasing resources as security environments continue to weaken in many parts of the world where Al-Qaeda operates and seeks to operate.**

Based on these findings, we conclude that *the current U.S. strategy toward Al-Qaeda is unlikely to attain the United States' desired goals*. Therefore, *we recommend that the U.S. government should undertake a new review of its policy goals and overarching strategy against Al-Qaeda*. This review should take a fresh look at Al-Qaeda and the environments in which it operates, or seeks to operate, as they exist today. This review should also critically examine U.S. strategic goals with respect to Al-Qaeda and like groups, the resources required to achieve those goals, and the political and domestic appetite for sustaining them. It should also examine the balance of roles across U.S. government agencies and the timelines and metrics required for success.

The U.S. has been battling Al-Qaeda primarily militarily for 16 years and yet the group is stronger and present in more places today than it was in 2001. Clearly, the U.S. needs a renewed approach.

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Glossary

AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
AQS	Al-Qaeda-Syria
AQY	Al-Qaeda in Yemen
ASD	Assistant Secretary of Defense
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
ASSF	Afghan Special Security Forces
CIDNE	Combined Information Data Network Exchange
CJIATF	Combined Joint Inter-Agency Task Force
CTS	Counterterrorism Service (Iraq)
DHS	U.S. Department of Homeland Security
DOD	U.S. Department of Defense
EIJ	Egyptian Islamic Jihad
FSI	Fragile States Index
GWOT	Global War on Terror
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
INL	U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
OIF	Operation Iraqi Freedom
OTI	USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives
POLAD	State Department's Political Advisor
SO/LIC	Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict
SOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command
SOF	Special Operations Force
SOLO	Special Operations Liaison Officers
TFI	Department of the Treasury's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence
UN	United Nations

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Summary of Assessment

Introduction

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, “The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States’ efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001.”² The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment. Section 1228 specified that the independent assessment should include the following topics:

1. An assessment of Al-Qaeda core’s current relationship with affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents,³ and how it has changed over time.
2. An assessment of the current objectives, capabilities, and overall strategy of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how they have changed over time.
3. An assessment of the operational and organizational structure of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.

² Carl Levin and Howard “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, December 19, 2014, Section 1228, “Independent Assessment of the United States Efforts against al-Qaeda.” <https://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ291/PLAW-113publ291.pdf>.

³ The NDAA did not provide specific definitions for the terms: “affiliated,” “associated,” and “adherent.” Our analysis focuses on Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates, as we explain in the Methodology section of this report. For the purpose of the paper, we define “affiliated groups” as: “groups that have aligned with Al-Qaeda, which means that they have pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda has publicly accepted/acknowledged the pledge.” In order to bound our assessment within resource and time constraints, we largely exclude less formal participants, including Al-Qaeda inspired individuals and small groups, or what the NDAA refers to as “associates” and “adherents.”

4. An analysis of the activities that have proven to be most effective and least effective at disrupting and dismantling Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.
5. Recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.⁴

The NDAA mandated that the results of this assessment be provided to select congressional committees via an unclassified report, which CNA did in August, 2017.⁵ This document summarizes the results of CNA's assessment of these topics.

Methodology

To address the topics mandated by the NDAA, we employed an “expanded net assessment” approach. Traditional net assessment examines the interplay between the U.S. and an adversary directly, and the topics mandated by the NDAA for this study fit within such a construct. However, in order to fully understand the conflict between the U.S. and Al-Qaeda, it is necessary to also examine changes in the environments in which this conflict has played out and how those changes have impacted the dynamics and trajectory of the conflict. To conduct such an expanded net assessment, our analysis proceeded in four stages:

- First, we relied on a wide variety of data sources (described below) to create case studies on Al-Qaeda core and six of its affiliates: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shebab (in Somalia), Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and Al-Qaeda in Syria (AQS). We also developed a case study on the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Although the latter ultimately did not fit the definition of an affiliate, we used the data from this case as part of our assessment where appropriate. After we developed the case studies, we then conducted a qualitative comparative analysis of these cases to address the first three topics required by the NDAA concerning Al-Qaeda's strategies, objectives, capabilities, and structure (to include the relationship between the core and its affiliates). We also used the case study data to identify what specific challenges Al-Qaeda's activities pose to U.S. national security interests.
- Second, we examined in detail how the environments relevant to this conflict have evolved since 2001, and we identified specific vulnerabilities in the

⁴ 2015 NDAA, Section 1228.

⁵ McQuaid, et al. *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.

security environments of the countries where Al-Qaeda has operated or sought to operate. We then conducted a comparative analysis of these examples to identify what types of security vulnerabilities Al-Qaeda exploits, how it does so, and what has changed in the security environment of these countries (and in the regions in which they sit) that could account for Al-Qaeda's current state and the changes in its state over time. We also examined the impact of changing security environments on the United States' ability to pursue its objectives against Al-Qaeda over time.

- Third, we catalogued the various components of U.S. government efforts against each of seven Al-Qaeda entities (the core and six affiliates). We then organized these components into several discrete "approaches" that the United States has used to combat Al-Qaeda over the past 16 years—in effect, we detailed the toolkit that the United States has used or is using to combat these groups. As part of this step, we articulated the rationale behind each of the U.S. approaches, to make clear what the U.S. government believed it could accomplish via each approach.
- Last, we used a qualitative, analytically comparative framework to conduct an expanded net assessment of Al-Qaeda, U.S. efforts against the group, and the environment in which this conflict has taken place. To do this, we first assessed whether the U.S. approach to Al-Qaeda core and each of its affiliates has been optimally aligned to the challenges that these groups pose to U.S. national security interests as well as to the vulnerabilities in the security environment that they exploit for their own gains. Second, we assessed the U.S. approach across all of the cases to identify which U.S. actions against Al-Qaeda have been most and least effective.

Data

We collected data from a wide range of sources, including the following:

- Strategic documents from across the U.S. government
- Operational and tactical documentation from across the Department of Defense (DOD), the Department of State, the intelligence community, and other entities
- Intelligence reporting and assessments
- Extensive discussions with leading Al-Qaeda experts from the research and academic communities
- Extensive discussions with current and former U.S. government officials (e.g., military, intelligence, and law enforcement professionals)

- Open sources, including social media, news outlets, and blogs
- The subject matter expertise of our own analysts, many of whom have focused on Al-Qaeda and like-organizations for all, or a large portion of, their careers

Scoping

Given the magnitude of the topics directed for study by the NDAA, and the limited time and resources available for this assessment, we had to bound the scope of the study to make it tractable. We did so in the following ways:

- We took the NDAA’s direction of this study to the Secretary of Defense to imply that the focus of the study should be on DOD’s actions against Al-Qaeda. This is not to say that we ignored the actions of other U.S. government agencies—we identified those as best we could within the constraints of the study—but we focused our attention on the approaches taken by DOD, which account for most of the efforts and resources applied by the United States against Al-Qaeda to date.
- We focused our analytical attention on Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates and excluded less formal participants, including Al-Qaeda inspired individuals and small groups. We define “affiliates” as groups that have aligned with Al-Qaeda, meaning that they have pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda has publicly accepted that pledge. To that end, this assessment focuses on Al-Qaeda core, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Qaeda in Syria, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, al-Shebab (in Somalia), and the now-defunct Al-Qaeda in Iraq.
- We took the NDAA’s focus on the disruption, dismantling, and defeat of Al-Qaeda—and the absence of the term “defend”—to imply that the study should focus on the United States’ offensive efforts against Al-Qaeda abroad, thereby excluding the policies and programs carried out by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), as well as the counterterrorism-related efforts of state, local, and tribal authorities.
- We also took the language of the NDAA focused on disrupt, dismantle, and defeat to be indicative of the current U.S. policy goal for Al-Qaeda. As such, we largely focus our findings with respect to that policy goal, though we recognize that there are other policy goals that might be pursued.
- Finally, given the NDAA’s requirement for an unclassified report to Congress, we focused our attention on unclassified sources of material for this assessment. In the course of our research, we did review a number of classified documents and held classified discussions with current U.S. government

personnel, but we used that information as background and context for our unclassified research.

Organization

The remainder of this document is organized into five parts. The first part summarizes the results of our assessment of the first three issues in the NDAA which focus on Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates and how they have evolved and changed over time in terms of relationships, structure, objectives, capabilities, and strategies. The second section summarizes our analysis of the security environment in the countries where Al-Qaeda and its affiliates operate. The third section summarizes our assessment of U.S. approaches to Al-Qaeda since 2001, highlighting which aspects of each approach have been effective and which have not. The fourth section summarizes our findings and recommendations for future U.S. government efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The final section presents our conclusions.

Assessment of Al-Qaeda

Nearly 16 years after September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda is a very different organization, in a very different world. It has suffered significant setbacks and periods of weakening, but it has also had impressive gains and expansion. In 2001, the core of Al-Qaeda was in Afghanistan and the organization had a nominal presence in a handful of other countries (Figure 1). Today, in addition to what remains of core Al-Qaeda, there are five active Al-Qaeda affiliates: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Qaeda in Syria, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and al-Shebab. Together, these groups are active in over 10 Muslim-majority countries. In addition, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, once the most virulent of Al-Qaeda's affiliates, evolved into what we now know as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Figure 1. Al-Qaeda's expansion over time: 2007 to 2017

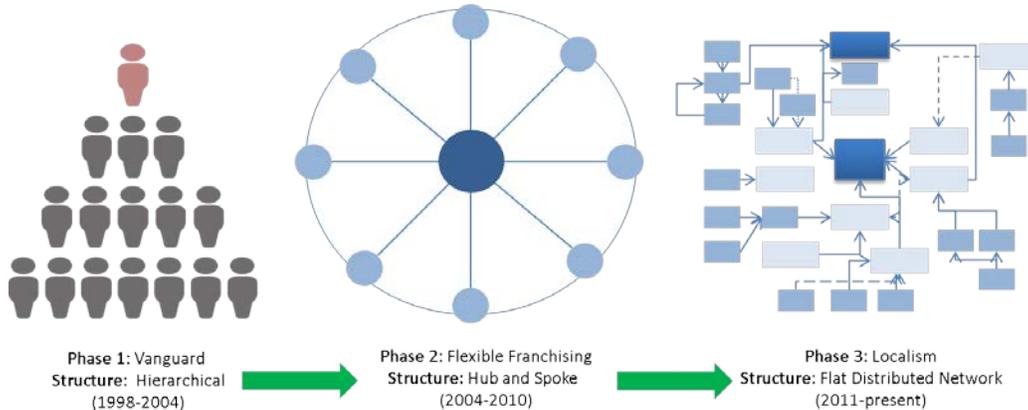


Footnote: In 2006, AQI changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). In 2013, ISI tried to consume the AQ branch it launched in Syria (becoming ISIS). In 2014, the Iraqi affiliate was formally dropped by senior AQ leadership.

Source: P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Zack Gold, CNA.

The evolution of Al-Qaeda has been significantly shaped by U.S. and other countries' efforts to defeat the group. But equally, if not more significant, the deteriorated political, economic, and security conditions across much of the Middle East, Africa, and Southwest Asia have provided apertures that Al-Qaeda has skillfully exploited to its advantage to grow into new areas, gain influence, and attract followers. It is within the context of on-going international counterterrorism efforts, and a changing world, that Al-Qaeda has gone through three distinct developmental phases since 2001, revealing an ability to adapt, spread, and remain resilient. Each of the three phases differs in terms of Al-Qaeda's relationships, structure, objectives, capabilities, and strategies (Figure 2). We summarize these phases below.

Figure 2. Al-Qaeda's operational structure in each of its phases



Source: P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Zack Gold, CNA.

Phase one: Vanguard (1998-2004)

The first phase focused on Osama Bin Laden, the son of a successful Saudi businessman. Bin Laden used his sizeable family wealth to establish Al-Qaeda with ideological input from Abdullah Azzam, who has been described as an architect of international jihad. In 1998, Bin Laden merged his group with the group Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), which supplied Al-Qaeda with some of its most disciplined and resourceful militants. Ayman al-Zawahiri, EIJ's leader, became Al-Qaeda's deputy leader.

During its vanguard phase, Bin Laden was at the top of a cadre of jihadi veterans that sought out—and were sought by—local causes to support them with financing, training, and fighters. The 9/11 Commission referred to this group as “the general headquarters for international terrorism.”⁶ Although Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and the core were operationally based in Afghanistan, the group claimed a relatively small roster of members (in the hundreds), some of whom were dispersed as emissaries from East Africa to Indonesia in search of opportunities.⁷

⁶ Thomas H. Kean and Lee Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004), 67, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/911commission.pdf>.

⁷ Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, 67.

In terms of the group's strategy and objectives in this phase, for Al-Qaeda, "victory" was defined as the establishment of a Muslim caliphate that would lead a global clash against the West. To achieve this, Al-Qaeda believed that it needed to both collapse the international system of independent Muslim-majority states and convince Muslim populations to replace their current governance structures with that of strict Islamic law (Sharia). In this phase, to achieve these outcomes, Al-Qaeda sought to:

- Overthrow and replace local and national governance structures in Muslim lands (the so-called "near enemy") and replace them with governance based on its interpretation of Sharia
- Remove U.S. presence from what it considered Muslim lands and U.S. support to the governments in those countries by attacking the U.S. homeland, and Americans and American interests abroad (the so-called "far enemy")
- Discredit, undermine, and eventually replace the Western-dominated international order with a pan-Islamic caliphate based on its interpretation of Sharia

In this phase, Al-Qaeda was a hierarchical organization, with strong leadership that provided detailed guidance to the rank and file. In terms of capabilities, Al-Qaeda was focused on spectacular attacks in the West, primarily the United States and Europe, and recruitment and training in Afghanistan, until its ability to do so was thwarted by U.S. operations there in late 2001 and 2002. Prior to the U.S. invasion, having freedom of movement in Afghanistan allowed Al-Qaeda to plan, train for, and execute complex operations such as those on September 11, 2001, with little to no external pressure. During this phase, Al-Qaeda was also focused on its messaging and spreading its ideology throughout Muslim-majority countries in order to justify its actions and gain followers. A key part of its messaging was also aimed at U.S. and Western audiences in an attempt to force the West out of Muslim-majority countries.

Phase two: Flexible franchising (2004-2010)

During this phase, Al-Qaeda began lending its name to regional affiliates in order to survive and, in some cases, expand, in the face of the U.S.-led Global War on Terror (GWOT). However, not all of its franchises were created equally, and the "mechanism" for franchising was different from one affiliate to the next. Both affiliates in Africa, AQIM and al-Shebab, took years to prove their value, and even after they pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda there was a gap in time before they were formally merged into the organization. On the other hand, Al-Qaeda perhaps rushed to close the deal that created its Iraqi branch (AQI), in order to capitalize on the opportunity the U.S. presented to the group when it invaded and occupied a second Muslim country. The

creation of AQI also positioned Al-Qaeda to take advantage of the presence of large numbers of U.S. troops to target and attack.

The lack of an effective U.S. stabilization plan in Iraq following the invasion of the country in 2003 created the conditions for AQI to establish a foothold and attract jihadis from within the Middle East and beyond to fight the United States in the heart of the Middle East. The U.S. toppling of a secular regime in Baghdad also put the United States at war in two Muslim countries, which was a boon to the narrative of a “clash of civilizations” on which Al-Qaeda fed. Even if the invasion of Afghanistan was viewed as justified, international opinion was strongly against the Iraq war, isolating Washington and diminishing post-9/11 goodwill around the world.

The organization’s strategy and objectives remained the same in this phase as in the first phase, except that the organization also began to spread its brand and presence by establishing affiliates. With the establishment of the affiliates, Al-Qaeda remained fairly hierarchical with its core members at the center, but it evolved in this phase to take on a “hub-and-spoke” structure with the affiliates taking guidance from the core. In terms of capabilities, during this phase the affiliates—in particular AQAP—began to attempt to carry out attacks in the West. It was also during this phase that AQI began to make widespread use of the improvised explosive device (IED) against Iraqi, U.S., and coalition forces in Iraq. Over time, the IED has become a standard weapon of Al-Qaeda and other like-organizations, including ISIS.

During this phase, Al-Qaeda also conducted large-scale attacks aimed at weakening the international coalition that had assembled against it. For example, in Madrid, Al-Qaeda conducted a large-scale attack using explosive devices detonated by cell phones. It is widely believed that the attack was intended to intimidate the Spanish government as a result of its having joined the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. Shortly after the bombings, Spain held elections, which resulted in the election of a new government under the Socialist Party. Several months after the election, Prime Minister Zapatero kept his campaign promise and withdrew Spain’s 1,300 troops from the coalition in Iraq.⁸

Phase three: Localism (2011-present)

Today, Al-Qaeda continues to adjust to the Arab Spring events that unfolded in 2011, beginning with the ouster of Tunisian strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, which prompted protests, uprisings, revolutions, and civil wars across many Arab countries. The deterioration of the security environments in Egypt, Libya, Syria,

⁸ Keith Richberg, “Madrid Attacks may have Targeted Elections,” *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A38817-2004Oct16.html>.

Tunisia, and Yemen provided oxygen to Al-Qaeda affiliates and like-minded groups, allowing them to take advantage of instability and, where there was ongoing conflict, delve deeper. Perhaps no affiliate's fortunes reversed as drastically in this phase as those of AQI, which used the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, the marginalization of Iraqi Sunnis by the government in Baghdad, and the emergent civil war in Syria to push into Syria and—from a safe-haven there—launch successive attacks against the government in Baghdad, seize huge swaths of both Iraq and Syria, and declare itself the new caliphate. The rapid re-emergence of its Iraqi affiliate was not, however, a boon to Al-Qaeda. Instead, ISIS' 2014 declaration of the caliphate (for which Al-Qaeda had been working so diligently and patiently to set the conditions) provided Al-Qaeda with a new strategic challenge: a competing group claiming the mantle of global jihadism.

As this phase has unfolded, Al-Qaeda has become a flatter, more networked organization. The core "hub" in the previous phase's structure has diminished over time, with affiliates acting increasingly more independent of the core. Today, Al-Qaeda's individual franchises focus on exploiting local conflicts—most notably in Syria and Yemen—and Al-Qaeda affiliates seek opportunities to move into additional (and often adjacent) areas where there is ongoing conflict and instability. They are able to do this because they are under less pressure today than they have been in the past and therefore can operate more freely in these environments. Over this phase, the affiliates have become increasingly responsive to local contexts, and commensurate with their size, have reduced their focus on attacking the U.S. homeland and the West relative to the previous phases.

Overall, Al-Qaeda maintains the strategy and objectives described above in its previous phases, but it has also expanded its operational modus operandi: it has become deeply enmeshed in local conflicts; increased its focus on, and role in, the provision of local governance; and expanded its control of territory. Notably, in this phase, Al-Qaeda has also been seeking to position itself as "less extreme" in comparison to ISIS and to outlast the rival group. It is possible that Al-Qaeda is leaving the door open for rapprochement with ISIS, or with what remains of ISIS, in the coming months and years. In terms of capabilities, Al-Qaeda has been taking advantage of civil unrest in the broader Middle East and Africa to increasingly participate in local conflicts. In Syria and Yemen, Al-Qaeda branches are employing the full spectrum of military capabilities against their enemies in an effort to militarily defeat them. In the Sahel region of Africa, AQIM continues to plan and execute fairly regular large-scale attacks on soft targets, such as hotels, in addition to targeting French and United Nations (UN) forces in the region. In Somalia, al-Shebab continues to plan and execute fairly regular attacks against government and soft targets in that country and in neighboring countries.

During this phase, Al-Qaeda affiliates have increased their targeting of the aviation sector. In the previous phase, only AQAP was actively plotting attacks against

aircraft. In this phase, AQAP, AQS, and al-Shebab have each plotted—and the latter has executed (though unsuccessfully)—attacks using hidden explosives aboard aircraft. The only attack claimed by Al-Qaeda in the West during this phase was the January 2015 assault on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. The attackers were brothers, who had received weapons training in Yemen in the summer of 2011.⁹ However, it is unclear how much—if any—planning, funding, or direction AQAP provided to this attack.¹⁰

In terms of what is next for Al-Qaeda, there is not a consensus view of the organization's future trajectory. Some speculate that Al-Qaeda is currently taking a “strategic pause” from attacks on the West and “laying low” while the focus of international efforts is on destroying ISIS. Al-Qaeda may seek to exploit the demise of ISIS for any number of purposes, including re-claiming the role of the vanguard and the “true” path of global jihadism, in addition to more practical reasons such as seeking to recruit previous ISIS followers into their fold. It is also likely that Al-Qaeda and its affiliates are directing much of their operational capabilities at fighting local and national governments in Muslim countries (the so-called “near enemy”) to overthrow and replace them. The objective to hit the “far enemy” has certainly not gone away, but that part of Al-Qaeda's strategy appears to be receiving relatively less emphasis today than it has in the past, at least for the time being.

Relationship between Al-Qaeda “core” and its affiliates

Most of Al-Qaeda's affiliates have depended on Al-Qaeda leadership for general strategic guidance, and there is evidence that affiliates have carried out direct instructions from Osama Bin Laden, his successor Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and other core leaders. However, much of the published correspondence captured from Bin Laden's Abbottabad hideout and other intercepted letters leave the impression that the Al-Qaeda leader was disappointed with his subordinate groups. For example, in one letter Bin Laden lamented that even AQAP, the affiliate most actively attempting

⁹ Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, “Both Brothers Behind Paris Attack Had Weapons Training in Yemen: Sources,” Reuters, Jan. 11, 2015, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-yemen-idUSKBN0KKOF620150111>.

¹⁰ Tim Fernholz, “The Unanswered Questions After AQAP Takes Credit for the Charlie Hebdo Attacks,” Quartz, Jan. 14, 2015, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, <https://qz.com/326588/the-unanswered-questions-after-aqap-takes-credit-for-the-charlie-hebdo-attacks/>.

external attacks, was not trying hard enough.¹¹ Table 1 summarizes Al-Qaeda core’s relationships with its affiliates today.

Table 1. Al-Qaeda core’s relationships with the affiliates

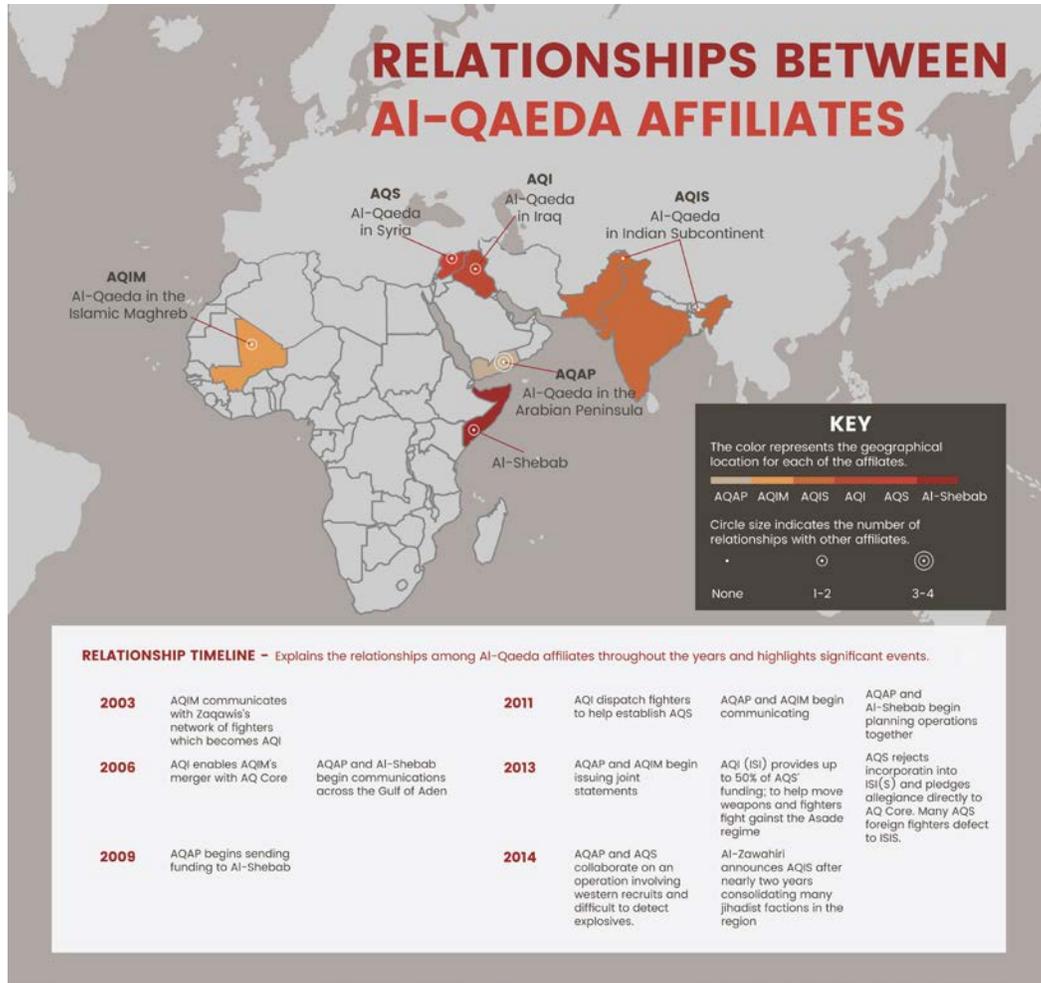
AQI	Had its relationship voided by Al-Qaeda in February 2014
AQIM	Follows general guidance from Al-Qaeda core
AQAP	Follows general guidance from Al-Qaeda core
Al-Shebab	Follows general guidance from Al-Qaeda core. Recently, there has been open-source documentation of al-Shebab receiving and following direct orders from Al-Qaeda leadership
AQS	Has key Al-Qaeda core veterans within its decision-making leadership
AQIS	Has Al-Qaeda core members within its decision-making leadership

Relationships among Al-Qaeda’s affiliates

An assessment of the affiliates’ current ties to one another is important for understanding Al-Qaeda’s structure and whether the concept of a “core” continues to be relevant. As shown in Figure 3, today, AQAP is connected to all of its peer affiliates—with the exception of AQIS. AQAP and al-Shebab, operating across the Gulf of Aden from each other, have maintained inter-group communications since 2006. From 2009 to 2013, AQAP also provided funding to al-Shebab. Additionally, there is some evidence of joint planning of operations between the two groups since 2011. Subject matter experts, for example, suspect that the Somali affiliate does not, on its own, have the capability to produce the laptop bomb that detonated aboard a flight out of Mogadishu in February 2016 and that therefore it must have received assistance from another group. AQAP and AQIM began direct communications with each other in 2011. Since 2013, the groups have also been issuing joint statements. Reports also point to operational links between AQAP and AQS, which in 2014 was working with AQAP to develop another external aviation plot. However, it is unclear in open-source reporting whether AQAP and AQS co-planning of operations has continued after that.

¹¹ Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined? Combating Terrorism* Center at West Point, 2012, 29, accessed Jun. 15, 2017, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CTC_LtrsFromAbottabad_WEB_v2.pdf.

Figure 3. Al-Qaeda affiliates' relationships with each other



Source: P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Zack Gold, CNA.

Al-Qaeda challenges to the U.S. and its interests

Al-Qaeda and its affiliates conduct activities that directly impact the United States and its interests at home and abroad. We refer to these activities as “challenges.” Based on our comparative examination of Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates’ activities today and over time, we identified five challenges that the organization poses to the United States and its interests. These are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Challenges Al-Qaeda and its affiliates pose to the United States

Challenges	Definition	Examples
Conduct attacks on U.S. interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attack U.S. homeland Attack U.S. regional interests Attack U.S. local interests (e.g., U.S. embassies and Americans in country) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1998 attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania 2000 attack on USS <i>Cole</i> 2001 9/11 attacks 2009 “Underwear bomber”
Conduct attacks on U.S. allies (within and outside region)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attack Western interests Attack local interests that represent the West Attack local/regional interests (governments, economic centers, academic institutions, etc.) Attack local security/military/law enforcement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing attacks on UN mission in Mali 2003 attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad 2004 Madrid attacks 2005 attacks on London transit 2005 AQI hotel attacks in Amman, Jordan 2015 Al-Shebab attack on Garissa University in Kenya
Attempt to overthrow local and national governments in partner countries and replace with Al-Qaeda governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foment instability and strife by attacking sectarian or civilian targets Control territory; expand territory Provide support/assistance to local population Establish Sharia rule and courts, conduct governance activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AQI attacks and brutality against Shia population in Iraq AQIM part of jihadi alliance that took over and ruled northern Mali in 2012. In 2015, AQAP administered Sharia in Mukalla, Yemen, and provided humanitarian and civic services
Conduct messaging / propaganda activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discredit the Western order Disseminate AQ-brand Islam as “true” version of Islam Malign local governments as illegitimate Promote narrative that Muslims are victims of U.S./Western aggression, abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From 2001, Al-Qaeda’s “Al-Sahab” produces videos providing spiritual guidance, recruitment and propaganda. Affiliates have their own media outlets In 2010, AQAP launches <i>Inspire</i> magazine for Western Muslims
Man, train, & equip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruit, convince followers to join jihad in person, online, etc. Train members of the group and provide information/advice to actual/potential followers/attackers Acquire funding, weapons, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Until 2001, Al-Qaeda openly operated training camps in Afghanistan. Today, Al-Qaeda affiliates still train fighters After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Al-Qaeda’s network funneled funds, arms, and fighters to Zarqawi’s network, which became AQI

	and other materiel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Al-Qaeda affiliates, AQIM especially, have earned millions of dollars ransoming hostages, which it uses to support operations
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Summary of findings on Al-Qaeda Core and its affiliates

Nearly 16 years after September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda is a very different organization in a very different world. It has suffered setbacks and periods of weakening, but it has also made gains and expanded in the face of international efforts against it. With respect to the first three topics required by the NDAA, we arrived at these findings:

- Al-Qaeda has kept a focus on the same core goals that it had in 2001 most notable of which is the establishment of a global caliphate.** The organization has also added goals and adjusted its strategy over time in response to counter-terrorism actions against it and changes in the environments in which it operates. Al-Qaeda’s leadership continues to advocate for a long-term, patient campaign utilizing terrorist and insurgent tactics against both the “near enemy” (apostate Muslim regimes) and the “far enemy” (the United States and the West).
- Al-Qaeda today is larger, more agile, and more resilient than it was in 2001.** Sixteen years ago, the core of Al-Qaeda was in Afghanistan and the organization had a nominal presence in a handful of other countries. Today, in addition to what remains of core Al-Qaeda, there are five Al-Qaeda affiliates: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Qaeda in Syria, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and al-Shebab (in Somalia). In addition, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, once the most virulent of Al-Qaeda’s affiliates, evolved into what we now know as ISIS.
- In 2001, Al-Qaeda was a rigidly hierarchical organization. Today, Al-Qaeda is a flat, decentralized, and geographically dispersed organization.** The notion of “core” Al-Qaeda sitting at the center of the group’s affiliates is waning in utility, as many of the original members of Al-Qaeda and its other leaders have moved out of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and co-located themselves with some of the group’s affiliates (most notably AQAP and AQS). The group’s affiliates, which are now active in over 10 Muslim-majority countries, have more autonomy than in the past, and most of the affiliates have connections with other affiliates (the possible exception being AQIS).
- Al-Qaeda is a learning and adaptive organization, and this contributes to the group’s resilience.** Al-Qaeda has shown that it can weather severe setbacks

(e.g., AQI's near defeat in Iraq), learn from its mistakes, and evolve its approach over time. In recent years, Al-Qaeda has been able to adapt its approach to make new gains. In particular, the group's affiliates have become more adept at pursuing local goals via the provision of governance attuned to local contexts.

- **The threat from Al-Qaeda to the United States homeland remains, but does not appear to be the foremost goal of every part of the organization.** While Al-Qaeda's leadership continues to advocate for attacks against the United States directly and some of its affiliates (e.g., AQAP and AQS) have at times acted in accordance with these wishes, Al-Qaeda's affiliates today seem more focused on achieving success in local and regional conflicts against the organization's "near enemies."
- **The emergence of ISIS (an Al-Qaeda offshoot), presents both obstacles and opportunities for Al-Qaeda.** ISIS is arguably the vanguard of global jihad today and the group has amassed an impressive following and significant resources in only a few years. However, ISIS has also drawn the bulk of the attention and resources of the United States-led global counterterrorism effort in recent years, which has reduced the pressure on Al-Qaeda in other areas.
- **Al-Qaeda may be biding its time to regroup, regenerate, and regain the mantle of global jihad.** While the world has been focused on ISIS in recent years, Al-Qaeda has been learning, adapting its approach, and grooming the next generation of its leadership via the jihad in Syria, Yemen, and other locations. Notable among these due to his lineage is Hamza Bin Laden, one of Osama Bin Laden's sons.

Assessment of local and regional security environments

The trajectory of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates has been shaped by the organization's own actions and decisions, but also in response to external forces. Actions by the United States and its partners are one such external force, but the shifts in local and regional conditions have also impacted how the group has changed and evolved. Many of the countries where Al-Qaeda operates—and the broader regions in which these countries sit—have become increasingly politically, socially, and economically unstable over the past decade and a half. Al-Qaeda has adapted to these changes and exploited them to its benefit. Shifts in these conditions have also often negatively impacted the United States' ability to pursue its objectives against Al-Qaeda.

Security vulnerabilities

Because these conditions present an opportunity for Al-Qaeda to grow and expand, we refer to them as “vulnerabilities” in the security environment. For example, Al-Qaeda has taken advantage of crises and the relative freedom of action they provide to recruit and train members, spread propaganda, plan and execute attacks, and even govern through their own structure. For efforts against Al-Qaeda to be effective, these contextual factors must be understood and taken into account since they not only have allowed for the growth and expansion of the organization but also have greatly influenced—and, at times, limited—U.S. efforts to counter the group. For example, in Syria and Yemen, the conditions of the civil wars in those countries today are such that the United States simply does not have a partner nation government with which to work. In Table 3, we describe and define seven security vulnerabilities that Al-Qaeda exploits, and we present specific examples of where Al-Qaeda has been able to do so.

Table 3. Summary of security vulnerabilities in countries where Al-Qaeda operates

Vulnerability	Definition	Examples
Internal conflict	Ongoing internal violence at the local/communal, regional, or central level(s). Can take different forms, to include: sectarian fighting, civil war, insurgencies, and separatist movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syria: civil war (2011-present) • Yemen: civil War (2015-present) • Afghanistan: insurgency (2002-present) • Somalia (1991-present) • Iraq (2004-2007, present)
History of violent Jihadism	A long-standing history of jihadi movements, opposed to the government, within the population in which Al-Qaeda can tap and build	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yemen: Jihadi groups (1990s) • Afghanistan/Pakistan (1980s to the present)
Collapse or partial-collapse of the central government	The central government is not operating effectively due to an external invasion or an internal coup, uprising, revolution, insurrection, etc. In this case, governments do not have control of their national territory or their borders, and face violent opposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syria (2011-present) • Yemen (2015-present) • Mali (2012-present) • Iraq (2003-present) • Afghanistan (2002-present)
Government illegitimacy	A significant portion of the population does not view the central government as the legitimate authority, but sees it as a foreign puppet, a sectarian regime, a corrupt failure, and/or an oppressive tyrant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraq: Shia-dominated government, backed by U.S. • Syria: Minority Alawite regime in Sunni majority country • Afghanistan: U.S. brokered “National Unity Government” following flawed elections

<p>Demographic instabilities</p>	<p>Trends that leave large portions of the population economically vulnerable, such as youth bulges, ethno-sectarian competition/violence, refugee populations, internally displaced peoples (IDPs), and mass urbanization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraq: Shia/Sunni strife • Syria: Urbanization • Mali: Youth bulge, Tuareg rebellions • Yemen: Youth bulge, sectarian tensions, displacement of populations as part of the ongoing conflict • Afghanistan: Large IDP populations in Pakistan and Iran (now being forced back into Afghanistan)
<p>Security sector ineffectiveness</p>	<p>Problems within the security sector, including lack of capacity/capability and professionalism within the security forces, weak institutions for security and defense, and corruption</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mali: Extensive corruption within government and military • Iraq: Sectarianism and corruption led to the collapse of the U.S.-trained Iraqi Army • Afghanistan: Afghan security forces have been steadily losing ground in recent years • Yemen: The Yemeni security forces have effectively collapsed
<p>Neighbor in crisis</p>	<p>When a neighboring country is undergoing significant internal violent strife/conflict or is in a state of conflict with a third country</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syria (Iraq, 2003-present) • Iraq (Syria, 2011-present) • Mali (Algeria, 1991-2002) • Afghanistan (Pakistan, 2002-present)

Summary of findings on the impact of local and regional security environments

With the specific questions from the NDAA in mind, we offer the following findings concerning the evolution of local and regional security environments and the associated impact on Al-Qaeda and the United States:

- **In the years since 2001, many of the countries in the Middle East and Africa have become increasingly politically, socially, and economically unstable.** The worsening conditions in many of these countries have led to a host of vulnerabilities in their security environments, such as internal conflicts, government corruption and illegitimacy, collapse of governing regimes, and neighboring states in crisis.
- **Al-Qaeda routinely exploits vulnerabilities in the security environments of weak and failing countries in order to maneuver and expand.** These

environments allow the organization to operate with relative freedom. In addition, often there are grievances within the population that the organization can exploit to its advantage. Key examples include: Syria, Yemen, the Sahel region of Africa (especially Mali), Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Southeast Asia. In these countries and many others, security vulnerabilities have emerged or become more widespread within the past decade.¹²

- **Al-Qaeda can exploit security vulnerabilities in weak or failing states, though its success in doing so still requires skillful approaches on the part of the organization’s affiliates.** It is not a given that populations in vulnerable or failing states will support Al-Qaeda. Rather, the organization must devise effective approaches that allow it to take advantage of conditions. For example, in places where there is on-going civil war, the government is not responding to the needs of the people in terms of basic services and governance. This provides an aperture for Al-Qaeda to step into, for example, by establishing its own parallel governance structures or providing services. Al-Qaeda’s ability to take advantage of these conditions is enhanced when it has a pre-existing presence or relationships with disaffected populations or groups in a country, or when it is able to quickly establish such relationships.
- **Al-Qaeda has benefitted from slow, negative trends in the security conditions in countries across much of the Middle East and Africa, but its largest gains have occurred when there were sharp and rapid deteriorations.** For instance, Al-Qaeda’s strongest affiliates today are AQAP and AQS, which exist in the midst of the civil wars in Yemen and Syria, respectively. Additionally, AQI instigated a civil war in Iraq and its strength increased considerably as that civil war increased in intensity.
- **Worsening trends in security conditions not only help Al-Qaeda but can significantly hinder U.S. government efforts to counter the group.** The United States’ “by, with, and through” approaches (in which we lose local partners), unilateral counterterrorism actions (in which we lose bases for such operations), and diplomatic and development activities (in which our civilian personnel lose the ability to engage at-risk communities) are examples of efforts that have been hindered by these deteriorating security conditions.

¹² Please refer to the Fragile States Index (FSI), which is produced by the Fund for Peace. The FSI is an annual report on the status of fragility in countries around the world. A comparative look at the countries where Al-Qaeda operates today versus 2006, using a variety of indicators, shows that fragility has increased significantly in these countries and regions. The FSI data can be accessed at: <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/>.

Assessment of U.S. government effectiveness against Al-Qaeda

Since 2001, Al-Qaeda has been largely framed as a national security issue for the United States that requires a military response, with other U.S. government entities playing mostly supporting roles. With respect to the fourth NDAA topic, this assessment focuses on the tools that the DOD has applied against Al-Qaeda to understand which have been effective and which have not, and under what circumstances. In looking across the DOD’s actions against Al-Qaeda core and its affiliates, we identified activities and programs that fall into eight categories, which we call “approaches.” For each approach, we also identified the rationale behind it—why the U.S. uses it and what outcomes the U.S. hopes to achieve by its use (Table 4).

Table 4. DOD approaches against Al-Qaeda

Approach ¹³	Rationale
<p>ATTACK THE NETWORK</p>	<p>The U.S. attacks and removes the Al-Qaeda network’s key nodes (e.g., high value individuals) in order to disrupt its ability to operate and to degrade its capabilities. Attacking the network includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Direct action</i>, which includes kinetic missions such as raids and strikes from manned or unmanned aircraft • <i>Isolating the Network</i>, which includes interrupting foreign fighter flows and disrupting terrorist financing so that the Al-Qaeda network is weakened and ultimately defeated¹⁴ • <i>Capture/Detention/Interrogation Operations</i>, which remove fighters from the battlefield and generate intelligence for future operations

¹³ Cyber operations are a key line of effort for the DOD against Al-Qaeda; however, for reasons of classification, we chose to omit them from this assessment.

¹⁴ CJCS General Dunford stated that: “...to be successful [the U.S.] needs to, number one, cut the connective tissue between regional groups that now form a transregional threat.” Global Threats and American National Security Priorities: A Discussion with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, Washington, D.C. Thursday, February 23, 2017, The Brookings Institution.

SECURITY COOPERATION / BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY	The U.S. provides partner nation forces with training and equipment in order to increase their capability and capacity to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda (also called “Train and Equip” programs, or, when Department of State is in the lead, security assistance) ¹⁵
REGIME CHANGE AND STABILIZATION OPERATIONS	The U.S. conducts major combat operations in order to remove regimes that support terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, to deny space for Al-Qaeda to operate, and to provide a platform for direct action, security cooperation, and stabilization activities
ADVISE, ASSIST, AND ACCOMPANY	The U.S. supports partner nation security forces with operational advice and assistance in order to improve the capability and capacity of those forces to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda. In some cases, U.S. forces also accompany partner nations’ security forces to bolster their will and capability to conduct effective operations
“THIRD PARTY” PARTNERS	The U.S. partners with or supports third-party entities who conduct counterterrorism operations in order to amplify U.S. unilateral actions, generate additional access or information, and reduce resource requirements for the U.S. Examples include working with ¹⁶ an ally (e.g., France against AQIM), international organizations (e.g., the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) against al-Shebab), or local forces (e.g., Sunni tribal elements as part of the Al Anbar Awakening movement)
MESSAGING / COUNTER-MESSAGING	The U.S. provides, promotes, and supports messaging that conveys our values, interests, intentions, and justifications to generate support for U.S. counterterrorism activities. The U.S. also provides, promotes, and supports messaging that counters Al-Qaeda’s ideology, intentions, and justifications in order to degrade support for Al-Qaeda’s vision and operations
INTELLIGENCE AND INFORMATION SHARING	The U.S. promotes sharing of intelligence and information among U.S. government agencies and with allies and partner countries to accelerate, improve, and better coordinate counterterrorism operations
BUILDING NETWORKS AND	The U.S. engages with and synchronizes a wide array of partner organizations and countries as part of a coordinated, cooperative, or coalition approach to counterterrorism in order to enable the other elements of the U.S. approach (e.g., by increasing resources,

¹⁵ Kathleen J. McInnis, Nathan Lucas, “What is ‘Building Partner Capacity’? Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service R44313, December 18, 2015. See also: Joint Publication 3-20, “Security Cooperation,” May 23, 2017.

¹⁶ For the purpose of this paper, we deliberately use the phrase “work with” to capture a broad spectrum of arrangements that the United States could have with these entities, ranging from formal agreements, to coordination and cooperation, to providing training and equipping to combined operations.

PARTNERSHIPS	<p>access, and reach). Two prominent activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Military Diplomacy and Civil Affairs Operations</i>: The U.S. military engages with partner nation security entities, non-state partner organizations, and local populations in order to forge relationships, build trust, create a common perception of the enemy, and generate access • <i>The SOF Network</i>: The U.S. maintains a persistent, distributed SOF posture in order to improve strategic reach and our ability to rapidly respond to or interdict threats posed by Al-Qaeda
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Summary of the most and least effective aspects of the U.S. government's approaches

Given time and resource constraints—and the sixteen year timeframe covered by this study—we were unable to assess each of these approaches to the level of depth of a formal programmatic evaluation. Rather, we relied on a variety of mostly qualitative data sources, including interviews with over forty subject matter experts and current and former high-ranking U.S. government officials, to identify which aspects of each approach have been deemed most and least effective. Table 5 on the next few pages presents a summary of the results of our assessment.

Table 5. Summary of the most, and least, effective aspects of U.S. government approaches against Al-Qaeda

Approach	Most Effective Aspects	Least Effective Aspects
ATTACK THE NETWORK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When persistently applied, this approach has pressured and disrupted Al-Qaeda by forcing its key members to “keep their heads down.” Examples include efforts against core Al-Qaeda post-2008 and those against AQI in the 2004-2008 timeframe When used early against a group that has not yet gained momentum, this approach can blunt progress being made by the group to organize, plan, and conduct operations. Examples include U.S. airstrikes against the Khorasan Group (part of AQS) in 2015 and against AQAP in 2017 When applied with a tempo that outpaced the Al-Qaeda network’s ability to respond and reconstitute, this approach has led to the dismantling of Al-Qaeda groups. The most notable example is AQI in the 2006 to 2008 timeframe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This approach does not address the underlying conditions that give rise to an Al-Qaeda presence, therefore it is not effective for consolidating the gains that may accrue from its use It has resulted in significant numbers of civilian casualties. The Obama administration strove to minimize these via the imposition of “near certainty” standards for the use of lethal force, but even these stringent requirements could not completely remove this risk It has placed a heavy—and increasing—burden on SOF and the intelligence community. In his most recent congressional testimony, the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) stated that the current pace of SOF deployments is unsustainable The emphasis on “kill” missions over “capture” missions in recent years has resulted in missed opportunities to gather and exploit intelligence
SECURITY COOPERATION / BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY (BPC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the DOD has engaged in long-term, patient, and persistent BPC activities, this approach has yielded capable partner forces that have then conducted effective operations against Al-Qaeda (though typically with some continued U.S. assistance). The examples cited most often are the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) and the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) When the provision of equipment has been tailored and calibrated to the needs and sustainment capabilities of the host nation forces, this approach has led to effective improvement of the operational capabilities of partner forces (e.g., programs under the 1208/1209 authorities and the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When used in the midst of conflict, this approach has returned results below expectations. The most prominent example is Afghanistan, where the U.S. has invested tens of billions of dollars and nearly a decade’s worth of advising into the Afghan security forces, only to see them consistently lose territory to the Taliban in the wake of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) drawdown in 2014 When the U.S. has failed to tailor the equipment provided to the partner force in terms of the latter’s ability to employ, maintain, or sustain the equipment, or when the U.S. has failed to provide equipment that is adequately suited for the geography or climate of the local environment, this approach has been ineffective.

	<p>CTPF have shown success)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When the DOD has removed individuals being trained from the midst of a combat environment, this approach has been more effective. Examples include training of Afghan pilots conducted in the U.S., and the IMET program 	<p>The most prominent case is Afghanistan, where the U.S. has in numerous instances provided Afghan security forces with equipment that it cannot employ, maintain, or sustain, only to see that equipment unused or misused</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When the U.S. has failed to maintain oversight of the equipment provided, some or all of the equipment has eventually fallen into the hands of terrorist groups. A notable example is the amount of equipment left behind by the Iraqi Army and eventually captured by ISIS during the latter's blitzkrieg into Iraq in 2014 • When the U.S. has failed, or was unable, to take a persistent, patient approach to BPC—resulting in ad hoc or episodic activities—the results have been less effective. An example is Pakistan, where the U.S. was involved for several years in efforts to train the Pakistani Frontier Corps but had to stop after the souring of U.S.-Pakistani relations in 2012 • When the U.S. has cycled myriad units through a country as trainers—as opposed to using repeat rotations of the same units—the results of this approach have been less effective. For example, Afghan Army units have not had a consistent set of partner advisor units, which has contributed to their slower development relative to Afghan SOF
<p>REGIME CHANGE AND STABILIZATION OPERATIONS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Afghanistan, the U.S. invasion did remove a key safe-haven for Al-Qaeda and initial U.S. operations there dealt the organization a significant blow in terms of attrition of fighters and reduction in the group's freedom of action • In Iraq, the U.S. did eventually discern how to conduct effective counterterrorism operations against AQI, which were significantly enabled by a number of factors related to the large-scale presence of U.S. forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The invasion of Iraq is the prime example of how this approach can go wrong. Al-Qaeda had only a minimal presence in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion but was able to capitalize on the resultant insecurity to rapidly expand in both size and reach. The Iraq invasion was also a distraction from the focus on core Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which reduced pressure on that part of the organization and allowed it to reconstitute • In Iraq, while the U.S. was eventually able to decimate AQI, the withdrawal of U.S. forces there in 2011 removed

		<p>pressure on the remnants of AQI and on the government of Iraq to address grievances in the Sunni communities in which AQI had found support. Both of these issues eventually enabled the resurgence of terrorism in Iraq, now in the form of ISIS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In both Iraq and Afghanistan, a large-scale U.S. presence in the country served as a rallying cry for foreign jihadists. And in both cases, the U.S. was unable to secure these countries' borders to prevent the influx or outflow of fighters • The Iraq and Afghanistan wars have been extremely costly—the U.S. has lost thousands of personnel to these wars and has expended over a trillion dollars on them
ADVISE, ASSIST, AND ACCOMPANY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When the U.S. has employed persistent, patient, and prolonged advise-and-assist activities, this approach has been most effective. The most commonly cited examples are the Iraqi CTS and ASSF, though U.S. efforts to develop a Somali partner force and U.S. efforts in the Philippines (i.e., JSOTF-P) have also been effective • The use of professional advisors (e.g., Army Special Forces) and sustained sourcing of these advisors from the same units (e.g., Army SF Groups) have been critical to the effectiveness of these efforts • Accompany missions are most effective when advisors are given authorities to be fully engaged with the partner force, at least up until the “last terrain feature” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those examples (e.g., efforts to advise and assist the Pakistani Frontier Corps or Yemeni security forces) in which the U.S. was unable to maintain a persistent application of this approach have been less effective • This approach is less effective (or may be ineffective) when it is conducted by untrained or <i>ad hoc</i> advisors, which often come from non-advisory-focused conventional military units or via military personnel who are not adequately trained or do not have the requisite skill sets to be effective advisors
“THIRD PARTY” PARTNERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the case of AQIM, the U.S. provided limited but critical support to the French-led intervention in 2013 that successfully dislodged rebels and Al-Qaeda fighters from the north of that country. The U.S. has continued to support French-led efforts to counter Al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups in the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There have been instances of third-party partners pursuing their own interests above the mutual interests of the third-party and the U.S. One example is in Yemen, where the U.S. has been supporting Saudi Arabia’s Operation Decisive Storm and working with UAE forces. While these operations at least ostensibly target AQAP

	<p>Sahel. The U.S. provision of enabling capabilities to French operations has improved the sustainability of those operations at relatively low cost to the U.S.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Afghanistan, the U.S. was able to leverage the presence of large numbers of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces to free some U.S. capabilities to combat Al-Qaeda directly. Numerous NATO and other third-party countries contributed their own SOF, which were used to develop Afghan special police forces which are conducting effective high-risk arrest and response activities in Kabul and other populated areas 	<p>forces, at times they have given AQAP freer rein in that country.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the U.S. has relied on non-state armed groups as a partner, it has sometimes then failed to persuade the host nation government to effectively integrate these forces into state security structures or to effectively demobilize, disarm, and reintegrate them. One example of this was the failure of the Iraqi government to integrate the “Sons of Iraq” (Sunni tribal elements that participated in the Awakening movement) into the Iraqi Security Forces, as was initially promised.
<p>MESSAGING / COUNTER-MESSAGING</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When we have enabled local voices to be heard against Al-Qaeda’s ideology, this approach has been most effective. One example was the use of so-called “Radio in a Box” devices in Afghanistan to provide a platform for local Afghan voices to speak out against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Another was the use of fixed and mobile loudspeakers to deliver addresses by moderate clerics and local government officials in various parts of Iraq 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This approach is widely viewed as being the one in which the U.S. has been the least effective. Reasons for this include a lack of understanding of local audiences; over-engaging in “tit-for-tat” discussions about U.S. versus Al-Qaeda narratives on social media; failure to devise and deliver a consistent, proactive, and positive U.S. narrative; not enough emphasis on the empowerment of local voices as opposed to Western ones; and too much emphasis being placed by the U.S. on its own counterterrorism operations (e.g., via press releases highlighting the killing of Al-Qaeda members). U.S. efforts to speak authoritatively about the “nature of Islam” or to counter Al-Qaeda’s ideology by identifying “good” and “bad” strains of Islam have also been ineffective
<p>INTELLIGENCE AND INFORMATION SHARING</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The continued and expanded use of the combined joint interagency task force (CJIATF) model has been an effective application of this approach The emphasis in some parts of the intelligence community to write for release, along with efforts to create blanket coalition release authorities and to use coalition networks has been an effective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased sharing of classified information carries attendant risks which have not always been effectively mitigated. Leaks from those trusted with access to this information—Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden being among the more notable cases—have at times increased risk to U.S. personnel or the success of U.S. operations. When these leaks have crossed U.S. government agencies (e.g., Manning—a member of DOD—leaking State Department cables), they have

	<p>way to promote and enable this approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The placement of liaison officers with other U.S. government and/or foreign entities (e.g., via SOCOM's Special Operations Liaison Officers (SOLOs) or via the State Department's Political Advisor (POLAD) program) has been a good practice for fostering information sharing • The expansion and/or broadening of U.S. government intelligence sharing agreements with foreign countries has been effective 	<p>eroded trust between those agencies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. government has been notoriously ineffective at archiving its own operational information. Early in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, for example, units would often redeploy with their own computers, whose hard drives would then be wiped clean upon their return. This resulted in the loss of significant information and institutional knowledge. There were some attempts to address this (e.g., the Combined Information Data Network Exchange (CIDNE) database used to document operational events in Iraq and Afghanistan), but those examples are limited and even CIDNE did not become widely used until 2007 in Iraq and 2008 in Afghanistan
<p>BUILDING NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The United States' emphasis on building and maintaining coalitions for its operations against Al-Qaeda have helped maintain the support of the international community for sustained counterterrorism operations around the world. These efforts have also helped impart legitimacy to U.S. operations in other countries • The United States' focus on coalition building and diplomacy has been mostly successful at generating and maintaining the access that the U.S. needs for its military operations (e.g., overflight rights and access permissions) • The use of coalitions has been successful at reducing the overall cost of counterterrorism operations for the U.S., as well as for other countries involved in the fight against Al-Qaeda • Liaison networks (e.g., Global SOF Network) have helped the U.S. maintain a persistent sensory presence worldwide to identify shifting patterns in Al-Qaeda activity. They have also enabled other U.S. approaches (e.g., information sharing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of coalitions to combat Al-Qaeda has often resulted in challenges in maintaining unity of effort. U.S. partners often have differing views of the Al-Qaeda threat and the best approaches to deal with it, or different national interests. In some instances, coalition partners of the U.S. have been reluctant (or have refused) to conduct certain types of operations (e.g., kill/capture missions), which has hampered the effectiveness of coalition operations (e.g., in Afghanistan where many nations put "caveats" on the employment of their forces prohibiting them from participating in counterterrorism activities) • In some instances, the U.S. has invested significant resources—time, money, and political capital—in trying to build partner relationships, with limited or no success. An example is the U.S. attempt to work with Pakistan against Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups, which has vacillated between the U.S. providing billions of dollars in aid and Pakistan allowing U.S. forces to operate within its territory; and the U.S. calling extremist organizations (e.g., the Al-Qaeda-friendly Haqqani Network) a "veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency"

Summary of findings on U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda

Having analyzed the U.S. government’s counterterrorism strategies, the approaches the DOD has used to counter Al-Qaeda, and the ways in which each approach has been most and least effective, Table 6 presents a summary of some broad observations from our assessment of U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda, at institutional and operational levels.¹⁷

Table 6. Summary of assessment of U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda

	Successes	Failures
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. has made significant progress moving from a “stove-piped” approach to a comprehensive “whole-of-government” approach to countering Al-Qaeda, and countering terrorism in general The U.S. has established key partnerships and worked cooperatively with countries around the world to counter Al-Qaeda The U.S. has developed a highly effective and efficient set of counterterrorism forces which operate through a combination of intelligence and SOF, coupled with continued innovation and improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. has failed to learn that regime change without effective stabilization operations creates enormous opportunities for Al-Qaeda (and other like-organizations) in both the targeted country and neighboring ones The U.S. has failed to develop a proactive, consistent, and compelling narrative that can effectively compete with the narrative that Al-Qaeda uses to advance its cause and to gain new recruits and followers The U.S. has failed to adequately and consistently align its approaches in ways that address the full spectrum of challenges that Al-Qaeda poses to the U.S. and the security vulnerabilities that Al-Qaeda exploits in countries where it currently operates or seeks to expand The U.S. has failed to fundamentally appreciate the resilience of Al-Qaeda as an organization, as a brand, and as a movement

¹⁷ By “institutional,” we refer to activities that focus on processes and organization, and on the way the counter-Al-Qaeda campaign is conducted. By “operational,” we mean how effective the DOD has been at reaching its stated operational objectives for Al-Qaeda: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat.

Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There has not been another terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland anywhere near the scale of the attacks of 9/11 • In the early years of the war in Afghanistan, U.S. forces were effective at disrupting core Al-Qaeda, driving its leadership into hiding, and depriving the organization of what had been its main base of operations in Afghanistan • In Iraq in the 2006-2008 timeframe, U.S. forces were able to almost completely dismantle AQI • The DOD has had success building capacity in some partner nation security forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. has not effectively consolidated gains in the few instances where it has had success against Al-Qaeda in order to prevent the group from resurging • The U.S. has failed to stop the spread of Al-Qaeda • The U.S. has been unable to replicate the conditions that allowed it to almost completely dismantle AQI in its fight against any of the other Al-Qaeda affiliates
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Discussion and recommendations

The NDAA calls for us to provide recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, but it does not define these terms—nor are there commonly accepted definitions for them across the U.S. government. As a result, we reviewed a number of sources and established the following definitions, which we will use in this discussion:

- **Disrupt:** Al-Qaeda is unable to conduct attacks against the U.S. homeland or U.S. interests abroad (e.g., U.S. embassies, U.S. military facilities, U.S. personnel operating overseas).
- **Dismantle:** Al-Qaeda has been reduced to a point where it is no longer a coherent, functioning entity operationally and tactically.
- **Defeat:** Al-Qaeda does not have the capability and will to fight the United States and its partners.

Assessment of U.S. government effectiveness at *disrupting* Al-Qaeda

The United States has primarily emphasized approaches that aim to disrupt Al-Qaeda (especially since 2011) and has been generally effective at doing so.

An examination of the U.S. successes against Al-Qaeda reveals that U.S. approaches to the group have primarily aligned with the aim to disrupt it, and the U.S. has effectively done so in a number of cases, to include: in Afghanistan, against the core in 2001-2003; against AQI in 2007; and through its ongoing efforts to target key individuals in Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Requirements for disrupting Al-Qaeda

If the United States continues to pursue a strategy that emphasizes *disrupting* Al-Qaeda in order to reduce the short-term risk of an attack on the U.S. homeland and its interests abroad, it should recognize the following serious shortcomings associated with this strategy:

- **The approaches that the United States takes to disrupt Al-Qaeda do not address the range of security vulnerabilities that have emerged (and in some cases are getting worse), in the places where Al-Qaeda operates or seeks to expand.**
- **A continued emphasis on disruption will come with additional costs and may not be sustainable over time.** The level of resources that the United States has invested in dedicated counterterrorism forces and operations since 2011 has been steadily increasing, and yet, since 2011, Al-Qaeda has continued to expand. These trends, when combined with worsening security vulnerability trends in many countries of the Middle East and Africa, suggest that the United States may need to steadily increase its investments in counterterrorism forces just to maintain Al-Qaeda in a disrupted state.
- **Continued or increased efforts aimed at disruption will not necessarily put the United States on a path to dismantling, and ultimately defeating, Al-Qaeda; in some cases, it could have the opposite effect.** Al-Qaeda's growth and expansion into new areas has continued in spite of U.S. efforts to disrupt the organization to date. This suggests that disruption in an overall general sense is not leading to the defeat or even dismantling of Al-Qaeda. And in some cases, our study suggests it may be contributing to the group's resilience.

These observations together suggest that the degree of the Al-Qaeda problem is likely to increase in the near term and therefore the requirement for U.S. forces to disrupt the group will also likely increase. As a result, if the U.S. government chooses to prioritize the disruption of Al-Qaeda, we assess that it would need to:

- Largely continue its current approaches to Al-Qaeda, but prepare itself—and the American public—for the likelihood of increased costs in both blood and treasure to maintain Al-Qaeda in a disrupted state.

- Conduct additional analysis to determine how much further it can expand its current approaches to countering terrorism before the forces tasked with these missions (e.g., SOF) reach a breaking point.

Assessment of U.S. government effectiveness at *dismantling* Al-Qaeda

The U.S. has had some successes in dismantling Al-Qaeda, but none has been sustained.

In our study, we identified a number of cases in which the U.S. (and often its partners) has been able to dismantle a part of Al-Qaeda. These are:

- Al-Qaeda core, 2001-2002, Afghanistan
- AQI, 2009-2010, Iraq
- AQAP, 2003, Yemen (Yemen led)
- AQAP, 2002-2006, Saudi Arabia (Saudi led)
- ASG, 2000-2014, Philippines (Philippine led)

However, in each of these cases, the group in question has been able to resurge, due to a variety of factors. In the case of Al-Qaeda core, the U.S. removed pressure from the group by diverting the assets needed to do so to Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in 2003. In the case of AQI, by the end of 2011, the U.S. felt confident enough in its victory over that group to withdraw its forces from Iraq. But these gains proved only temporary and by 2014 the remnants of AQI (along with a host of new recruits and merged groups) moved back into Iraq as ISIS due to the continued presence of strong vulnerabilities in Iraq's security environment. In the case of AQAP, while the Saudis have been able to keep that group from operating or having a presence in their country, severe vulnerabilities in the security environment of Yemen have allowed the group to take hold and expand there. And in the special case of ASG, while the government of the Philippines has been able to disrupt that group, ASG's embrace of ISIS has led to a recent degree of resurgence, at least in part due to the continued existence of security vulnerabilities in that country.

Requirements for dismantling Al-Qaeda

If the U.S. government chooses to pursue a policy focused on trying to fully *dismantle* the Al-Qaeda organization, we assess that it would need to:

- Create an operational plan focused on Al-Qaeda with a goal of isolating each affiliate and conducting high-tempo counterterrorism operations to dismantle

each part of the organization. To enable these operations, the United States would need to:

- “Surge” resources to reinforce ongoing counterterrorism efforts focused on Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. This would likely entail greater use of conventional U.S. military forces to bolster U.S. SOF (who are stretched thin) and greater use of agencies such as the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), and the Department of the Treasury’s Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (TFI).
- Establish well-defined rules of engagement and limits for collateral damage, and push authorities for military action within those guidelines down to the lowest politically acceptable levels within the DOD. In addition, the restrictions placed on U.S. diplomats in the wake of the Benghazi incident would need to be rescinded such that these individuals can get off of embassy compounds and out of capital cities in order to engage relevant local entities and populations.
- Establish a CJATF to focus on severing the linkages between Al-Qaeda’s affiliates (i.e., personnel movement, money transfers, and communications). Expanding on Operation Gallant Phoenix may be an efficient means of doing this.¹⁸
- Strive to establish and maintain counterterrorism platforms that are as close to the areas in which Al-Qaeda is operating as possible. In some instances (e.g., Yemen, Syria, Pakistan), this may entail revisiting U.S. policies regarding “boots on the ground” and/or require strong diplomatic efforts to regain access.
- Reconsider the balance of emphasis that has been placed on “kill” missions relative to “capture” missions. This necessarily entails working though how the United States would legally handle increased numbers of Al-Qaeda detainees.
- Design a new, proactive messaging campaign that considers how to amplify the values and ideas shared by the West and much of the Muslim world, relying in part on local Islamic voices, in an effort to counter Al-Qaeda’s ideological narratives. The United States would need to designate and resource a single entity (e.g., the State Department’s Global Engagement Center) to serve as the

¹⁸ Statement by General Raymond A. Thomas III, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) before the Senate Armed Services Committee, May 4, 2017.

focal point for these efforts, with robust funding and support from all relevant U.S. government agencies.

- Conduct thorough interagency reviews of the security vulnerabilities of the countries where Al-Qaeda currently has a presence, along with those countries most likely to be targeted by Al-Qaeda for future expansion. These reviews would need to identify these countries' most pressing security vulnerabilities, and the U.S. should work with each country (via the U.S. country team) to identify proactive measures that could be taken (potentially with U.S. support) to address them, so as to consolidate any successes gained from the actions recommended above or prevent Al-Qaeda's expansion into new areas. Such measures might include:
 - Strengthening border security forces
 - Strengthening internal police and intelligence forces
 - Strengthening platforms for moderate voices to deliver proactive, positive messages
 - Security sector reform and defense institution building
 - Economic stimulus and development at the local level, as well as national economic reforms
 - Strengthening government accountability (via internal institutions or civil society organizations)
- Invest in maintaining and strengthening our international alliances and partnerships, most notably those with governments and non-government organizations that share U.S. interests and goals with respect to Al-Qaeda.

These recommendations may sound like a tall order, and indeed they are in terms of the level of additional investment that would be required by the United States. But our assessment of the U.S. track record against Al-Qaeda to date suggests that this level of activity and investment would be required in order to truly dismantle Al-Qaeda and its affiliates and prevent the resurgence of these groups.

Assessment of U.S. government effectiveness at *defeating* Al-Qaeda

The United States has not defeated Al-Qaeda core or any of its affiliates, and it is not clear that the United States—at the strategic level—has a vision for what that defeat would look like or how to bring it about.

In looking across the history of U.S. efforts against Al-Qaeda, there are no examples of the United States having successfully caused Al-Qaeda to lose the capability and the will to continue fighting. In addition, as part of this assessment we were unable to identify a consensus view among current or former U.S. government officials as to what the defeat of Al-Qaeda would look like, or how the United States might go about accomplishing that goal.

Requirements for defeating Al-Qaeda

If the U.S. government decides to pursue the complete *defeat* of Al-Qaeda, we assess that it would need to:

- Devise a vision for what defeat of the group would look like, both politically and practically, and then ensure that this vision is promulgated and pursued by the entirety of the U.S. government, so that all U.S. entities are synchronized and aligned in their mission against Al-Qaeda. The United States would also need to share this vision with its partner nations and organizations, and use it as a lens through which to identify common and divergent interests among these entities.
- Create and resource a strategy to bring about the vision for Al-Qaeda's defeat. As part of this strategic planning process, the United States would need to critically examine its current assumptions that the DOD should be the lead agency for this effort, and that the three goals articulated by the NDAA—disrupt, dismantle, and defeat—are a linear process. Additionally, the United States would need to clearly address how to defeat both Al-Qaeda's capability and its will to fight. The requirements for dismantling Al-Qaeda that we identify above largely address its capability, but the United States would need to think much more deeply about how to effectively address Al-Qaeda's will.
- Prepare for a protracted fight against Al-Qaeda and like-organizations. While the objective of dismantling Al-Qaeda could conceivably be achieved on a timescale of years, the U.S. experience with Al-Qaeda over the past two decades suggests that true defeat of the group is likely to take decades more.

Summary of conclusions

The war between Al-Qaeda and the United States government has been one of notable gains and significant setbacks on both sides for nearly two decades. While both entities publically state the same goals as they did in 2001, the approaches that each are taking today suggest that both sides have learned, adapted, and evolved their thinking, organizational structures, and activities according to their experiences—especially in recent years.

In this assessment, we have addressed the relationships, strategy, objectives, capabilities, and structure of Al-Qaeda; the impact of changing security environments across much of Africa and the Middle East on Al-Qaeda and U.S. efforts to counter the group; and how the U.S. government has been most and least effective against Al-Qaeda to date. Per the NDAA requirement, we have also provided the U.S. government with the actions that it would need to take to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda—which we believe are distinct, and not linearly escalating, goals. Having completed these assessments, we conclude the following:

- **Current U.S. efforts are more aligned with the direct threat that Al-Qaeda poses to the United States and less to the security conditions, or vulnerabilities, that Al-Qaeda exploits to survive and expand.**
- **U.S. government efforts to date have not defeated Al-Qaeda. The current U.S. strategy—centered on military approaches and anchored in the assumed linear goals of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating the organization—is unlikely to do so.**
- **Dismantling Al-Qaeda would entail a commitment of U.S. resources well beyond those committed today.**
- **Continued disruption of Al-Qaeda is likely to require increasing resources as security environments continue to weaken in many parts of the world where Al-Qaeda operates and seeks to operate.**

Based on these findings, we conclude that *the current U.S. strategy toward Al-Qaeda is unlikely to attain the United States' desired goals*. Therefore, *we recommend that the U.S. government should undertake a new review of its policy goals and overarching strategy against Al-Qaeda*. This review should take a fresh look at Al-Qaeda and the environments in which it operates, or seeks to operate, as they exist today. This review should also critically examine U.S. strategic goals with respect to Al-Qaeda and like groups, the resources required to achieve those goals, and the political and domestic appetite for sustaining them. It should also examine the balance of roles across U.S. government agencies and the timelines and metrics required for success.

The U.S. has been battling Al-Qaeda primarily militarily for 16 years and yet the group is stronger and present in more places today than it was in 2001. Clearly, the U.S. needs a renewed approach.

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