

CNA ASSESSES U.S. EFFORT TO DEFEAT AL-QAEDA

Despite 16 years of costly U.S. military action against Al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization has grown significantly in size, resilience, and most notably in its global footprint.

These are the few of the conclusions reached by analysts at the research organization CNA after conducting a comprehensive assessment of U.S. efforts against Al-Qaeda for the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The independent assessment was submitted to Congress as required by the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act.

In 2001, Al-Qaeda was made up of a core of jihadists concentrated in Afghanistan. Today, that group has mutated into a network that spans a belt from West Africa to Bangladesh.

On the positive side, the researchers found that Al-Qaeda's command and control of its foot soldiers has diminished as it has devolved into a set of loosely connected affiliates. And its terrorist activities have been sufficiently disrupted by U.S. and allied forces that the U.S. homeland has not come under a major attack since September 11, 2001.

The Defense Authorization Act specifically asked for an assessment of U.S. efforts to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda.” “We’ve been pretty successful at disrupting Al-Qaeda, especially in recent years,” says **Jonathan Schroden**, director of the **Center for Stability and Development** at CNA and one of the report’s principal authors. “But we cannot defeat Al-Qaeda with the current approach,” he adds.

In fact, just to continue the current level of disruption, “we’ve had to invest more in forces as Al-Qaeda has grown,” says CNA Principal Research Scientist **Julia McQuaid**, the report’s lead author. “Is there a breaking point?” she asks. “Is the American public prepared for increased costs in both blood and treasure to maintain Al-Qaeda in a disrupted state?” McQuaid, Schroden and several other analysts who developed the assessment have on-the-ground experience in the region; Schroden deployed to Afghanistan ten times as a CNA analyst supporting U.S. forces.

The study encompasses the entire breadth of the problem across decades and continents, and also across the three principal variables: Al-Qaeda’s own internal activities, U.S. and allied efforts to counter them, and the environments in which Al-Qaeda operates. This third factor turns out to have played a particularly important role in Al-Qaeda’s growth and spread. To quote the 306-page report: “The deterioration of the security environments in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen provided oxygen to Al-Qaeda affiliates and like-minded groups, allowing them to take advantage of instability.”

A country-by-country analysis of security vulnerabilities and the growth of Al-Qaeda affiliates found that the organization made its largest gains when and where there were sharp and rapid deteriorations, such as when Yemen and Syria descended into civil war. Many of these came in the aftermath of popular Arab Spring protests or revolutions that met with a backlash or failed to fulfil their democratic aspirations.

One local opportunity that Al-Qaeda was able to exploit did not spring up from the grass roots, however, but was created by the U.S. government itself. In dozens of interviews with current and former government officials, CNA researchers asked, “What was the single worst action the U.S. has taken in the fight against Al-Qaeda?” According to Schroden, “Routinely we got the answer: ‘the invasion of Iraq.’”

That 2003 invasion created a two-fold opportunity for Al-Qaeda. First, it took pressure off the core of Al-Qaeda, including Osama Bin Laden, as U.S. counterterrorism forces shifted attention away from their largely successful efforts in Afghanistan. Second, the failure to stabilize Iraq in the aftermath of the invasion created an opening for Al-Qaeda to expand by instigating a Sunni-Shia civil war. Al-Qaeda in Iraq would eventually become the Islamic State, divorcing itself from the Al-Qaeda network in the process.

In addition to the local-environment variable, the study examined the history of U.S. anti-Al-Qaeda approaches as they relate to the goals of “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat,”

first articulated in 2009. Their first obstacle was the absence of accepted definitions of those terms. “There really is no consensus about what that defeat would look like,” says McQuaid, which raises problems in developing a strategy to accomplish it.

After in-depth research, the analysts articulated the following definitions:

- **Disrupt:** Al-Qaeda is unable to conduct attacks against U.S. interests.
- **Dismantle:** Al-Qaeda is no longer coherent and functioning operationally.
- **Defeat:** Al-Qaeda has neither the capability nor the will to fight the U.S.

The study concluded that the vast majority of U.S. effort has been concentrated on disruption. A common assumption is that disrupting Al-Qaeda is a step in the direction of dismantling and defeating it, but the study found that evidence contradicts that assumption. Rather, the authors

concluded that one of most common disruption tactics—drone strikes against Al-Qaeda leaders—works against its defeat as collateral civilian casualties drive up recruitment and help Al-Qaeda to grow. “Military-centric approaches have focused more on the symptoms of the problem,” says Schroden. “We’ve done much less to address the underlying problems that lead to an Al-Qaeda presence in a country.”

The battle against Al-Qaeda has endured for nearly a generation. Next year will mark the first intake of U.S. military recruits born after the U.S. invaded Afghanistan to root out Al-Qaeda. The assessment suggests that lessons from both the successes and the failures of the past 16 years should be used to inform a revised policy with a long-term perspective, one that is more likely to lead to the ultimate defeat of Al-Qaeda. “Our estimation is that this effort will go on for at least another generation,” says Schroden. “So it’s time for the U.S. government to take stock of where we are in this fight.”

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Note to writers and editors: CNA is not an acronym and is correctly referenced as “CNA, a research organization in Arlington, VA.”