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SPECIFIC AUTHORITY: N00014-16-D-5003 10/25/2017

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**Approved by:**

**October 2017**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eric V. Thompson'.

Dr. Eric V. Thompson, Director and VP  
Center for Strategic Studies

## Abstract

In its independent assessment of U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda that was mandated by Congress via the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), CNA concluded that the current U.S. strategy toward Al-Qaeda was unlikely to achieve its stated goals to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat the group. CNA recommended that the U.S. government should undertake a new review of its policy goals and overarching strategy against Al-Qaeda. This occasional paper presents three potential policy options for the U.S. government to consider, should it seek to undertake such a review. These options are retrenchment, escalation, and containment.

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Current Assessment</b> .....	<b>3</b>
Al-Qaeda and its affiliates .....	3
The security environment .....	6
U.S. government approach .....	7
Net assessment.....	9
<b>New Policy Options for the U.S. against Al-Qaeda</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Retrenchment.....	11
Nature of the policy and strategic goal .....	11
Lines of effort .....	12
Advantages of retrenchment .....	12
Disadvantages of retrenchment.....	14
Escalation.....	16
Nature of the policy and strategic goal .....	16
Lines of effort .....	16
Advantages of escalation.....	17
Disadvantages of escalation .....	18
Containment.....	20
Nature of the policy and strategic goal .....	20
Lines of effort .....	21
Advantages of containment .....	22
Disadvantages of containment.....	24
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>28</b>

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## List of Figures

Figure 1.	Al-Qaeda's global presence, 2017 .....	4
Figure 2.	Al-Qaeda's organizational structure in each of its phases .....	5
Figure 3.	State fragility in 2006 and 2017 .....	6
Figure 4.	Recipients of DoD Counter Terrorism Partnerships Fund support, FY17 .....	8
Figure 5.	Countries with U.S. drone strikes against Al-Qaeda, 2016 .....	8
Figure 6.	Summary of U.S. retrenchment strategy for Al-Qaeda.....	12
Figure 7.	Summary of U.S. escalation strategy for Al-Qaeda .....	17
Figure 8.	Summary of U.S. containment strategy for Al-Qaeda .....	22

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# Glossary

AAH	Area of Active Hostilities
ADRP	Army Doctrine Reference Publication
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
AQS	Al-Qaeda in Syria
ASD SO/LIC	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
CCL	Cell for Coordination and Liaison
CIA CTC	Central Intelligence Agency's Counter Terrorism Center
CTPF	Counter Terrorism Partnerships Fund
DOD	Department of Defense
DOJ	Department of Justice
DOS	Department of State
DOT	Department of Treasury
FY	Fiscal Year
G5	Group of Five
GCC	Geographic Combatant Command
IC	Intelligence Community
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

MNJTF	Multi-National Joint Task Force
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
RPV	Remotely Piloted Vehicle
SOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command
SOF	Special Operations Forces
TSA	Transportation Security Administration
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USCG	U.S. Coast Guard

# Introduction

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) stated, “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 that independent assessment, which CNA published in August 2017.<sup>1</sup>

As part of that assessment, we examined:

- The evolution of Al-Qaeda’s strategy, organization, capabilities, and relationships over the past two decades
- The evolution of the security environments in which Al-Qaeda’s “core” group and its declared affiliates have operated or sought to operate, and how these groups have exploited worsening conditions in those environments
- The evolution of the U.S. government’s approaches to Al-Qaeda and what aspects of those approaches have been most and least effective.

We then analyzed the results of our research on these three topics to assess where the U.S. stood with respect to its stated policy goals for Al-Qaeda—namely, to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat the organization. We concluded the following:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Julia McQuaid et al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-2Rev, October 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. The U.S. government does not have commonly accepted definitions for these terms. In our assessment, and for the sake of this paper, we define these terms as follows: 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.

- Current U.S. efforts are aligned more closely with the direct threat that Al-Qaeda poses to the United States and less closely with 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 assessed that *the current U.S. strategy toward Al-Qaeda is unlikely to attain the United States' desired goals*. Therefore, we recommended that *the U.S. government undertake a new review of its policy goals and overarching strategy against Al-Qaeda*.<sup>3</sup> Using the findings from our independent assessment as a starting point, we present in this occasional paper our thoughts on a set of options that the U.S. might consider as part of such a policy review. We will discuss three distinct options: **retrenchment**, **escalation**, and **containment**.

To be clear, we recognize that there are other options available to the U.S. government beyond these three choices. And we recognize that Al-Qaeda (and like organizations, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) is not a singular group and so it may be possible—or even advantageous—to apply a mix of these options to various parts of the Al-Qaeda organization. But these three options are worth considering as a starting point for a renewed discussion on the United States' strategy toward Al-Qaeda, as they represent a range of options with distinct advantages and disadvantages relative to each other and to the current U.S. strategy. Our intent in presenting these options is to provide the U.S. government with a structured foundation from which to launch an effort to devise a new strategy for its approach to Al-Qaeda.

In the remainder of this paper, we will first briefly summarize the current state of Al-Qaeda, the security environment in which it operates, and the U.S. government's efforts against the group. We will then discuss the three policy options in turn, and end with some concluding thoughts as to the way ahead.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## Current Assessment

In this section, we will in turn summarize the current status of Al-Qaeda, the nature of the security environments in which the group is operating or seeking to operate, and the status of U.S. government efforts against the group.<sup>4</sup>

### Al-Qaeda and its affiliates

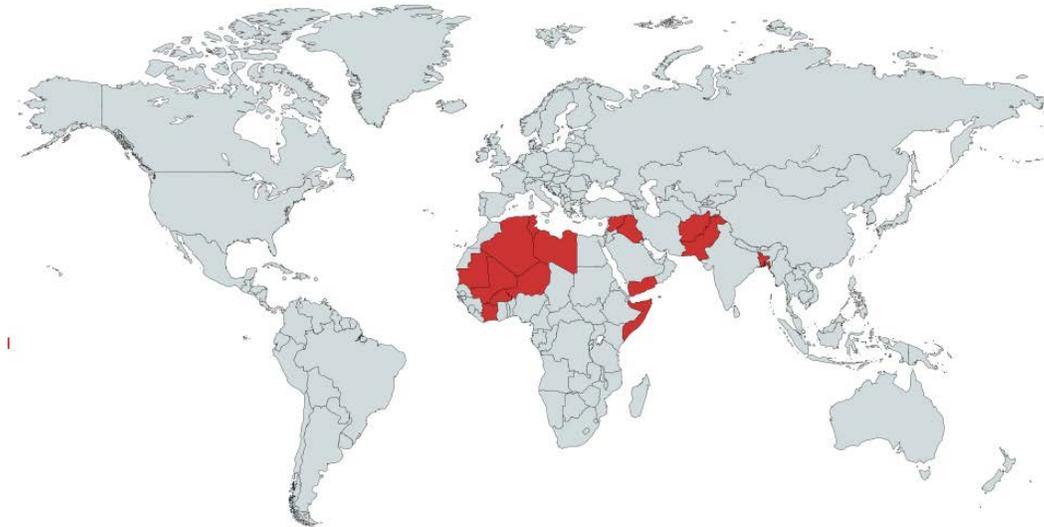
Al-Qaeda today is a very different organization from what it was on September 11, 2001. In the 16 years since the attacks of that day, Al-Qaeda has suffered setbacks and periods of weakening, but it has also made gains and expanded in the face of international efforts against it. Today, Al-Qaeda is larger, more agile, and more resilient. 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).<sup>5</sup> In addition, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), once the most virulent of Al-Qaeda's affiliates, has evolved into what we now know as ISIS (Figure 1).

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<sup>4</sup> The information in this section is largely adapted from McQuaid et al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.

<sup>5</sup> We acknowledge the debate over the current status of the group formally known as Jabhat al-Nusra and now commonly referred to as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (or part of the group known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham), and we discuss this at length in our independent assessment (ibid.). For the sake of simplicity here, we will use the phrase "Al-Qaeda in Syria (AQS)" as a broad reference to these groups, which until recently were publically aligned with Al-Qaeda.

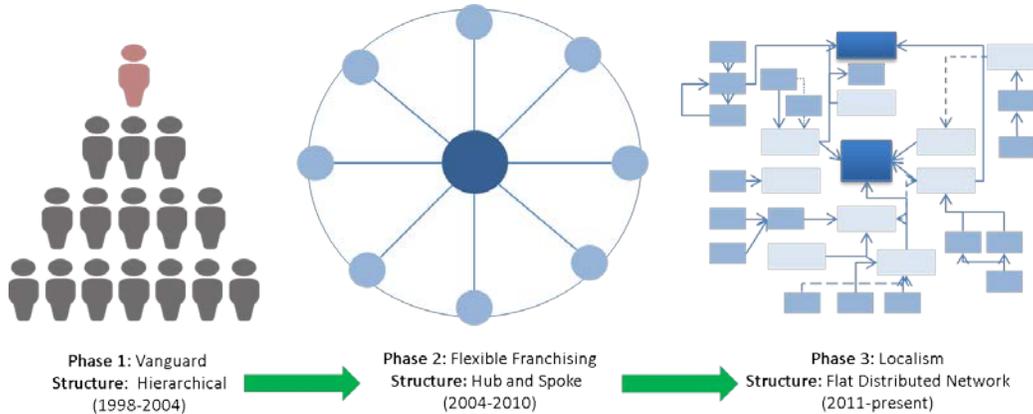
Figure 1. Al-Qaeda's global presence, 2017



Note: Countries in red are active operating locations of Al-Qaeda affiliates; the map does not display the locations of Al-Qaeda associated or inspired groups.

Early in its existence, Al-Qaeda was a rigidly hierarchical organization, with Osama Bin Laden as its leader. Over time, Al-Qaeda embraced the creation or incorporation of affiliates—groups that pledged loyalty to the Al-Qaeda organization and its stated goals—giving it more of a “hub and spoke” structure. As some of these groups gained in strength, and with the killing of Osama Bin Laden and many of his top lieutenants, Al-Qaeda evolved further to what it is today: a flat, decentralized, and geographically dispersed organization (Figure 2). Currently, the notion of a “core” group of Al-Qaeda leaders sitting at the apex or the center of the organization 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). Those affiliates are now active in over 10 Muslim-majority countries, have more autonomy than in the past, and have connections with other affiliates (the possible exception being AQIS).

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



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

While Al-Qaeda's structure has evolved over time, the group has retained a largely steadfast focus on the same core goals that it had in its infancy—the most notable of which is the establishment of a global caliphate. 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). However, this is not to say that the organization has been strategically rigid. In fact, Al-Qaeda has shown an ability to adjust the ways in which it pursues its core goals in response to actions against it and changes in the environments in which it operates. For example, some of Al-Qaeda's current affiliates avoid the level of brutality that AQI employed in Iraq (and which ISIS employs today), provide essential services and local governance in places where official governments do not, and tolerate activities that Al-Qaeda would likely have shunned in the past (such as chewing the narcotic leaf *qat* in areas of Yemen controlled by AQAP).

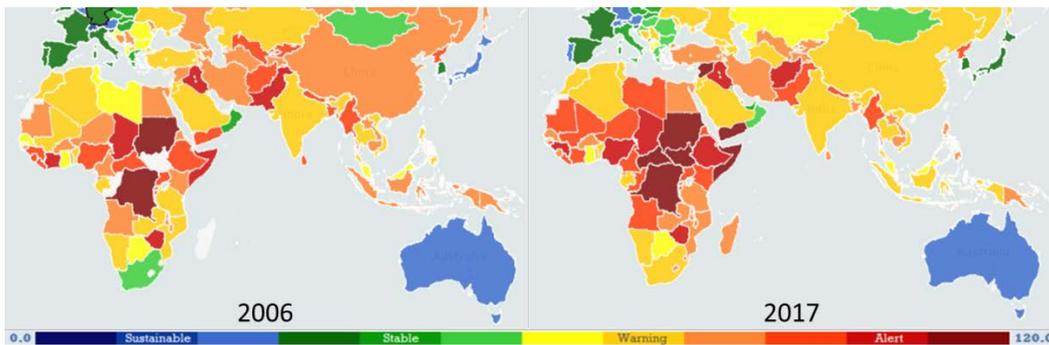
Al-Qaeda's adaptations over the past 20 years make clear that it is a learning organization. Al-Qaeda has also shown that it is resilient—it can weather severe setbacks (such as AQI's near defeat in Iraq), learn from its mistakes, and evolve its approach over time. An example of this is how Al-Qaeda has reacted to the emergence of ISIS, which stormed onto the world stage in 2014 and seized the mantle of international jihad. As the international coalition has focused on the “annihilation” of ISIS the past three years, Al-Qaeda has continued to rather silently make gains in the background and has been positioning itself as a “moderate” group relative to the likes of ISIS. And while still a subject of debate, many Al-Qaeda watchers have argued that the group has deliberately avoided attacks against the U.S. and Western homelands in recent years so as to avoid the kind of international efforts currently being applied against ISIS.

When it began, Al-Qaeda might have resembled a more traditional terrorist organization, but today it is most accurately described as a collection of largely localized insurgent groups. While what remains of its core leadership does continue to advocate for attacks against the United States directly, most of Al-Qaeda’s affiliates today seem more focused on achieving success in civil wars, and local and regional insurgencies against Muslim governments—the organization’s “near enemies.”

## The security environment

In 2001, Al-Qaeda’s members were mostly concentrated in Afghanistan. In the years since then, many of the countries in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia have become increasingly politically, socially, and economically unstable, as exemplified in the *Fragile States Index*, a qualitative annual assessment of state fragility. As shown in Figure 3, many of the countries in this region are currently assessed as notably more fragile than they were 10 years ago.

Figure 3. State fragility in 2006 and 2017



Source: The data for these images come from the *Fragile States Index*, an annual report published by the Fund for Peace that captures economic, social, and political pressures on the stability of states. The index has been updated each year since 2006.

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. These conditions, combined with demographic trends such as youth bulges and population migrations, have created opportunities for movement and expansion that Al-Qaeda has exploited. Key locations where Al-Qaeda has done so include Syria, Yemen, the Sahel region of Africa (especially Mali), Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Southeast Asia.

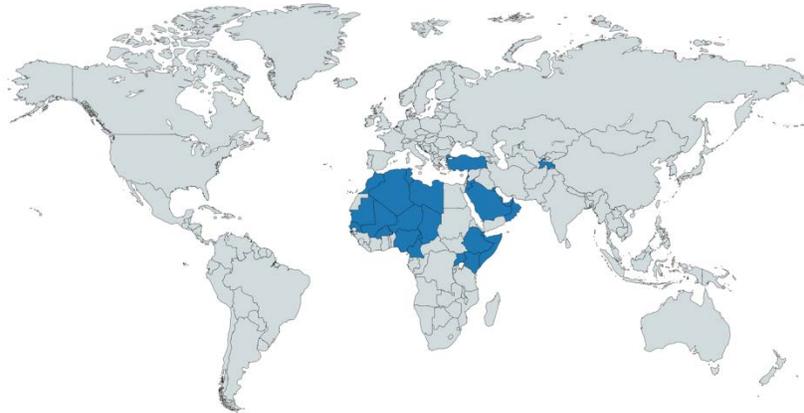
In looking across Al-Qaeda's efforts to exploit such conditions over time, it is clear that the existence of such weaknesses in the security environment do not automatically benefit the group—Al-Qaeda still has to be adroit in its efforts to do so in order to succeed. Often, it does this by taking advantage of a pre-existing presence among, or relationship with, disaffected populations or groups in a local area. But it is also clear that while Al-Qaeda has been able to benefit from slow, negative trends in the security conditions in countries across much of the Middle East and Africa, 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.

Given Al-Qaeda's history, there is every reason to believe that the group will continue to try and exploit these worsening conditions to grow and expand. And worsening security conditions are doubly problematic for the United States, as they present Al-Qaeda with opportunities and they can result in the loss of local partners, local bases, or local access that the U.S. would use to pursue actions against the group.

## U.S. government approach

As stated earlier, the U.S. government's goals are to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda. To do this, since 2001, the U.S. has pursued a strategy that is largely focused on military activities. While other elements of the U.S. government—such as the Department of State (DoS), Department of Treasury (DoT), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the non-defense agencies of the intelligence community (IC)—play important roles in the United States' pursuit of this goal, the preponderance of resources for addressing Al-Qaeda overseas since 2001 has gone to the Department of Defense (DoD), and many of the approaches that the U.S. has employed against Al-Qaeda have been military-centric. For example, the U.S. has large-scale programs to train and equip foreign militaries to build their capabilities to counter Al-Qaeda directly, one example being the Counter Terrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF, see Figure 4). The United States also provides advisors—often in the form of special operations forces (SOF)—to advise, assist, and, in some cases, accompany these foreign forces in counterterrorism missions.

Figure 4. Recipients of DoD Counter Terrorism Partnerships Fund support, FY17



Source: Data for this figure are from Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), "Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund: Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year (FY) 2017," February 2016, available at [http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2017/FY2017\\_CTPF\\_J-Book.pdf](http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2017/FY2017_CTPF_J-Book.pdf).

The U.S. also conducts so-called "attack the network" operations, in which it gathers intelligence to uncover the identities and locations of members of the Al-Qaeda organization, and then conducts kill or capture missions against them. One of the tools the U.S. uses for such kill missions is remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs, or drones). In 2016, the U.S. conducted drone strikes in at least Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Syria (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Countries in which the U.S. conducted drone strikes against Al-Qaeda, 2016



Source: The Bureau of Investigative Journalism database of drone strikes (available at <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war>).

A range of other efforts also support these military activities: messaging and counter-messaging; countering financial flows between Al-Qaeda groups and imposing sanctions on designated terrorists; intelligence and information sharing; and economic and governance development programs designed to prevent the radicalization and recruitment of at-risk Muslim populations.

Given the wide-ranging nature of these efforts and their distribution across a number of U.S. government agencies, it is impossible to provide an accurate tally of the yearly cost of U.S. government efforts against Al-Qaeda. However, even a rough estimate that includes programs such as the CTPF and those focused on the war in Afghanistan (which remains tied to denying Al-Qaeda safe haven there), reaches a sum in the range of tens of billions of dollars annually. While this yearly price tag is much reduced from what the U.S. was spending at the height of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, it remains a significant annual cost for the United States.

In addition to the financial cost, there is also a human cost. As mentioned above, the U.S. relies primarily on the military to pursue its goals against Al-Qaeda, and, within the military, it relies primarily on its SOF to do so. This reliance has resulted in a heavy burden on U.S. SOF, which has led the current commander of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), General Tony Thomas, to describe the pace of SOF deployments as “unsustainable.”<sup>6</sup>

## Net assessment

In looking across the status of Al-Qaeda, the security environment in the regions where Al-Qaeda operates, and the U.S. government response, we observe the following:

- Al-Qaeda is larger, more geographically dispersed, and more resilient than it was in 2001.
- The security conditions that Al-Qaeda exploits in order to survive and expand are becoming increasingly widespread in countries across the regions in which it operates or seeks to operate.
- The U.S. continues to spend at least tens of billions of dollars annually in its fight against Al-Qaeda and has been deploying the forces conducting that

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<sup>6</sup> See video of General Thomas’ testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?427710-1/hearing-focuses-us-special-operations>.

fight at a potentially unsustainable pace. And yet, as we concluded in our independent assessment, *the U.S. is not on a path to achieve its goals of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating Al-Qaeda.*

It is with the recognition of these three points—that the current U.S. strategy is not achieving its goals even at great cost, that Al-Qaeda has been expanding in recent years despite significant U.S. efforts against the group, and that the conditions in many regions favor Al-Qaeda’s continued expansion—that we offer a set of potential alternative policy and strategy options in the next section.

# Policy Options for the United States Against Al-Qaeda

In this section, we will discuss three distinct policy options for the U.S. government to consider relative to Al-Qaeda. These are *retrenchment*, *escalation*, and *containment*. For each option, we describe the policy and its goal(s), present specific areas of activity (referred to as “lines of effort”) to support the policy, and highlight the advantages and disadvantages of each.

## Retrenchment

### Nature of the policy and strategic goal

In this option, the U.S. withdraws militarily and economically from the fight against Al-Qaeda in other countries to focus on homeland defense and encourages other countries to conduct their own operations against the group. In essence, the U.S. would stop playing the “away game” and focus on the “home game,” by investing its resources in strengthening defense of the homeland. To be clear, we are not suggesting in this option that every member of the U.S. military or Foreign Service deployed overseas would come home, as the U.S. has personnel abroad that are arrayed against other national security priorities (e.g., military forces in South Korea). Rather, the U.S. would take a hard look at its overseas presence, identify which personnel, units, and operating locations were primarily being used to combat Al-Qaeda, and selectively reduce its overseas posture accordingly.

With this policy, the strategic goal of the United States relative to Al-Qaeda would be to *secure the U.S. homeland from terrorist attacks*. Here, we define “secure” as “preventing the U.S. homeland from being damaged or destroyed as a result of terrorist actions.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> We adapted this definition from that in U.S. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1-02, *Terms and Symbols*, published November 2016.

## Lines of effort and agency roles

In pursuing retrenchment, the main line of effort would be protecting the U.S. homeland. With this in mind, in this policy option the lead federal agency would be the Department of Homeland Security, with components such as the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) playing leading roles.

Supporting lines of effort would include intelligence / information sharing, international diplomacy and coordination, strategic messaging, law enforcement, and countering of terrorists' financing. These efforts would be conducted in support of DHS's overall lead by entities within the IC, such as the Central Intelligence Agency's Counter Terrorism Center (CIA CTC), as well as entities within other U.S. government agencies, such as the DoS's Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Department of Justice (DoJ) and the FBI, DoT's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, and various entities from DoD, such as U.S. Northern Command, U.S. Southern Command, and the Marine Corps Embassy Security Group. Figure 6 shows a simplified diagram of main and supporting lines of effort for this policy.

Figure 6. Summary of U.S. retrenchment strategy for Al-Qaeda



## Advantages of retrenchment

A policy of retrenchment has a number of potential advantages. These include the following:

- *Focused investment of U.S. resources at home.* By putting security of the homeland, or homeland defense, ahead of overseas military operations in the prioritization for U.S. resources, the U.S. could steer a sizeable fraction of the

money currently being spent overseas into investment at home. Alternatively, it could use the savings from reduced costs of overseas military operations to reduce the size of the U.S. budget deficit, which has been often cited as a U.S. national security issue in recent years.

- *Fewer U.S. military combat casualties and reduced strain on military forces.* By withdrawing from many of the places where we are currently fighting Al-Qaeda abroad, we would presumably suffer fewer U.S. military casualties overseas and would reduce the strain on SOF and intelligence forces that are currently stretched thin by near-continuous overseas deployments.
- *Renewed military focus on high-end, existential threats to the United States.* By withdrawing from offensive operations against Al-Qaeda overseas, the U.S. could refocus at least some of the military's budget and much of its attention on threats that many argue pose existential challenges to the United States—such as those emanating from Russia or China. A rebalancing of DoD spending from counterterrorism to high-end warfighting, deterrence, and readiness would presumably help the U.S. stay ahead of growing challenges from these and other state adversaries.
- *Disentanglement of the U.S. from “messy, intractable situations” abroad.* Currently, the U.S. provides support to a number of poorly governing regimes around the world in order to secure their cooperation in the fight against Al-Qaeda. Many of these governments are corrupt, illegitimate, and/or incompetent, and some have blatant disregard for the welfare of their own populations. The United States' association with, and support to, these regimes damages its reputation and standing worldwide. Additionally, U.S. overseas operations against Al-Qaeda and like groups inevitably result in civilian casualties. Both issues—U.S. support of corrupt and abusive regimes, and U.S. operations resulting in civilian casualties—have been shown to benefit efforts by Al-Qaeda to recruit new members and expand into new areas. By getting out of these situations and removing U.S. support from these regimes, the U.S. could potentially recast its image within Muslim populations over time. Doing so might also cause countries that have been largely content to watch the U.S. deal with Al-Qaeda (e.g., China) to become more involved and take on an increased share of the burden in globally countering such groups.

- *Tangible and simple theory of victory and measures of success.*<sup>8</sup> In this option, the theory of policy success and the metrics for gauging it are relatively straightforward and appealing in their simplicity:
  - Theory of victory: The U.S. would secure the homeland and our overseas installations by making it as difficult as possible for terrorists to attack these targets—to the point where U.S. targets are so difficult to attack (either absolutely or in comparison to other potential targets) that groups such as Al-Qaeda choose to focus their attention elsewhere.
  - Measures of success: In this case, there are two primary measures of success: the number and frequency of terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland and overseas installations. If these numbers are at levels acceptable to U.S. leadership and the U.S. public, the policy is working. If they are not, either the policy or its execution is flawed.

## Disadvantages of retrenchment

A policy of retrenchment also has a number of potential disadvantages relative to other options, which include the following:

- *Accomplishment of a key Al-Qaeda objective.* One of Al-Qaeda’s core goals is to force the United States to withdraw support from what the group sees as apostate Muslim regimes, so as to presumably make it easier for the group to topple those governments. If the U.S. were to withdraw its support from these governments (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia), it is possible (and perhaps even likely) that some of them would fall. If this were to pass, it would be a victory for Al-Qaeda and another step toward the establishment of the caliphate that Al-Qaeda seeks as its core strategic goal—an outcome that the U.S. has thus far viewed as unacceptable.
- *Signal of U.S. weakness abroad.* There is a belief among Al-Qaeda and like groups, and even among some state actors, that the U.S. cannot stomach American casualties, and will withdraw from conflicts as a result of these. Proponents of this view cite the American experience in Vietnam, and events

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<sup>8</sup> A “theory of victory” (alternatively described as a “theory of change”) is a means of articulating the logical connections between actions the U.S. government may undertake and the desired outcomes of those actions. By expressly articulating such a theory in detail, inherent assumptions and biases—as well as metrics for gauging success—become more readily apparent.

such as the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia in the wake of Operation Gothic Serpent (the “Blackhawk Down” incident in 1993) or from Lebanon in the wake of the Marine barracks bombing in 1983, as empirical evidence for their beliefs. If the U.S. were to withdraw from its overseas fight against Al-Qaeda and like groups, some might view this as yet again an example of a core U.S. weakness and Al-Qaeda would likely portray it as a victory of the group against the United States.

- *Likelihood of further Al-Qaeda expansion.* If the U.S. were to cease conducting suppressive military activities against Al-Qaeda around the globe, and other countries were not willing or able to do so in place of the United States, empirical evidence suggests that the group would expand even further. Al-Qaeda’s own history provides several examples of this (the most notable being that of AQI/ISIS), and the historical record is replete with examples of insurgent groups who resurged and expanded when military pressure against them was reduced.
- *Decreased focus on human rights.* Currently, the U.S. uses at least some of its leverage from the provision of military and economic support to try and convince foreign governments to improve their performance on human rights issues. If the U.S. were to withdraw such support and leave these countries to fight groups such as Al-Qaeda on their own, it is likely that human rights issues would be exacerbated in a number of them.
- *Decreased partner commitment to the U.S. and/or to fighting Al-Qaeda.* Akin to the previous point, if the U.S. removes its military and economic support from countries currently involved in the fight against Al-Qaeda, it is possible that these countries would seek such support from U.S. adversaries (e.g., Russia, China, Iran) and/or seek to reach accommodations with Al-Qaeda and like groups so as to avoid the furtherance of internal conflict.
- *Decreased ability to isolate the U.S. homeland due to globalization.* The U.S. homeland has never been as isolatable as some might like to think, as the attacks of 9/11 and Pearl Harbor so amply demonstrated. The globalization of goods, communications, and movement of people is likely to make it increasingly difficult to isolate the U.S. homeland from networked groups such as Al-Qaeda who would seek to attack it.

## Escalation

### Nature of the policy and strategic goal

In this policy option, the U.S. escalates its war against Al-Qaeda. As we concluded in our independent assessment, the U.S. today is primarily focused on disrupting Al-Qaeda from attacking the U.S. homeland. In this option, the U.S. would adopt a much more aggressive approach to begin systematically taking apart the entire Al-Qaeda organization.

The strategic goal under this policy would be to *dismantle Al-Qaeda*, with “dismantle” defined as “Al-Qaeda has been reduced to a point where it is no longer a coherent, functioning entity operationally and tactically.”<sup>9</sup>

### Lines of effort

The main line of effort in this option would be to attack the Al-Qaeda network via primarily military means. This would put DoD squarely in the lead, with the geographic combatant commands (GCCs, especially U.S. Central Command and U.S. Africa Command) and SOCOM playing leading roles. Their military forces would even more aggressively engage in direct action (kill/capture) missions and/or support such missions conducted by surrogate or third-party forces. Such missions would be conducted in declared “areas of active hostilities (AAHs),” which would likely be expanded beyond those that exist today. The IC would play a critical supporting role by generating intelligence necessary to facilitate successful military operations, and the CIA would provide additional support by conducting its own kill/capture missions against Al-Qaeda outside of declared AAHs.

Supporting lines of effort would include intelligence/information sharing and international coordination (DoD, IC, and DoS), countering terrorist finance (DoT), and detention and interrogation of Al-Qaeda members (DoD and DoJ). In recognition of the fact that rendering Al-Qaeda operationally irrelevant requires minimizing radicalization and recruitment, this approach would also include messaging and counter-messaging (DoS and DoD), and local development and stabilization with an emphasis on those populations most directly impacted by Al-Qaeda or U.S. efforts against the group (USAID and DoS).

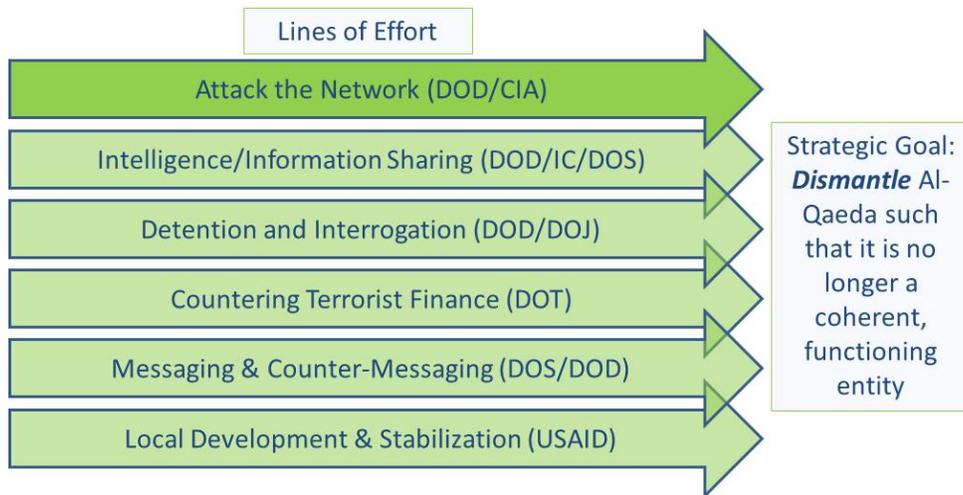
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<sup>9</sup> McQuaid et al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.

On paper, these lines of effort closely resemble the current U.S. government approach. The differences in this policy option would be in the resources applied against Al-Qaeda (much greater), the level at which authorities for action are held (much lower), and the degree of primacy these efforts would have relative to the other priorities held by *all* relevant U.S. government agencies (singular whole-of-government focus). An illustrative example would be to harken back to the U.S. fight against Al-Qaeda in Iraq, when authorities for action were pushed to tactical levels, U.S. government agencies came together with a strongly unified sense of purpose against the group, and resources were focused on addressing the fight against AQI as a singular U.S. national security priority. In this option, a similar intensity of focus would be generated via White House orders that, until directed otherwise, *all* U.S. government agencies would collectively prioritize this effort.

A simplified diagram of main and supporting lines of effort for this policy is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Summary of U.S. escalation strategy for Al-Qaeda



## Advantages of escalation

A policy of escalation designed to dismantle Al-Qaeda has a number of potential advantages. These include the following:

- *Aligns with prior U.S. experience.* As mentioned above, the U.S. has chosen to escalate its efforts against Al-Qaeda in the past, so this is not an unfamiliar policy option. More specifically, the U.S. escalated its approach to Al-Qaeda in Iraq during the 2006-2008 timeframe—for example, by greatly increasing the

number of daily kill/capture missions conducted against members of AQI and by surging conventional forces into Iraq. This escalation contributed to an outcome where by 2009-2010, AQI was no longer an operationally or tactically coherent, functioning entity (our definition of “dismantle”). The U.S. similarly escalated its approach to combatting core Al-Qaeda members in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region in the early years of Barack Obama’s first presidential term, by greatly increasing the number and frequency of drone strikes against members of Al-Qaeda in those areas. Thus, the U.S. has experience with this approach and has effectively applied it in several past instances.

- *Show of U.S. strength and resolve.* By escalating the fight against Al-Qaeda, the U.S.—and its political leaders—could demonstrate renewed strength and resolve in the global fight against Al-Qaeda (and like groups).
- *Tangible and simple theory of victory and measures of success.* In this option, the theory of policy success and metrics for gauging it are relatively straightforward and appealing in their simplicity:
  - Theory of success: The U.S. would escalate the tempo of attacks against the Al-Qaeda network to the point where the latter cannot effectively adapt and reconstitute, thus rendering the group operationally and tactically ineffective. The U.S. would also conduct focused, well-resourced prevention and stabilization efforts in the areas at most risk of Al-Qaeda movement, expansion, or reconstitution, in order to consolidate the gains from military successes against the group.
  - Measures of success: The primary measure for this policy option is the rate of damage inflicted on the Al-Qaeda network, which can be gauged by the pace of attrition of critical nodes and linkages in that network—and the network’s ability to generate new nodes and linkages. In other words, success would entail removing key members of the Al-Qaeda organization faster than the organization can recruit and regenerate itself.

## Disadvantages of escalation

A policy of escalation also has a number of potential disadvantages, which include the following:

- *Increased costs and/or risk.* As the term “escalation” implies, this option would carry with it a requirement for increased resources being applied against Al-Qaeda above and beyond what the U.S. is currently devoting to this fight. Another potential cost might come in the form of increased risk from other national security threats, were the U.S. to shift resources currently being

applied elsewhere (such as deterring Russia or Iran) to the fight against Al-Qaeda.

- *Unlikely to be sustainable beyond the near term.* Given the toll that the current pace of deployments is having on our counterterrorism forces (i.e., SOF and the intelligence community), it is hard to see this option being sustainable beyond a three- to five-year “surge” period unless the U.S. were to make structural changes to generate more of these types of forces (e.g., by expanding the ranks of SOF further) or to shed these forces of missions not focused exclusively on attacking the Al-Qaeda network. The same is true of our civilian development and stabilization personnel, who are critical to consolidating military gains against Al-Qaeda, in order to prevent the group from resurging in the wake of military operations against it.
- *Increased casualties and detainees.* If the U.S. escalated its fight against Al-Qaeda, it is likely that the U.S. would suffer increased casualties to both its military and civilian personnel. It is also likely that the U.S. would cause more civilian casualties overseas, which (beyond the moral issue) presents a practical challenge insofar as it might lead to increased rates of radicalization and recruitment opportunities for Al-Qaeda. And given that “capture” missions have proven to be much more conducive to generating increased tempo of counterterrorism operations than “kill” missions (due to intelligence gleaned from interrogations of captured individuals), it is likely that an escalation approach would also generate more Al-Qaeda detainees, which could create additional legal challenges for the United States.
- *Outcomes unlikely to be sustainable.* As mentioned above, the U.S. is familiar with escalation as an option against groups like Al-Qaeda and has successfully dismantled some elements of that organization in the past. However, the U.S. has also routinely failed to consolidate the gains of those operations. In each case, the group in question has been able to regain its strength and resume its operations; some groups have even emerged stronger and more resilient than before (e.g., ISIS emerging from AQI). These experiences call into question whether the consolidation and sustainment of gains derived from intense military operations against groups such as Al-Qaeda is even a fundamentally achievable outcome for the United States.

## Containment

### Nature of the policy and strategic goal

In this policy option, the U.S. would focus on keeping Al-Qaeda and its affiliates fixed in their current locations and preventing them from expanding, while working through local and regional coalitions to steadily degrade the organization over a period of many years. This strategy recognizes three fundamental aspects of the Al-Qaeda problem:

- Al-Qaeda affiliated groups tend to operate in countries that have failed or very weak governance, meaning that the U.S. typically lacks an effective, reliable national security partner in the countries of interest.
- These countries often have neighbors that view Al-Qaeda groups as prioritized (and in some cases, existential) threats and are eager to prevent their spread.
- The populations in countries where Al-Qaeda operates often do not support the group, but they may have few or no better options given the absence, weakness, or predatory nature of their governments.

In other words, this option recognizes that working primarily “by, with, and through” the government of a country with an Al-Qaeda problem is often infeasible, because such a government either doesn’t exist (e.g., Yemen), is not one with which the U.S. would partner (e.g., Syria), is predatory, corrupt, and/or incompetent (e.g., Afghanistan), or is unlikely ever to have the capacity to secure its own territory (e.g., Mali). To address these realities, in this option the U.S. would seek to establish and/or support coalitions of regional and local actors (government and non-government) to serve as the lead elements of a long-term, persistent, and locally-tailored approach to Al-Qaeda.

Through a containment policy, the strategic goal of the United States would be three-fold: to **isolate**, **contain**, and **neutralize** Al-Qaeda in its current locations. We define these terms here as follows:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> We adapted these definitions from: U.S. Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Supplement to the Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, MCRP 5-12C, November 16, 2011.

- *Isolate*: Seal off Al-Qaeda—both physically and psychologically—from sources of support, deny it freedom of movement, and prevent it from having contact with other like groups.
- *Contain*: Stop, hold, or surround Al-Qaeda groups and prevent them from withdrawing any part of their forces for use elsewhere.
- *Neutralize*: Render Al-Qaeda ineffective at achieving its goals, both globally and locally.

## Lines of effort

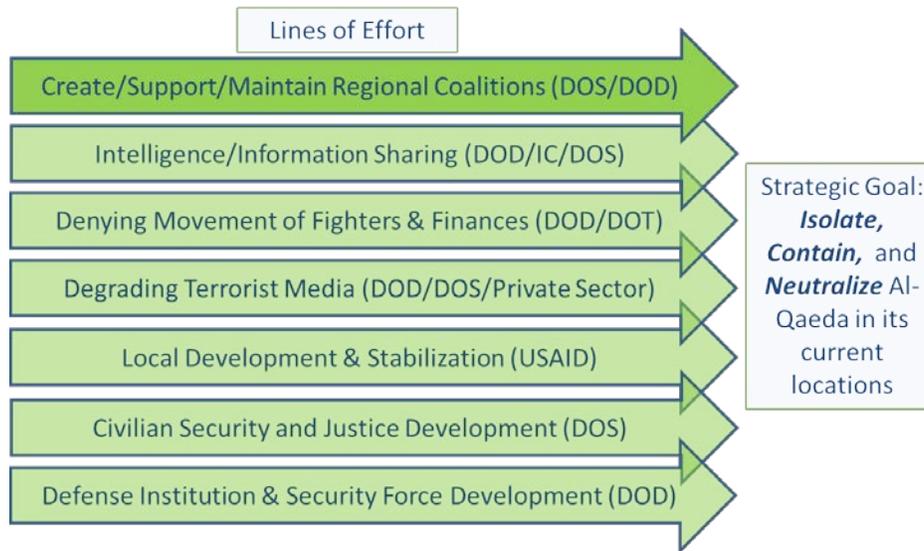
In this approach, the first phase is to isolate and contain Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, so as to prevent these groups from moving or expanding elsewhere. As these efforts progress, a gradual shift to a second phase would occur and efforts would focus on neutralizing Al-Qaeda by degrading its capabilities and improving the ability and will of affected countries and regional partners to resist and overcome Al-Qaeda's presence. In the first phase, the main effort is creating and supporting regional coalitions; in the second, it is maintaining and supporting them.

Given the long-term nature of this policy and its focus on empowering regional and local actors, DoS would be the lead federal agency with the primary actors being ambassador-led country teams and regional coordinators at the ambassador level. These entities would be responsible for creating, supporting, or maintaining the regional and local coalitions necessary for this approach. Other U.S. government entities, including DoD, DoT, DHS, and the IC, would support DoS and these coalitions by working to isolate the various Al-Qaeda affiliates by: denying the movement of their members and their financial assets, degrading their media infrastructures, and, in tandem with the private sector, degrading their ability to use the internet and its various applications.

Increasingly over time, DoS and USAID would work with and through regional and local actors to address risk factors (e.g., political, social, economic, environmental) that Al-Qaeda exploits to gain agency in local areas. Also, DoS would leverage its authorities to develop civilian police and justice sector capabilities, and DoD would persistently work to create competent and uncorrupt military forces. Of note, in this approach these efforts would start small and progress only as quickly as the recipient country and regional partners could “absorb” and maintain such assistance—meaning that these efforts should be viewed as long term (e.g., having timelines spanning 10 years or more).

A simplified diagram of main and supporting lines of effort for this policy is shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Summary of U.S. containment strategy for Al-Qaeda



## Advantages of containment

A policy of containment has a number of potential advantages relative to other options. These include the following:

- *Extension of some current approaches.* The U.S. is already supporting this approach in several locations, so in some ways it is familiar. For example, the U.S. approach to al-Shebab in recent years has relied in large part on regional peacekeeping forces—via the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)—to complement the activities of U.S. military forces who have been targeting al-Shebab directly. AMISOM’s forces come largely from Uganda, Burundi, Djibouti, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone—all important neighbors of Somalia.<sup>11</sup> Another example is the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which has been leveraged in recent years to provide a regional security force to combat the Nigerian jihadist group known as Boko Haram. This entity, which draws its forces primarily from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, struggled in its first few years of counterterrorism operations against Boko Haram but has been achieving some positive effects over the past

<sup>11</sup> See <http://amisom-au.org/> for more details on AMISOM.

year.<sup>12</sup> France, the United States, and the United Kingdom have been supporting these efforts via a small Cell for Coordination and Liaison (CCL) that coordinates international support, information sharing, training events, and engagements with non-governmental organizations.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on its experience with the MNJTF, France has more recently been advocating for support to a joint force of up to 5,000 troops from the so-called Sahel “Group of Five” (G5) countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger).<sup>14</sup> France has recently obtained a United Nations Security Council resolution welcoming the force’s deployment to combat terrorism in the Sahel region (e.g., against Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). To date, the European Union has pledged €50 million in financial support to the force, though the U.S. has thus far declined to follow suit. These examples serve to highlight the familiarity of this approach to the U.S. and some of its allies, at least in Africa.<sup>15</sup>

- *Prioritizes leadership and involvement of regional and local actors.* By creating, sustaining, and maintaining regional and local coalitions, this strategy emphasizes “local solutions to local problems.” In this approach, the U.S. plays a largely supporting role, providing key capabilities such as logistics, communications, planning advice, and intelligence, as well as some amount of financial support (e.g., to the regional security force). By putting coalitions of regional actors at the forefront, this option allows the U.S. to better isolate Al-Qaeda’s affiliates, to avoid taking “ownership” of the problem, and to avoid unwanted costs such as U.S. military casualties and extended overseas deployments. Additionally, it deprives Al-Qaeda of the ability to argue that the U.S. is occupying or colonizing the contested regions—a key narrative that the group uses for attracting recruits.

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<sup>12</sup> William Assanvo, Jeannine Ella A Abatan, and Wendyam Aristide Sawadogo, “Assessing the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram,” Institute for Security Studies, *West Africa Report Issue 19*, September 2016. Available at: <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war19.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Author discussions with CCL personnel, July 2017.

<sup>14</sup> “Security Council Welcomes Deployment of Joint Force to Combat Terrorism Threat, Transnational Crime in Sahel, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2359 (2017),” UN Press Release SC/12881, June 21, 2017. Available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12881.doc.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> See also: Donald C. Bolduc, Richard V. Puglisi, and Randall Kaailau, “The Gray Zone in Africa,” *Small Wars Journal*, May 29, 2017. Available at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-gray-zone-in-africa>.

- *Emphasis on long-term sustainability.* This approach recognizes that the country in which Al-Qaeda is operating is likely weak and incapable of rapidly generating competent security forces or addressing root cause issues; otherwise, the country would presumably not have an Al-Qaeda problem in the first place. In these countries, large-scale influxes of foreign assistance or attempts to rapidly develop security forces are likely to incentivize corrupt or otherwise predatory behaviors that create additional opportunities for Al-Qaeda to exploit. Therefore, this approach emphasizes taking a long-term, patient, and persistent approach with a priority on the quality of development and security forces as opposed to their quantity and rate of generation.

## Disadvantages of containment

Relative to other options, containment of Al-Qaeda has a number of potential disadvantages, which include the following:

- *Hardest of the options to implement politically.* A strategy of containment is perhaps the hardest of the options for a U.S. administration to “sell” politically to the U.S. public, for at least three reasons:
  - The theory of victory and measures for success are not as straightforward and tangible as in the other options, and the timelines for success are longer—likely stretching beyond the four-year (or even eight-year) tenures of U.S. presidential administrations.
  - The U.S. would have to invest substantial diplomatic effort—and financial and material support—to maintain and sustain the regional coalitions leading the fight against Al-Qaeda’s affiliates. It is likely that members of these coalitions will have interests that conflict with U.S. interests and/or the broader interests of the coalition, and these disagreements will require skillful diplomacy and strategic patience to effectively resolve.
  - The application of this approach might require working with countries that the U.S. might prefer to avoid (e.g., Iran) or empowering countries with which the U.S. might disagree on issues such as human rights (e.g., Saudi Arabia).
- *No set piece application.* Whereas the retrenchment and escalation options could potentially be employed in a similar fashion against all aspects of the Al-Qaeda organization, a containment strategy requires substantial tailoring by region and country. For example, this approach is already largely being applied against al-Shebab, so continued application there might require

increased diplomatic efforts (and potentially financial support) to keep the force-contributing countries of AMISOM from withdrawing their forces from Somalia (as some are planning to do). On the other hand, application of this approach in Syria or in Yemen would require first bringing the civil wars in those countries to some manner of political resolution, and then working to generate a regional coalition to isolate and neutralize Al-Qaeda in the post-civil war environment (an especially tall order in the case of Syria).

## Conclusion

As we concluded in our independent assessment, the current U.S. policy for combatting Al-Qaeda is not likely to achieve its stated goals. With that in mind, we have presented here three alternative policy options for the U.S. government to consider: *retrenchment*, *escalation*, and *containment*. While these are not new policy ideas, we believe the time is right to consider them as a broad and distinct set of options for the future. In looking at them as a whole, several overarching points are worth observing.

First, none of the three options espouses “defeat” of Al-Qaeda as the policy goal. As we defined it in our independent assessment, defeat requires the removal of both the group’s *capability* to fight, and its *will* to do so. In our assessment, we did not identify anything approaching a consensus view of what it would take to completely remove the will of groups such as Al-Qaeda to attack the United States. In the absence of such an understanding, we believe the U.S. is better suited in focusing its efforts on blunting the capability of Al-Qaeda to do so. Therefore, we have framed three options here that largely focus on this aspect. To be clear, in each option Islamic terrorism remains a feature of the international landscape—distinctions among the options become the accepted level of such activity and the level and types of U.S. resources expended against it.

Second, we do not see these options as necessarily mutually exclusive. Al-Qaeda today is a conglomeration of localized insurgent groups, and it may be that the most effective way to approach one of its affiliates is not the best way to approach the others. As well, it is clear from examining the pros and cons of each option that there is not a “single best option” that clearly stands out from the others—clear-eyed analysis of the options reveals substantial potential advantages and disadvantages of each.

With these points in mind, we recommend that the U.S. government consider these options as a starting point for further analysis of its future strategy against Al-Qaeda. In particular, we recommend that the U.S. use a suite of analytic tools, such as wargaming, alternative futures analysis, red teaming, network analysis, and expanded net assessment, to examine the application of each of these options to Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups. Doing this should help identify a tailored blend of these options that is as closely aligned as possible with the United States’ strategic goals, financial resources, and political will.

Within the next couple of years, the U.S. military will begin enlisting and deploying young men and women who were born after the attacks of 9/11, and we will have entered the second generation of the so-called “war on terror.” As we have assessed, that war has had some notable successes, not the least of which has been the prevention of another 9/11-scale attack on the U.S. homeland. But it has also come at extraordinary costs and our current approach is not progressing toward the goals we have thus far articulated. As we approach the second generation of this war, the time is right for the U.S. to critically re-examine its policy and strategy with respect to Al-Qaeda. Starting from a set of distinctly different policy options, as we have laid out in this paper, and examining them with fresh eyes unencumbered by the codified assumptions of the past 16 years, will be critical to identifying a sustainable new strategy for the United States against Al-Qaeda. The sacrifices of the generation of men and women who have fought our war on terror to date, and those that will most certainly be paid by the next generation to fight Al-Qaeda, deserve no less.

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