

Al-Qaeda Core: A Case Study

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October 2017





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SPECIFIC AUTHORITY: N00014-16-D-5003 10/27/2017

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October 2017

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Schroden'.

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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, which was completed in August 2017.

In order to conduct this assessment, CNA used a comparative methodology that included eight case studies on groups affiliated or associated with Al-Qaeda. These case studies were then used as a dataset for cross-case comparison.

This document is a stand-alone version of the Al-Qaeda “Core” case study used in the *Independent Assessment*. CNA is publishing each of the eight case studies separately for the convenience of analysts and others who may have a regional or functional focus that corresponds to a specific case study. For the context in which this case study was used and for CNA’s full findings, see *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.

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Glossary

AQ	Al-Qaeda
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
ASD (SO/LIC)	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
DOD	Department of Defense
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
NCTC	National Counterterrorism Center
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
USS	United States Ship

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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.” The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.¹

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.

¹ Julia McQuaid, Jonathan Schroden, Pamela G. Faber, P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Alexander Powell, Zack Gold, David Knoll, and William Rosenau, *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

In order to answer the first four questions posed by Section 1228, CNA conducted eight case studies on groups affiliated and associated with Al-Qaeda.² The case studies were then used to conduct a cross-case comparative analysis.

This document is a stand-alone version of the Al-Qaeda core case study used in the *Independent Assessment*. CNA is publishing each of the eight case studies separately for the convenience of analysts and others who may have a regional or functional focus that corresponds to a specific case study. For the context in which this case study was used and for CNA's full findings, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.³

The present case study is organized as follows: First, we introduce Al-Qaeda core by highlighting its leadership structure, its ideology and goals, and its funding. Second, we explain the evolution of the group by phases, from its origins to the present day. Third, we outline the security vulnerabilities in the areas Afghanistan where Al-Qaeda core operates. Fourth, we outline the U.S. approach to countering Al-Qaeda core. We conclude the case study with a discussion on whether the U.S. has, at any time, effectively defeated, dismantled, or disrupted the group.

² These groups include: Al-Qaeda "core," Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shebab, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Al-Qaeda Syria (AQS), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

³ McQuaid et al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.

Overview of Al-Qaeda Core

Founded in Afghanistan in 1988, Al-Qaeda (“the Base,” in Arabic) is a global jihadi enterprise composed of two major components: a “core” (sometimes referred to as “Al-Qaeda Central”) and five major regional affiliates or “franchises.” The core was responsible for some of the deadliest and most audacious attacks in the history of modern terrorism, including the near-simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 that killed 224 people and wounded more than 5,000; the October 2000 suicide attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen that killed 17 sailors and wounded another 39; and the coordinated attacks on September 11, 2001 that killed nearly 3,000 and wounded 6,000 others.

Leadership and structure

The size of Al-Qaeda’s core has fluctuated over time. Recent estimates suggest that Al-Qaeda Central has fewer than 1,000 members, many of whom have sanctuary in remote parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁴ By most accounts, the core is tightly knit, despite the fact that U.S. operations against “high value targets” have required the continuous refreshment of its upper ranks. At one time, the core had an elaborate structure that included military and information committees. The origins and development of this structure is discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections

⁴ Some senior Al-Qaeda figures have decamped to Syria: Zawahiri’s deputy, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, was killed in a targeted strike in Idlib Province in February 2017; “Al-Qaeda’s Deputy Leader Reportedly Killed by US Drone Strike in Syria,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), February 27, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/27/Al-Qaedas-deputy-leader-reportedly-killed-us-drone-strike-syria/>, accessed March 11, 2017. Two Al-Qaeda affiliates, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), quickly issued a joint statement eulogizing al-Masri: “AQAP and AQIM Eulogize Zawahiri Deputy Abu al-Khayr al-Masri,” SITE Intelligence Group, March 2, 2017.

on the history of Al-Qaeda Central. How much, if any, of this structure still exists remains an open question among experts.⁵

Relationships with affiliates/command and control

Al-Qaeda affiliates, as defined by one leading authority on terrorism, are “those groups that have taken the Al-Qaeda name and/or whose leaders have sworn loyalty to the Al-Qaeda core leader who, in turn, has acknowledged that oath.”⁶ Scholars, policymakers, and intelligence officials disagree about how much control the core exerts over its franchises today.⁷ But there is consensus that at a minimum Ayman al-Zawahiri, the core’s leader and former second in command to Osama Bin Laden, provides strategic guidance to the groups that make up the Al-Qaeda firmament.

Zawahiri (and Bin Laden before him) sometimes expressed deep frustration over the behavior and direction of affiliates, most notably in the case of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI’s depredations under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a thuggish, barely literate Jordanian ex-convict, threatened to tarnish the Al-Qaeda “brand.”⁸ In a letter written in 2010, Bin Laden bemoaned “miscalculations” by “Mujahidin spread

⁵ Kangil Lee, *Does Al-Qaeda Central Still Matter?* International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism, January 2015, accessed February 17, 2017, http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rev_RUNI.2015.n37.49599.

⁶ Daniel Byman, “Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al-Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations,” *Security Studies* 23, no. 3 (2014): 435. Byman notes that formal affiliation among terrorist groups is a relatively rare phenomenon. Such affiliation can create opportunities (such as expansion), but can also impose costs (such as “brand tarnishing” as a result of unpopular affiliate actions).

⁷ For a range of views, see U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Homeland Security, “The Rise of Radicalism: Growing Terrorist Sanctuaries and the Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” November 18, 2015, <https://homeland.house.gov/hearing/the-rise-of-radicalism-growing-terrorist-sanctuaries-and-the-threat-to-the-u-s-homeland/>, accessed March 1, 2017; and Leah Farrell, “How Al-Qaeda Works,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011.

⁸ Emily Hunt, *Zarqawi's 'Total War' on Iraqi Shiites Exposes a Divide among Sunni Jihadists*, Policywatch 1049, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 15, 2002, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/zarqawis-total-war-on-iraqi-shiites-exposes-a-divide-among-sunni-jihadists>, accessed March 3, 2017; and “Al-Qaeda Disowns ‘Fake Letter,’” BBC News, October 13, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4339912.stm.

out into many regions,” particularly the killing of Muslims during the course of operations.⁹

While affiliates may not always comply with the expressed wishes of Al-Qaeda Central, they do appear to continue to turn to Zawahiri and his top lieutenants for high-level direction. In the words of one specialist writing in 2013, “regional affiliates of the ‘system of systems’ still look to their core Al-Qaeda . . . for overall theological inspiration and strategic guidance, along with tactical support, training, and resourcing.”¹⁰ Yet providing such guidance and support is not a simple matter. In the judgment of policymakers and scholars, the relentless campaign of targeted strikes and other measures against senior leaders in their refuges in the hinterlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan have seriously degraded the core’s ability to meet and communicate with the affiliates.¹¹

Ideology and goals

Al-Qaeda militants dream of establishing a new Islamic state, modeled on the medieval caliphate. The restored caliphate would be ruled in accordance with sharia law and would include all current and former Muslim lands stretching from Southeast Asia to Western Europe. Ultimately, the caliphate would serve as a platform from which the entire world would be brought to Islam.¹²

But for Al-Qaeda, unlike ISIS, this is a long-term objective.¹³ Like ISIS, Al-Qaeda employs extreme violence, sometimes on a mass scale (such as the attacks of

⁹ SOCOM-2012-0000019-HT, quoted in Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, May 2012), pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ Martin Rudner, “Al-Qaeda’s Twenty-Year Strategic Plan: The Current Phase of Global Terror,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36 (2013): p. 957.

¹¹ Authors’ discussions with senior U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) official, Arlington, Virginia, March 10, 2017; and Daniel Byman, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, March 1, 2017. Targeted strikes and raids have killed senior figures such as Ilyas Kashmiri, Abu Yahya al Libi, Atiyah Abd al Rahman and Abu Zaid al Kuwaiti—and of course, Osama Bin Laden on May 2, 2011, in Abbottabad, Pakistan. See also Reza Jan, “Al-Qaeda Isn’t on Its Heels,” May 27, 2014, accessed March 10, 2016, <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/Al-Qaeda-isnt-on-its-heels.316841/>.

¹² Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 65.

¹³ Like many other religious and secular violent extremist organizations throughout history, Al-Qaeda nurtures what the scholar J. Bowyer Bell termed the “revolutionary dream,” an all-encompassing vision that helps the group “to shape reality, to foster an armed struggle, to fuel irregular war [and to] seek legitimacy by rewriting history”; J. Bowyer Bell, *Dragonwars: Armed*

September 11, 2001). But Al-Qaeda's violence typically is instrumental, finely calibrated, and ultimately, more pragmatic. "Military operations," as the core calls terrorist activities, are intended to reinforce political messages and promote political aims. The core has always been alert to the possibility that attacks could alienate the Muslim "masses"—hence its insistence on vetting major plots, and its opposition to sectarian killings, as in the case of the AQI's killing of Muslims. Indeed, Al-Qaeda core has tried to distance itself from other jihadists at war in Syria, letting ISIS face the wrath of coalition military forces while building a new reputation as "moderate extremists."¹⁴

The United States has always held a central position in Al-Qaeda's demonology.¹⁵ America is the pre-eminent evil spirit at war with Islam, a global oppressor and international bully, and the puppet master manipulating apostate regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, and elsewhere.¹⁶ As Bin Laden declared in 1998, "the United States itself is the biggest mischief maker, terrorist, and rogue in the world, and challenging its authority will be a good deed in Islam in every respect."¹⁷

But where many saw unparalleled American power and hegemony, Bin Laden detected in the U.S. weaknesses, fissures, and the seeds of its own destruction apparent to those who were willing to look carefully. Using Mao Zedong's famous phrase, Bin Laden dismissed American soldiers as "paper tigers" who cut and run when faced with motivated adversaries, as in Somalia, Lebanon, and Vietnam.¹⁸

Struggle and the Conventions of Modern War (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1999), p. 49.

¹⁴ Bruce Hoffman, "The Global Terror Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration," *CTC Sentinel*, November/December 2016, accessed February 10, 2017, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-global-terror-threat-and-counterterrorism-challenges-facing-the-next-administration>.

¹⁵ See for example "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders: World Islamic Front Statement," February 23, 1998, <https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>, accessed February 28, 2017.

¹⁶ In a message delivered in late May 2008, Abu-Yahya al-Libi described this purported war against Islam: "It is a war that targets all of the strongholds of Islam. It invades homelands and penetrates minds and thoughts. It dares to shed blood exactly as it dares to destroy beliefs and tamper with the sacred; "The Moderation of Islam and the Moderation of Defeat," Open Source Enterprise (OSE), FEA20080521688868, May 21, 2008.

¹⁷ JMW, "FBIS Document: Ten Years of Osama Bin Laden Statements," Bin Laden Quotes Blog, February 27, 2004, <http://binladenquotes.blogspot.com/2004/02/fbis-document-10-years-of-osama-bin.html>, accessed February 21, 2017.

¹⁸ "Usama bin Laden: American Soldiers are 'Paper Tigers,'" *Middle East Quarterly*, December 1998, accessed January 22, 2017, <http://www.meforum.org/435/usama-bin-laden-american-soldiers-are-paper-tigers>.

From 1992 until his death, Bin Laden exhorted fellow Muslims to kill Americans. In 1996, Bin Laden and Zawahiri arranged for an Arabic media outlet in London to publish a self-described “fatwa,” declaring that it was the “individual duty for every Muslim who can do it “to kill Americans—in effect, a declaration of war against the United States.¹⁹ By 1998, Bin Laden succeeded in defining and distinguishing the Al-Qaeda brand. Rather than vowing to attack Israel, or striking at local tyrants (the “near enemy”), as other extremists urged, Bin Laden stressed the centrality of the American foe—the source of grievances across Muslim-majority countries, the “head of the snake,” the “far enemy.”²⁰

The need to weaken and destroy America is an enduring Al-Qaeda trope. In “General Guidelines for Jihad” (2013), Zawahiri laid out the chain of logic supporting this approach:

The purpose of targeting America is to exhaust her and bleed her to death, so that it meets the fate of the former Soviet Union and collapses under its own weight as a result of its military, human, and financial losses. Consequently, its grip on our lands will weaken and its allies will begin to fall one after another.²¹

Like revolutionary armies throughout history, Al-Qaeda is pursuing a strategy of attrition, playing a long game, hoping to sap the will of the godless Americans, the “worshippers of the cross,” the “pigs and monkeys,” the Jews, and other adversaries in order to continue the struggle.²²

Funding

For most of its history, the core’s finances were robust, at least by the standards of many armed groups. Al-Qaeda used cash to support other jihadi groups, build alliances, and contribute to the overall struggle against perceived enemies, near and

¹⁹ Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, pp. 47.

²⁰ Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, pp., 48.

²¹ Ayman al Zawahiri, “General Guidelines for Jihad,” 1434 (2013), accessed January 22, 2017, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf>.

²² Hoffman, “The Global Terror Threat”; and Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, eds., *Al-Qaeda in its Own Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 241.

far.²³ Wealthy individuals in the Persian Gulf countries who made up the so-called Golden Chain were major benefactors.²⁴ Since 9/11, anti-money laundering standards, financial controls, and sanctions imposed by the United Nations and other bodies and countries have helped restrict the flow of at least some of this funding.²⁵

²³ Daniel Byman, *Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 156.

²⁴ Juan Zarate, *Treasury's War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), p. 80.

²⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury, *National Terrorist Financing Risk Assessment: 2015*, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illicit-finance/Documents/National%20Terrorist%20Financing%20Risk%20Assessment%20%E2%80%93%2006-12-2015.pdf>.

Evolution of Al-Qaeda Core by Phase

Phase one: Origins (1988–1996)²⁶

Al-Qaeda was established by Osama Bin Laden, scion of an immensely rich Saudi family of Yemeni origins, and Abdullah Yusef Azzam, a Palestinian Sunni scholar and an architect of international jihad whose motto was “Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogues.”²⁷ In the Afghan crucible of Soviet occupation, a “militant brotherhood without borders” had been forged, and in the judgment of Bin Laden and Azzam, it could be repurposed after the defeat of the Soviet forces, which by 1998 appeared imminent.²⁸ Initially, Afghan *mujahideen* (“holy warriors”), both Arab and non-Arab, would have as their targets “infidel” governments that were oppressing Muslims in places like Palestine, the Philippines, and Chechnya.

In 1991, Bin Laden accepted the invitation of Hassan al Turabi, an Islamist leader and a key figure in the National Islamic Front regime in Sudan, to relocate to that country,

²⁶ In addition to the other works cited in this case study, accounts of the origins and development of Al-Qaeda include Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2003); and John Gray, *Al-Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern* (New York: The New Press, 2005).

²⁷ Quoted in Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 53. Azzam’s importance to Bin Laden, and the development of Al-Qaeda in general, can hardly be overstated. According to the scholar Youssef Aboul-Enein, Azzam should be regarded as “the Clausewitzian theorist of Islamist militancy, who combines a lethal understanding and destructive interpretation of Islamic law and history, with destructive interpretations of the French and Russian revolutions”; Youssef Aboul-Enein, Azzam, “The Late Sheikh Abdullah Azzam’s Books: Part III: Radical Theories on Defending Muslim Land Through Jihad,” *Combating Terrorism Center Guest Commentary*, undated, accessed April 12, 2017, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Azzam_part_3.pdf.

²⁸ Anonymous [Michael Scheuer], *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, Inc., 2002), 107.

where Bin Laden established a wide array of business and terrorist enterprises.²⁹ Support flowed to terrorists in East Asia, Africa, the former Soviet Union, and the Balkans through front organizations such as the Benevolence International Foundation, which supported embattled Muslims and foreign fighters in Bosnia and Herzegovina. International pressure on Sudan led to Bin Laden's expulsion in 1996 and a return to Afghanistan.

Phase two: The road to 9/11 (1996–2001)

Now fully merged with Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad—which supplied Al-Qaeda with some of its most disciplined and resourceful militants—Al-Qaeda had become what the 9/11 Commission called “the general headquarters for international terrorism,” with a complex global web of connections, relationships, and allies.³⁰ At this stage in its development, according to the 9/11 Commission, Al-Qaeda was a “hierarchical top-down group with defined positions, tasks, and salaries.”³¹ It had attracted followers as far afield as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Bin Laden was in effect a world citizen—a cosmopolitan, globe-trekking “Davos Man,” but with a Koran and a Kalashnikov rather than a Filofax and a BMW.³²

Thus far, Bin Laden and the core had devoted most of their energies to supporting other jihadis in their various national and regional struggles. But Bin Laden and his chief aides were also contemplating more direct involvement in strikes against the “head of the snake.” After years of meticulous planning and preparation, Al-Qaeda operatives conducted a near-simultaneous attack on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. In January 2000, Yemeni Al-Qaeda members attempted unsuccessfully to bomb the USS *The Sullivans*, anchored in Yemen's port of Aden. But ten months later, Al-Qaeda members, in a boat loaded with high explosives, pulled alongside the USS *Cole*, moored in the Aden harbor for a scheduled refueling. The explosion blew a 40-foot hole in the side of the vessel, with lethal effect.³³

²⁹ Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, pp. 57.

³⁰ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 67.

³¹ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 67.

³² Peter Bergen *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the World of Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001) p 196.

³³ U.S. Department of Justice, “Al-Qaeda Associates Charged in Attack on USS Cole, Attempted Attack on Other U.S. Naval Vessels,” May 15, 2003, accessed February 25, 2017, https://www.justice.gov/archive/opa/pr/2003/May/03_crm_298.htm.

The planning, conduct, and immediate and longer-term consequences of the 9/11 attacks have been the subject of many narratives, memoirs, and analyses. On one level, 9/11 might be judged a failure for the Bin Laden enterprise: retribution was all but inevitable. Al-Qaeda's symbiotic relationship with the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan—"the world's first terrorist-sponsored state"—was obliterated by U.S. airpower, Special Operations Forces, and paramilitary units.³⁴ Al-Qaeda's training camps, a considerable source of capable personnel for "military" operations, were destroyed. Al-Qaeda's most important sanctuary was eliminated, and its members forced to flee for their lives into neighboring Pakistan.

At the same time, Bin Laden had succeeded in terrifying the world's greatest power. In a single morning, a tiny band of suicidal militants had contributed to the deaths of thousands of "infidels," and in so doing, showed that the "head of the snake" was vulnerable to just several sufficiently righteous, motivated, and trained jihadis.³⁵ The 9/11 Commission was surely correct when it concluded that "September 11, 2001 was a day of unprecedented shock and suffering in the history of the United States. The nation was unprepared."³⁶

Phase three: Franchise mode (2002–2014)

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the Bush administration's broader "Global War on Terror" aimed above all else at preventing the emergence of a major sanctuary from which to mount another 9/11-style attack on the homeland. OEF shattered Al-Qaeda's organizational and operational base, but this was only a temporary setback. Beginning on April 11, 2002, with the bombing of a synagogue in Tunisia, Al-Qaeda operatives carried out major attacks in Casablanca (May 16, 2003), Istanbul (December 20, 2003), Madrid (March 11, 2004), and London (July 7, 2005). The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 created new opportunities for Al-Qaeda,

³⁴ International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, *Perspectives on Radicalisation and Political Violence: Papers from the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence*, January 17-18, 2008, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1234516938ICSRPerspectivesonRadicalisation.pdf>.

³⁵ The 9/11 attacks failed to wreck the U.S. economy, a stated goal of Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. Moreover, New York proved to be highly resilient in economic terms. However, "subsequent anti-terrorist initiatives at home and abroad were more costly than the direct damage caused by the attack"; Adam Z. Rose and Brock S. Blomberg, *Total Economic Consequences of Terrorist Attacks: Insights from 9/11* (2010), accessed March 5, 2017, http://research.create.usc.edu/published_papers/190.

³⁶ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, executive summary.

which framed Operation Iraqi Freedom as a Western grab for oil-rich Muslim lands, and as a further assault on Islam itself. Moreover, the core apparently was able to maintain at least some aspects of its hierarchical structure. If captured Al-Qaeda documents offer any indication, the core was highly bureaucratized, with distinct military, communications, and administration and finance committees.³⁷

At the same time, the Al-Qaeda core sought to expand by establishing affiliates. Some of these groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), had emerged during the course of local conflicts, and only later swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda.³⁸ Others were more “organic” Al-Qaeda entities—Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), for example, was the product of a merger between various Al-Qaeda groups active in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Core-affiliate interactions reportedly took place through second-tier leaders who head communications committees at Al-Qaeda Central and within the franchises.³⁹

Affiliates were expected to undertake at least some attacks against Western interests—not necessarily through so-called external operations, but at least within their area of local and regional operations. Typically, the center did not micromanage the activities of its franchises. Instead, it sought to exercise strategic influence, nudging its partners in the direction of targets that reflect the interests of the West.⁴⁰

But affiliates resisted at least some of the core’s entreaties. As mentioned earlier, al-Zawahiri repeatedly urged Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to end its sectarian killings. And although Al-Qaeda core was willing to give franchisees some leeway in fulfilling the mandate to strike local interests, the core was unwilling to grant *carte blanche*. Documents captured from Bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound reveal the leader’s deep concerns about the operational focus of the affiliates. For example, in one communication Bin Laden issued a stern rebuke to Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the leader of AQAP—widely considered the most dangerous of the franchises. In Bin Laden’s

³⁷ See, for example, “Harmony Program,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, document AFGP-2002-000078, undated, accessed February 12, 2017, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/harmony-program>.

³⁸ AQIM, formerly known as the Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), grew out of an Islamist faction fighting the Algerian regime in the 1990s. AQIM swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2006; Carla E. Humund, *Al-Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, Congressional Research Service, R43756, August 11, 2016, accessed January 13, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43756.pdf>.

³⁹ Leah Farrall, “How Al-Qaeda Works,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-asia/2011-02-20/how-al-qaeda-works>.

⁴⁰ Peter Margulies and Matthew Sinnott, “Crossing Borders to Target Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates: Defining Networks as Organized Armed Groups in Non-International Armed Conflicts,” *Yearbook of International Humanitarian Law*, February 2, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-038-1_12.

judgment, Wuhayshi's jihadis spent too much time attacking Yemeni security forces and not enough on targeting Westerners and Western interests.⁴¹

Phase four: Whither Al-Qaeda Core?

Al-Qaeda core's balance sheet is a complicated one.⁴² The core has had major setbacks during the past fifteen years. The death of Bin Laden on May 2, 2011 was, if nothing else, a devastating symbolic blow to the global movement he had helped to create. For the time being at least, Afghanistan is not the sanctuary it was before the fall of the Taliban state. Authorities have detected and disrupted serious Al-Qaeda plots against Western targets, such as the attempt by "underwear bomber" Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to bring down Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on Christmas Day, 2009.⁴³ But the organization has been unable to repeat any of the terrorist "spectaculars" it carried out in the years between 1998 and 2005. In the judgment of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Al-Qaeda Central is staggering under the counterterrorism blows inflicted upon it:

[T]he group's cohesiveness the past three years has diminished because of leadership losses from counterterrorism pressure in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the rise of other organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) that serve as an alternative for some disaffected extremists. The 2015 deaths of Nasir al-Wahishi and Abu Khalil al-Sudani, two of al-Qa'ida's most experienced top leaders, has hindered the organization's core functions.⁴⁴

Far-flung franchisees now operate outside of the core's control, sometimes with negative consequences for the Al-Qaeda brand, which has become toxic, even among

⁴¹ Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?*, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, NY, May 2012.

⁴² Brian Michael Jenkins, "Fifteen Years After 9/11: A Preliminary Balance Sheet," September 21, 2016, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT458.html>.

⁴³ United States Department of Justice, "Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab Sentenced to Life in Prison for Attempted Bombing of Flight 253 on Christmas Day 2009," February 16, 2012, accessed March 15, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/umar-farouk-abdulmutallab-sentenced-life-prison-attempted-bombing-flight-253-christmas-day>.

⁴⁴ National Counterterrorism Center, "Terrorist Groups: Al-Qa'ida," undated [2015], accessed March 2, 2017, https://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al_qaida.html.

some otherwise like-minded extremists.⁴⁵ For many would-be jihadists, Al-Qaeda, led by a charisma-challenged, low-wattage figure like Zawahiri—hunkered down and in survival mode in the wild borderlands of Pakistan—seems to have considerably less luster when compared with a cutting-edge jihadi group like ISIS.

Yet for decades, Al-Qaeda has demonstrated that it is nothing if not resilient, agile, and tenacious, with a remarkable self-replicating ability.⁴⁶ According to one estimate, Al-Qaeda has a presence in nearly two dozen countries—three times as many as before 9/11. More than 15 years later, and despite the best efforts of the most powerful nations on earth, Al-Qaeda is still in the terrorism game.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Robin Wright et al., *The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Beyond*, United States Institute of Peace and the Wilson Center, December 2016/January 2017, accessed February 15, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/The-Jihadi-Threat-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-and-Beyond.pdf>. Indeed, shortly before his death, Bin Laden reportedly considered “re-branding” Al-Qaeda. “Reading the Abbottabad Papers: Rebranding Al-Qaeda,” *The Economist*, May 4, 2012, accessed January 22, 2017, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/clausewitz/2012/05/reading-abbottabad-papers>.

⁴⁶ Jason Burke, *The New Threat: The Past, Present, and Future of Islamic Militancy* (New York: The New Press, 2015), 16.

⁴⁷ Bruce Hoffman, “The Global Terror Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration.” *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 11 (November/December 2016): 1-7.

Security Vulnerabilities in Afghanistan

The independent assessment involved analyzing the security environment in which each affiliate or associate operated. We conducted the environmental analysis on the assumption that the success of an Al-Qaeda affiliate or associate is based not solely on resources, funding and leadership structure, but also on a permissive environment with security vulnerabilities. For Al-Qaeda core, we summarized the security vulnerabilities in Afghanistan during two different time periods: 2001-2003 (Table 1) and 2009-2017 (Table 2).

The security vulnerabilities included internal conflict, history of violent jihadism, partial/collapse of government, government illegitimacy, demographic instabilities and security sector ineffectiveness.

Table 1. Security vulnerabilities in Afghanistan (2001-2003)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal Conflict	Following the swift removal of the Taliban regime from power in late 2001, Taliban members melted away in the face of superior U.S. airpower. For the next two years (during the initial phase of OEF) the Taliban remained quiet in their activities. Despite this, the country of Afghanistan continued to suffer from internal conflict resulting from the destruction of the former regime and the continued hunt for Al-Qaeda.
History of Violent Jihadism	The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a lightning rod, bringing together jihadist militants from across the world. The relationships that many jihadists made with one another while in Afghanistan were lasting. ⁴⁸
Partial / Collapse of Government	The Taliban regime, which had ruled Afghanistan since 1996, fell from power with relative ease following U.S. intervention after the September 11, 2001 attacks. An Afghan Interim Authority was set up in December 2001, which

⁴⁸ "The Abu Sayyaf-Al-Qaeda Connection," ABC News, December 20, 2001.

	lasted through June 2002, at which point an Afghan Transitional Authority was elected. ⁴⁹
Government Illegitimacy	Given the lack of an Afghan government capable of providing security throughout the country, and the fact that the previous government (however illegitimate it was) had been deposed, the Afghan Interim Authority faced questions about its future.
Demographic Instabilities	Afghanistan faces numerous difficulties stemming from its demographics, starting with a general lack of knowledge. There has never been a complete national census taken in Afghanistan. ⁵⁰ Furthermore, the country contains many different ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara, and Uzbeks. Finally, Afghanistan has a very young population, with over 60% of Afghans under the age of 24, according to the <i>CIA World Factbook</i> . ⁵¹
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Following the overthrow of the Taliban regime, there were no Afghan security institutions. ISAF was set up in December 2001 to provide security in and around Kabul. Provincial reconstruction teams were created to provide stability in locations around the country. In October 2003, the UN extended ISAF's mandate to cover the entire country. ⁵²

Table 2. Security vulnerabilities in Afghanistan (2009-2017)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal Conflict	Afghanistan has faced an armed insurgency since the Taliban were removed from power in 2001. As of November 2016 the Long War Journal estimated that the Taliban controlled 42 districts out of 407, and contested 55. ⁵³ Additionally, the presence of multiple terrorist groups capable of carrying out attacks (including the Islamic State) exacerbates violence in the country.

⁴⁹ "Afghan Government," Institute for the Study of War. <http://www.understandingwar.org/>

⁵⁰ Ali Karimi, "Afghanistan's Demographic Drought," *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2014.

⁵¹ "Afghanistan," *CIA World Factbook*, updated May 30, 2017.

⁵² "History," Resolute Support Mission website, accessed at <http://www.rs.nato.int/history.html>.

⁵³ Bill Roggio, "Afghan government 'has lost territory to the insurgency,'" *The Long War Journal*, February 1, 2017.

History of Violent Jihadism	The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a lightning rod, bringing together jihadist militants from across the world. The relationships that many jihadists made with one another while in Afghanistan were lasting. ⁵⁴
Government Illegitimacy	Many people view the current Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as corrupt and illegitimate. Under the current power-sharing agreement, the National Unity Government brings together two political rivals, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah to share power. In practice, however, President Ghani and CEO Abdullah are using their appointments to appoint allies, increasing partisanship across the board. ⁵⁵
Demographic Instabilities	Afghanistan faces numerous difficulties stemming from its demographics, starting with a general lack of knowledge. There has never been a complete national census taken in Afghanistan. ⁵⁶ Furthermore, the country contains many different ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara, and Uzbeks. Finally, Afghanistan has a very young population, with over 60% of Afghans under the age of 24, according to the <i>CIA World Factbook</i> . ⁵⁷
Security Sector Ineffectiveness	Afghan Government security institutions are unable to exert control over its entire population or land mass, as evidenced by the amount of territory controlled by the Taliban. Additionally, continued insider attacks by militants posing as members of Afghan security institutions further reduces confidence in the ability of the security sector to protect the Afghan people. ⁵⁸

⁵⁴ “The Abu Sayyaf-Al-Qaeda Connection,” ABC News, December 20, 2001.

⁵⁵ *Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Government*, International Crisis Group, Report N° 285, 10 April 2017.

⁵⁶ Ali Karimi, “Afghanistan’s Demographic Drought,” *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2014.

⁵⁷ “Afghanistan,” *CIA World Factbook*, updated May 30, 2017.

⁵⁸ Javid Ahmad, “What Drives Insider Attacks in Afghanistan?” *Foreign Affairs*, April 5, 2017.

U.S. Approach to Counter Al-Qaeda Core

The U.S. approach to countering Al-Qaeda core is summarized below. As above, the tables differentiate between the approaches taken in 2001-2003 (Table 3) and 2009-2017 (Table 4).

Table 3. U.S. approaches to Al-Qaeda core (2001-2003)

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Following the liberation of Afghanistan, U.S. attention turned to locating remaining pockets of AQ fighters in the country. U.S. elements conducted a series of raids on enemy positions in different parts of the country. One example is Operation Valiant Strike.⁵⁹
“Third Party” Partners (Northern Alliance/Tribal Elements)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The U.S. partnered with the Northern Alliance (a force of opposition fighters operating in the north of the country) and tribal warlords to push Al-Qaeda and the Taliban out of Afghanistan and retake the country. U.S. SF provided partnered forces with close air support (CAS) and helped them plan operations.⁶⁰ U.S. forces also partnered with forces loyal to Hamid Karzai forces in the south, training and equipping them to retake Kandahar.⁶¹ U.S. and coalition forces partnered with Afghan militias during Operation Anaconda to destroy AQ elements in Shahi Kowt,

⁵⁹ “U.S. Troops Raid Afghanistan in Hunt for Al-Qaeda,” Fox News, March 20, 2003, accessed at: <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2003/03/20/us-troops-raid-afghanistan-in-hunt-for-Al-Qaeda.html>.

⁶⁰ Richard W. Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, CMH Pub 70-83-1, page 11.

⁶¹ Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, page 21.

Kandahar Province. ⁶²	
Intelligence and Information Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S established a Task Force which included an interagency intelligence fusion cell.⁶³
Civilian Military Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After the overthrow of the Taliban regime, CENTCOM established a Combined Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force to coordinate relief efforts.⁶⁴ • Throughout the country, Provincial Reconstruction Teams included civil affairs soldiers tasked with, among other things, carrying out small scale reconstruction projects and assessing humanitarian conditions.⁶⁵

Table 4. U.S. approaches to AQ core (2009-2017)

U.S. Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	The U.S. maintains a robust CT presence in Afghanistan despite the drawdown in troop numbers, with approximately 2,000 out of the remaining 9,800 troops performing counterterrorism combat missions as of 2017. These troops target senior Al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan primarily using manned and unmanned aircraft. ⁶⁶
Advise, Assist, and Accompany	The U.S. partners primarily with Afghan SOF to conduct CT operations. This partnership can range from training and advising the Afghan forces, to accompanying them during the operation. ⁶⁷
Train & Equip	The U.S. partners primarily with Afghan SOF to conduct CT operations.

⁶² Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, page 32.

⁶³ Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, page 20.

⁶⁴ Stewart, *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, page 19.

⁶⁵ Center for Army Lessons Learned, *Afghanistan Provincial Reconstruction Team: Observations, Insights, and Lessons*, No. 11-16, February 2011.

⁶⁶ Carla E. Humud, *Al-Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, CRS Report R43756, August 11, 2016.

⁶⁷ *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Report to the United States Congress*, Lead Inspector General for Overseas contingency Operations, July 1, 2016-September 30, 2016.

Partner for CT	This partnership can range from training and advising the Afghan forces, to accompanying them during the operation. ⁶⁸
Security Sector Reform	Under the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission, Coalition advisors work with the relevant Afghan ministries to help ensure that Afghan security forces follow the rule of law and act in accordance with Afghanistan's constitution." ⁶⁹ This also includes addressing issues of corruption.
Major Combat Operations – Invasion / Occupation	Under President Obama, the U.S. saw a drastic increase in the number of troops in Afghanistan. While the majority were undertaking counterinsurgency (COIN), there was a persistent CT effort in Afghanistan. This continued after the drawdown, becoming Operation Freedom's Sentinel in 2015. ⁷⁰
Support Host Nation Ability to Own the Battlespace	The U.S. and Coalition forces help the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan control its territory to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a safe-haven from which Al-Qaeda can launch attacks.
Counter Threat Financing	The U.S. targets Al-Qaeda's finances through sanctions administered by the Office of Foreign Assets Control in the Treasury Department. Sanctions are meant in part to prevent terrorists from accessing the U.S. financial systems. ⁷¹

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQ core?

During the initial phase of Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan the U.S. succeeded in both **disrupting and partially dismantling** Al-Qaeda core. U.S. superior airpower overwhelmed the group and, along with U.S. direct action, split Al-Qaeda forces. Many Al-Qaeda leaders were removed from the battlefield, and the group's ability to carry out attacks was seriously reduced. Remaining Al-Qaeda senior leadership (including Bin Laden) was forced into the mountains at Tora Bora. However, Bin Laden was able to escape into neighboring Pakistan. While the U.S.

⁶⁸ *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Report to the United States Congress.*

⁶⁹ *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Report to the United States Congress.*

⁷⁰ "Operation Freedom's Sentinel," Defense Procurement and Acquisition Policy website, accessed at: http://www.acq.osd.mil/dpap/pacc/cc/operation_freedom_sentinel.html.

⁷¹ Carla E. Humud, *Al-Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa*, CRS Report R43756, August 11, 2016.

continued to pursue Al-Qaeda leaders using direct action (ostensibly with Pakistani assistance), there are questions surrounding how much effort the Pakistani government contributed.

U.S. success in disrupting and partially dismantling the group can in large part be attributed to Al-Qaeda core's hierarchical organizational structure at the time. With Bin Laden on the run and given operational security concerns, other Al-Qaeda operatives received little to no instructions for how to proceed. Overall, the light footprint approach pursued by the U.S., which heavily leveraged partner forces, combined with Al-Qaeda's top-down nature, resulted in strongly disrupted group in the years following the September 11 attacks. However, despite weakening the group, the U.S. was unable to **defeat** Al-Qaeda core. The group went underground and rebuilt while the U.S. turned its attention to Iraq.

By the time the U.S. shifted its attention back to Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda had changed, diffusing as an organization and forming several external affiliates. The direct action approach of targeting leaders in the organization has since seen diminishing returns. Today, Al-Qaeda core is considered by many to be resurgent, with its leadership based in Pakistan. It has demonstrated a lasting relationship with militant groups in the region. While the group has not carried out any major attacks on the west since September 11, it is neither **defeated nor dismantled**. It has, however, likely been **disrupted** due to probable limitations in communication and training.

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQ core?

Afghanistan's history of violent jihadism can be ascribed in large part to the actions of Bin Laden and the other mujahedeen who entered the country to fight the Soviets in the 1980s. Therefore, inasmuch as Al-Qaeda core is the brainchild of Osama Bin Laden, "Al-Qaeda" as an idea may plausibly be viewed as contributing to violent jihadism in Afghanistan. However, the rise of Al-Qaeda core as an organization in Afghanistan can most directly be attributed to the permissive environment engendered by the Taliban in the mid-1990s. Had the Taliban movement rejected Bin Laden and his followers after he was expelled from Sudan, Al-Qaeda would not have gained a foothold in the country. The actions of Al-Qaeda (specifically, the September 11 attacks) did result in the collapse of the Taliban regime; however, this was a favorable outcome in the eyes of the United States, which viewed the Taliban as illegitimate rulers anyway. While Al-Qaeda, through its actions, contributed to deteriorating security conditions in Afghanistan over the last 15 years, the group did not cause the vulnerabilities found in the environment.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

During the early years of OEF-Afghanistan, the U.S. took a light footprint approach. The Taliban regime was toppled with minimal U.S. presence in the country. U.S. elements partnered with Afghan militias, providing them with overwhelming airpower to push the Taliban and Al-Qaeda out of the country. This was supplemented with U.S. unilateral direct action to target Al-Qaeda leaders, and some limited civilian-military operations to provide humanitarian aid to those in need. By the time Hamid Karzai was elected President in 2004, the U.S. had shifted its attention to Iraq, which became the main effort; and NATO had taken control of ISAF in Afghanistan. Beginning in 2008 under President Bush, and increasing in 2009 under President Obama, the U.S. shifted its attention back to Afghanistan. Under the mandate of counterinsurgency, troop numbers rose significantly, and the U.S. put more effort into building the Afghan security forces, security sector reform, and supporting Afghanistan's ability to control the battlespace. Unilateral direct action sharply increased during this time period, as the U.S. maintained a substantial force posture in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

In this case study, we examined Al-Qaeda core's leadership structure, its relationship to affiliates and associates, its ideology and goals, and its funding. We outlined the vulnerabilities in Afghanistan's security environment that Al-Qaeda core exploited, and the relative effectiveness of the U.S. government's approaches to counter Al-Qaeda core over time. For the full context in which this case study was used, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.⁷²

⁷² McQuaid, et. al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

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