

A Renewed Al-Qaeda: Strategizing for a Comeback

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Introduction

Al-Qaeda, the premier global jihadist terrorist entity having its footprints in more than 60 countries and responsible for perpetrating the world's hitherto biggest terrorist attacks of 9/11, appears to have adopted a strategy of working in tandem with local Islamist-jihadist groups. This may be regarded as a strategic shift from directing and masterminding international terrorist attacks to collusion with its associated networks, such as Al-Shabab in Somalia and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and promoting local jihadists in Yemen, Sinai, Syria, and West Africa. Al-Qaeda's local chapters such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) are also working alongside local Al-Qaeda linked Islamist groups. It appears as if Al-Qaeda no longer subscribes to the approach it adhered to during the times of its former Emir Osama Bin Laden and has substantially re-crafted its strategy under Ayman al-Zawahiri.

It may be argued that Al-Qaeda is quietly rebuilding itself in a new fashion — nurturing the predictions of it being reshaped into the 'world's top terrorist group' (Ryan, 2019). In this purview, this essay aims to examine Al-Qaeda's expansive presence across conflict zones in Africa and Asia and the approach it adopts for rebranding itself from being a global terrorist group to a 'glocal' one while still managing a global character. 'Glocal' is used here to explain the Al-Qaeda's new modus operandi with its face as an organization that is more reliant on its subsidiary groups. During its lifetime, the Islamist terrorist entity has experienced several phases; a centralized organization (pre-9/11), a decentralized organization (post 9/11), and a leaderless entity (after the death of the then Emir in 2011). Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri assumed the leadership mantle in 2011 and attempted to transform the organization, but he was immediately faced with the rising ISIS challenge. He decided to lay low, marking a new era for the organization. However, now, Al-Qaeda has entered a new phase which has been termed as "Al-Qaeda's long game" and "Al-Qaeda's secret plan". It may be argued that Al-Qaeda is more focused on surviving itself and fulfilling its strategic objectives than moving towards the organization's ideological goals. It appears that the current strategy of Al-Qaeda is to work in collusion with local Islamist groups and galvanize local support. This Glocalized approach can be observed in Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, West Africa, and Yemen. The following section sheds light on this approach which is succeeded by the factors that influence and lead Al-Qaeda in adopting such an approach.

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Al-Qaeda's Strategic Approach

It is important to study the functioning of different terrorist organizations in relation to Al-Qaeda to understand its strategic shift. Afghan Taliban have remained the primary backers of Al-Qaeda; providing them safe havens in the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (1996-2001). The relationship between the two groups is still reaping mutual benefits; the only change observed being that Al-Qaeda now works as a support group to the Taliban for Islamist insurgency in Afghanistan. Not only that Al-Qaeda-run training camps have been discovered in Afghanistan, but Al-Qaeda also issues a monthly magazine describing the military activities of the Afghan Taliban. Additionally, the Al-Qaeda franchise for South Asia — Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) — is the primary force fighting alongside the Afghan Taliban. AQIS leaders, such as its former Emir Asim Umar and other high command leaders including Rehan al-Pakistani and Abdul Haseeb Al-Kashmiri, were killed in 2019 by the US and Afghan forces while they were fighting alongside Afghan Taliban in the Helmand province (BBC News, 2019).

Furthermore, one of the largest AQIS terrorist training camps was discovered by US forces in the Shorabak district of the Kandahar province in 2015, a traditional stronghold of Afghan Taliban (Joscelyn, 2015). The Afghan Taliban have never condemned Al-Qaeda and its subsidiary groups or promised to oust them from Afghanistan during peace talks, though they agreed to fight and defeat ISIS's Khorasan chapter based in eastern Afghanistan. According to a recent UN report on Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda has its footprints in 12 (out of its total 34) provinces, and with Taliban's assurances of not severing ties, the Haqqani Network of Afghan Taliban has established a new joint unit of 2000 militants in alliance with Al-Qaeda.² Al-Qaeda also congratulated the Taliban leadership on 'their victory against US in Afghanistan' on signing the US-Taliban peace deal on February 29, 2020, through their official monthly magazine *Nawa e Afghan Jihad*, which pays tribute to this feat, was later renamed to *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind*. This case indicates that unlike its perceived image as an umbrella group for all Islamist-jihadist movements worldwide, Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (also AQIS) works with the Afghan Taliban as a support and subsidiary organization and cooperating for the Taliban war efforts by all means. This relationship would help Al-Qaeda acquire a future staging area in Afghanistan and can be considered as a broader Al-Qaeda policy — something of a strategic shift.

Unlike the Afghan Taliban, Al-Shabab — a local Salafist group of Somalia and a breakaway faction of the local movement known as the Islamic Courts Union — is an Islamist terrorist group affiliated with Al-Qaeda. According to the Bin Laden Book Shelf records and letters published by Directorate of National Intelligence (DNI), Al-Shabab wanted to work as an auxiliary of Al-Qaeda for long; however, Bin-Laden did not want the counter-terrorist community to focus on this group because of its relations with Al-Qaeda. Later, Al-Shabab pledged allegiance to Bin Laden and officially became an Al-Qaeda entity. The regional focus of Al-Shabab is argued to be an approach that Al-Qaeda greatly respects. Al-Shabab has primarily focused on Somalia, Kenya, and other neighboring countries, instead of the West, for carrying out its terrorist attacks. Despite the rise of ISIS, Al-Shabab continued to remain affiliated with Al-Qaeda and has also established links with regional Al-Qaeda affiliates (such as AQIM) and other Islamist terrorist groups (BBC News, 2017) and

² For details on this, please see Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting the threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan, May 27, 2020.

also supports Al-Qaeda in Yemen. Currently, Al-Shabab — in connivance with Al-Qaeda — rules over a large swath of territory in Somalia and continues to perpetrate terrorist attacks in the region.

Al-Qaeda's presence in the Syrian civil war (starting in 2011) is another unique case. The Nusra Front (Jahbat al-Nusra) led by Abu Mohammad al-Julani, which had pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda's Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2013 (BBC News, 2013), was at one point termed as the deadliest of all Islamist terrorist groups involved in the conflict. Al-Qaeda's Emir also sided with al-Julani on the dispute over leadership between him and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Following this, al-Baghdadi parted ways with Al-Qaeda and led his faction, namely ISIS, to carve out territories in Syria and Iraq; eventually proclaiming the Islamic State and Caliphate in 2014. Later, when Nusra Front rechristened into *Hayat ut Tahrir wal Sham* (HTS) in 2016 and decided to have an independent stance (disassociating itself from Al-Qaeda because of fear of backlash from Global Coalition against ISIS) while ruling over Idlib province (which it still does), a new Al-Qaeda linked group — Tanzim Hurras ad-Din — surfaced in 2018 under the leadership of Al-Qaeda veterans Khalid al-Aruri and Abu Hammam al-Shami.³ This organization was a merger of several factions that previously fought alongside HTS (Hamming & Ostaeen, 2018).⁴ Neither HTS nor Tanzim Hurras ad-Din, when affiliated with Al-Qaeda, attempted to perpetrate terrorist strikes in the western countries — a move, unlike ISIS which masterminded several terrorist attacks in US and Western Europe. This strategy of laying low, surviving the onslaught, and not seeking attention is argued to have worked in their favor. Professor Bruce Hoffman claims that Al-Qaeda currently has the greatest number of militants at its disposal in its entire history; the largest fraction of which is involved in the Syrian conflict (Hoffman, 2018).⁵ This situation is indicative of the successful implementation of the Al-Qaeda's strategy of surviving and accumulating strength, territory, weapons, recruits, and quasi-states. This is probably the reason why amid the fall of Raqqa in 2017, where ISIS was faced with disarray, Al-Qaeda has still managed to retain its strength.

Similarly, in Yemen, Al-Qaeda established its footprint in the early 2000s, and it continues to grow since then as the country weakens at a fast pace. Some of Al-Qaeda's top commanders, leaders, and stalwarts (including Nasir al-Wahayshi, Qasim al-Raimi, and Khalid Batrafi) besides ideologues like Anwar al-Awlaki and Mohammad al-Zindani hail from Yemen. In addition, the country hosts multiple Al-Qaeda affiliated Islamist terrorist groups (such as Aden and Abyan Islamic Army and Ansar al-Sharia Yemen), falling under the broader umbrella of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) which is one of the strongest and most active Al-Qaeda affiliates. Since the Islamist insurgency in Yemen also has a local color, Al-Qaeda, despite being a global jihadist entity, has acknowledged this fact and continues to support the local Islamist insurgents fighting the government and Shia-Houthi rebels

³ Other Al-Qaeda veterans also joined the newly established group including Sami al-Uraydi, Abu Julaybib, Abu Khallad al-Muhandis, and Abu al-Qassam from Jordan and Abu Abdul Rahman al-Makki from Saudi Arabia.

⁴ These factions included Jaysh al-Malahem, Jaysh al-Sahel, Jaysh al-Badiyya, Saraya al-Sahel, Saraya Kabul, and Jund al-Shariah.

⁵ According to him, Al-Qaeda has 40,000 fighters in Asia and Africa who are involved in different conflicts, such as in Syria (10,000-20,000), Egypt (1,000), South Asia (1,100), Yemen (4,000), Somalia (7,000-9,000), Libya (5,000), and other African countries (4,000).

of the Ansar Allah terrorist group. The Yemeni Al-Qaeda has a strong presence in the country's central and southern Sunni majority provinces and has fought harshly against ISIS-Yemen for attempting to control its strongholds in Badya province (Raghavan, 2019). The Islamist insurgency in Yemen is primarily a localized phenomenon, and it appears as if Al-Qaeda has — as a matter of strategy — carefully managed to blend itself.

Al-Qaeda's Rationale

The question arises on the rationale behind such an approach of Al-Qaeda since it is not a local Islamist movement or not the one ideologically believing in nationalism, local cultures, norms, and self-governance related local issues. Al-Qaeda's shift in approach may be derived from the issues it continues to face. Al-Qaeda surprised US with 9/11 terrorist strikes, but US responded with a greater surprise through mobilizing all its resources and allies to destroy Al-Qaeda's infrastructure, hideouts, safe-havens, and arresting hundreds of high-value leaders in many countries. The US Special Forces also killed several high-profile leaders of Al-Qaeda (including Bin Laden) in drone strikes and Special Forces' operations carried out across three continents. Amid this scenario of a continuous onslaught and loss of experienced cadre of Islamist militants, the best possible strategy was to survive and salvage what remains. Though it is against Al-Qaeda's ideological nature, it appears as if there was no other resort except to survive with a strategic shift. Hence, Dr. Zawahiri, despite his uncharismatic personality and earlier tactical blunders (split of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and later in Syria), has somehow managed to steer Al-Qaeda through difficult waters and can strengthen it further with the new strategy in place.

However, a more immense loss to Al-Qaeda — than the loss of seasoned cadre — was split. The Al-Qaeda in Iraq (also known as Al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers) was the most active Al-Qaeda affiliate that fought against the US forces in Iraq and inflicted heavy losses to the US troops, with thousands of casualties including over 4000 fatalities. The affiliate broke away from Al-Qaeda Central after Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's death in a US airstrike near Baghdad in 2006. Though the organization lost its momentum after Zarqawi, the Syrian conflict benefitted in its regrouping and the Iraq franchise provided leadership and cadre to the newly opened Syrian franchise — the Nusra Front. Al-Julani was initially a commander of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, but al-Baghdadi sent him to Syria to launch an Al-Qaeda affiliate there because of his Syrian descent. Later, the Baghdadi-Julani rift led to the breaking up of the organization. Contrary to Zawahiri's assessment, the Baghdadi-led ISIS gained more ground, recruits, and captured more weapons in Syria and later in Iraq to proclaim itself as a state and a potent competitor to Al-Qaeda.

Another issue faced by Al-Qaeda pertains to the control over territories from where it can train and equip its recruits, and plan and execute its operations. The 9/11 terrorist strikes and the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan (Global War on Terrorism and Operation Enduring Freedom) resulted in the loss of Al-Qaeda's base in Afghanistan. However, with the transformed strategy of forging ties with local groups, Al-Qaeda has managed to develop several operating bases in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Somalia and West Africa and is expected to progress further.

Recapping Al-Qaeda's Approach

The cornerstone of current Al-Qaeda's strategy is apparently based upon certain parameters which may be termed as Al-Qaeda's long game of glocalization and survival. Al-Qaeda capitalized on the rise of ISIS and availed this opportunity to its own benefit; during the heydays of ISIS, it remained out of sight and quietly started rebuilding itself without competing with them. The organization is presently not focusing much on carrying out international terrorist attacks (with certain exceptions such as the Pensacola terrorist attack); instead, it is working with local groups without antagonizing local customs, norms, values and culture (as it had done in the case of Iraq, resulting in Sahwa Movement in 2006-7). Unlike its previous endeavors to internationalize its cause and ideology, the terrorist entity stays low and gains fewer media coverage ever. Above all, Al-Qaeda is making inroads in ungoverned spaces available in weak, failing, or civil war-ravaged countries like Afghanistan, Syria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Yemen, and Syria. Its most recent attempt to expand itself in Mali has been brought to the spotlight by killing AQIM's Emir Abdul Malik Droukkel by the French force in June 2020. The situation depicts that Droukkel, an Algerian national who reportedly was also working with Ansare Dine in West Africa, had been able to find safe havens in Mali while developing rapport with Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM). Therefore, it is concluded that Al-Qaeda has adopted similar tactics in geographical regions ranging from Africa to Asia — allowing itself to grow and expand surreptitiously.

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