Al Qaeda Origins, Ideology, Goals and Future

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the origins, objectives, ideology, motivation, leadership structure, targets, strategies, tactics, and future of Al Qaeda. The past nearly two decades have seen the degrading, destruction, and dispersing of Al Qaeda across the Middle East and Africa but it still exists. Since 9/11 and the demise of Osama Bin Laden Al Qaeda has quietly worked at rebuilding itself across the globe using a franchising or licensing of affiliates across dozens of nations. So, it is essential that the study and analysis of this organization continue, so that it is finally destroyed and its ideas discredited and dismissed.

Keywords: Al Qaeda, jihadism, terrorism, Bin Laden, al Zawahiri, Salafism, Wahabism, licensing, branding

Al Qaeda Origins

The history of Al Qaeda to some degree can trace its roots to the Salafist and Wahabist movement that became more active in the 20th century that wished for a return to a perceived more traditional and pure form of Islam.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab claimed that the decline of the Muslim world was caused by pernicious foreign innovations (bida’)—including European modernism…. He counseled the purging of these influences in an Islamic Revival. He also gave jihad an unusual prominence in his teachings. (Stanley, 2005, p. 1)

From a 20th century historical perspective, it is the creation of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan to wage jihad against the Soviet Union that occupied that nation for a decade in the 1980’s that is the precursor to Al Qaeda. “Al Qaeda has its origins in the uprising against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan…. Thousands of volunteers from around the Middle East came to Afghanistan as mujahideen, warriors fighting to defend fellow Muslims” (Hayes, Borgna, & Rowen, 2016, p. 1). Once the Soviets withdrew the mujahedeen mission was over and they needed to find another role some went to other hot spots, like Bosnia and others returned home and it is the advent of Sadamm Hussien’s invasion of Kuwait and the resulting western response of Operation Desert Storm that gives the jihadists a new enemy which would be the United States and European nations involved in the war. The establishment of military bases in the sacred homeland of Islam, Saudi Arabia becomes a focal point of contention and Al Qaeda is born and has a new mission. Through a confluence of events, the founders of Al Qaeda find themselves in Afghanistan at the same time with similar views of the Western world and the relationship of fundamentalist Islam to modernity and global integration. The three prime movers behind the creation of Al Qaeda are Osama Bin Laden, Ahmen al Zawahiri, and Dr. Fadl; each has their unique role to play; Bin Laden is the wealthy financier, Zawahiri is the operational/military strategist/tactician based on his experience in Egypt with Al Jihad terrorist organization, and Dr. Fadl is the spiritual and philosophic guide for

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Al Qaeda. “Al Qaeda has its roots in an organization that grew out of the ‘mekhtab al khidemat’ (the ‘Services Office’) organization and from 1989 their name became Al Qaeda or in English the Base or Foundation” (PBS Frontline, n.d., p. 1). This new Jihadist terrorist organization focuses its attention on driving the “infidels” from the holiest lands of Islam and the 1990’s are witness to ever increasing levels of terrorist violence with its first bombing attack at the “Gold Mihor hotel in Aden 1990, World Trade Center attack 1993, massacre at Luxor 1997, USS Cole and culminating in the second WTC attack on 9/11/2001” (PBS Frontline, n.d., p. 1).

**Ideology and Motivations**

Al Qaeda has made its fundamentalist Islamic Jihadist ideology quite clear its mission is to

> The principal stated aims of Al Qaeda are to drive Americans and American influence out of all Muslim nations, especially Saudi Arabia; destroy Israel; and topple pro-Western dictatorships around the Middle East. Bin Laden also said that he wishes to unite all Muslims and establish, by force if necessary, an Islamic nation adhering to the rule of the first Caliphs. (PBS Frontline, n.d., p. 1)

In Bin Laden’s first fatwah, he clearly states his intentions and who the enemy of Al Qaeda is

> In February 1998, Usama Bin Laden endorsed a fatwah under the banner of the "International Islamic Front for Jihad on the Jews and Crusaders. This fatwah, published in the publication Al-Quds al-'Arabi on February 23, 1998, stated that Muslims should kill Americans—including civilians—anywhere in the world where they can be found. (PBS Frontline, n.d., p. 1)

> "In an address in or about 1998, Usama Bin Laden cited American aggression against Islam and encouraged a jihad that would eliminate the Americans from the Arabian Peninsula” (PBS Frontline, n.d., p. 1)

The focus of Al Qaeda has remained constant for the past 25 years with a history of attacks in North America, Europe, Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. To that extent, the ideologies and motivations of this organization provide insight into who, what, and where their terrorist activities may be anticipated.

**Aim and Ambitions**

The aims and ambitions of Al Qaeda are clearly articulated and calls for its affiliates to adopt Salafist reforms of Sharia Law, wage jihad against Western encroachment in the Islamic world, attack the far enemy, removal of apostate regimes, wage economic warfare on the West, and attacks on non-Sunni Muslim religious groups. Over the past decades, Al Qaeda has launched attacks in each of these target groups listed above. “Bin Laden and Al Qaeda violently opposed the United States for several reasons” (PBS Frontline, n.d., p. 1).

1. The United States was regarded as an “infidel” because it was not governed in a manner consistent with the group’s extremist interpretation of Islam.

2. The United States was viewed as providing essential support for other “infidel” governments and institutions, particularly the governments of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the nation of Israel, and the United Nations organization, which were regarded as enemies of the group.

3. Al Qaeda opposed the involvement of the United States armed forces in the Gulf War in 1991 and in Operation Restore Hope in Somalia in 1992 and 1993. In particular, Al Qaeda opposed the continued presence of American military forces in Saudi Arabia (and elsewhere on the Saudi Arabian peninsula) following the Gulf War.

4. Al Qaeda opposed the United States Government because of the arrest, conviction and imprisonment of persons belonging to Al Qaeda or its affiliated terrorist groups or those with whom it worked. For these and other reasons, Bin Laden declared a jihad, or holy war, against the United States, which he has carried out through Al Qaeda and its affiliated organizations. (PBS Frontline, n.d., p. 1)
So, the aims and ambitions of Al Qaeda have been clearly articulated since its earliest formation and have served as its guide posts in the launching of numerous high casualty terrorist attacks over the decades.

**Leadership**

The founders of Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, and Dr. Fadl provided the leadership of the organization. Bin Laden became the iconic public relations figure until going underground post 9/11 and even during this phase he continued to direct the organization and serve as a recruitment tool. With Bin Laden death the torch passed to al Zawahiri who had served principally as the military strategy and tactics planner for the organization under Bin Laden. In 2008, Dr. Fadl broke from Al Qaeda renouncing the use of violence in the pursuit of Jihad, it is important to note that Dr. Fadl was the spiritual and philosophic scholar of Al Qaeda. Dr. Fadl, in his new book published from Tora prison in Egypt, states “We are prohibited from committing aggression, even if the enemies of Islam do that” (Wright, 2008, p. 1).

Post Bin Laden, there has been a tendency to view Al Qaeda as a franchise with regional affiliates in places, like Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and Tunisia having leaders emerge with successful and unsuccessful terrorist plots.

Since 2001 Al Qaeda has continued to exist organizationally mainly as a series of local franchises. In Iraq, for instance, Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia was led by a Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who had previously opposed Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan. Expanding rapidly among the defeated Iraqi Sunni after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. (Cockburn, 2011)

**Structure**

The organizational structure has evolved from a hierarchical based structure with the master visionary in the person of Osama Bin Laden to a more decentralized franchise affiliate structure with local leaders in countries, like Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen to name a few.

Al Qaeda began as a hierarchical movement but began to decentralize after the American-led invasion of Afghanistan overthrew the Taliban, eliminating Al Qaeda’s sanctuary in that country.

Affiliate groups, many of which had existed in some form prior to 9/11 but without formal ties to other groups, gradually began to formally align with Al Qaeda. Despite these alliances, most affiliates continued to focus primarily on local grievances and did not adopt Al Qaeda’s call for global jihad against the West as an immediate priority.

In a 2014 interview, Zawahiri appeared to acknowledge a degree of decentralization, stating that Al Qaeda is a message before it is an organization. While many analysts use the metaphor of marketing to describe Al Qaeda as a “brand”, and its offshoots as “franchises”, others describe the decentralization phenomenon in terms of a core group of professionals surrounded by new membership in “grassroots” affiliates. (Congressional Report, 2014)

The literature appears to reach some degree of consensus that Al Qaeda since 9/11 has become to some extent more a brand that its decentralized affiliates can attach themselves to and the analogy is made to an Al Qaeda franchise.

Al Qaeda has been moving towards decentralization ever since the invasion of Afghanistan, with isolated cells and loosely affiliated groups that have only a tenuous connection to the greater Al Qaeda hierarchy tapping into Bin Laden’s “franchise”, appropriating its ideological “brand name” for their actions. (Elkus, 2007, p. 5)

Below is a diagram that shows the leadership and command structure of Al Qaeda “Al Qaeda had a command and control structure which included a majlis al shura (or consultation council) which discussed and approved major undertakings, including terrorist operations. Al Qaeda also had a ‘military committee’ which
considered and approved ‘military’ matters” (PBS Frontline, n.d. p. 1).

![Figure 1. Seattle times. (Source: http://old.seattletimes.com/news/nation-world/crisis/terrorism/binladen_18.html).](image)

The structure represents the three elements of Al Qaeda, the master visionary/financier in Bin Laden, the strategic/tactical military dimension in al Zawahiri, and finally the religious and philosophic guide in Dr. Fadl’s Seattle Times.

Al Qaeda has been forced over the years to adapt to the loss of a geographical operational based in Afghanistan, the loss of its leader Osama Bin Laden and the continued pursuit of the destruction of its command structure by western nations. Ayman al Zawahiri has assumed the leadership of Al Qaeda with the death of Bin Laden but likely finds himself in the same position with the continuous western pressure to eliminate him as well. So, the decentralized structure of Al Qaeda is likely to continue in the foreseeable future.

**Targets**

Al Qaeda has an indiscriminate list of potential targets as its ideological foundation allows for the killing of infidels anywhere on the globe and the concept of tafkir allows for attacks on Muslim governments/countries citizens as well. The history of Al Qaeda attacks indicates that they select targets that will garner maximum attention from media and their enemy; examples being embassies, hotels, public transportation (airlines, cargo shipping, trains, buses, and subways) tourist locations, military installations, apartment buildings, and a variety of other targets. Al Qaeda also likes targets that have secondary or tertiary impacts economically and psychologically the largest example being the WTC 9/11 attack as well as the Kenyan and Tanzanian US Embassies. “Bin Laden and Zawahiri urged followers to attack economic targets to weaken both the West and local regimes” (Congressional Report, 2014, p. 4).

Recently, a message attributed to Al Qaeda announced dramatic terrorist attacks to come in the future.

The message, translated by *The Washington Times*, says the attacks will be strong, serious, alarming, earth-shattering, shocking and terrifying. The coming strikes by Al Qaeda, with God’s Might, will be in the heart of the land of nonbelief, America, and in France, Denmark, other countries in Europe, in the countries that helped and are helping France, and in other places that shall be named by Al Qaeda at other times. The message, posted on the Ansar al Mujahideen network on Sunday, carried the headline: “Map of Al Qaeda and its future strikes”, April 23, 2015. (Gerz, 2013, p. 1)

Only time and Al Qaeda actions will demonstrate whether this announcement is the hyperbole of psychological warfare or are such boasts supported by terrorists’ attacks.
Strategies and Tactics

If one looks at the history of Al Qaeda attacks or inspired attacks, they have a common consistency and they tend to favor mass casualty attacks on foreign targets. As Al Qaeda has devolved from a centralized command structure to a more decentralized affiliate based organization, many of the more recent attacks have come from its Yemen affiliate and the Somali organization Al Shabbat. “Al Qaeda today is not a traditional hierarchical terrorist organization, with a pyramid-style organizational structure, and it does not exercise full command and control over its branch and franchises” (Congressional Report, 2014, p. 1)

Its core philosophy allows for the more indiscriminate killing of “infidels” where you find them and of non-Sunni Muslims or the takfirist. The signature of previous attacks confirm that Al Qaeda prefers suicide bombings that generate significant media exposure creating fear/anxiety in their enemies and creating a propaganda victory to attract new membership and affiliates.

Analysis of Success

Determining whether or not Al Qaeda has been successful will depend on the metrics that are employed. If luring the “far enemy” into a decade long war in Iraq and Afghanistan is a metric then one would have to say on that score certainly they have been successful. “Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda’s number two and chief strategist, wrote at the time of 9/11 that the aim of the group was to lure the US into an over-reaction in which it would wage battle against the Muslims” (Cockburn, 2011, p. 1). If replicating their “success” with the World Trade Center attacks of 9/11 with other attacks of similar scale then they have not been successful. The attacks on transit systems in England, Spain, and tourist locations, like Bali certainly have been brutal and scores were killed and harmed in these attacks but they genuinely pale in comparison to the audacity and scale of 9/11. One could argue that untoward effect of the 9/11 attack placed Al Qaeda squarely in the cross hairs of every intelligence, law enforcement, and military forces of modern nations. This notoriety led to the decades long pursuit of Bin Laden and eventual assassination in 2011 and in some sense the end of a centralized Al Qaeda organization. Some view the current state of Middle East turmoil as a result of Al Qaeda’s efforts to engage the west in a war fought in the Middle East.

Al Qaeda is the most successful terrorist organization in history. By destroying the World Trade Centre in New York on 9/11 it provoked the US into launching wars damaging to itself in Afghanistan and Iraq. Al Qaeda aimed to destroy the status quo in the Middle East and it succeeded beyond its wildest dreams. (Cockburn, 2011, p. 1)

History when viewing Al Qaeda is less likely to take this inflated role of Al Qaeda in the unraveling of Middle East governments from Libya, Egypt, to Syria as seriously as the quote above…but certainly Al Qaeda has been one of the toxic ingredients of the regions destabilization.

Future of Al Qaeda

With the defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, Al Qaeda rises as the preeminent Islamist jihadist terrorist organization globally. Al Qaeda has what some analysts refer to as franchises in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Russia, Myanmar, and Somalia. Bruce Hoffman offers a startling assessment of Al Qaeda growth and reaches in his 2018 article Al Qaeda’s Resurrection the map below is his estimate of Al Qaeda’s affiliates or franchises globally (Bruce Hoffman, 2018). At the time of 9/11 Al Qaeda’s membership would have been counted in the 100’s and as you can see from Hoffman’s estimates it is now in
It appears that there are two schools of thought on the status and future of Al Qaeda, some policy-makers see the successful assassination of Osama Bin Laden as a “watershed” event signaling the decline of the centralized command structure of Al Qaeda. While others view Al Qaeda in ascendance with the decentralized affiliate franchise structure providing for greater geographic engagement across some sixty nations thought to have Al Qaeda cells or members.

Those who view Al Qaeda as weakened generally reference the decline of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and treat affiliates largely as a separate threat. Those who view Al Qaeda as growing in strength tend to focus on the rise of Al Qaeda affiliate groups, which they view in conjunction with Al Qaeda senior leadership as a single global network.

In early 2014, DNI James Clapper responded in the negative to a question on whether Al Qaeda was on the path to defeat, noting that the group was instead, “morphing and franchising itself.” 75 Retired Marine Corps general James Mattis in late 2013 described predictions of Al Qaeda’s demise as “premature” and “discredited”. (Congressional Report, 2014 p. 24)

There is debate about how Al Qaeda should be defined as...is it the “base” as it names denotes, “is it a revolutionary vanguard, a global insurgency, a decentralized network or franchise of affiliates” as Anne Stenersen discusses in her article Understanding Al Qaeda Threat to the West (2018, p. 1). Clearly, Osama Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda has survived and actually prospered after his demise and needs to be understood within the context of its ambitions, structural changes, and geographic scope. Al Qaeda is in fact all of these descriptors and has become a transnational licensor of Islamist terrorism for its affiliates from Africa to the Middle East, and Southwest Asia. The leadership of Al Qaeda has been decentralized and dispersed across nations like Syria, Iran, Turkey, Libya, and Yemen “Accordingly, its leaders have been dispersed to Syria, Iran, Turkey, Libya,
and Yemen, with only a hard-core remnant of top commanders still in Afghanistan and Pakistan” (Bruce Hoffman, 2018, p. 4). These affiliates have adopted the brand Al Qaeda but have their own unique ambitions for spreading Islamism and jihad in their country or region.

Only 400 strong when the Twin Towers fell, damaged by the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and then overshadowed by ISIS, Al Qaeda has quietly rebuilt itself to the point of being able to draw on tens of thousands of foot-soldiers. (Levy & Scott-Clark, 2017, p. 7)

This decentralization is a consequence of strategy, not accident, according to analyst Adam Elkus. In 2007, he wrote that:

Al Qaeda has been moving towards decentralization ever since the invasion of Afghanistan, with isolated cells and loosely affiliated groups that have only a tenuous connection to the greater Al Qaeda hierarchy tapping into Some of these “knock-off” groups spring from pre-existing militant groups committed to some version of Islamist transformation of their society. (Zalman, 2019, p. 1)

It is important to recognize how Al Qaeda has changed over the past two decades since 9/11 and adapt our views and strategies accordingly. Nathan Sales a counter-terrorism expert at the State Department says:

Al Qaeda has been relatively quiet. This is a strategic pause not a surrender…. Al Qaeda is not stagnant. It is rebuilding and it continues to threaten the United States and its allies…. Make no mistake, Al Qaeda retains both its capability and intent to hit us. (Hjelmgaard, 2019, p. 1)

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, Al Qaeda is likely here for the foreseeable future and with its decentralized structure and geographic dispersion, it will be more difficult to monitor and eradicate. The wild card for the world ISIS has been decimated and its horrific leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi killed, in a masterfully planned and executed attack on his compound by American Special Forces. ISIS and its leader were in discussions with other jihadist groups regarding collaboration and mergers so al- Baghdadi’s elimination is highly disruptive for ISIS and its vision of their future. It is possible the ISIS adherents will turn to Al Qaeda and it will likely absorb its remnants and other jihadist terrorist organizations as its critical mass continues grows and its brand spreads.

References


