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Three Years after Osama bin Laden

Al Qaeda Today: Transitions and Trajectories

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Al Qaeda Today
Transitions and Trajectories

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Since the May 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden by the US Seal Team Six in Abbottabad, Pakistan, the composition and character of the aforementioned terrorist group has undergone several changes. Three years since bin Laden's death and the change in leadership to Ayman al-Zawahiri, there is an apparent difference in the former's al Qaeda, and the latter's al Qaeda. Although these changes had begun much before bin Laden's death, the transition sped up soon after his death.

What is the nature of the present-day al Qaeda? What are the structural and changes it has undergone as an organisation, and where does the network stand, in times of globalisation of terror?

I
AL QAEDA TODAY:
ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE, LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGIES

Ideology & Context

On a very fundamental level, the objective of al Qaeda is to impose Islamic law and code of conduct in the areas they deem fit in.[2] The political vacuum that came about in West Asia following the Arab Awakening significantly aided in al Qaeda's expansion. Al Qaeda and related groups filled the void and ran several operations in these countries and got new and motivated fighters via political amnesties and/or prison-breaks – that resulted in imprisoned jihadists no-longer in captivity –that occurred during the Awakening. Essentially, the weakening of existing government structures greatly aided in the spread and strengthening of al Qaeda as several militias cropped up in the absence of legitimate governance.

However, the affiliate groups' interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence did not go down well with several citizens of these countries. For example, the Boko Haram rose to power by undertaking efforts such as providing water to draught struck regions etc. in Nigeria, but their extremist interpretation of the Sharia does not find acceptance among many in the country.[3]

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[1] The author would like to thank Dr. D. Suba Chandran, the patient subjects of her interviews, Professor Anwar Alam, and most of all, Mr. Rana Banerji, for providing with time, guidance, and invaluable insights

[2] MI5, "Al Qaida's Ideology." Accessed October 10, 2014. https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/the-threats/terrorism/international-terrorism/the-nature-of-the-threat/al-qaidas-ideology.html.

[3]Many in Nigeria view the Boko Haram's interpretation of Sharia as un-Islamic owing to the group's usage of tactics such as violence against women and children, and for waging individual war. Some Muslim clerics publicly criticized the group for attacking religious institutions, especially mosques that were opposed to Boko Haram – resulting in the assassination of one cleric and death threats to others who publicly oppose. The Jamaatu Nasril Islam, an umbrella body for Nigeria's Muslim community, too, condemned and opposed Boko Haram's activities as un-Islamic. The kidnapping of 200 schoolgirls by the group especially did not go down well with Nigerians. In fact even al Qaeda condemned the act. See the following: "Outspoken religious leader killed in Nigeria," *Arab News*, February 03, 2014. http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/02/nigeria-cleric-critical-boko-haram-killed-20142211454198 1119.html (accessed October 10, 2014); "Boko Haram outrages Muslims." *Arab News*, May 09, 2014. http://www.arabnews.com/news/567916 (accessed October 10, 2014).

Organisational Structure[4]

Over the past three years, al Qaeda's organisational structure has been increasingly becoming a franchisee-based model. Although al Qaeda always maintained a sizeable number of allies, overall, there existed a unified command structure. This has been rapidly changing since 2011, and the change is stark. Today's al Qaeda doesn't enjoy the same levels of effectiveness of unified command it did under bin Laden (explained subsequently in the paper).

While such a structural change towards a voluntary franchisee-isation could point towards the reduced capabilities of the organisation's core command, this could also indicate the growing strength of the affiliates, given the belligerence and/or the relative levels of relative autonomy enjoyed by the groups – thereby suggesting the retention of the network's high competence levels.

Leadership and Strategies

There were signs of fractures[5] when al-Zawahiri replaced bin Laden as the leader. Ayman al-Zawahiri was appointed as the replacement almost immediately after the US' Operation Neptune Star killed bin Laden, but the announcement came weeks later, in June 2011. While this could have been due to internal differences, the decision stayed, and he went on to assume the post. Ayman al-Zawahiri was perceived (by both jihadists and some analysts) as someone with lesser credentials and lacking the 'charisma' of his predecessor; and was never accepted as a 'worthy' replacement for bin Laden by many officials and analysts, and likely even by some jihadists.[6] Regardless, the decision held and he is the current leader of the terrorist group.

Al Qaeda did already have institutional relationships with key terrorist groups across the West Asia North Africa (WANA) region[7] (explored in detail further ahead in the paper). However, relatively smaller groups that grew stronger during and after the Arab Awakening (such as the al Shabaab) – that were keen on allying with al Qaeda for legitimacy, infrastructural support and backing, and to channel funds–provided the former with opportunities to establish stronger and more comprehensive grips in their regions of operation.

This quid pro quo deal worked like clockwork at the beginning, and seemed to have long-term benefits for the organisation. However, today, despite being a formidable force, al Qaeda's strengths are not entirely the same. Its capacity and capability to gain more allies, and have them follow al-Zawahiri's directions, has diminished considerably. This happened due to the difference in the motivations,

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[4] This paper explores the global organisational structure of al Qaeda and its allies vis-à-vis the nature of relationship al Qaeda central shares with the said allies. The paper does not list individual names and ranks of members. In this context, a franchisee-based model means a system where there is a central command led by al-Zawahiri, but the various groups affiliated and/or allied to al Qaeda have greater grip on their individual operations as opposed to all allies and affiliates doing exactly as directed to by the al Qaeda chief.

[5] Although jihadist forums buzzed with endorsements for al-Zawahiri to succeed bin Laden, many jihadists viewed al-Zawahiri as too critical of other Islamists, and as more of a philosopher. Furthermore, his Egyptian lineage meant Arab jihadists from the Gulf countries – who saw bin Laden as one of them – were skeptical about his potential treatment of non-Egyptian jihadists. Furthermore, according to reports, al-Zawahiri, although respected, was not loved/adored the way bin Laden was. A possible evidence of this phenomenon was the six-week delay in al Qaeda's formal announcement declaring him as the new chief – despite the decision having been finalised much earlier.

[6] See the following: Daniel L. Byman, "Zawahiri's Big Challenge," Brookings, May 12, 2011. http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/05/12-al-qaeda-byman (accessed October 10, 2014); "Ayman al-Zawahiri." Global Security. http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/zawahiri.htm (accessed October 10, 2014); Lalit K Jha, "Zawahiri is Not Popular Within Al-Qaeda: US Official," Global Security, May 08, 2011. http://www.outlookindia.com/news/article/Zawahiri-is-Not-Popular-Within-AlQaeda-US-Official/721212 (accessed October 10, 2014).

[7] Martha Crenshaw, "Mapping Militant Organisations." Last modified 2013. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/maps/view/alqaeda.

ambitions, and agendas of al Qaeda's franchisees that are scattered all over the world. Given their – especially al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) – increasing thrust towards financial independence from al Qaeda, this phenomenon is likely to continue in the aforementioned trajectory.

However, this does not mean al Qaeda is a defeated force. They still continue to gain a lot of ground – especially in terms of recruitment and deputation.

II
ORGANISATIONAL TRENDS AND THE EXTENT OF INFLUENCE

Overall, today, al Qaeda has a direct and/or indirect presence in South Asia, Central Asia, North Asia, the Gulf region, North Africa, Maghreb, Sahel, the Levant, and Southeast Asia, among others.[8]

Any study carried out on al Qaeda and/or its affiliates must not view the situation keeping only al Qaeda at the centre. It is imperative that all the affiliated groups and splinter groups too are laid substantial emphasis upon while being studied and analysed in detail. This is essential because they are, in terms of operational structures, skills, successes and agendas, as formidable as al Qaeda itself; and if not on the same scale, but within their area of operation, extremely effective.

Franchisee-ing Nature

Today, al Qaeda has a global reach, and the primary cause for that is its sped-up initiative of alliance-building with groups from diverse geographical and political areas. Over the past four years, this alliance-making structure – opportunistically stirred and sped-up following the Arab Awakening – has led to al Qaeda's organisational structure becoming franchisee-based.

There are numerous large, medium and small sized groups that are in alliance with al Qaeda, but each of them have an agenda of their own. Not all of them conform to every edict of al-Zawahiri's. They may agree on various issues for various reasons, but very few groups sincerely 'obey' and/or work exclusively towards all of al Qaeda's primary goals. An example of the phenomenon is Jabhat al-Nusra, an established al Qaeda ally operating in Syria – that was at loggerheads with the then al Qaeda ally, the erstwhile Al Qaeda in Iraq, the IS. [9]

Furthermore, in this large scheme of operations, when foreign fighters who partake in terrorist activities return from the 'field' to their home countries, they carry home with them the expertise, experience and ideology they have gained as foot soldiers for the al-Qaeda and/or their affiliated groups. They then become potential founders of newer such groups. Two examples explain this phenomenon:

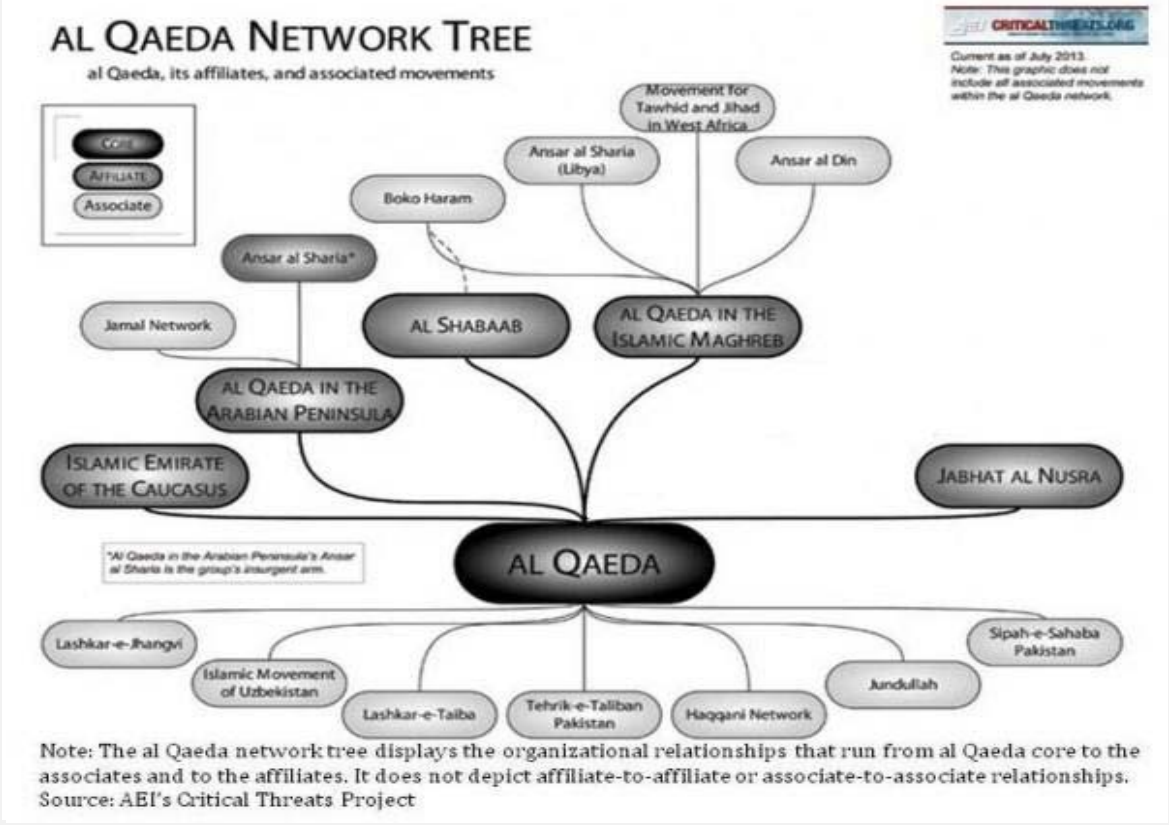
a. The attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels carried out by French national Mehdi Nemmouche, a former fighter in Syria, on May 24, 2014, killing four people. Through his

[8] See the following: United Nations Security Council, Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, "The List established and maintained by the Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee with respect to individuals, groups, undertakings and other entities associated with Al-Qaida." Last modified September 23, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2014.

http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/AQList.htm; Crenshaw 2013

[9] "Al-Qaeda's ISIL vows to 'crush' Syrian rebels." *Al Arabiya*, January 07, 2014. http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/01/07/Al-Qaeda-groups-fight-each-other-in-Syria.html (accessed October 10, 2014).

years in the IS camp, he became more and more radicalised and became a loose cannon – to an extent that the IS itself wanted him out.[10]



***Infographic courtesy**: American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project*

b. The rise of the Somali national, Mukhtar Robow, who was trained in Afghanistan by al Qaeda in the 2000s. Also known as Abu Mansur, Robow, on his return to Somalia, helped found the Somalia-based terrorist group, the al Shabaab.[11] His employment history with the Saudi company, al Haramain Foundation – an enterprise under UN sanctions for financing terrorism – is telling, because it establishes direct links between the al Shabaab and a terrorist financer. In that context, it isn't difficult to imagine more Robows in the future.

Al Qaeda network today is thus a loosely tied group of organisations; and this has come to define the nature and future direction of the organisation's operational capabilities. Many new jihadist groups have cropped up over the past four-five years – such as the southern Algeria and Northern-Mali based Mouvement pour l'Unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest, and the Kurdistan-based Ansar al-Jihad a-Alami, in 2011 – and they are in many ways considerably different in composition and character than that of al Qaeda.

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[10]Anne Penketh, "Brussels Jewish Museum shooting: suspect with Islamist links arrested," *The Guardian*, June 01, 2014. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/01/suspect-arrest-brussels-jewish-museum-shooting (accessed October 10, 2014).

[11] Will Connors, Siobhan Ghorman, and Sarah Childress, "Somali Militant Group Built Training Camps, al Qaeda Links," *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2010. http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703722804575369112124063190 (accessed October 10, 2014).

However, in more than one region, al Qaeda and its affiliates support and facilitate the operations of each other despite ideological differences. A related manifestation of this phenomenon is the continuing relationship between al Qaeda and the AQIM, where the latter publicly praised the former's rival, the IS, for its achievements, but still referred to al-Zawahiri as their leader[12]. Therefore, to understand and predict future jihadist actions, it is essential to study these groups in detail, instead of focussing solely on the parent group, al Qaeda[13]. These smaller affiliate groups are no longer just bystanders and foot soldiers. Today, they are taking on larger roles, and are gradually becoming players themselves. In the coming years, the world will have to deal not just with al-Zawahiri and his men, but also with these groups.

III
CHARACTER

Age Factor

Today, there is an evident demographic change in the ranks of al Qaeda's affiliates; and along with it a change in operational capabilities.[14] The new generation of leadership and foot soldiers in the affiliated groups is considerably younger in age than its predecessors. This factor is of importance, given the differences of motivation and actions undertaken by young adults thrown into the violent combat at ages as early as 12.[15]

The young fighters are often more violent in the nature of operations, and display little tolerance for religious leadership. The rigid nature of ideological leanings/interpretations, the psychological need for feeling powerful that feeds into their intolerance towards dissent from any quarter – which often tends to be Muslim clerics who deem an act Islamic or un-Islamic, and who often condemn these groups' actions – could be a reason.[16] The recent kidnappings of over 200 school girls by the Nigerian group, Boko Haram, indicate the departure of these groups' motivations from traditional radical Islamic interpretations towards result-oriented terror-inducing tactics. A high number of people are now being attracted to the IS model of jihad – that is more brutal, violent and action-oriented.[17]

The dip in the median age of recruits and/leaders in al Qaeda brings with it, grave consequences. Jihadist leaders belonging to the younger generation are increasingly influenced by today's social and technological dynamics. This means, these younger leaders bring with them more violence due to varying ideological perspectives, and technical know-how to carry out orchestrated attacks. Younger

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[12] Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb calls for reconciliation between jihadist groups," *Long War Journal*, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/al_qaeda_in_the_isla.php (accessed October 10, 2014).

[13]Keeping in mind the overarching theme, this paper does not trace the individual future trajectories of the allies and affiliates.

[14] United Nations Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, "Fifteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2083 (2012) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities." Last modified January 23, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/41

[15] "Mali: Islamists Should Free Child Soldiers'" Human Rights Watch, January 15, 2013. http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/01/15/mali-islamists-should-free-child-soldiers (accessed October 10, 2014).

[16] "Outspoken religious leader killed in Nigeria" & "Boko Haram outrages Muslims"

[17] Greg Miller, "Fighters abandoning al-Qaeda affiliates to join Islamic State, U.S. officials say," *Washington Post*, August 09, 2014. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/fighters-abandoning-al-qaeda-affiliates-to-join-islamic-state-us-officials-say/2014/08/09/c5321d10-1f08-11e4-ae54-0cfe1f974f8a_story.html (accessed October 10, 2014).

leaders have also evidently been more successful in enticing more people to join their ranks. The use of the Internet for propaganda is a good example of this phenomenon.

Technological Advancements

Al Qaeda is increasingly becoming technologically advanced.[18] While they did have their encryption systems earlier as well, they have been consistently building on it and in fact, according to reports, they have recently developed "multiple new encryption products as well as adaptations to new platforms like mobile, instant messaging, and Mac."[19] According to a Recorded Future analysis, "Following the June 2013 Edward Snowden leaks we observe an increased pace of innovation, specifically new competing jihadist platforms and three (3) major new encryption tools from three (3) different organizations – GIMF, Al-Fajr Technical Committee, and ISIS – within a three to five-month time frame of the leaks"[20] This innovation is based on "best practice, off the shelf, algorithms," especially BouncyCastles and CryptoSMS.[21]

Furthermore, al Qaeda and the IS have been competing with each other on the technological front as well. Al Qaeda's encryption softwares – the Mobile Encryption Program, the Asrar al-Dardashah Plugin, and the Asrar al-Mujahideen Program – are in a full-fledged brand rivalry with the IS's Ansar al-Ghubara in the global jihadist market.

This phenomenon is evidenced the in al Qaeda-affiliated Global Islamic Media Front's December 2013 statement, which said "we confirm that there wasn't any relationship between the program "Asrar al-Ghurabaa" and the Front's encryption program "Asrar al-Mujahdeen", and therefore, we advise and warn the brothers not to use the program "Asrar al-Ghurabaa" entirely!"[22]

Increased Adaptability

The age factor, coupled with the localisation of recruitment and alliances, has also resulted in increased capabilities in adapting to areas, regardless of whether to take shelter or wage jihad. These autonomous local militant groups move dexterously across borders, forming alliances of their own and establish safe havens for each other for adverse times.[23] This flexibility provides them with more room to manoeuvre from and in, making them particularly effective. Pakistan is a case in point here,

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[18]Steven Stalinsky and R Sosnow, "Al-Qaeda's Embrace Of Encryption Technology - Part II: 2011-2014, And The Impact Of Edward Snowden," Working paper, The Middle East Media Research Institute, 2014. http://www.memrijttm.org/al-qaedas-embrace-of-encryption-technology-part-ii-2011-2014-and-the-impact-of-edward-snowden.html.

[19] See the following: "How Al-Qaeda Uses Encryption Post-Snowden (Part 2) – New Analysis in Collaboration With ReversingLabs." Recorded Future, August 01, 2014. https://www.recordedfuture.com/al-qaeda-encryption-technology-part-2/ (accessed October 10, 2014); *The Global Islamic Media Front, "Mobile Encryption for Android (V 1.1) and Symbian Updated for Android to Include Encrypting Files and Emailing Them Securely." (Accessed October 10, 2014). http://gimfmedia.com/tech/en/download-mobile-encryption/.*

[20] "Mobile Encryption for Android (V 1.1) and Symbian Updated for Android to Include Encrypting Files and Emailing Them Securely"

[21] "How Al-Qaeda Uses Encryption Post-Snowden (Part 2) – New Analysis in Collaboration With Reversing Labs" August 01, 2014

[22] See the following: Warning about the use of the program 'asrār al-ghurabā', Last modified December 04, 2013. Accessed September 19, 2014. https://shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=215706; New statement from the Global Islamic Media Front: "Warning About the Use of the Program 'Asrār al-Ghurabā", "Jihadology: A Clearinghouse for Jihādī Primary Source Material, Original Analysis, and Translation Service." Last modified December 04, 2013. Accessed September 19, 2014. http://jihadology.net/2013/12/04/new-statement-from-the-global-islamic-media-front-warning-about-the-use-of-the-program-asrar-al-ghuraba/.

[23] "Fifteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2083 (2012) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities" January 23, 2014

in terms of its operations in its Federally Administered Tribal Areas. [24] According to the UN, a similar phenomenon can be noted in Africa, where "Somalia managed to do with Al-Shabaab, and French and allied forces managed to do with Al-Qaida affiliates in Mali through Operation Serval. AQIM is no longer anchored in Mali or its original sanctuaries in Algeria. Instead, many fleeing militants have regrouped in southern Libya."[25]

Imported Commanders

Another noticeable trend in al Qaeda and its affiliates is that of 'imported leaders'. Today, many commanders of al Qaeda and/or its affiliates do not necessarily belong to the same region the organisation belongs to. An example of this phenomenon is the commandeering of the AQAP by the recently-killed Uzbek national, Abu Muslim al-Uzbeki, and Chechen-origin Abu Islam al-Chechen, in Yemen, and the slightly less apt yet relevant commandeering of the al-Shabaab by the Somali-origin Kenyan called Ikrima.[26]

Although this may seem to contradict the aforementioned observation of localised recruitment, the imported leaders phenomenon holds true as well. Indeed, there is a surge in localised recruitments in affiliate groups; but the increased presence of fighters from various ethnic and citizenship backgrounds – the presence of Pakistani-origin fighters in the Syrian civil war, Punjabi terrorists affiliated with al Qaeda conducting operations in Afghanistan, and in fact, al-Zawahiri's leadership of the organisation itself – points towards a globalised form of operations.[27] Furthermore, more jihadist fighters from various ethnic backgrounds – Arabs, Chechens and Pathans – are being recruited, trained and deployed in lands far from their home.

Key Fault-line

At present, al Qaeda is comparable to a multi-national enterprise with offices across the globe. The problem lies in the coordination among the regional centres, and between the branches and the head office. Today, more than one affiliate has openly disregarded the instructions of al-Zawahiri.[28] Abu Huda al Sudani, operating in Afghanistan, along with nine other jihadists, publicly lambasted al Qaeda for not branding Shia Muslims as infidels, and expressed support for the IS.[29] This, despite one of the 10 being the brother of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi who is widely considered to be the most

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[24] Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism. US Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2008, Chapter 2. Country Reports: South and Central Asia Overview." Last modified April 30, 2009. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2008/1224[34].htm.

[25] See the following: "Fifteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2083 (2012) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities" January 23, 2014; United Nations Security Council, "Chair's Briefing to the Security Council 28 May 2014." Last modified May 28, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/pdf/Briefing_28may14.pdf.

[26] "Foreign al-Qaeda suspects killed in Yemen offensive," *Al-Shorfa*, May 08, 2014. http://al-shorfa.com/en_GB/articles/meii/newsbriefs/2014/05/08/newsbrief-01 (accessed October 10, 2014); Bill Roggio, "Target of SEAL raid in Somalia tied to top al Qaeda leaders," *Long War Journal*, October 07, 2013. http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2013/10/swedish_kenyan_jihadists_repor.php (accessed October 10, 2014); Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister. "U.S. target in Somalia: An inside story on an Al-Shabaab commander," CNN, October 07, 2013. http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/07/world/africa/somalia-al-shabaab-commander/ (accessed October 10, 2014).

[27] See the following: Eric Schmitt, "Qaeda Militants Seek Syria Base, U.S. Officials Say," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/26/world/middleeast/qaeda-militants-seek-syria-base-us-officials-say.html?_r=0 (accessed October 10, 2014); "Al Qaeda militants moving from Pakistan to set up in Syria: NYT," *Dawn*, March 26, 2014. http://www.dawn.com/news/1095712 (accessed October 10, 2014).

[28] "Fighters abandoning al-Qaeda affiliates to join Islamic State, U.S. officials say," August 2014

[29] Thomas Joscelyn, "Previously obscure al Qaeda leader responds to dissenters," *Long War Journal*, May 30, 2014. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/05/post_7.php (accessed October 10, 2014).

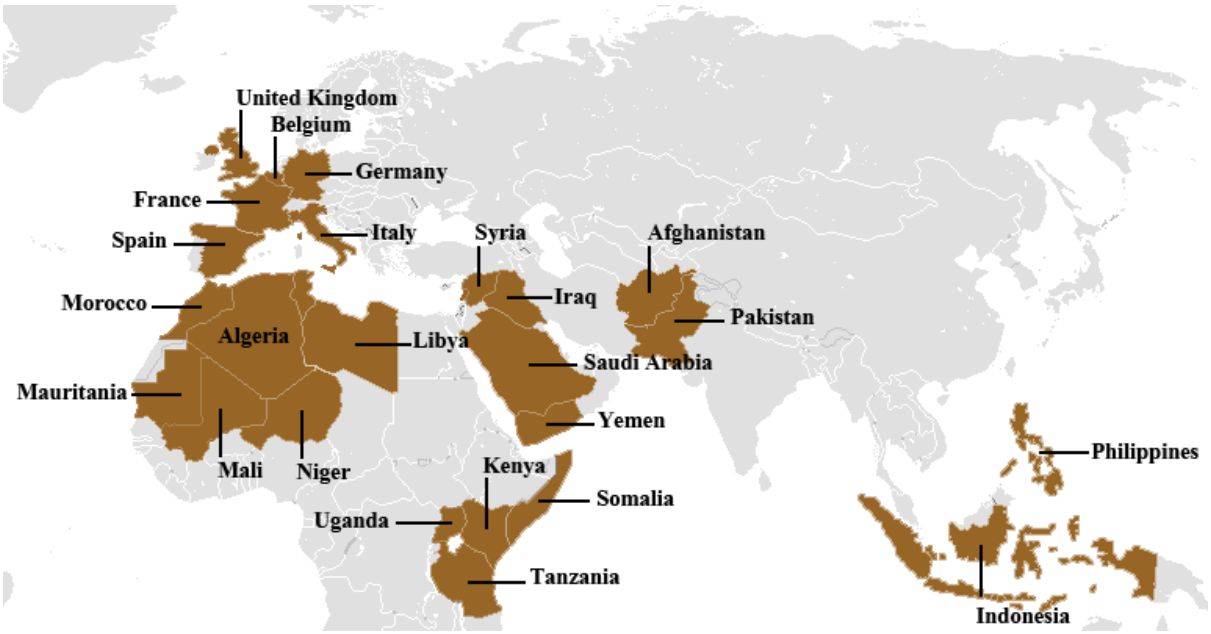
influential living Jihadi Theorist and one who is often quoted by al Qaeda to strengthen their arguments.[30]

Furthermore, there is severe infighting for power and legitimacy between these groups itself; groups that envision different endgames for their efforts.[31] The most evident manifestation of this phenomenon is the February 2014 split between the then Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (now called the IS) and al Qaeda over the Syrian group Jabhat al-Nusra's affiliation.

IV
AL QAEDA STRONGHOLDS

Al Qaeda today, contrary to its seemingly diminishing strength, is in fact gaining a grip in North Africa and West Asia, especially via al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).Al-Qaeda's direct affiliates include al Nusra Front (Syria and Lebanon), AQIM (Maghreb), AQAP (a consortium of Islamic Jihad of Yemen, and Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia), Al Shabaab (Somalia), Egyptian Islamic Jihad (Egypt).

However, it has lost its formerly-enjoyed grip on large parts of Iraq, and is engaged in a turf-war with the IS (the erstwhile al Qaeda in Iraq and then the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant) for control in Syria. Among the key reasons for the allies' continuing loyalty to al Qaeda – apart from the long-standing nature of relationships, ideological affinities, and the acceptance of Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar as the Amir-ul-Momineen – is the phenomenon of 'bin-Ladenism' that is slowly becoming apparent.[32]



***Infographic Courtesy**: Wikimedia Commons*

[30] Ibid.

[31] James J. F Forest," Al-Qaeda's Influence in Sub-Saharan Africa: Myths, Realities and Possibilities, "The Terrorism Research Initiative. Last modified 2011. (accessed October 10, 2014). http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/156/html.

[32] The Soufan Group, "A Region Choked by bin Ladin-ism." Last modified September 09, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-a-region-choked-by-bin-ladin-ism/.

Gradually spreading across West Asia and North Africa, 'bin-Ladenism' is more common among small groups with localised ambitions that draw their ideological and operational motivations from Osama bin Laden's speeches and writings.[33]

V
KEY ALLIES

As mentioned earlier, al Qaeda has several large and small regional bases all over the world. However, its primary dealings take place with certain big groups in each region.[34]

In South Asia, the Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Haqqani Network are its primary partners, whereas, whereas the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the largely-manageable Emarat Kavkaz are its key allies in Central Asia.[35] Reports have suggested that Jamaat Ansarullah, a Tajik splinter group could grow in prominence in the future. The Caucuses too remain vulnerable to becoming a breeding and training ground for the terrorists.[36]

In Africa, al Qaeda in the Islamic Magheb (AQIM), the al Murabitoun, the al Shabaab, Boko Haram, and the Tunisian Combatant Group remain key allies.[37] In West Asia, following the split with the IS (then called the ISIL), al-Zawahiri's main regional affiliates are the highly potent groups, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ansar al-Islam, and the AQAP. There are indicators that signal that the AQAP could be the main al Qaeda's link to the other loosely affiliated groups in the WANA region.[38]

Southeast Asia is not untouched either. In Indonesia, the largely unorganised but rising force, the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur – an umbrella organisation consisting other groups such as the Jemaah Islamiah (of the Bali bombings) and the Jamaah Ansharut Tauhi – is an ally, while the Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front appear to be its allies in the Philippines.[39] The persecution of large numbers of Muslim Rohingyas is likely to draw al Qaeda to the erstwhile Burma. Whether it will start fresh operations or ally with the Arakan Mujahideen is yet to be seen.[40] Today, Syria is considered the holiest ground to carry out jihad in.

If the human rights situation in Rakhine does not improve quickly, there is a likelihood of an al Qaeda presence, direct or indirect, in the region within a year. Such a situation will further complicate the already delicate state-of-affairs in neighbouring Bangladesh – that is currently struggling to uphold secular values in the face of a surge from radical Islamists.

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[33] "TSG IntelBrief: A Region Choked by bin Ladin-ism. September 2014"

[34] See the following: "The list established and maintained by the al-qaida sanctions committee with respect to individuals, groups, undertakings and other entities associated with al-qaida, 2014"; Crenshaw 2013

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Arakan mujahideen video 1. (2013, August 23). [Video podcast]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwvRI8r9ccU. Accessed October 10, 2014.

VI
FUNDING

The ISIL's case is most significant because of the growing hold and reach it has gained over the past year. The recent events – wherein it took control of major Iraqi and Syrian cities before declaring an Islamic caliphate – means it is likely that the ISIL chief, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had breached the walls of the terrorist funding supply chain long before 2013, when he openly started rebelling against al-Zawahiri.

The inference here is that there is a clear difference of opinion even among those who fund these organisations. There is an evident shift (or not) among existing funders vis-à-vis their preferred organisational loyalties. Also, if groups such as the ISIL have managed to sustain, it is not just due to the shifting loyalties of the existing funders. Their sustenance also indicates that newer sources of funds are cropping up. This is worrisome, for given the political and ideological clashes between the countries in the region – especially in West Asia – and the amplifying tensions, the splintering nature of the terror networks will only increase; and they will only grow stronger.

However, this does not mean that al Qaeda is losing out on funders. Al Qaeda still has a strong funding channel that supports the organisation, and one wouldn't be wrong to say that it is exploring more options in the area; and it is likely to be successful in several of its endeavours, given the present geopolitical scenario. Today, al Qaeda and its affiliates have intensified operations in the following three key areas to boost funding, and its impact is visible from Europe to Oceania: narcotics trade; kidnapping; and the manipulation of international financial systems (to trade and/or to transfer)

Narcotics Trade

The ongoing shifts in the geopolitics of the WANA and South Asian regions are likely to result in a spike in illegal narcotics trade and antiquity smuggling across South Asia, WANA, Central Asia, Russia and Europe to channel funds. Already, in Afghanistan, the Taliban is showing greater propensity to protect the poppy harvest, and to regulate narcotics trafficking and production.[41]

At 5,500 tons, Afghanistan is the source of 80 per cent of the world's opium production. In 2013, for the third consecutive year, the country saw a spike in opium production; the area under opium cultivation increased 36 per cent from 154,000 hectares in 2012 to 209,000 hectares in 2013 – with Kandahar and Helmand, the two most insecure provinces in the country, witnessing most increase. Furthermore, heroin made from Afghan opium has reached new markets such as Southeast Asia and Oceania (that were previously supplied to from Southeast Asian sources). According to the UN, the Balkan route used for trafficking Afghan heroin into Western and Central Europe is now gradually being replaced by a 'Southern Route' with heroin being smuggled through the area south of Afghanistan reaching Europe, via the Near and Middle East and Africa, as well as directly from Pakistan.[42]

Kidnapping

However, narcotics trade, although a major source of funds, isn't the only one. Kidnapping for ransom is on the rise all over West Asia and North Africa. A noticeable phenomenon in the most important process of the operations – funding – is the rise in the instances of kidnappings for ransom. The frequency of incidents of kidnappings of foreign nationals to be exchanged in return for ransom or for

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[41] United States Department of Defense, "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan." Last modified November 2013. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://www.defense.gov/pubs/October_1230_Report_Master_Nov7.pdf.

[42] United Nations & Government of Afghanistan, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & Afghan Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2013: Summary Findings." Last modified November 2013. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghan_report_Summary_Findings_2013.pdf.

securing the release of imprisoned jihadists has seen a steep rise. Control Risk's RiskMap 2014 Report estimates[43] that "Asia and the Pacific accounted for the majority of recorded kidnaps-for-ransom in 2013, rising from 31% of global cases in 2012 to 35%. The region dominated the top ten high-risk kidnapping countries in 2013, with India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Philippines all recording high numbers of kidnaps. While all four countries suffer from varying degrees of militancy, criminal kidnap-for-ransom gangs also contribute to the trend."[44]

Africa too, has been swept by a wave of kidnappings. While Nigeria was pitted as the country with highest risk of kidnapping, the Sahel region is threatened by the Islamist militias operational in Algeria, Kenya, and Mali. Approximately 30 per cent of kidnappings in Yemen were committed by the AQIM. The West Asian region isn't safe either, given the uncertainty created by the Syrian civil war.

According to the US, "an estimated $120 million in ransom payments was paid to terrorist groups between 2004 and 2012."[45]

According to the UN, between 2011 and 2013, the AQAP alone received $20 million.[46] A total of 1,283 kidnappings motivated by terrorism were reported in 2012, and a single hostage could deliver a seven-figure ransom into the hands of terrorists. The AQIM, with an estimated $15 million annual budget, received $5.4 million on average per hostage in 2012, an increase of nearly $1 million from 2011. Each ransom payment encourages further kidnappings, creating a vicious cycle of encouragement as well as funding for Al-Qaida and its affiliates. When a ransom is paid, the insurance sector, private companies and risk consultancies may be involved in providing the funds or facilitating payments. The kidnap and ransom insurance market, worth $250 million in 2006, doubled in size by 2011.

Whether it is ransom money, 'charity donations' from wealthy benefactors, or narco-dollars, carrying out large-scale transactions involving tens of thousands of dollars demands an astute understanding of the international financial systems.

Manipulating International Financial Systems

Today, more terrorist groups understand the loopholes in the international financial system, and deftly manipulate it to their benefit. The 2013 Financial Action Task Force report states that terrorist groups, especially those in West Africa, now tend to "exploit globalisation and technological advances in collecting, transferring, and utilizing funds for their activities," and that the "nexus between terrorist financing and trade is also readily apparent in West Africa." [47]

While al Qaeda used to carry out transactions by using fraudulent company names and accounts, and also by under-valuing and over-invoicing goods and/or services, the financial crackdown initiated by the UN has forced the group to explore other options as well.

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[43] "RiskMap 2014 REPORT," Control Risks, 2014. http://www.controlrisks.com/webcasts/studio/flipping-book/RiskMap-Report-2014/files/assets/basic-html/page108.html (accessed October 10, 2014).

[44] "Fifteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2083 (2012) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities" January 23, 2014

[45] Ambassador Lewis A. Lukens, United States Government, "Remarks by U.S. Ambassador Lewis A. Lukens Kidnapping for Ransom Denial of Benefits Workshop." Last modified October 30, 2012. Accessed October 15, 2014. http://photos.state.gov/libraries/senegal/323264/pdf/sp-en_2012-10-30.pdf.

[46] "Fifteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2083 (2012) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities" January 23, 2014

[47] Financial Action Task Force. Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Authority of Heads of State and Government, Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa, "Terrorist Financing in West Africa." Last modified October 2013. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/TF-in-West-Africa.pdf.

One can therefore notice a trend of increasing criminalisation of the activities. This indicates a shift and/or expansion from ideology-driven methods to achieve institutional goals to functionality-based efforts to ensure the sustenance of the organisation.

This has obviously led to the cultivation of a parallel industry where there are several 'facilitators' and 'point persons' in various regions of the world, and these persons provide assistance and means to terrorist groups to traffic money, drugs and arms. Interestingly, ideologically opposed groups, even those with no affiliations and/or dealings with each other converge here. For instance, some point people have aided and provided material support to al Qaeda, the AQIM, and the Colombian armed revolutionary group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia.[48]

This points towards a phenomenon where facilitators without any particular sympathies or affinities/ leanings for organisations or ideologies, exist – and that religion-based terrorist organisations such as al Qaeda are becoming increasingly unconcerned/unbothered about the ideological background of those who facilitate them. Although such occurrences began taking place a little before bin Laden was killed, it has increased after his death. This supplements the observation that today, there is a trend in al Qaeda to emphasise more on functionality than ideological stand points in order to further their agenda – for, otherwise, narcotics trade wouldn't be a source of funds at all, given how drug abuse is considered un-Islamic.

Additionally, several international NGOs serve as facades for terrorist funding, some of whom have been listed further in the paper; and given how contributing to charity is extremely common in the Islamic world, many sincere NGOs too stand the risk of being exploited either by duping or malpractice by employees. Some major organisations that have been associated with al Qaeda are the Karachi-based Al-Akhtar Trust International; the Al Haramain (with branches in Afghanistan, Albania, Sarajevo, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Pakistan, US, Union of Comorros, Somalia, Netherlands, Kenya, and Tanzania); the Pakistan-based Al Rashid Trust; the Benevolence International Foundation (with former and current bases in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sarajevo and Zenica), Canada, China, Croatia, Georgia (Duisi and Tbilisi), the Netherlands, Pakistan (Islamabad, Peshawar), the Palestinian Territories, Russia (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Moscow), Saudi Arabia (Riyadh and Jeddah), Sudan, Tajikistan, UK, the US, and Yemen); the Global Relief Foundation (with branches/presence in the US, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, West Bank and Gaza, Somalia and Syria); the Pakistan-based Rabita Trust; the Bosnia-based Taibah International; and the Pakistan-based Wafa Humanitarian Organisation.[49]

Diamond Trade

Another important trend is terrorist financing via diamond trade. Given the considerable change the diamond trade market has undergone in the past few years – such as the lack of monopoly, diversification of distribution channels, entry of new markets and trade centres, the use of internet to trade and the increasing preference to use online transaction over cash payments, among others – have resulted in the terrorists beginning to manipulate this trade route to carry out financing. Diamonds can be used to earn, gain or store value, and are easily moved or smuggled.

According to the FATF, their low weight, very high value, high durability, exchangeability for other commodities, ability to remain undetected, changeability, unsteady price and the ease in which they

[48] Ibid

[49] "List established and maintained by the Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee with respect to individuals, groups, undertakings and other entities associated with Al-Qaida" September 23, 2014

can be traded outside the formal banking system are just some of the characteristics that make them vulnerable to terrorist financing.[50]

Given the growing presence of al Qaeda in diamond producing countries across the African continent – such as Ivory Coast, Central African Republic, South Africa, Tanzania and Democratic Republic of Congo– it is likely that with tightening international financial processes and the UNSC clampdown, diamond trade will be used more for terrorist financing in the coming years. It has traded in gemstones before, and a greater presence in diamond-producing countries will only boost this effort.

Therefore, the phenomenon of diversifying loyalties of funders, and the terrorist groups'(al Qaeda or otherwise) grasp of loopholes in the international financial system needs to be studied in depth, given that it's the funding channels that need to be tackled with, in order to bring about substantial results towards curbing the terrorist menace.

VII
OPERATIONAL TACTICS

Among the increasingly used tactics is the employment of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) to carry out attacks. Al Qaeda now possesses the capabilities to fashion IEDs from fertilizer, commercial/domestic and military grade raw material.[51]

According to the UN, al Qaeda and its affiliates "use both military components when they can secure them and civilian components to construct IEDs. Governments play the leading role in securing military stockpiles or preventing leakage from official procurement channels. The private and public commercial sectors, however, play a crucial role in manufacturing and influencing the availability, audit and signatures of commercial components. These include fertilizers such as ammonium nitrate and potassium chlorate, often used to make IEDs. Commercial detonating cord is also increasingly being used by terrorist manufacturers of IEDs."

Reports suggest that apart from the affiliates, explosives experts in al Qaeda are also actively training 'trustworthy' non-affiliate individuals in procuring raw materials, and creating and detonating the IEDs. This is worrisome, given that non-affiliated members cannot be as easily tracked as affiliated members. The most viable way to address this issue would be to trace the production, sale and transit of potentially useful raw materials.

VIII
POTENTIAL TRAJECTORIES

Globalisation of Terror

Today, Syria is home to more foreign fighters (approximately 31,500) than Afghanistan did during the Soviet invasion and Taliban era (approximately 10,000 during the cumulative years from 1979-89 and 1996-2001).[52] The recruits aren't all from the WANA region. A considerable number of recruits are

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[50] See the following: Financial Action Task Force; Egmont Group of Financial Intelligence Units, "Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing through Trade in Diamonds." Last modified October 2013. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/ML-TF-through-trade-in-diamonds.pdf; US Government Printing Office, "House Committee on Financial Services, Sub-committee on Oversight and Investigation, Terrorist responses to improved U.S. Financial Defenses (109-3) (Testimony of Douglas Farah)." Last modified February 16, 2005. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-109hhrg22159/pdf/CHRG-109hhrg22159.pdf.

[51] "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan." November 2013

[52] See the following: Christopher M., Blanchard, Humud Carla E., and Nikitin Mary Beth D. Congressional Research Service, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response," Last modified September 17, 2014.

from Western nations. According to Professor Peter Neumann, Director, the International Center for the Study of Radicalization, King's College London, "the number of foreign fighters stagnated or decreased from December 2013 to June 2014 because of infighting between armed groups in Syria, but once the IS group started capturing territory, including Iraq's second-largest city Mosul, and declared a caliphate, it started attracting more foreign fighters."[53] Reports suggest that among others, there are approximately 500 British, 100 Americans, 400 Germans, 700, 300 Belgians and 100 from the US, and about 100 Danish, Swedish and Norwegian fighters each in Syria.[54]

According to Gilles de Kerchove, the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator for the European Union, approximately 2000 fighters in Syria are from the 28 EU states alone. According to the Syrian authorities, nationals of 83 countries were fighting in Syria.[55]

The IS and al Qaeda are recruiting as many people as possible – and are reaching out to their global target audience – to keep up the fight for control. Given how the two groups differ ideologically, fighters tend to take sides best suited to their worldviews. Furthermore, the armed conflict in Syria is likely not something the Syrians approve of. Most Syrians partook in the civil uprising demanding political, economic, and social change, and were not looking for grave levels of religious and sectarian war.

This shows the increasing scope and ability of al Qaeda to influence and attract more 'employees', and from varied backgrounds – breaching even the walls of cultural linkages. Furthermore, geographically speaking, many jihadists who originated from West Asia and North Africa who joined primarily to wage their jihad in the Af-Pak region are now diverting course to return to the heart of West Asia to wage their 'holy war'.

This could spiral the already overwrought sectarian schism in the region – that which has already begun with the IS's efforts towards the exodus of non-Sunni Muslims and other minorities in Iraq. Interestingly, the IS's onslaught and al Qaeda's resistance to the group – among other complex intertwined issues in West Asia – has resulted in the otherwise rival West Asian nations and groups to opt towards banding together for the first time since World War II. Furthermore, this could intensify the power-struggle between al Qaeda and the IS.

Increasing Levels of Autonomy

A worrying trend that is emerging is that of the splintering of groups that are allied with al Qaeda. Fighters from these groups have had the opportunity to train and fight under al Qaeda leadership when the parent group was still unified, but when they splinter away, their agendas and trajectories have to be tracked from the scratch. With no control that can be asserted by al Qaeda directly, these groups are loose cannons that can cause a lot of damage in the areas – however big or small – they operate in. Furthermore, these groups might attempt to leverage the IS-al Qaeda fight for influence to

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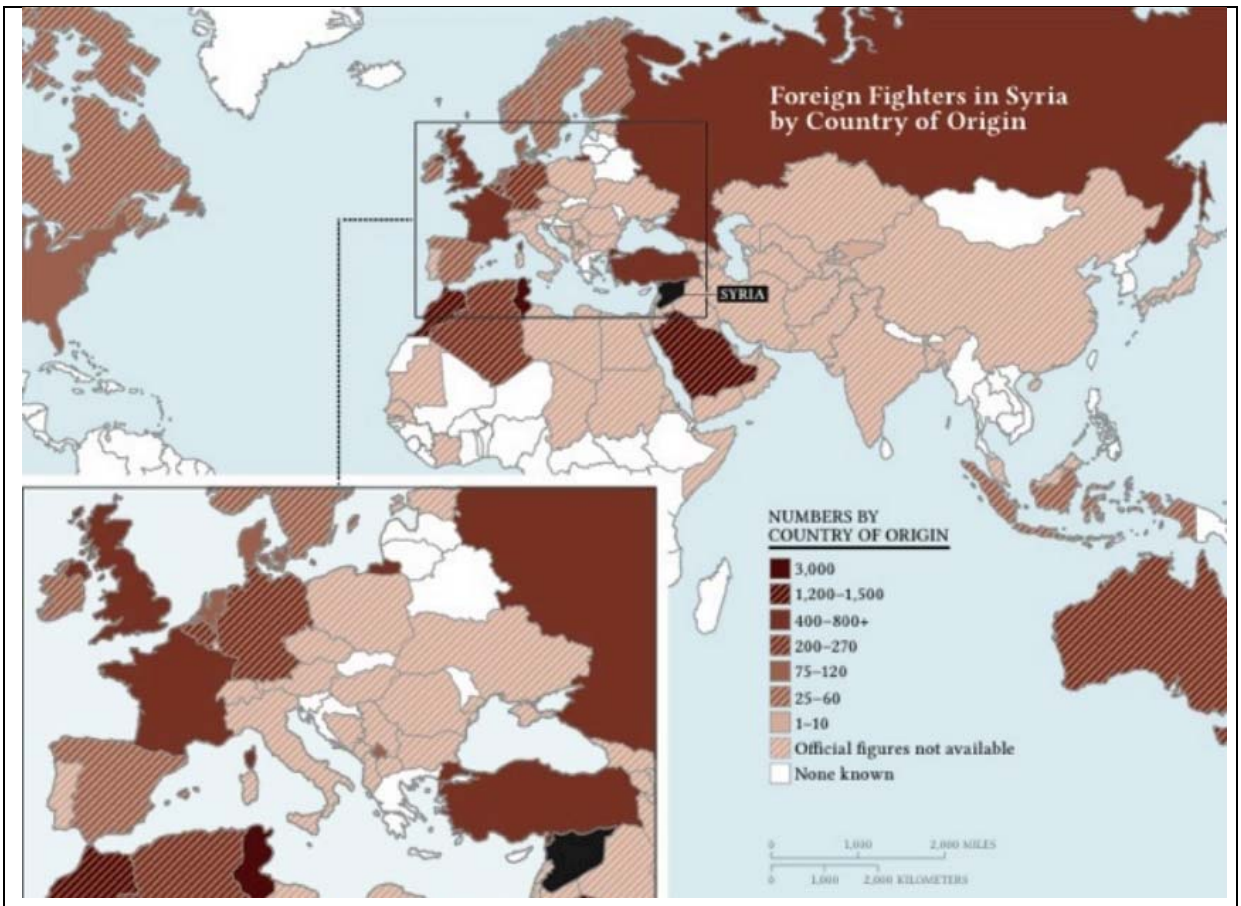
Accessed October 15, 2014. http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf; Richard Barrett, The Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters in Syria." Last modified June 2014. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf; Jeffrey D., Palmer. Jihadology.net, "The Death of Moroccan Exceptionalism: A Brief History of Moroccan Salafi Jihadism and Current Jihadist Trends." Last modified September 05, 2014. Accessed October 15, 2014. http://jihadology.net/category/foreign-fighters/.

[53] See the following: Edith M. Lederer. "Expert: Over 12,000 foreign fighters in Syria." *Associated Press*, September 08, 2014. http://news.yahoo.com/expert-over-12-000-foreign-fighters-syria-235526437.html (accessed October 10, 2014); "Foreign Fighters in Syria. June 2014"; United Nations General Assembly, "Statement by H.E. Mr. Walid A1-Moualem, Deputy Prime Minister [and] Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Head of the Delegation of the Syrian Arab Republic, At The 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly New York." Last modified September 30, 2013. Accessed October 10, 2014. http://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/68/SY_en.pdf.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid

further their own agendas, thereby portending a dangerous precedent.



***Infographic courtesy**: The Soufan Group*

Simultaneously, one must make the distinction between affiliated member organisations and independent entities that work with al Qaeda when needed. This is because it isn't that all the groups that are trained by al Qaeda automatically become their allies. In many cases, al Qaeda and other groups have 'collaborated' in specific 'projects'. This means the two independent groups worked together and neither party exerts any control over the other. An example of such a relationship is that between al Qaeda, and the Jemaah Islamiah in Indonesia.[56]

As a result, today, the affiliates are stronger than they historically were. Therefore, al Qaeda core's failure to hold absolute control over affiliated groups, and the complex web of agendas and endgames of affiliates and 'collaborators', has resulted in future scenarios becoming unpredictable and more chaotic. Al Qaeda of bin Laden, once an organised structure with set endgames and long term plans has been replaced with al-Zawahiri's al Qaeda: one that is fractured, has short-term goals, and riddled with communication issues.

[56] Nelly Lahoud, Stuart Caudill, Liam Collins, Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, Don Rassler, and Muhammad al`Ubaydi. "Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?" Combating Terrorism Centre: 14-15. https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CTC_LtrsFromAbottabad_WEB_v2.pdf (accessed September 9, 2014).

However, accepting one popular assessment that this has come about due to bin Laden's death and his succession by an 'uncharismatic' leader would be wrong. The difference between bin Laden and al-Zawahiri's al Qaedas lies in the difference in the nature and political climate they had to operate in.

When bin Laden headed al Qaeda, the number of splinter and/or militant groups were much fewer than there are today. The funding flowed to al Qaeda, and the affiliated groups paid heed to the operational command of al Qaeda leadership. The onset of the Syrian civil war, which embroiled several actors in a proxy war for influence, considerably changed the dynamics of the region. This isn't to say that there weren't any dissenting affiliates earlier. For instance, there were tensions between the leaders of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and al Qaeda core, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden even as early as 2006. However, the Syrian civil war became the melting pot of all complexities, kick-starting a whole new era of terrorist operations. Following the onset of the Arab Awakening in 2010 – just months before Operation Neptune Spear – al Qaeda's affiliate network grew wider – despite the fact that several of the new affiliates did not have global ambitions in particular. The political unrest that began in Tunisia spread like wildfire, engulfing several countries in the WANA region, giving rise to numerous local militias all over the region. Al Qaeda found a wide variety of allies to choose from, in these groups.

According to the UN[57], today, "restoration of political stability and security in one region does not necessarily serve to weaken the threat posed by Al-Qaida and its affiliates. It may simply mean that terrorists find safe havens and opportunities elsewhere. The shift in geographical focus of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb in particular demonstrates this adaptability. AQIM militants have moved away from Mali and Algeria to regroup in southern Libya."[58]

The Inevitability of the al-Qaeda-IS Power Struggle

Given the increasing strength and capabilities IS, it would be of the essence to trace the rivalry between al Qaeda and the former. Al Qaeda is likely to continue with its agenda while also simultaneously try to gain acceptance of the people whose lands it operates on; and the IS – given its proven ability to fight in two countries and hold its ground without suffering heavy losses – will continue with its ultra-brutal ways – that even al Qaeda denounced as too brutal.

Already, the IS has proved itself more capable than al Qaeda in securing funds. While al Qaeda, in its infancy, depended heavily on funding from wealthy benefactors, the IS controls fund-generating commodities.

The primary reason the IS has been quicker at generating and/receiving funds is the areas they control. Unlike al Qaeda, the IS controls energy-rich areas in the West Asia. The IS has noticeably targeted, attacked and gained control of oil-producing areas of Syria, and has established an institutionalised system of trading oil and gas. This means the IS will primarily look to expand and assert control on areas that house power plants too. This would mean that as long as they have clients to trade oil with, any international effort to curb and block channels of terrorist funding will be insufficient.

Although al Qaeda has a presence in vast stretches in the region, barring few, most of those regions are non-productive in terms of revenue. The IS control of and trade in commodities from Syrian

[57] "Fifteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2083 (2012) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities" January 23, 2014

[58] "Chair's briefing to the Security Council: Statement delivered on behalf of the al-qaida sanctions committee" May 2014

energy fields is a case in point here. Conversely, the IS has fewer regions under its control; but it owns money-spinning assets that it is ably putting to use to fund its agendas.[59]

What is worrying, however, is the seemingly ever-increasing strength of the IS – especially in their capabilities to carry out attacks and sustain the fight for lengthy periods. Essentially, they have managed to do what al Qaeda could not do all by itself and for which it relied on affiliates. The IS has been fighting in two countries as a single group, and has managed to carry on without incurring heavy losses.

Furthermore, its numbers are growing. Although some numbers are difficult to confirm, at present, reports suggest that an estimated 31,500 jihadists fight under the IS banner, two-thirds of whom are stationed in Syria.[60] A considerable number of fighters are not from the IS, that is, not native to either Syria or Iraq.[61] According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the foreign fighters enter Syria via Turkey.[62] The imported fighters element can increase the chances of suicide attacks – given the absence of a sense of belongingness the foreign fighters will feel towards Iraq and Syria.

Al-Zawahiri's repeated calls and efforts to end infighting among leaders of affiliated groups have so far had negligible results, and is likely to be increasingly ignored in the future. The IS is manifestly attracting more young fighters than al Qaeda. Al-Baghdadi's successful offensives in Syria and Iraq have young Islamists convinced that the IS is more relevant than al Qaeda; and power may likely veer towards the group that demonstrates clout via deeds and not just words alone.

Another important phenomenon is the increasing tendency among the radicalised youth – who join jihadist ranks – to join the IS because the Islamic State gives them a chance to live in a 'Caliphate' they control, instead of having to be on the run that joining al Qaeda would demand from them.

According to Brian Jenkins, "provides an opportunity to live in a caliphate and to be on the winning side as opposed to being on the run. But unlimited violence—the chance to get avenge past insults, to fulfill every violent fantasy–is obviously what ISIS propaganda thinks will resonate most with its potential recruits. And recruits attracted by violence are precisely the kind ISIS is most likely to now get."[63]

Therefore, given the motivations, to a decent extent, an effective deterrent to prevent radicalised youth from joining the IS' ranks would be to destroy the effectiveness of the 'Islamic Caliphate'. Since more youths happen to be joining the IS due to its unique selling point of not having to run and hide – and in fact be able to operate as a legitimate authority – a spectacular fall of the 'Caliphate' will once again put them back to the running and hiding days; and thereby take the convenience factor away

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[59] Ben Hubbard and Anonymous, "Life in a Jihadist Capital: Order With a Darker Side." *The New York Times*, July 23, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/24/world/middleeast/islamic-state-controls-raqqa-syria.html?_r=0 (accessed October 10, 2014).

[60] "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response." September 2014. http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf

[61] "Foreign Fighters in Syria. June 2014"

[62] "Islamic State 'has 50,000 fighters in Syria'." *Al Jazeera*, August 19, 2014. http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/islamic-state-50000-fighters-syria-2014819184258421392.html (accessed October 10, 2014).

[63] Brian Michael Jenkins, "The Devourers – Al-Baghdadi and The Islamic State," Brian Michael Jenkins (blog), September 04, 2014. http://www.brianmichaeljenkins.com/2014/09/04/the-devourers-al-baghdadi-and-the-islamic-state/ (accessed October 10, 2014).

from them. With the convenience factor gone, resulting in a fall in the numbers of recruits al Qaeda-IS power-struggle will mellow down, allowing the world to re-focus and re-assign resources to counter the remaining terror threats.

An interesting feature is the absence of a grand 'divine' prophecy to legimitise much of al Qaeda's actions and endgames as opposed to the hadith about a 'malahim' (day of reckoning) of a war between good and evil at Dabiq, Syria, that the IS uses for self-propaganda and 'marketing'.[64] This makes Syria a comparatively holier war, and therefore, the IS, a preferred 'employer' for jihadists.

The turf war between the two groups is likely to escalate and will either in significant damage to both parties or al Qaeda loses – and with it, several of its franchisees, that will be left to their own devices – fuelling a perilous leadership vacuum that will ultimately bring more chaos. Simultaneously, major funding channels of both organisations – that likely originate from the same place – will have to be traced meticulously, for al Qaeda might get more funding to tackle its rival, now that the IS is not controlled by any of the major players in the region.

Al Qaeda's 'Look East Policy'

In the first week of September 2014, al-Zawahiri, in a video message, launched an al Qaeda wing in the Indian sub-continent to "raise the flag of jihad."[65] When the IS unilaterally launched the 'Islamic Caliphate'[66] and began administering towns they controlled – by collecting taxes, selling northern Syrian oil to Damascus etc., al Qaeda felt the threat to their existence grow exponentially. The IS's release of a map charting all the territories it wants under its 'Caliphate' only reinforced the threat. The map spread from West Asia to Southeast Asia, and explicitly identified Greater Khurasan – the historical geographical construct that includes parts of Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India – the very region al Qaeda basecamp is located in.[67]

Although al Qaeda always had plans for India, the potential jihadists' reading of the IS as more effective, increased the immediacy in al Qaeda's need to act quickly. Essentially, al Qaeda's launch of its South Asian wing is its attempt to consolidate power in the region where it's based in – in the face of international competition. Already, the Afghanistan-based jihadist group, Hezb-e-Islami, has indicated its intentions to join the IS, and key commanders from the Pakistan-based TTP, including their spokesperson Shahidullah Shahid, have already declared their allegiance to the IS.

South Asia is a volatile region, with two countries – Afghanistan and Pakistan – in turmoil of various kinds, and other countries[68] – especially India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh – that are vulnerable to an onslaught. The AQSA will tighten its existing terror network in the Af-Pak region. Although Indian states of Gujarat and Kashmir too remain vulnerable – as will Punjab given the geographical proximity to the Pakistan-based Punjabi Taliban – Assam is key for al Qaeda to spread its activities east. Given the rising levels of fundamentalism in the subcontinent, thanks to Saudi Arabian petro-

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[64] "Reflections on the final crusade: The prophecies regarding the Roman crusades." *Dabiq (Issue IV)* https://ia801403.us.archive.org/0/items/Dabiq04En/Dabiq_04_en.pdf (accessed October 15, 2014).

[65]"TRAC Pakistan," al Qaeda Central Command announces new Franchise: Qaedat al Jihad AQ in Indian Subcontinent, Web, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4Xh4t5iXaM.

[66] "Khalifah ENT," First Appearance of Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi ISIS Caliph [FULL English Subtitles], Web, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcbRG1Slywk.

[67] John Hall, "The ISIS map of the world: Militants outline chilling five-year plan for global domination as they declare formation of caliphate - and change their name to the Islamic State." *Daily Mail*, June 30, 2014. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2674736/ISIS-militants-declare-formation-caliphate-Syria-Iraq-demand-Muslims-world-swear-allegiance.html (accessed October 10, 2014).

[68] John Simpson, "Afghan militant fighters 'may join Islamic State," BBC News Asia, September 02, 2014. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29009125 (accessed October 10, 2014).

dollars that flow into the many madrassas that impart hard-line interpretations of the Quran in the region, the likelihood of terror networks allying and growing is very real.

Today, in several areas of South Asia, interpretation of the Quran is societally more fundamentalised than it was a decade ago. South and Southeast Asia are home to more Muslims than West Asia. Adding to the already delicate situation is the perception of marginalisation among South Asian Muslims. The dastardly treatment of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, the rising intolerance towards Islamic ways of life in Sri Lanka, the increasing radicalism in the Maldivian polity, the disquiet over governance in Bangladesh, the politico-social flux in Pakistan, and the indecisiveness apparent in Afghanistan, provide for an excellent ground and timing for an entity like the AQSA to actually consolidate itself quickly. That al-Zawahiri spoke in a mix of Arabic and Urdu is telling. He is reaching out to his target audience by taking on their contours.

There is a possibility that al Qaeda's generous funders sitting in Saudi Arabia might have egged al-Zawahiri on to ensure that the ground they hold now isn't lost to the IS – that poses serious threats even to the Saudi state. Al Qaeda, in continuation with its desperate efforts to do damage-control/salvage its existence – which isn't entirely undermined yet – will now move east, where the IS hasn't spread its tentacles much. It will increase activities in Assam, use it as a bridge to spread to Bangladesh, and from there, to Myanmar, the increasingly radicalising Indonesia and Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei Darussalam.

Impact on the Sectarian Schisms in West Asia

The Shia-Sunni divide in the region – particularly in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon – fuelled by politico-historic events and tangled in a power-division as it currently is has resulted in a lack of sense of common national identity among the people. The IS's dramatic actions in the past few months has only intensified this situation. The region was held together by delicate threads, ones that al-Baghdadi has deftly snapped (but only after political ambitions of several leaders and groups had further weakened these threads) – by openly attacking Iraqi Shias. While religion is being used as a stimulus, the responses to such stimuli have taken a sectarian form, resulting in brutal outcomes. In fact, despite the historic rivalry between the followers of Shia and Sunni schools of Islamic thought, the scale of sectarianism in today's WANA is unprecedented – spreading across the Levant, Yemen and the Gulf countries. If the comparatively recent present-day political borders of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan continue to be challenged and/or erased, sectarian violence is only likely escalate further. This will happen as an outcome of crumbling state structures leading the masses to seek refuge in their own ethnic and/or religious group – resulting in a potential ghetto*isation* in the region.

The events unfolding in Iraq and Syria therefore pose a challenge al Qaeda's relevance. Al-Zawahiri has consistently denounced the IS as barbaric, and as mentioned earlier, cut ties with their erstwhile Iraqi wing. The power-struggle in Iraq and Syria has therefore resulted in al Qaeda being seen as more sane and the moderate jihadists could align themselves with al Qaeda – therefore making the chances of granting al Qaeda more legitimacy.

The lynchpin in this case is Iraqi Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). They have come closest to the Kurdish goal; the KRG's Peshmerga has proven to be the only force that is capable of fighting the IS; and most of Iraq's energy reserves are in the Kurdish areas – and the KRG has already set off on a path towards economic independence via oil sales. The growing threat of the IS, and the Peshmerga's prowess have proven the importance of the Kurds, as strong and key players in the current turmoil. The break-up of Iraq already seems imminent, and when it happens, there will be a Kurdistan, and, as former Indian diplomat, K. P. Fabian, states, "...one or more Sunnistans, and a Shiistan. The last one will remain Iran's protectorate." This would set a whole new precedent for politico-economic and social relations in West Asia.

IX
CONCLUSION

Al Qaeda of today is a product of several key transformations it underwent since the death of Osama bin Laden. Sensing its reducing capability, reach and influence, Ayman al-Zawahiri's al Qaeda has switched to a more decentralised model and has somewhat taken a back seat. It does carry out regular attacks and other activities, but it has evidently taken a more mentor-ly role for the budding terrorists across the region. The splinter groups and affiliates of the organisation in far flung areas have made their assessments about al Qaeda, and, have chosen to move further with their own agendas; and have disregarded al-Zawahiri's instructions in more than one occasion the recent past.

The evident absence of unity and/or coordination between al Qaeda and its affiliates is among the primary reasons for speculation and deductions that the former is growing weaker. However, that does not mean al Qaeda is incapable of causing more damage. At present, al Qaeda and its affiliates share an extremely decentralised model of operations; but it is likely that the levels of decentralisation and autonomy granted to regional groups may be higher than what al-Zawahiri would prefer.

While this may be seen as the beginning of the fall of al Qaeda, it is significant to note how al-Zawahiri's decentralisation policy has strengthened the local networks and groups across the globe, and in the WANA region in particular; and together, these groups are more deadly, more unpredictable, and comparatively, more difficult to manage and/or deal with.

The rising levels of radicalism in several countries in the WANA region and associated political shifts, have also contributed to the formation of new groups and splinter groups. This coupled with the current phenomenon of recruitment taking place in a localised manner guarantees to an extent the durability of the loosely-held network. Additionally, even if al Qaeda's prominence continues to ebb, it does not translate to victory over terrorism in total.

Neither the fragmentation within and between affiliated parties nor the practise of disregarding al Qaeda's edicts and taking independent and extremely violent action is new. Osama bin Laden himself expressed his displeasure about this phenomenon, as expressed in the letters found in the compound of his Abbottabad residence.[69]

Essentially al Qaeda today exhibits the following characteristics, and potential trajectories:

1. Today, al Qaeda central operates from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, but that is not their only home ground. They are gaining ground in Yemen, Mali and Syria, and carry out several coordinated attacks. Additionally, the loosely-held nature of the network does have the potential to work in al Qaeda's favour – as the reduced rigidity might provide flexibility to an extent, making adapting easier.

2. Splinter groups and affiliates with mandates similar to that of al Qaeda, and their training grounds and safe havens, too are many and scattered.

3. Affiliated regional groups have proven themselves as tough forces that can forge alliances and adapt to different situations without much effort. This has put them in positions of power; and more importantly, positions to make demands from. While this indicates towards potential

[69]"Letters From the Bin Laden Compound," *The New York Times*, May 03, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/05/04/world/asia/04binladen-text.html?_r=0 (accessed October 10, 2014).

cracks in the structure of the organisation, overall, the terror network remains strong and logistically effective.

4. Although the affiliates operate locally, their strength and capacity will continue to grow as long as funds keep flowing – essentially meaning that there is a possibility of these groups moving outside their regions to carry out jihad as well.

5. The infighting between local groups, especially evident in the Maghreb and Syria – a trend al-Zawahiri is trying to put an end to – could be exploited to reduce al Qaeda's capabilities and, as a result, threats.

6. Al Qaeda is gaining more ground in terms of technological prowess, and is exploring newer options for communication, and financial and weapons transactions.

7. There is a competition on technological competence between al Qaeda and the IS – on a global scale.

8. Four years since his death, Osama bin Laden is still extremely relevant among jihadists. His legacy has resulted in the phenomenon of "bin-Laden-ism", and is taking strong roots in Algeria, Mali, Somalia, Libya (especially involving al Qaeda affiliates – the AQIM, AQAP, and the Ansar al-Sharia; and the non-affiliate, the Boko Haram).[70] Essentially, although and/or despite there being some form of disregard to al-Zawahiri, the 'bin Laden-connect' has helped retain and ensure some level of fealty to the network.

9. This 'globalisation' of al Qaeda, their effective use of technology, and their capabilities and means towards sustaining affiliates and fighting the IS will define the nature and trajectories of the organisation in the coming years.

10. Al Qaeda will now spread eastwards, as is evident in its launch of al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. There is a possibility that al Qaeda's generous funders sitting in Saudi Arabia might have egged al-Zawahiri on to ensure that the ground they hold now isn't lost to the IS – that poses serious threats even to the Saudi state. Al Qaeda, in continuation with its desperate efforts to do damage-control/salvage its existence – which isn't entirely undermined yet – will now move east, where the IS hasn't spread its tentacles as much. It will increase activities in Assam, use it as a bridge to spread to Bangladesh, and from there, to Myanmar, the increasingly radicalising Indonesia and Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei Darussalam.

11. Countries in South and Southeast Asia will have to beef up security, and communication between al Qaeda and its regional allies, especially potential allies such as the recently-formed Arakan Mujahideen in Myanmar, will have to be meticulously tracked. A close watch needs to be kept on the Indonesia-based Mujahidin Indonesia Timur – an umbrella organisation consisting other groups such as the Jemaah Islamiah (of the Bali bombings) and the Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid, and the Philippines-based Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

12. Given its network, the Indian Mujahideen, although decimated for the most part, could become one of al Qaeda's vehicles for hire in India, along with the Students Islamic Movement of India.

[70] "TSG IntelBrief: A Region Choked by bin Ladin-ism. September 2014"

13. Al Qaeda's turf war with the IS has the potential to manifest in an unfortunate manner in the Af-Pak region, and will become particularly worrisome for Pakistan's internal security and stability.

14. The world is now witnessing a full-blown power-struggle between an established global leader of terror, and a fast-emerging entity that is vying for the top title. Given how al Qaeda has been an established 'global leader', despite its relatively diminished operational capabilities, al Qaeda still remains a formidable force.