

# An al-Qaeda Balance Sheet

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Nine years after the 9/11 attacks, there is a growing sense among academic, government, and think tank counterterrorism analysts that al-Qaeda is losing the battle against its enemies, led by the West in general and the United States in particular.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there are ample signs that al-Qaeda is in trouble, including its loss of important operational leaders; defeat or near defeat of various al-Qaeda franchises outside the Afghan-Pakistani headquarters; and a slew of ideological challenges leveled against the group by some of its former allies. Despite these and other setbacks, however, a number of recent successful and unsuccessful plots serve as a stark reminder of the ingenuity, adaptability, and resilience of the al-Qaeda-led global jihad movement.<sup>2</sup> On August 27, 2009, for example, Abdullah Hassan Talea Asiri, a Saudi national, attempted to blow up Saudi Arabia's assistant interior minister, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, using a highly sophisticated device he had hidden either in his body or in his underwear.<sup>3</sup> The terrorist was a former member of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) who deceived the Saudi government into believing that he had sworn off terrorism. On Christmas Day 2009, Nigerian citizen Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to detonate explosives hidden in his underwear on Northwest Airlines flight 253, but was restrained by alert passengers. Also in December 2009, Humam

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Khalil al-Balawi, a Saudi national, blew himself up at a CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan, killing seven CIA officers. Balawi had been an informer for the Jordanian GID and played a highly sophisticated double game, leading his Jordanian handlers into believing that he had rightfully earned their trust.

Despite years of efforts by Western governments to counter al-Qaeda's jihadist narrative, in the year 2010 al-Qaeda's guiding ideology, the Salafi jihad, continues to attract followers, while the internet continues to serve as the group's main platform for disseminating its ideology and promoting violent extremism. This paper will offer a balance sheet of al-Qaeda's current strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, the conflict between al-Qaeda and the West has become a war of perceptions centering on the question of which of the two sides is more harmful to the Islamic *umma*.

### **An al-Qaeda Scorecard**

Despite much talk in recent years of al-Qaeda's imminent demise, al-Qaeda capitalizes on a number of core strengths that guarantee its relevance at least in the foreseeable future. The first and most obvious strength is the fact that after regrouping along the Afghan-Pakistan border region, al-Qaeda has been able to reestablish a safe haven for itself, which not only provides a training ground but also affords it an opportunity to link up to other like-minded groups. The fact that al-Qaeda's current safe haven is less ideal than its former safe haven in Afghanistan is less important.

The second strength is that al-Qaeda's core ideological arguments remain appealing, foremost among them the charge that the United States is waging a war on Islam. All else being equal, as long as US troops remain in Arab and Muslim countries, al-Qaeda's ability to rally individuals to its side will persist. Accusing the United States of a conspiracy against Islam is easier for al-Qaeda when it can point to the presence of US forces in the Middle East.

A third core advantage of al-Qaeda is the ongoing appeal of its guiding Salafi-jihadist ideology, which prides itself on its inclusiveness. It is easy to adopt Salafi-jihadist tenets, and hence it is easy to become a follower (if not a formal member) of al-Qaeda. Unlike some groups or cults that require rigid entrance exams and other practices that limit the pool of potential candidates, al-Qaeda welcomes recruits with open arms.

Deep knowledge of Islamic theology is not required to be identified with the movement, and from an organizational point of view may even be counterproductive, since ignorance facilitates radicalization. What is required is merely identification with the basic world view presented by this religious ideology: that Islam is in decline as a result of an anti-Islamic conspiracy, and that only jihad (understood solely in militant terms) can redeem the Islamic religion and return it to its former grandeur. In other words, it is the strength of weak ties that makes the Salafi jihad so appealing to some, and so frustrating an ideology to challenge for the West. It is the inclusivity of Salafi-jihadist ideology, and also the lack of alternative ideologies that can compete with Salafi jihadism that attracts a growing number of converts into the movement.

A fourth core advantage of al-Qaeda is that despite sporadic successes by the West in shutting down jihadist websites, the internet continues to work in al-Qaeda's favor. The United States and its allies have been hard pressed to find a suitable counterweight to global jihad's incitement and propaganda efforts. In the Afghan-Pakistan tribal region and al-Qaeda's regional nodes, al-Qaeda and its affiliates have built up a dedicated media campaign. In the tribal belt, for example, DVDs, movies, and other media produced by local branches of companies such as As-Sahab, Ummat Studios, and Jundullah CD Center feature jihadist propaganda in Urdu, Pashto, Arabic, and other languages. Al-Fajr media center provides copies of such videos in German, Italian, French, Turkish, and a host of other languages.

Offsetting many of al-Qaeda's advantages, however, are several signs that the group has been significantly weakened in recent years. These signs include the capture of important al-Qaeda members such as Abu Faraj al-Libi in May 2005 and the killing of others, such as Hamza Rabia (November 2005); Abu Laith al-Libi (January 2008); Abu Sulayman al-Jazairi (May 2008); Abu Khabab al-Masri (July 2008); Saleh al-Somali (December 2009); and Saeed al-Masri (May 2010). Accompanying the loss of al-Qaeda senior leaders has been the defeat or near defeat of a number of al-Qaeda's local affiliates. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, prior to its current reincarnation in Yemen, had virtually ceased to exist, while al-Qaeda in Iraq is a shadow of its former self.

Al-Qaeda has been further plagued by a series of recantations and defections by such formerly venerated jihadists as Abdul Qadir bin Abdul

Aziz, also known as Dr. Fadl, or the Saudi cleric Salman al-Awdah. These more recent recantations follow previous condemnations of isolated acts of extreme jihadist violence by theologians highly respected in the jihadist community, including Abu Basir al-Tartusi, who rejected the usefulness of the London bombings, and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who condemned AQI's systematic targeting of Shia civilians. Figures that are more marginal within the jihadist movement have also distanced themselves from al-Qaeda's violent tactics. Top Deobandi institutions such as the Dar ul-Ulum Deoband have issued *fatwas* condemning terrorism, while former members of the radical Hizb ut-Tehreer have formed Quilliam, an institution designed to voice opposition to terrorist violence. Finally, in places like Algeria and other countries across the Muslim world, individuals have begun protesting suicide attacks and other forms of extremist violence.

Exacerbating al-Qaeda's problems in recent years are a number of underlying weaknesses and long term challenges. The first is on the structural level, where al-Qaeda has to witness bad behavior of local affiliates. The clearest example of an al-Qaeda affiliate spiraling out of control and giving al-Qaeda a bad name was that of al-Qaeda in Iraq during the Zarqawi years, when the slaughter of Shia Muslims alienated many members of the *umma*. This and similar problems are challenges to al-Qaeda inherent in its structure as a globalized organization. Al-Qaeda's networked organization is not only an advantage but can be an impediment as well.

Competition from state and non-state entities presents another challenge. Iran poses one of these problems for al-Qaeda due to its ongoing defiance of the West, and especially the United States, which runs in the face of al-Qaeda's credibility in claiming the status as the Muslim world's leading anti-American force. Iranian foreign policy successes such as its determined pursuit of nuclear weapons, the growing regional role it attempts to play, and its hostile attitude to Israel are problems for al-Qaeda because they remind al-Qaeda's current and potential supporters of the discrepancy between what the group preaches and what it does. It underscores al-Qaeda's failure to attack Israel and act against Iran despite the jihadist movement's extremist rhetoric vis-à-vis these states. Al-Qaeda also perceives popular Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizbollah as a threat. Indeed, Hizbollah's ability to

stand up to Israel in the 2006 war cast the militant Shia organization as the Muslim world's only group able to fight the Jewish state. Similar to the case of Iran, the political and military success of Hizbollah undermines al-Qaeda's ability to claim a leadership role for the Islamic community at large.

The recantations and condemnations by individuals who were part of al-Qaeda's foundational history, meanwhile, have presented al-Qaeda with what are perhaps the most significant challenges, namely those on the ideological level. Al-Qaeda has been put in the extremely uncomfortable position of having to defend itself against charges that its actions cause the death of countless innocent Muslims. Whether al-Qaeda actively calls for and/or sponsors these killings using ideological justifications of fighting apostate Muslims; whether it turns a blind eye to Muslim deaths, arguing that the ends justify the means; or whether al-Qaeda genuinely tries to minimize Muslim fatalities is beside the point. The fact that its attacks have so far not only failed to bring about redemption to the Islamic people but have increased Muslim deaths is al-Qaeda's major weakness, and one that the West should continue to expose.

Ultimately, one of the most important battles in the overall war against al-Qaeda will be the battle of perceptions. Al-Qaeda and the United States are engaged in a battle where each side contends that the other side is harming the Muslim *umma*. Al-Qaeda argues that the United States is harmful to Muslims in that it is leading a war against Islam, humiliating the *umma* through its ongoing occupation of Islamic lands, and supporting Israel and authoritarian Arab and Muslim governments. The United States, on the other hand, is pointing its fingers at the real life consequences of al-Qaeda's actions – the killing of countless of innocent Muslims and al-Qaeda's failure to provide measurable improvements for the lives of ordinary Muslims.

The battle will be decided based on which of the two sides proves more skillful in this battle of perceptions. The more skillful party will successfully highlight the perceived weaknesses of the enemy, but also prove that its intentions and the consequences of its actions are helpful to the *umma*. It will also better deflect attention away from the charges and accusations hurled from the other side. To defeat al-Qaeda in the battle of perceptions, the United States must do more on each of these three

fronts of the battle of perceptions. Only if the United States is able to demonstrate credibly the horrific results of al-Qaeda's actions, assure the *umma* of America's benevolent intentions vis-à-vis the Islamic world, and defend itself more skillfully against baseless accusations will it prevail in the war against al-Qaeda.

### Notes

- 1 See, for example, Kristen Chick, "CIA Director says Al Qaeda on the Run as a Leader Killed in US Drone Strike," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 18, 2010.
- 2 The global jihad movement is defined here as a transnational movement of like-minded jihadists led by al-Qaeda. It includes affiliated and associated individuals, networks, and groups. The term "affiliated" denotes groups that have formal ties to al-Qaeda, and have often adopted the al-Qaeda name for themselves, e.g., al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The term "associated" refers to entities with more informal ties to al-Qaeda, i.e., those that are influenced by al-Qaeda's guiding ideology but that have not sworn loyalty to Bin Laden. This categorization is not perfect – some groups associated with al-Qaeda have not fully adopted al-Qaeda's ideology, and other groups fall into a gray area between associates and affiliates. However, for descriptive purposes in this article, that division shall suffice. For a discussion of the origins and evolution of al-Qaeda and its guiding ideology, and for a description of the transition from al-Qaeda to a global jihad movement, see Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 62-151.
- 3 Earlier reports that the bomber had hidden the device in his rectal cavity have yet to be confirmed.