

A REPORT OF THE CSIS HOMELAND
SECURITY AND COUNTERTERRORISM
PROGRAM AND THE CSIS TRANSNATIONAL
THREATS PROJECT

Confronting an Uncertain Threat

THE FUTURE OF AL QAEDA AND ASSOCIATED MOVEMENTS

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Cover photos: *Top*—President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and members of the national security team, including Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, far right, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, standing, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, receive an update on the mission against Osama bin Laden in the Situation Room of the White House, May 1, 2011. A classified document seen in this photograph has been obscured. White House photo by Pete Souza, http://www.defense.gov/dodcmsshare/homepagephoto/2011-05/hires_P050111PS-0210c.jpg. *Middle*—Map of Yemen, © iStockphoto.com/Jean Ursula/Jean Assell. *Bottom*—After the mass shooting at Fort Hood, emergency responders prepare to transport the wounded. Source: The U.S. Army http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_The_U.S._Army_-_Preparing_the_wounded_for_transport_at_Fort_Hood.jpg.

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PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

Purpose

Al Qaeda and associated movements (AQAM) has become an increasingly diffuse security threat. Although the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands may have represented the epicenter of global terrorism in the past decade, al Qaeda's various regional affiliates are growing in prominence. The past several years also have seen a rise in al Qaeda-inspired plots by small cells or unaffiliated individuals based in the West.

This flattening and expansion of al Qaeda's global scope, both physically and virtually, has complicated U.S. and international efforts to combat global terrorism. Counterterrorism professionals work tirelessly to confront existing threats. But the need to focus on today's exigencies—combined with officials' limited resources for alternative and long-range planning—means that governments tend to pursue reactive, rather than anticipatory, policies and strategies vis-à-vis terrorism.

Containing—if not defeating—AQAM will require that policymakers and practitioners shape a global environment that is inhospitable to terrorism. Doing this, in turn, necessitates a better understanding of where and how future AQAM threats are likely to emerge. This report seeks to help fill this need for anticipatory knowledge and assist in the development of improved counterterrorism policies and strategy.

Methodology

Assessing the long-term future of AQAM is fraught with obvious challenges. Rather than trying to do the impossible and explicitly define what AQAM will look like in 2025, this study embraces uncertainty by providing a range of alternative futures for the movement. By framing the issue in this way, we accomplish two tasks. First, this report encourages our readers to think aggressively about the many evolutionary pathways AQAM could take in the coming years and the intervening steps that would get it there. Second, and more important, this approach generates a set of recommendations that provide flexibility to help governments mitigate AQAM no matter how it ultimately evolves.

The key elements used to write this report included a baseline assessment of AQAM, case studies, field research, and the expertise of our Senior Advisory Group.

Baseline Assessment

Our first step in this yearlong study was to produce a baseline assessment of AQAM, *A Threat Transformed*,¹ which established a working lexicon and an analytic foundation. This report tracked the transformation of al Qaeda from a discrete, hierarchical organization into a network of networks and, later, into an ideologically driven movement.

Case Studies

To more meaningfully envisage AQAM in 2025, it was first necessary to understand the past trajectories of the movement's various components. To that end we completed a series of case studies to identify the key internal and external factors that drove AQAM's development.² Representing a range of operating areas and trajectories, our case studies included:

- Al Qaeda core
- Al Qaeda in Iraq
- Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
- Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
- Al Shabaab
- Jemaah Islamiyah
- Abu Sayyaf Group
- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
- Lashkar-e-Taiba
- Al Qaeda-inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals.

In the course of this research, we identified a number of factors that contributed to the rise, evolution, and sometimes decline of AQAM groups. The table on the next page outlines those factors found to be most influential for the various groups. These factors inform the paradigms for the future, presented in chapter 3.

Field Research

Parallel with producing the case studies, CSIS staff conducted field research abroad in France, the United Kingdom, Norway, Morocco, Egypt, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Mali, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Bangladesh. CSIS staff also leveraged findings from recent visits to Tajikistan,

1. Rick "Ozzie" Nelson and Thomas A. Sanderson, with Amrit Bagia, Ben Bodurian, and David A. Gordon, *A Threat Transformed: Al Qaeda and Associated Movements in 2011* (Washington, DC: CSIS, February 2011), <http://csis.org/publication/threat-transformed>.

2. See M. J. Kirdar, *Al Qaeda in Iraq*, Case Study no. 1 (Washington, DC: CSIS, June 2011), http://csis.org/files/publication/110614_Kirdar_AlQaedaIraq_Web.pdf; Rob Wise, *Al Shabaab*, Case Study no. 2 (Washington, DC: CSIS, July 2011), http://csis.org/files/publication/110715_Wise_AlShabaab_AQAM%20Futures%20Case%20Study_WEB.pdf; and Samuel Lindo, Michael Schoder, and Tyler Jones, *Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula*, Case Study no. 3 (Washington, DC: CSIS, July 2011), http://csis.org/files/publication/110722_Lindo_AQAP_AQAMCaseStudy3.pdf.

Key Factors Identified from Case Studies

Factor	Definition
Aligning interests with al Qaeda core	Affiliates make strategic decision to adopt al Qaeda core's transnational narrative and tactics
Counterterrorism pressure	Local or international governmental activities undertaken to disrupt AQAM
Funding	AQAM's means of generating revenue
Foreign intervention	Presence of foreign military troops in predominantly Muslim areas
Ideological resonance	Ability of AQAM's theological and ideological message to gain traction among a given constituency
Inadequate governance	Political environment in which government fails to provide security or deliver basic goods and services to population
Information and communication technology	Technologies that have allowed AQAM to connect with supporters and other affiliated groups
Leadership	Strong, charismatic leadership able to provide direction and structure to radical groups and individuals
Local support	Community in which AQAM operates passively or actively provides safe haven, facilitates operations, or both
Networking	Interaction among militant groups and individuals who provide support to one another
Political transition	Unstable political environment caused by transfers of political power
Public dissatisfaction	Poor economic, social, and political conditions that create popular disaffection with existing institutions
Safe haven	Area where terrorists are able to operate in relative security
State sponsor	Government that provides direct or tacit support to AQAM
Terrorist patron	Existing group that provides financial, logistical, and ideological support to a fledgling or existing affiliate

Russia, and China (Xinjiang). Interviews were conducted with government officials, military officers, religious and community leaders, academic specialists, journalists, and community activists, among others. Meetings with foreign experts also took place in Washington, DC. The goal of these interactions was to solicit diverse views on AQAM and on the many environments in which AQAM currently operates or could potentially expand. Insights from this travel were disseminated through podcasts and helped inform other portions of the study.³

Senior Advisory Group

An advisory group composed of counterterrorism practitioners, academic specialists, and subject-matter experts met three times throughout the duration of this project to provide input

3. Rick "Ozzie" Nelson and Tom Sanderson, "Audio: Interview with Rick 'Ozzie' Nelson and Tom Sanderson on Al Qaeda Research Trip to Southeast Asia," CSIS Podcast, July 13, 2011, <http://csis.org/multimedia/audio-interview-rick-ozzie-nelson-and-tom-sanderson-al-qaeda-research-trip-southeast-asia>; and Tom Sanderson, "Audio: Interview with Tom Sanderson on Al Qaeda's Future in Africa," CSIS Podcast, May 9, 2011, <http://csis.org/multimedia/audio-interview-tom-sanderson-al-qaedas-future-africa>.

and guidance. This group of experts also provided input and feedback to the research team throughout the course of the study. A list of Senior Advisory Group members can be found in the Acknowledgments.

Final Report

This report represents the culmination of the project. It includes four analytic segments, each of which contributes to our vision of AQAM's future and informs a set of recommendations.

The Future Environment

The first analytic section describes macrolevel external factors we predict will shape the larger world in 2025. We posit that the following factors will drive global change over the coming years: demographics, scarcity of natural resources, shifts in the global balance of power, technological innovation, interconnectivity, and changing perceptions of personal identity. These global factors will result in the increasing challenge of governance, which could influence AQAM in a myriad of ways.

Paradigms of the Future

The second and most significant component of this report employs an inductive approach to explore five potential paradigms, each describing a distinct vision of AQAM's evolution through 2025. These paradigms comprise three parts: first, a fictional scenario to tell the story of how particular events could lead to one of our hypothetical outcomes; second, a supporting analysis that closely examines the factors that would need to be in place to make the scenario plausible; and, last, a table of warning signs that translates theoretical findings into hard indicators that policymakers can use in assessing the trajectory of AQAM as it unfolds. We intend for these tables to be used as an additional tool for counterterrorism professionals to evaluate the future in support of proactive action.

Although these scenarios are fictional, the variables that can lead to these outcomes are very real and present, and our supporting analyses are based on current and historical data. By looking at possible futures for AQAM in this manner, our intention is to tease out the strongest indicators associated with each outcome.

Strategic Shocks

In the third analytic section of the report, we explore strategic shocks, discontinuities that might fundamentally alter the geopolitical landscape. This section highlights how potential departures from our broader assumptions about the future environment could alter any one of our projections of AQAM's evolution.

Conclusion

Our conclusion takes these analytical inputs and distills them to the key factors that we feel are most likely to impact the broader AQAM movement through 2025. It is around these factors that we tailor our policy recommendations.

Policy Recommendations

Understanding the futility of attempting to predict accurately and specifically what AQAM will look like in 2025, we recommend multifaceted policies that are sufficiently flexible to address a highly uncertain future. We also understand that curbing the spread of radicalization may limit the spread of terrorism. Thus, our recommendations also focus on countering violent extremism as well as countering terrorism. With this multilayered approach, we suggest steps that will undermine both AQAM's operational capabilities as well as its ideological message.

1

DESIGNING AN END TO THE LONG WAR

With the death of Osama bin Laden and the 10-year anniversary of September 11, 2001, a debate now rages about whether the war on al Qaeda and terror is over. It is a moment in which to reflect and also to prepare ourselves to confront what lies beyond the al Qaeda we have known—the one that rose steadily in the 1990s and perpetrated the most lethal attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor.

We have not seen the end of al Qaeda, its associated movements, or its ideology. In our baseline assessment, *A Threat Transformed*,¹ we delineated the evolving structure of AQAM—an al Qaeda hydra with a diminished core but with regional affiliates and inspired individuals and cells bound by a common, violent Islamist ideology. Al Qaeda has been buffeted relentlessly by global counterterrorism pressure. It has had its ideology increasingly marginalized by global opposition and opprobrium as well as the protest movements in the Arab world.

Even so, AQAM can still rear its heads violently and inspire individuals with its distorted narrative—enabled in many ways by globalization, underlying regional grievances, the stresses of youth bulges, and the force-multiplying effects of modern technology. A threat remains, but we do not have to submit to the inevitability of a never-ending conflict with a radical group and its distorted ideology. We can and must accelerate the end of al Qaeda and associated movements.

Policymakers and counterterrorism officials are constantly captured by the crisis of the day. They often find it difficult to plan beyond the known spectrum of threats or the foreseeable future. For counterterrorism officials and analysts, it is often difficult and risky to imagine the future trajectories of any movement and to consider actions to impact an enemy's evolution.

This study offers policymakers, counterterrorism officials, and analysts an opportunity to see over the horizon and consider a range of alternatives of how AQAM may materialize and threaten the United States and its allies. It allows for reflection on the specific factors that gave rise to al Qaeda's various outposts and how the future environment may affect its evolution. These insights can help reframe and refresh a counterterrorism approach—one that seeks to restrict, fracture, and defeat AQAM's global capabilities, reach, and aspirations while challenging, undercutting, and discrediting its underlying ideology and narrative.

This report enables policymakers, analysts, and the public to consider how to shape an ecosystem hostile to the growth and survival of AQAM. This study cannot predict the future, but it does provide a framework within which to consider the future of AQAM and how it can ultimately be eradicated. This approach is critical as we look out to 2025 and the enormous challenges and opportunities the future environment may present to AQAM and the United States and its allies.

1. Rick "Ozzie" Nelson and Thomas A. Sanderson, with Amrit Bagia, Ben Bodurian, and David A. Gordon, *A Threat Transformed: Al Qaeda and Associated Movements in 2011* (Washington, DC: CSIS, February 2011), <http://csis.org/publication/threat-transformed>.

Taxonomy, Objectives, and Ideology of AQAM

Taxonomy: This report concerns al Qaeda and associated movements (AQAM), which comprise three tiers of affiliation:

- **Al Qaeda core** is the group responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001. It was led in the past by Osama bin Laden. Al Qaeda core includes a cluster of ideologues, field commanders, and facilitators who have sworn an oath of loyalty (*bayat*) to al Qaeda and report directly to its senior leadership. Historically a hierarchical organization, al Qaeda core served as the command-and-control hub of operations and as the primary driver of ideological inspiration for the larger al Qaeda movement.
- **Al Qaeda affiliates and like-minded groups** encompass both official al Qaeda affiliates that have formally merged with al Qaeda core, such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and groups that have links to the al Qaeda core but retain ideological and operational independence, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan.
- **Al-Qaeda–inspired nonaffiliated cells and individuals** include radicalized groups and individuals who are not regularly affiliated with al Qaeda core but draw clear inspiration and occasional guidance from the core or affiliated movements. Examples include would-be Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad and Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hasan.

Objectives: While AQAM’s constituent parts are at times operationally independent and often motivated by unique local concerns, the groups share a common key objective: to establish an Islamic caliphate ruled according to the tenets of Sharia law. Many of AQAM’s constituent parts perceive the West, particularly the United States,

Taxonomy, Objectives, and Ideology of AQAM (*continued*)

as the primary physical and ideological obstacle to realizing this objective. According to Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and others, the United States has been “occupying the lands of Islam,” while “plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people,” and “terrorizing its neighbors.”¹ Al Qaeda core’s narrative centers on the assertion that the non-Muslim world is at war with Islam and that only violent action will suffice to remove the West’s malign influence and allow for the establishment of the caliphate.

Ideology: All components of AQAM subscribe to the belief that the global Muslim population represents one nation of people (*ummah*), each and every member of which is obligated to fight those who have been declared the enemies of Islam, both near and far. The near enemies are the apostate ruling regimes of Muslim-majority countries, which AQAM views as illegitimate and subordinate to the United States, while the far enemies are the United States and its Western allies that support these regimes. According to this ideological principle, which AQAM refers to as “defensive jihad,” enemies must be killed “in any country in which it is possible to do it.”² Thus, in the eyes of AQAM, the conflict has transcended borders to become a truly global struggle.

1. Osama bin Laden et al., “World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders: Initial ‘Fatwa’ Statement [in Arabic],” *al-Quds al-Arabi*, February 23, 1998, www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/fatw2.htm; for translation, see Federation of American Scientists, www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm.
2. Ibid.

2

THE FUTURE ENVIRONMENT

Global, regional, and local drivers have historically shaped the internal dynamics of al Qaeda and associated movements (AQAM). In assessing the future of AQAM, it is important to consider how the external environment will evolve in the years ahead and reflect on how these changes may affect AQAM. Drawing from a range of long-term forecasts, this section explores six global trends, separate from the AQAM-specific key factors previously identified, that will have the most significant impact on AQAM in 2025.¹ It is important to note that these trends are relatively linear and therefore are distinct from the more discrete strategic shocks discussed later in the report.

Demographics

According to a CSIS study on demographics, there is a strong linkage between “youth and poverty on the one hand and chronic violence, social instability, and recurring civil war on the other.”² Many al Qaeda-affiliated groups have emerged from the type of stratified, chaotic, and conflict-ridden environments often catalyzed by demographic shifts.

Violence and instability are also important for AQAM on the ideological level. Bin Laden and other AQAM figures have seized on disparate local tensions and conflicts in an attempt to weave a single global narrative. Without such grievances, this global narrative would have very little resonance on a local level.

One should not assume that all future conflict and social unrest will automatically lead to AQAM infiltration. Muslim insurgents in the ethnically Malay provinces of south Thailand, for example, have rejected offers of assistance from foreign militants. That said, as long as conflicts like the one in southern Thailand persist, the *potential* exists for AQAM infiltration.

Several regions with sizable Muslim populations and a history of AQAM presence will undergo significant demographic shifts through 2025, providing some possible insight into where the movement may attempt to expand its presence or where its ideology may find resonance.

Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2005, sub-Saharan Africa’s total population stood at 720 million, with a median age of 18. It is set to grow to 1.2 billion by 2025, an increase of 66 percent over 2005 levels.

1. The long-term forecasts cited here include Directorate General for Research, Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities, *The World in 2025: Rising Asia and Socio-Ecological Transition* (Brussels: European Commission, 2009); Richard Jackson and Neil Howe with Rebecca Strauss and Keisuke Nakashima, *The Graying of the Great Powers: Demography and Geopolitics in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2008); National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2008).

2. Jackson et al., *The Graying of the Great Powers*, p. 135.

By 2025, the median age will have increased to only 19.4.³ These demographic changes will likely exacerbate an already fragile and corrupt environment, suggesting that instability in sub-Saharan Africa will worsen in the years ahead.

Arab world. The population of the Arab world in 2025 will be 50 percent larger than 2005 levels, expanding from 324 million to 485 million. This growth will be partially balanced by a shrinking youth bulge. In 2005 the median age in the Arab world stood at 22.1; by 2025 it will be 26.0. This suggests that demographic shifts will likely fuel volatility in the Arab world although to a lesser extent than they will in sub-Saharan Africa.⁴

Non-Arab Muslim Asia. Non-Arab Muslim Asia will face less severe demographic pressure compared with sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world. In 2005, the population of this region was 798 million and the median age was 23.6. In 2025 the total population will expand by 37 percent over 2005 levels and will mature to a median age of 28.6. These data suggest that demographics are unlikely to lead to significant instability in the region by 2025, as population growth will be balanced by a significant aging.⁵

India and South Asia. In 2030 the population of India and South Asia will be two billion, a 34 percent increase over 2005 levels. In the same period, median age will go from 24.1 to 28.7. The relative magnitude of these demographic shifts is comparable with shifts in non-Arab Muslim Asia, and such shifts seem unlikely to fuel large-scale instability, at least relating to terrorism.⁶

Europe. Although demographic data on Muslims in Europe are incomplete, it seems inevitable that this population will continue growing. Estimates place the Muslim share of France's and Germany's populations in 2005 at 8.3 percent and 4.3 percent, respectively. By 2030 these figures will have grown to 15.2 percent for France and 12.0 percent for Germany.⁷ In contrast with places like sub-Saharan Africa, where population growth could catalyze instability, the expansion of Europe's Muslim community offers a different set of challenges. Given the already poor integration of Muslims in much of Europe, a growing Muslim share of the European population could further exacer-

3. Data projections for 2025 are calculated on the basis of *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision* (New York: UN Population Division, 2007), as cited in Jackson et al., *The Graying of the Great Powers*, p. 163. In line with regional breakdowns in *The Graying of the Great Powers*, sub-Saharan Africa includes Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, D. R. Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Réunion, Rwanda, Saint Helena, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

4. Data projections for 2025 are calculated on the basis of *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision*, as cited in Jackson et al., *The Graying of the Great Powers*, p. 165. In line with the regional breakdowns in that report, the Arab World includes Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestinian Territories, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Western Sahara, and Yemen.

5. Data projections for 2025 are calculated on the basis of *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision*, as cited in Jackson et al., *The Graying of the Great Powers*, p. 168, where non-Arab Muslim Asia countries include Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Maldives, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

6. Data projections for 2025 are calculated on the basis of *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision*, as cited in Jackson et al., *The Graying of the Great Powers*, p. 174, where India and South Asia include Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Laos, Melanesia, Micronesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Polynesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam.

7. Jackson et al., *The Graying of the Great Powers*, p. 123.

bate societal cleavages and encourage violent, right-wing, anti-Muslim activism of the type manifested in Norway in July 2011. With the perceived failure of multiculturalism,⁸ many European leaders seem unsure how to integrate first- and second-generation Muslims into European society.

Scarcity of Natural Resources

The growing populations discussed above will feed into a second key trend: scarcity of resources. By 2025, water, food, and energy—the basic inputs of modern life—will be in increasingly short supply. In 2025 it is estimated that three billion people will not have consistent access to water.⁹ Areas that will face the most acute water shortages include parts of North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia.¹⁰ According to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, food production must grow 50 percent by 2030 in order to meet increased demand.¹¹ Approximately 13 percent of the world's population—925 million people—were already chronically hungry in 2010, suggesting that a future increase in demand of this magnitude could lead to serious shortages going forward.¹² The prognosis on the energy front is not much better. The global demand for energy in 2025 will be 150 percent greater than it was in 2005, and oil supply will have already begun to peak.¹³

The shortage of readily accessible natural resources will widen the gap between haves and have-nots by 2025. This scarcity could result in a growing pool of disaffected individuals that could become more receptive to AQAM's rhetoric.¹⁴ Where resource scarcity results in conflict—either on the local or interstate level—AQAM may find the resulting chaos advantageous. In addition, scarcity of resources could trigger migration, resulting in poorly integrated diaspora communities

8. See, for example, Oliver Wright and Jerome Taylor, "Cameron: My War on Multiculturalism," *The Independent*, February 5, 2011, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/cameron-my-war-on-multiculturalism-2205074.html.

9. Directorate General for Research, Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities, *The World in 2025*, p. 15.

10. National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025*, p. 55 (Projected Global Water Scarcity, 2025).

11. Frances D'Emilio and Ariel David, "UN Chief: Food Production Must Rise 50 Percent by 2030," *USA Today*, June 3, 2008, www.usatoday.com/news/topstories/2008-06-03-3803373184_x.htm.

12. World Food Program, *Fighting Hunger Worldwide: The World Food Programme's Year in Review, 2010* (Rome: World Food Program, 2011), p. 33, <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/communications/wfp236112.pdf>.

13. Directorate General for Research, Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities, *The World in 2025*, p. 14.

14. Historically, AQAM leaders have been quick to highlight the West's role in subsidizing the growing gap between the rich and poor, especially in the Gulf States. Most notably, Osama bin Laden juxtaposed Saudi royal extravagance with the austerity of the common Saudi citizens. In 1995, bin Laden penned a letter to King Fahd asking: "How can you ask people to save power when everyone can see your enchanting palaces lit up night and day?" Ayman al-Zawahiri and bin Laden later also highlighted the West's involvement in subsidizing the gap between Saudi Arabia's rich and poor. In 2004 bin Laden called this "the greatest theft in history of the natural resources of both present and future generations," while Zawahiri pointed out that "most of the revenues [from Saudi wells] go to the enemies of Islam." AQAM has sought to operationalize this discontent by targeting oil-processing facilities in the Gulf, which the group did in 2006 with the attack at Abqaiq. See Steph Ulph, "Al-Zawahiri Encourages Targeting of Gulf Oil," *Terrorism Focus* 2, no. 23 (December 16, 2005), www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=627&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=238&no_cache=1; and Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Random House, 2006), p. 238.

that might be at risk for radicalization. More generally, resources scarcity will increase the likelihood that demographic pressures in places like sub-Saharan Africa do in fact lead to instability.

Global Balance of Power

In 2005 the developed world accounted for 54 percent of global gross domestic product, with the United States alone generating 22 percent of the world's total. By 2030, 62 percent of global GDP will reside in developing countries. China and East Asia will represent 26 percent of world GDP, exceeding the U.S. share by 7 percent.¹⁵ If one accepts GDP as a crude proxy for national power, these shifts reflect a complete reordering of the international system.

Such restructuring could have a profound impact on AQAM in the years ahead. The rise of China, India, and other non-Western powers will challenge AQAM's narrative that Western hegemony is preventing the restoration of the caliphate. As other countries assume more prominence or responsibility in the international system, AQAM's ideology and targeting priorities may reorient toward a new "head of the snake."¹⁶ This possibility makes it important to bear in mind that AQAM's ideological evolution has taken place exclusively in the context of a unipolar global order. It is unclear whether or how the movement's ideology will change as the global balance of power shifts.

Technological Innovation

In 1965 Gordon E. Moore, the cofounder of Intel, predicted that the number of transistors on a computer chip would double roughly every two years. This prediction has held, meaning that the processing power of computer chips is increasing exponentially. The ever-improving performance of computer chips is an apt indicator of the frantic pace of technological innovation.

As technology has improved, so too has its diffusion. Sophisticated tools are now available to consumers, giving groups and individuals capabilities that were available exclusively to governments, corporations, and universities only a short time ago.

The improvement and proliferation of technology are hugely beneficial for society, but technology does come with negative consequences. Technology has given nonstate actors like AQAM new resources that enhance their capabilities.¹⁷ The failure of government policies and laws to evolve on par with the pace of technological advancements further exacerbates the potential for adversaries, especially nonstate actors, to exploit technology.

15. Data from Jackson et al., *The Graying of the Great Powers*, p. 211.

16. Osama bin Laden famously referred to the September 11, 2001, attacks as a strike against "the head of the snake." Speaking through a translator in 2001, he said, "After three months, since the attacks, the blessed attacks against—that took place against the head of the snake, the United States and after two months since the crusader campaign started against Islam. We would like to speak on some of the implications of those incidents." See "Live From Afghanistan: New Videotape of bin Laden Surfaces; Afghanistan Experiences Refugee Crisis in Reverse; Will the War on Terror Spread to Somalia?" CNN.com, December 26, 2001, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0112/26/se.01.html>.

17. The militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, for example, reportedly used an advanced version of Google Earth to assist in the planning of terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008. See Josy Joseph, "LeT's Google Earth Link to 26/11 Nailed," Daily News and Analysis, November 23, 2009, www.dnaindia.com/india/report_let-s-google-earth-link-to-26-11-nailed_1315207.

The Impact of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring has redrawn the geopolitical ground of the Middle East and North Africa. Although most analyses have rightfully focused on the implications for the countries affected and the United States, AQAM also is affected by the turmoil.

A growing number of analysts have noted that these nonviolent, secular revolutions focused on local grievances and individual rights will fatally undermine al Qaeda's ideology and bring about its inevitable collapse. Many factors support this conclusion. That the Arab Spring toppled President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia undermines al Qaeda core's claim that the only viable solution to reform was violently forcing the far enemy to withdraw its support for apostate leaders, thereby making these local regimes vulnerable to attack. Adding insult to injury is the fact that the protesters accomplished in days what AQAM and its predecessors failed to achieve in decades.

Even the very nature of the protests discredited AQAM's call for struggle against the far enemy. Whereas bin Laden and his followers killed and maimed, those who took to the streets protested nonviolently. AQAM's explanation for the problems facing Muslims centered on the hidden power of Western puppeteers, but the protesters focused on local grievances like the lack of jobs, far-reaching corruption, and ineffective governance. The protesters' motivations were largely secular and modern, while AQAM marched under the banner of religion. Where Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri have called for a pan-Islamic state based on Sharia, the Arab streets have been calling for true democracy and a voice in shaping the future of their respective nations. The Arab Spring was therefore a withering indictment of bin Laden's far-enemy strategy.

This assessment rests on a comforting but perhaps misleading assumption, however. What if the aspirations of the protesters are not met and the revolutions do not bring about long-term reform? What if the bitter harvest of the Arab Spring is disillusionment and discontent? In Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain this could mean

If these trends are extrapolated out to 2025, it seems inevitable that terrorist groups will have access to more powerful technological tools than they do today. This means that large and medium-sized terrorist networks will likely see their ability to communicate, train, gather intelligence, organize or collaborate, and carry out attacks improve. Such groups may also begin to obtain weapons of mass destruction and cyberattack capabilities as the technological barriers to entry of these tools becomes lower and lower. Technology may also enhance the capabilities of small cells and even individuals to organize organically or to act alone. By 2025 these smaller networks or individual actors could engender major disruptions on their own.¹⁸

18. Although there are no indications that AQAM has conducted a cyberattack on the United States, a number of U.S. and international entities, including government agencies, multinational corporations, and

The Impact of the Arab Spring (*continued*)

raised expectations deflated by the protestors' inability to overturn the status quo. In Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, where the Arab Spring has displaced the status quo, failure could manifest differently. No longer unified in opposition to the old system, protesters could find that significant disagreements among themselves could stifle the fragile democratic process. Long-standing traditions of corruption and patronage politics or the rise of a new dictator—secular or theocratic—could have a similar effect in these countries.

If the Arab Spring leads to division and conflict, AQAM's arguments will resonate and the rising tide of disillusionment could reenergize the movement's concept of reform-by-jihad in the Arab heartland. Zawahiri and other AQAM leaders are betting heavily that the Arab Spring will suffer this unfortunate fate. The failure of these revolutions could produce a profound sense of disappointment among an entire generation of Arabs. Amid this despair, AQAM's message that armed struggle against the West is the only viable path to reform could find fertile ground. Such a development would be a strategic opportunity for AQAM to reassert itself and regain its relevance in the Arab world.

Paradoxically, the Arab Spring represents a strategic pivot for AQAM—at once the moment is an existential threat to its ideology and a potential window to restore lost relevance amid its core Sunni constituency. Given these stakes, AQAM's leaders will do everything possible to ensure the survival of their ideology, shape the narrative, and feed off the likely disillusionment arising from this chaotic period. The statements of prominent AQAM chiefs like Zawahiri and Anwar al-Awlaki and of surrogate groups like al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb reflect this realization and their attempts to shape the narrative of the Arab Spring.

Source: This is an abridgment of Juan C. Zarate and David A. Gordon, "The Battle for Reform with Al-Qaeda," *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2011.

It also is certainly possible that future innovations will make it easier for governments to identify and interdict terrorists like AQAM. On balance, however, the past decade demonstrates that terrorist groups have frequently benefited from technology more than the governments trying to counter them. The growing sophistication of improvised explosive devices—and the billions of dollars invested by the U.S. government to counter them—is indicative of the fact that recent trends in technology often favor asymmetric over conventional forces.

nonprofits, have been targeted by a stream of cyberattacks of unclear origins. The compromise of extensive amounts of sensitive data demonstrates that defensive policies are severely inadequate in reacting to advanced cyber attacks, exposing the U.S. government and its partners to grave damage by potential terrorist-sponsored schemes. See Dmitri Alperovitch, *Revealed: Operation Shady RAT* (Santa Clara, CA: McAfee, 2011), www.mcafee.com/us/resources/white-papers/wp-operation-shady-rat.pdf.

Interconnectivity

According to the World Bank, the total number of Internet users stood at 400 million in 2000.¹⁹ By 2009, this figure had grown to 1.8 billion.²⁰ If there is a linear growth rate, there will be 4.5 billion Internet users by 2025. Such interconnectivity will inevitably shape AQAM's strategy and impact going forward. AQAM has already used the Internet to perpetuate its ideology worldwide. As more and more people plug into the virtual commons, AQAM's messages will become accessible to a greater percentage of the world's population. The same can also be said for alternative ideologies and messages, which could compete with AQAM.

In addition to broadcasting propaganda to a wider audience, increasing interconnectivity could also amplify the global impact of future AQAM attacks, particularly those targeting economic infrastructure. AQAM recognizes the strategic choke points of the global economy and has sought to strike at them. For example, bin Laden issued calls to attack oil installations in December 2004. Ayman al-Zawahiri echoed these exhortations the following autumn. Furthermore, AQAM has acted on these words. In February 2006, al Qaeda operatives in Saudi Arabia attempted an attack on the oil-processing facility in Abqaiq, which processes 66 percent of the crude oil extracted from Saudi Arabia. AQAM has also been linked to the July 2010 attack on the Japanese tanker *M. Star* in the Strait of Hormuz, which was claimed by the al Qaeda-associated Abdullah Azzam Brigades, and the 2002 bombing of the *Limburg*, a French oil tanker off the coast of Yemen.²¹ Although such attacks failed to cause significant damage, they signaled AQAM's intent to target the pillars of the global economy.

As economic integration continues, the repercussions of a successful attack on key infrastructure like Abqaiq could become more and more significant. In other words, deepening global integration acts as a force multiplier for AQAM, amplifying the impact of AQAM's operations far beyond the point of actual attack.

Personal Identity

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, societies around the world have been buffeted in ways that challenge traditional perceptions of identity. Over time, this process has led individuals to re-evaluate how they identify themselves. When viewed in small increments, these shifts are hard to perceive. The annual Arab Public Opinion Poll, conducted by Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland, is illustrative in this regard. In 2008, the survey asked a sample of Arabs to select their most important identity. Approximately one-third, or 36 percent, selected Muslim; 39 percent selected a citizen of their country; 20 percent selected Arab; and 4 percent selected a citizen of the world.²² By 2010, these numbers had shifted: 39 percent selected Muslim, 32 percent selected

19. World Bank, "World Development Indicators—Visualization," April 26, 2011; see Google Public Data Explorer, www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met_y=it_net_user&tdim=true&dl=en&hl=en&q=global+internet+penetration.

20. Ibid.

21. "Yemen Says Tanker Blast Was Terrorism," BBC News, October 16, 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2334865.stm.

22. Shibley Telhami, *2010 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey* (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, with Zogby International, August 5, 2010), p. 70, www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2010/0805_arab_opinion_poll_telhami/0805_arabic_opinion_poll_telhami.pdf.

a citizen of their country, 25 percent selected Arab, and 4 percent selected citizen of the world.²³ In the course of two years, therefore, the most salient identity among sampled Arabs shifted from nationality to faith. Such a change may be an insignificant fluctuation, but it may indicate a more profound and fundamental shift.

This example illustrates the fluidity of identity in the twenty-first century. Such dynamism could have a wide-ranging impact on AQAM. The importation of foreign customs and values into certain communities could clash with traditional cultures. This volatile mix could result in backlash that may prove receptive to AQAM's rejection of Western cultural influence. Conversely, future generations may also identify themselves in ways that marginalize AQAM's appeal. Such was the case among many of the young activists who led the Arab Spring in early 2011. Because personal identity is at the core of radicalization and mobilization—and the rejection of violence—the evolution of this poorly understood trend merits further exploration.

Increasing Challenges of Governance

Taken together, these six trends point to a single overarching macrotrend: the increasing challenge of governance by 2025. Demographic pressure, scarcity of resources, and shifting personal identity will place stress on governments in the years ahead and may in some cases make it harder for them to perform their core functions. The development and proliferation of technology will increase the capabilities of terrorist groups and empower individual actors, leading to a decline in the power of sovereign states relative to nonstate entities. Interconnectivity will lead to the promulgation of ideas and amplify the impact of economic shocks. Finally, the shifting global balance of power will lead to new patterns of international cooperation and competition, which could unfold in unpredictable ways.

This analysis suggests that, on balance, the world will likely be more volatile in 2025 than it is today. AQAM has built a movement around its ability to exploit countries with weak governance structures. Whether AQAM will be capable of leveraging this unstable future to its benefit remains to be seen.

23. Ibid.

3

PARADIGMS FOR THE FUTURE

Understanding the factors that have driven al Qaeda and associated movements (AQAM) to its present manifestation, and having forecast what the global environment will look like in 2025, we can now build a set of future paradigms that explain how AQAM might manifest itself in several distinct scenarios. The intent behind each scenario is not to describe the exact future of AQAM, but to distill the key factors that might drive a future manifestation of AQAM along a similar track. The five paradigms are:

- AQAM as a core-driven movement;
- AQAM as an affiliate-driven movement;
- AQAM as a movement driven by lone wolves;
- AQAM becomes a state actor; or
- AQAM collapses.

Each of these paradigms includes three parts: first, a scenario that tells the story of how AQAM could evolve by 2025; second, an analysis that examines why key factors drove the movement in that direction; and, last, a table of indicators that may illustrate whether AQAM is evolving in a certain direction.

Although these five paradigms are presented discretely, in reality portions of several paradigms may manifest themselves simultaneously. Thus, they are not mutually exclusive and might not come to pass. As a whole, they attempt to provide policymakers and practitioners with a cross section of plausible manifestations of the movement.

Paradigm 1: A Core-Driven AQAM by 2025

Paradigm 1 conceptualizes AQAM as being driven by a strong, centralized leadership in 2025. In this case we posit the reemergence of al Qaeda core after a period of dormancy. By 2025, the revamped group plans and executes its own attacks and directs the operations of a range of new and reenergized affiliates. Rather than continued decentralization, AQAM since 2011 has instead undergone a consolidation of power, which now resides in a reinvigorated core.

Scenario

Through 2011 and into 2012, the death of Osama bin Laden was followed by a series of successful operations against senior al Qaeda core leaders in Pakistan and other safe havens. One of these strikes killed Ayman al-Zawahiri, prompting internal debates within the core regarding succession

and strategy. Discussions became divisive, and the core splintered. Locally focused militant groups based in South Asia assimilated most al Qaeda core personnel although some longtime core members in the Persian Gulf and the Levant, as well as a handful in Iran, remained unaffiliated and stayed committed to bin Laden's vision of striking the far enemy.

Around this time, Yemen erupted in civil war, pitting the remnants of the Saleh regime against a brittle coalition that included elements sympathetic to extremist ideologies. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) benefited from the turmoil by expanding its ranks and enhancing its capabilities. From a relatively secure base in southern Yemen, AQAP developed or enhanced ties with a range of smaller terrorist networks operating in Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. The group's expansion, in conjunction with the steady increase in pirate attacks in the Gulf of Aden and the emerging humanitarian crisis resulting from Yemen's collapse, exploited a "regional arc of instability" that extended from the Arabian Peninsula westward to the Horn of Africa and into East Africa.

AQAP eventually attempted a new, sophisticated wave of attacks against commercial aviation in the U.S. homeland. The U.S. intelligence community (IC) and its international counterparts collectively assessed that AQAP had become the most critical terrorist threat and thus bolstered counterterrorism efforts in Yemen. This reprioritization required the reallocation of resources away from Pakistan, the primary focus of U.S. counterterrorism efforts for the past decade. While the IC remained aware that terrorist groups continued to operate in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, these degraded organizations were assessed as showing no signs of directing mature plots against the U.S. homeland or U.S. interests abroad, an assessment largely attributed to the removal of a significant number of senior and operational leaders.

The resulting shift in U.S. counterterrorism pressure seemed to stem the ascendant capabilities of AQAP and other affiliate groups operating from within the so-called arc. The intervening years saw no serious attacks on the United States or its Western allies, and affiliate groups appeared more constrained to regional operations. As a new decade began, with al Qaeda core still inactive and affiliate groups now on the defensive, AQAM finally appeared to be waning.

Then, in early 2025, a series of simultaneous, large-scale attacks on major landmarks occurred in New York, Mumbai, Riyadh, and London. A variety of attack methods were employed, including the use of Mumbai-style tactics in New York and London. Although the physical and economic damage of these attacks paled in comparison with 9/11, the scope and scale of the attacks shook global confidence, especially since many took place inside the secure borders of stable nation-states.

Amid the chaos and speculation, a claim of responsibility surfaced online from an individual asserting he was the emir of al Qaeda core. In the name of Osama bin Laden, he declared that the United States and the West were guilty of the murder of thousands of Muslims in the course of "occupying Islamic lands." He went on to state that these attacks were only the first of many and that they would continue until the United States and its allies withdrew all military and diplomatic personnel from Yemen and all other Muslim-majority countries. He called these attacks the second phase in al Qaeda core's multigenerational war against the West.

A series of emergency meetings among international intelligence and security agencies determined that the plot originated from a safe haven in the Central Asian state of Tajikistan. The origins of the Tajik safe haven dated to around 2015, when decreased Tajik access to the Russian

labor market led to mass unemployment and a drastically reduced GDP.¹ Following the violent suppression of widespread protests, the Tajik government's grip on several provinces associated with the Tajik opposition weakened.

The leadership of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), still exiled in eastern Pakistan and northern Afghanistan, viewed the situation in Tajikistan as an opportunity to restart their campaign in Central Asia, and so they returned to Tajikistan by taking advantage of the same routes and facilitation networks used to smuggle Afghan narcotics northward. Once across the border, these fighters converged in Isfara, carving out a foothold near the town of Chorkuh. Although the IMU remained focused on Tajikistan and other Central Asian regimes, the group had undergone a degree of ideological hybridization,² as many members had been infected with al Qaeda core's global ideology and harbored ambitions to strike Western targets as well.

Owing to a lack of U.S. intelligence and counterterrorism efforts in Central Asia, the rise of the Tajik safe haven barely registered on the IC's radar prior to al Qaeda core's attack. The same went for the al Qaeda core emir himself, whom the IC never viewed as a serious threat. The IC reviewed its archive of raw intelligence and found that the emir and his close associates had fought for several years alongside the IMU, first in northern Afghanistan and then in western Pakistan. The emir also served as a trainer for the Islamic Jihad Union and helped prepare Turkish and German cadres for operations in Europe. Using these ties to Central Asian militants, the emir quietly relocated al Qaeda core to Tajikistan in 2020 and refocused its efforts on fulfilling bin Laden's vision of becoming a vanguard of a global war against the West. His efforts were supported by the IMU Shura, which viewed the emir's global focus as complementary to its local struggle.

Al Qaeda core's dramatic attack, when combined with the perceived failure of democracy in Egypt and other countries affected by the Arab Spring, reenergized the global Islamist terrorism movement, which had lost momentum and direction in recent years. The al Qaeda core emir was lionized as a defender of humiliated Muslims and quickly took advantage of his growing status. He released a second statement declaring a new dawn for "the global jihad" and urged other militants to strike at U.S. interests wherever possible. High levels of Internet penetration and cutting-edge social media tools quickly and securely pushed the emir's call to arms out to far-flung audiences. These technological innovations also enhanced operational planning. "Virtual training" of terrorists became so effective as to significantly diminish the need for physical training camps. Al Qaeda core and its affiliates also exploited new conduits for financial transfers, which outpaced evolutions in global antiterrorism financing regimes.

1. According to the International Labor Organization, between 750 thousand and one million Tajiks are employed as migrant laborers in Russia. The remittances these workers send home account for 42.8 percent of Tajikistan's GDP. If Russian leadership were to implement and enforce severe reductions in the number of Tajiks entering their country, these migrants would have few alternative opportunities elsewhere or at home. The rapid influx of around one million unemployed migrants would overwhelm Tajikistan's fragile economy and could catalyze a political crisis that could overwhelm the brittle regime in Dushanbe. See "Tajik Migrants Send Nearly 2.3 bn Dollars Home in 2010," ILO DWT and Country Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, January 20, 2011, www.ilo.org/public/english/region/eurpro/moscow/news/2011/0120.htm; and "Tajik Migrant Remittances Up by Over 27 Per Cent in Jan–Sep 2010," ILO DWT and Country Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, October 21, 2010, www.ilo.org/public/english/region/eurpro/moscow/news/2010/1021.htm.

2. For an explanation of the concept of ideological hybridization, see Thomas Hegghammer, "The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 9 (November 18, 2009), www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/the-ideological-hybridization-of-jihadi-groups.

During the next few months, regional militant groups and individuals attempted several strikes against U.S. and other targets abroad. The IC linked these attacks to the emir's exhortations and guidance, which were both strategic and operational in nature. Meanwhile, al Qaeda core received an influx of cash from wealthy donors in the Persian Gulf who saw the emir's attacks as vengeance for Western counterterrorism operations in Yemen and a response to the international community's perceived indifference to the grievances of Arab peoples. The emir distributed these funds to like-minded networks in Gaza, the Sahel, Somalia, and Bangladesh with the hope of gradually creating new franchises that would overwhelm global counterterrorism efforts. These entities reciprocated this patronage by publicly declaring their support for the emir and his cause. Al Qaeda core once again sat at the heart of global Islamist terrorism.

Analysis: Key Factors in Paradigm 1

The scenario for paradigm 1 is discrete, in that it offers a specific vision of how a core-driven paradigm might unfold. In reality, countless other potential scenarios could exemplify a core-driven paradigm. The following analysis acknowledges this fact and seeks to identify which overarching factors—like terrorist leadership or safe havens—might be associated with this paradigm. By considering such nominal factors, the analysis offers policymakers something beyond a single vision of AQAM in the future. Instead, it highlights the transcendent aspects of AQAM's evolution that may apply broadly across specific temporal and geographical circumstances.

What follows is an explanation of how paradigm 1 might unfold. At key points in the narrative, we highlight, in bold type, the overarching factors that are likely to prove decisive in the evolution of a core-driven paradigm.

The next few years could see a shift in **counterterrorism pressure** away from al Qaeda core and its base in Pakistan, toward affiliates in other parts of the world. The killing of bin Laden could reduce the Obama administration's leverage in pursuing remaining members of al Qaeda core. Some congressional leaders have suggested that bin Laden's death provides an opportunity to scale back U.S. commitments in the region as budgets grow tighter and popular support for overseas military engagements dwindles. Further, Pakistani military and intelligence officials have vowed to not tolerate further unilateral U.S. counterterrorism activities in their country.

Congressional hesitancy and Pakistani intransigence, both of which could constrain White House counterterrorism policy, come at a time when the United States is beginning to reduce its military footprint in Afghanistan. This reduction will likely squeeze U.S. counterterrorism capabilities in the region by degrading crucial enablers like intelligence collection.

Even if these factors do not lessen the intensity and frequency of U.S. counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda core, other demands might have the same effect. In the volatile landscape of 2011, there are any number of threats against which U.S. resources might be redirected from al Qaeda core. The most likely of these is AQAP. The group is responsible for two recent high-profile plots against the U.S. homeland—the December 2009 attempted bombing of a commercial passenger flight and the October 2010 attempted bombing of two cargo planes. Faced with a collapsing government, Yemen may present AQAP with new opportunities for recruitment and attacks as conditions in the country grow worse.

Even before the killing of Osama bin Laden, a number of U.S. intelligence and counterterrorism officials reportedly said that AQAP had come to represent a greater threat than al Qaeda core.

We are likely to see more of these types of statements in the coming months and years, and such statements will likely be backed up by a tangible shift in U.S. counterterrorism resources to different parts of the world.

It is reasonable to assume that counterterrorism pressure might engender at least two unintended, and negative, outcomes. First is the reinforcement of AQAM's stock narrative of Islam being under attack from the West. If recent history is any guide, enhanced operations directed at AQAP, along with other targets in places like Somalia and North Africa, are likely to result in tactical successes—more militants killed and captured. Such operations will not address the underlying grievances fueling the movement, however; and AQAM operatives are likely to exploit these strikes as further evidence of supposed Western aggression against Muslims. Indeed, AQAP made this type of claim following its December 2009 plot. Similar counterterrorism operations in the future may serve as catalysts for further radicalization among potential al Qaeda recruits, especially if the Arab Spring fails to deliver on its many promises of increased freedom and democracy.

Second, and most relevant to al Qaeda core, a reduction in counterterrorism pressure may give al Qaeda core the breathing room it would need to consolidate and regenerate its terrorist capabilities. This would be consistent with historical evidence of prematurely diminished counterterrorism pressure allowing terrorist groups to reconstitute.

If given a respite from counterterrorism pressure, a potentially rejuvenated al Qaeda core might take advantage of additional **safe havens** beyond Pakistan. Paradigm 1's scenario posits that deteriorating political and economic conditions in Tajikistan will, by 2025, lead to a new sanctuary for al Qaeda core. Although such a development is plausible given Central Asia's potential for decline and instability, accurately predicting which areas will be safe havens for transnational terrorism in 2025 is fraught with obvious challenges.

A better assumption—one that supports the idea of al Qaeda core relocating—is that ungoverned areas hospitable to globally oriented terrorist groups will likely remain a permanent fixture during the next decade and a half. Sanctuaries have historically depended on failed or failing states or state complicity, and such patterns will continue.³ In the future, however, we may also see the emergence of micro-havens.⁴ The Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon, which was controlled by Sunni militants until the intervention of the Lebanese military in 2007, provides

3. It is important to note, however, that completely failed states have not always proven ideally suited for terrorist groups. Al Qaeda's challenges in Somalia in the 1990s exemplify this dynamic. See Clint Watts, Jacob Shapiro, and Vahid Brown, *Al Qaeda's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 2, 2007), www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaidas-misadventures-in-the-horn-of-africa.

4. Micro-havens are ungoverned enclaves within sovereign states. In contrast with traditional terrorist havens, which tend to cover a country or region, micro-havens are usually smaller in geographic terms. Such havens seem likely to develop within urban areas located in the world's less-developed regions, where, according to UN estimates, "virtually all of the expected growth in the world population will be concentrated." See "World Urbanization Prospects: The 2009 Revision—Highlights" (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, March 2010), p. 4, http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Documents/WUP2009_Highlights_Final.pdf. As megacities like Dhaka and Karachi grow in the years ahead, they will likely become harder for governments to monitor and administer. This development, in conjunction with the access to communication, transportation, and financial infrastructure and a large pool of potential cadres, may make these urban micro-havens more appealing to terrorist groups in the years ahead.

a historical example of a micro-haven.⁵ In addition, the traditional view of safe havens as solely geographical must be revisited as the enemy will adapt and seek to exploit legal and virtual safe havens as well.

The scenario for paradigm 1 also posits that years of **networking**—close bonds with other terrorists developed in several conflict zones or in detention facilities—would allow al Qaeda core’s eventual emir to secure a base of operations in Tajikistan. As with safe havens, it is impossible to say which regions or conflicts will provide the opportunity for terrorist networking in the coming years. History shows, however, that networking among al Qaeda operatives, especially when it occurs during periods of intense conflict, helps forge lasting links among previously unrelated terrorist networks, resulting in the sharing of resources, ideology, and other forms of assistance.

Finally, the rise of a charismatic **leader** as emir would serve to organize and rally this set of networked individuals, thus forming a cohesive group. Throughout AQAM’s history, strong leaders like Osama bin Laden and AQAP’s Nasir al-Wuhayshi have inspired often-disparate militants to join a larger movement aimed at attacking the United States and its partners. Like bin Laden and Wuhayshi, al Qaeda core’s new emir would not emerge spontaneously—he would have honed his strategic and tactical leadership skills through years of practice, whether by delivering politically charged sermons to his close followers or by assisting with the operational planning of attacks. Such rhetorical effectiveness and operational experience would confer on a successful emir the bona fides to lead a reinvigorated al Qaeda core.

Together, these factors—a shift in counterterrorism pressure, the emergence of a safe haven, years of networking, and the rise of a charismatic leader—could help lay the foundation for al Qaeda core’s resurgence, an important step toward the core-driven paradigm in 2025. At least a few additional factors are necessary to realize this paradigm and allow a reconstituted al Qaeda core to reestablish its historic position of leadership.

Paradigm 1’s scenario envisions an al Qaeda core attack in 2025 energizing Islamist terrorists around the world. But in order for al Qaeda core to seize on this energy and *lead* a renewed global movement, affiliates and individuals would still need to possess the intent, if not always the capability, to attack Western targets. That intent could be fueled by the continued **ideological resonance** of al Qaeda’s narrative among would-be AQAM backers. Continued ideological resonance might result from a combination of anger over global U.S. counterterrorism operations, Western foreign policy more generally, and ineffective governance in the Muslim-majority world, among other causes. Although U.S. and international counterterrorism operations have been effective in dismantling significant portions of AQAM, efforts to counter radicalization generally, and AQAM’s ideology specifically, remain inadequate. This shortcoming could allow for the growth of a latent pool of ideological adherents that could be exploited by a charismatic leader.

5. Nahr el-Bared is a Palestinian refugee camp located in northern Lebanon. It was at one point controlled by Fatah al-Islam, a Sunni militant group founded by a Palestinian linked to the late leader of AQI, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In May 2007, Lebanese forces sought to regain control of the camp through heavy fighting that forced at least 27,000 people to flee their homes. According to the BBC, “Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are often a haven for armed groups.” See “Profile: Fatah al-Islam,” BBC News, August 15, 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-10979788; Rebecca Bloom, “Fatah al-Islam” (New York and Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, June 8, 2007), www.cfr.org/lebanon/fatah-al-islam/p13391; and “Nahr el-Bared Camp: 2007 Crisis, Displacement, and Emergency Response” (New York: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, n.d.), www.unrwa.org/userfiles/2010011944826.pdf.

Al Qaeda leaders have historically keyed on such anger in playing up a “Western war against Islam,” a narrative that has served as a powerful recruiting tool for al Qaeda core and numerous affiliates. Given similar environmental circumstances in the future, the emir of al Qaeda core in 2025 would likely follow the same path in an attempt to rally affiliates and individuals around a renewed global movement. He and his associates might be especially effective at disseminating their propaganda to a global audience because of remarkable advances in **information and communication technology**. It is, of course, impossible to predict what kind of innovations will fuel global media in the future; but throughout its history, al Qaeda has used new forms of media—historically audio and video and increasingly the Internet—to reach broad-based audiences effectively.⁶

After initially galvanizing popular support, al Qaeda core could then use these new forms of media to remain in near-constant contact with affiliates and individuals, disseminating strategic and operational guidelines with remarkable efficiency. Under these circumstances, for instance, virtual training could become so effective as to diminish the need for physical terrorist training camps.⁷ Technological advances would also enable al Qaeda core to better direct funding and material resources to affiliate groups. This would follow al Qaeda core’s pattern in the years before and after the September 11 attacks, when bin Laden’s group significantly expanded its network of like-minded entities to create a global movement.

Taken together, the developments described in this section constitute a plausible road map for the emergence of a core-driven paradigm by 2025. The next section is a tabular representation of the key factors that were highlighted in this analysis section, as well as indicators that these factors may be emerging.

Indicators for Paradigm 1

Factor	Scenario-specific event	Scenario-specific impact	Indicators
Shifting counter-terrorism pressure	U.S. government’s analytic and kinetic resources shift from al Qaeda core in Pakistan to AQAP in Yemen and other affiliates	Shift in counterterrorism pressure degrades affiliates but perpetuates their core grievances; also allows al Qaeda core enough room to regenerate its capabilities	Longer tenures for senior or operational commanders of al Qaeda core (less turnover, in other words); observance of increased physical movement and communication; congregating of al Qaeda core operatives
Safe havens	Economic instability in Tajikistan induces popular uprisings; a mishandled response by the Tajik government results in a loss of control over several provinces	IMU returns to Tajikistan and exploits available safe haven there to restart its campaign in Central Asia; later, al Qaeda core also relocates to Tajikistan and uses safe haven	Influx of foreign militants to area; emergence of alternative forms of governance in area; emergence of fixed terrorist and insurgent infrastructure in area (including camps and safe houses)

6. See pages 10, 22, and 30 for discussions of the effects on AQAM of the Internet and social media.

7. Virtual training camps are effective only if core leaders are provided the physical safe haven in which they are able to connect virtually. Thus, geographical safe havens will remain important to a core-driven movement.

Factor	Scenario-specific event	Scenario-specific impact	Indicators
Networking	Emir and his associates establish deep ties to IMU through shared experiences (eventual al Qaeda core emir and his associates fight alongside IMU in northern Afghanistan and western Pakistan; emir trains IMU operatives)	Years of networking with IMU leaders allow the emir to relocate al Qaeda core to IMU-controlled areas in Tajikistan, thus establishing for al Qaeda core a new safe haven	Presence of disparate foreign fighters in a conflict zone or at a training facility; operations involving individuals from a variety of groups; people from different groups show up in same promotional materials (such as a video) or release joint statements
Leadership	The eventual al Qaeda core emir emerges as a charismatic leader who can organize followers to form a cohesive al Qaeda core	Under the emir's leadership, existing but unorganized terrorist capacity in FATA is relocated to Tajikistan and then marshaled toward a singular goal of attacking the West	Communications from mid-level operatives increasingly flow through a single node; increased percentage of propaganda features a single leader; expressions of loyalty are directed to a specific individual
Ideological resonance	A combination of anger over U.S. counterterrorism operations and ineffective governance in Muslim-majority countries allows al Qaeda's narrative to resonate among affiliates and individuals	Continued ideological resonance means affiliates and individuals possess the intent to attack Western targets; with a revived al Qaeda core providing the means, the conditions exist for a renewed global AQAM movement	Increased consumption of AQAM propaganda materials and media; translation of materials into several languages; penetration into new markets; pool of adherents not dependent on a particular group
Information and communication technology (ICT)	Rapid advances in ICT allow al Qaeda core to create a truly global movement through the online (and other) dissemination of propaganda, transfer of financial resources, and operational and tactical training	Despite being located in a remote corner of Tajikistan, al Qaeda core is able to be in all places at once; ICT proves to be the ultimate force multiplier	Rise in Web traffic in terrorist chat rooms and Internet forums; embrace of new technologies by terrorist groups; decrease in physical travel of terrorists; increased allocation of limited group resources to media production (suggests increased focus on using ICT to propagandize)

Paradigm 2: An Affiliate-Driven AQAM by 2025

Paradigm 2 describes the transformation of AQAM from a decentralized movement inspired and occasionally led by al Qaeda core into a constellation of militant groups operating without any centralized leadership. Despite the increasing disaggregation of the AQAM movement, its constituent groups form a more aggressive and dangerous conglomerate. While some groups maintain formal affiliations, ties among groups are most likely to manifest in shared ideologies, narratives, and strategic and operational approaches. In 2025, the terrorist landscape will be more volatile as Islamist violence surges from a contingent of robust, thriving individual affiliates instead of from a central organization.

As argued in *A Threat Transformed*, the trend toward AQAM's decentralization has already begun.⁸ This assessment represents an extrapolation of the current course but envisions the wholesale collapse of al Qaeda core and a shift in the movement's center of gravity, changes that contribute to a more convoluted and lethal environment.

Scenario

Beginning with the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011, al Qaeda core was fatally weakened by unrelenting counterterrorism pressure over the following years. By 2020, al Qaeda core had deteriorated into obsolescence, yet affiliated groups proved capable of operating autonomously and advancing their ideology.

Despite the operational degradation of al Qaeda core, affiliates held onto elements of its ideological framework. During the last decade and a half, regional or local grievances remained salient in Muslim-majority countries, perpetuating the catalysts for radicalization. By 2025, affiliate groups had mastered the ability to seamlessly weave local grievances into a global movement—and they did so without guidance from al Qaeda core. By blurring these lines—targeting local “apostate” regimes and symbols of Western “occupiers”—affiliates simultaneously boosted their local profile while they projected power and attracted attention at the international level.

Building on this ideological resonance, al Qaeda affiliates gained momentum and by 2025 had become potent regional terror organizations and AQAM's center of gravity. Supported by extensive propaganda, each group developed strong and well-organized leadership cadres. After years of avoiding the brunt of U.S. counterterrorism pressure, al Qaeda affiliates established firmer tribal ties and a robust human infrastructure; as a result, many affiliates enjoyed more resilient sanctuary and were better able to resist counterterrorism pressure. Some groups even successfully infiltrated local governments, incapacitating host countries' ability to conduct counterterrorism operations and gather intelligence. New communications technologies enabled affiliates to communicate more securely within their organizations and between regions, fostering stronger linkages in planning and information sharing.

After three years of civil war in Yemen, the battle-hardened leadership of AQAP prosecuted its hybrid agenda most effectively. By 2025, AQAP had generated a substantial base of support,

8. Al Qaeda affiliates, like-minded groups, and al Qaeda-inspired cells and individuals have a larger role in global Islamist terrorism. See Rick “Ozzie” Nelson and Thomas A. Sanderson, with Amrit Bagia, Ben Bodurian, and David A. Gordon, *A Threat Transformed: Al Qaeda and Associated Movements in 2011* (Washington, DC: CSIS, February 2011), <http://csis.org/publication/threat-transformed>.

becoming the de facto governing body in the southern and eastern provinces of Yemen. From its stronghold among the tribes, AQAP waged a guerrilla war to establish an Islamic state across the southern Arabian Peninsula. Although it prioritized the domestic struggle against the Sana'a-based al-Ahmar regime, AQAP utilized its international branch, the Hadhramut Martyrs' Brigade (HMB), to attack U.S. interests on or around the Arabian Peninsula. By projecting its grievances externally, AQAP amassed popular support and gained the attention of sympathizers throughout the region. Yemeni, Saudi, and Kuwaiti militants flocked to HMB's stronghold in the port city of Al Mukalla to join the group.

Even without the unifying adhesive that al Qaeda core once provided, affiliates retained linkages for the purpose of sharing resources, exchanging tactical best practices, and sharing knowledge. In 2018, AQAP and al Shabaab established a convenient and lethal relationship that facilitated a steady flow of weapons, funds, and recruits.⁹ In an effort to fill their coffers, al Shabaab and HMB pursued a campaign of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, using tactics copied from Somali pirates to obtain ransom money. With al Shabaab and HMB in control of the coastline, Western navies were overburdened with maritime security responsibilities. Until 2020, piracy had not obstructed global trade enough to garner international support for significant military action. By 2025, however, pirate disruption of trade routes reached untenable levels, and terrorist funding from ransom payments exceeded historic amounts. In response, the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council nations were forced to implement an aggressive regional counterpiracy campaign.

Affiliate linkages were not limited to operational marriages of convenience; some groups had similar regional goals. In its quest to achieve a pan-African Islamic caliphate, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) expanded its reach into oil-rich Nigeria and established close links to Boko Haram, a Nigeria-based militant Islamist group.¹⁰ For AQIM, local Muslim sovereignty could be achieved only by ridding the entire region of former colonial powers and overthrowing secular governments. After the United States extended its campaign of strikes into the Sahel, AQIM responded by unleashing a wave of attacks against U.S. political interests in the region. Using funds derived from kidnapping, trafficking, and black-market oil revenues, AQIM simultaneously attacked Western oil infrastructure in West Africa and waged an insurgency against local authorities. In Mali, Libya, and Chad, AQIM operatives penetrated local security forces and set up a system to warn its members of impending counterterrorism raids, which severely handicapped efforts to combat the group. As kidnapping and assassinations ran rampant, the African Sahel region devolved into a hotbed of anti-Western violence.

After a tsunami in 2018 devastated the southern Philippines and parts of Indonesia, a public outcry against slow government response served as a catalyst for a new group, the Army of Islamic

9. Al Shabaab is an al Qaeda-affiliated organization that has risen rapidly to prominence in the midst of Somalia's decades-long anarchy. Originally the small, youth militia arm of a relatively moderate Islamist organization that rose to power in Somalia in early 2006, al Shabaab was radicalized and brought to prominence as a popular Islamist guerrilla movement in December of that year. Al Shabaab has more recently become a hybrid movement that has increasingly embraced transnational terrorism and attempted to portray itself as part of the al Qaeda-led global war against the West. For an analytic history of al Shabaab, see Rob Wise, *Al Shabaab*, Case Study no. 2 (Washington, DC: CSIS, July 2011), http://csis.org/files/publication/110715_Wise_AlShabaab_AQAM%20Futures%20Case%20Study_WEB.pdf.

10. Boko Haram translates to "Western education is forbidden." Also known as the Nigerian Taliban, Boko Haram seeks to overthrow the Nigerian government and impose Sharia law. See Lauren Ploch, *Nigeria: Elections and Issues for Congress*, Report no. RL33964 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 17, 2011), <http://openocrs.com/document/RL33964/>.

New Social Media and AQAM's Future

It is the human needs to connect, to be heard, and to be able to unite and organize around interests or a cause that are most vital in understanding the impact of social media. Wireless connectivity will be pervasive in the future—on subways, on airplanes, and on everything in between. People in every corner of the world will observe, analyze, and share from anywhere at any time; every connected person will have a platform and a megaphone.

Social media, as we now understand and experience them, did not exist 10 years ago. Yet the three giants of the industry have grown so rapidly and with such remarkably high adoption rates outside the United States that social media have become not only mainstream but also essential infrastructure.

Facebook, created in 2004, now boasts 750 million users; YouTube, begun in 2005, now services two billion requests per day, with fully three-quarters of requests coming from outside the United States; and Twitter, the soul of brevity, began in 2006 and already has 200 million users. There are myriad on-ramps for connectivity and networking, and the entry barriers to the social media realm are low and few.

What do the coming years portend for the growth and penetration of social media—and what will they do for both AQAM and its opponents? Highly secure, widely available mobile devices will enable individuals, cells, subcommunities, and larger groups with common interests to find one another and organize in an unprecedented fashion. Key influencers in or near these communities can then assemble, organize, and guide new constellations of actors in violent or destabilizing activities.

One component of enhanced communication, organization, and influence will be the production, manipulation, and dissemination of images and messages—challenging governments and other entities ill equipped to respond in kind. Taken together, these innovations will be a force multiplier for AQAM, boosting its ability to conduct operations and to survive probable countermeasures.

We have already seen the first successful steps in organizing around antiregime protests. Citizens, political candidates, and governments have taken notice; immediacy in organizing and messaging will influence the dynamics of cooperation, competition, and conflict and will change the future political and governance landscape. We are only just entering the realm of new social media—the future of this dynamic and powerful trend will certainly be profound in both positive and negative ways. This rapidly advancing technology will likely prove highly advantageous to AQAM, compelling counterterrorism forces to address the mounting threat head-on.

Union (AIU), to emerge as a destabilizing force in Southeast Asia. Started by prison inmates who had been radicalized by police violence, AIU was then bolstered by a handful of Indonesian students who had studied in Yemen during its civil crisis and had returned to the militant Islamic community seeking a change of government through violence. To gain support and funding from sympathetic Muslims worldwide, AIU unleashed a flurry of inflammatory propaganda blaming “illegitimate,” un-Islamic authorities—both regionally and globally—for their negligent response to the tsunami. Fueled by the desperation of flood victims, AIU’s impassioned rhetoric resonated widely and recruitment soared. The group was able to capitalize on the spread of Salafist sentiment to build up its regional infrastructure to hatch antiseccular plots in Indonesia, Brunei, and Malaysia. Singaporean intelligence also uncovered an attack planned against the headquarters of the Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines.

Technology was also crucial for facilitating the affiliate-driven movement. In 2025, advances in networked communications prove problematic for Western intelligence experts to penetrate, enabling distinct regional groups to expand their ties. Specifically, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) greatly improved its cyberprowess, which connected and empowered operatives in Pakistani diaspora communities who felt aggrieved by the West and India. On August 14, 2025, the 78th anniversary of Pakistani independence, LeT carried out a coordinated attack on popular military haunts in Plymouth (in the United Kingdom) and Mumbai (India), killing 203 people, including 87 military personnel.

Despite the proliferation of affiliates’ operations around the globe, the United States defended its homeland from attack. This success led to the unintended consequence of counterterrorism falling as a national security priority. By 2022, however, Americans were rudely awakened to the resurgence of Islamist violence under the affiliates. A raid by the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service on a safe house in Amsterdam revealed that representatives from Libya, Somalia, Yemen, and Nigeria had formed a Council of the Global Caliphate and were planning a federated attack against a variety of U.S. interests. Realizing that the growing global insurgency had evolved into a serious menace undermining U.S. security at home and abroad, U.S. officials scrambled to respond.

Analysis: Key Factors in Paradigm 2

Several geopolitical developments could engender the affiliate-driven movement envisioned in paradigm 2. Because affiliates are by their very nature decentralized, a range of local, regional, and international drivers might play a role in shaping this new strategic environment. This analysis, however, will focus on the five overarching developments that will most significantly influence the outlook for AQAM in 2025.

In the scenario for paradigm 2, we assume that counterterrorism operations in the FATA would fatally weaken al Qaeda core. The leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri might prove to be disastrously divisive, inciting ideological fissures and a breakdown in recruitment, funding, and operational planning. Further, if the Afghan Taliban enter the political process following a U.S. drawdown, their support for foreign terrorist groups may wane. Al Qaeda core, isolated and with precious few backers and a shrinking safe haven, would fade away, and the leadership of the broader movement would be stifled.

Some analysts suggest that the removal of **leadership**, specifically of al Qaeda core as a unifying authority, marks the beginning of the end of the global Islamist terrorism threat. Although

AQAM may lose some of its cohesiveness, it will lose none of its vigor as a network of affiliates. Instead, affiliates and associated groups could develop well and even flourish independent of al Qaeda core. These groups could have varied grievances or goals, some of which antedate al Qaeda core's global leadership, but they embrace an overarching strategic concept of resistance against an oppressor and utilize this universal narrative to further their own political agenda. By combining the local and the global elements of Islamist violence, affiliate leaders could enhance their political legitimacy and widen their target audience.

Another defining factor of the affiliate-driven outlook could be continued **ideological resonance** of al Qaeda's core message. The encroachment of Salafist ideology is already occurring in regions populated by more tolerant Sufi Muslims. If expectations of economic advancement and social equality are unfulfilled, a new generation of frustrated youth might be susceptible to a militant interpretation of Salafism. In some countries, such as Libya, Sudan, and Yemen, governments utterly lack the capacity to provide for the needs of their populations. In several parts of the world, a poorly managed response to a natural disaster or continued exploitation of resources might spark public outrage and civil discontent. Should these areas descend into chaos, al Qaeda affiliates might attempt to fill the resulting ideological vacuum with a blame narrative similar to the one spun by today's AQAM leaders. Effective propaganda will be key: by blaming the West and secular Muslims for local injustices, these groups could augment their recruitment and support base from within aggrieved neighborhoods, tribes, sects, refugee camps, and even among far-flung diaspora communities.

Locally focused groups might embrace al Qaeda core's ideology because it would raise awareness of and lend credibility to their local struggles. For example, the mutation of LeT from an al Qaeda-linked group into a transnational threat is well underway: LeT has fought in Kunar, Afghanistan; plotted to strike the U.S. embassy in Bangladesh; and singled out Westerners and the Jewish community during the 2009 attack in Mumbai. LeT's trend toward a more global agenda of violence—in part fueled by bin Laden's globalist ideology—could result in even greater efforts to strike Western targets. With significant Pakistani diaspora populations in the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Persian Gulf states, and a robust human infrastructure already in place in Pakistan today, LeT could easily become the most dangerous terrorist threat to the West by 2025.

The potentially limited successes of democratic reform movements might also evoke widespread **public dissatisfaction** and diminish the appeal of nonviolent political engagement. If economic stagnation, ineffective governance, and social stratification persist in parts of the Muslim-majority world where popular movements altered long-standing autocratic governments, greater levels of violence could be seen as the only means of political protest. In countries where democracy exists in name but not in practice, disenfranchised Muslims may abandon nonviolent protest in favor of violent action. Muslim separatist movements, such as those in Russia's North Caucasus and among Uighurs in Xinjiang, China, will likely continue to utilize terrorism to further their cause and attract the support of sympathetic Muslims. Even if an affiliate's struggle for liberation is local, embracing a global agenda could draw more attention and support to the cause. New affiliates might spring up in rejection of peaceful paths to political changes; small pro-al Qaeda cells composed of hard-line defectors from Hamas are already emerging in Gaza.

In the future, regional instability and civil strife will almost certainly persist and could even worsen around the globe. Affiliate groups might concurrently take advantage of this turmoil to regroup and ingratiate themselves with sympathetic layers of society, resulting in increased **safe haven** for al Qaeda affiliates. A nascent Libyan government in Benghazi might focus its atten-

tion on rebuilding governance for its power base in the east at the expense of those in Tripoli and elsewhere, allowing AQIM to take advantage of fertile recruitment and training grounds in a fractured Libya. Likewise, ineffective regimes in countries like Chad, Somalia, and Nigeria could leave ungoverned territories vulnerable to increased penetration by militant groups. It is conceivable that an arc of instability could solidify and worsen across the Sahara, Sahel, into the Horn of Africa, and through the Arabian Peninsula, facilitating rampant kidnapping, arms trafficking, and other illicit activities that would support regional and global operations.

The nature of **counterterrorism pressure** is likely to change in the coming years and will undoubtedly affect the affiliate-driven paradigm. After years of fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States and NATO will likely be hesitant about committing a large-scale troop presence to any new or festering hot spots of militant activity. Without significant military or counterterrorism forces focused on disrupting terrorist nodes, affiliate groups would not have to constantly move and would therefore have more room to recruit, plan, and execute terrorist operations. Two mutually reinforcing factors might precipitate a decrease in U.S. military and intelligence operations. First, the successful prevention of further terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland and fading memories of 9/11 could generate complacency and a sense of relative safety. For some Americans, bin Laden's death signaled a major victory, and without a successful attack on U.S. soil their willingness to expend more resources might be curtailed. Second, congressional concerns over the budget combined with a domestic focus on the lingering economic malaise might lead to a decreased U.S. presence abroad.

Even if the United States and its allies do not substantially reduce overseas operations, they might face diminished cooperation from regional governments. Some post-Arab Spring governments will likely be less amenable to cooperate with U.S. counterterrorism efforts, limiting the ability of the United States to target remaining al Qaeda adherents effectively. Furthermore, radical Islamist groups might not face the severe repression that they did under regimes like Mubarak's in Egypt or Saleh's in Yemen. As a result, al Qaeda affiliates might more aggressively recruit among populations that were previously more difficult to reach.

Alternatively, a reduction of U.S. counterterrorism pressure could cause a shift among some militant groups away from a staunchly anti-American orientation. U.S. intervention has been a strong driver of recruitment for al Qaeda, and with the foreign enemy out of sight, certain groups might focus inward on the domestic causes of their grievances. Even with a drawdown of any large-scale Western military presence in Muslim countries, however, targeted counterterrorism operations will continue to provide fuel for AQAM's recruitment and will motivate militants to strike at Western targets to which they have access.

With such a diverse spectrum of threatening affiliate groups, the United States and its allies may find that targeting one group will not significantly degrade others. A lapse in counterterrorism focus on these regional affiliates might mean a precipitous increase in these groups' lethality. This new strategic environment, which could resemble a global insurgency, would require U.S. officials to combat several durable and self-sustaining groups that enjoy greater operational capacity and local sympathy than al Qaeda core's centrally inspired but marginalized movement. If left untouched, the intensity of the Islamist threat may surprise the West in 2025, making the counterterrorism landscape even more challenging and complex than what it is today. What follows is a tabular representation of the key factors that were highlighted in this analysis section as well as indicators that these factors may be emerging.

Indicators for Paradigm 2

Factor	Scenario-specific event	Scenario-specific impact	Indicators
Leadership	Al Qaeda core is removed as unifying authority of global Islamist movement	Affiliate groups flourish independently; affiliate leaders' legitimacy is enhanced at the regional and local levels	Evidence of sophisticated planning in regional plots; highly publicized statements garner regional leaders substantial recognition and credibility among local Muslim populations
Public dissatisfaction	Limited or unsuccessful democratic reform diminishes appeal of nonviolent political engagement; disillusioned Muslims turn to violence	Demands for political change (such as national liberation or Islamist governance) are increasingly expressed through violence	Decline in popularity of peaceful political parties; rise in terrorist attacks on democratic institutions and voting sites near election dates; assassination attempts on secular pro-democracy leaders
Ideological resonance	Governments in Muslim-majority countries such as Yemen, Nigeria, Libya, and Indonesia are unable to provide effective governance or social services, so grievances persist	Regional affiliates exploit grievances to further their local agendas; groups augment recruitment and support by blaming the West, un-Islamic regimes, or both; Sufi Muslims increasingly convert to militant Salafism	Strong regional grievance-based propaganda campaigns spring up in hot spots of economic or social problems; uptick in communications and funds flowing between Muslim diaspora and extremist groups in their home countries; young Muslims flock to religious schools espousing radical or militant interpretation of Islam
Safe havens	Turmoil and civil strife ignite or stoke regional instability, reducing territorial control and creating sanctuary for affiliates	Affiliates regroup, ingratiate with sympathetic tribes or urban neighborhoods, and exploit ungoverned territories	Influx of foreign militants to area; emergence of alternative forms of governance in area; emergence of fixed terrorist or insurgent infrastructure in area (including camps and safe houses) constructed on previously uninhabited land; substantial increase in piracy, kidnapping, arms trafficking, and other illicit activities helpful to terrorist operations

Factor	Scenario-specific event	Scenario-specific impact	Indicators
Reduced counterterrorism pressure	Military fatigue, public complacency and budgetary concerns mean counterterrorism falls in priority among U.S. policymakers; U.S. counterterrorism efforts face reduced partner nation capacity and cooperation from Muslim-majority states	Increased physical operating room and greater freedom of political expression enable affiliates to expand recruitment, training, planning, and execution of terrorist plots	Evidence of thriving training camps, militant religious schools, or robust safe house networks; increase in quantity and lethality of terrorist attacks globally

Paradigm 3: A Lone-Wolf AQAM by 2025

Paradigm 3 demonstrates how a decentralized constellation of independent actors (lone wolves) and small cells inspired by al Qaeda’s ideology could replace the current model of AQAM by 2025. The scenario presumes that, after years of unrelenting counterterrorism efforts, al Qaeda core and its various regional affiliates can no longer sustain their organizational infrastructure and are forced to dissolve. Salafi-jihadist ideologies continue to attract a diverse range of disaffected individuals, however, and in some cases inspire them to take violent action. By abandoning any traditional group structure and instead relying on information and communication technology to disseminate propaganda, tactics, and guidance across a loosely bound network of individuals and small cells, the movement has become nearly impossible for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to detect or disrupt.

Scenario

By 2018, comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism operations had taken a heavy toll on hierarchical AQAM groups. Traditional geographic safe havens, subject to precise and relentless military and intelligence operations by the United States and its partners, no longer offered protection for groups to train, recruit, or organize attacks. Degraded to the point that they could no longer command or control terrorist attacks internationally, these groups increasingly called for Muslims around the world, particularly those in the West, to undertake “individual jihad.” As the last remnants of these groups were destroyed or went into hiding, their aggressive use of the Internet to circulate ideology and the call to arms breathed life into the al Qaeda movement. Individuals from around the world united online as a community with shared grievances against the United States and other states they viewed to be oppressing Islam.

As information and communication technology evolved, the al Qaeda movement grew rapidly and became the primary means of carrying on AQAM’s struggle. A firebrand theologian in Malaysia could broadcast his sermons in a range of languages using online translators directly to the smartphones of followers across the globe, each of whom could pass his lecture to others. In a virtual world, would-be terrorists from the suburbs of Paris, France, and Maiduguri, Nigeria, “met” through the use of avatars and animated features, with a former member of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to receive bomb-making instruction. All that was needed was one major event to force the lone wolves out of their homes and onto the streets to cause havoc and terror.

In June 2025, a group of 60 Muslims, many of whom converted to Islam while serving prison sentences for violent felonies, settled in a compound located outside of Detroit, Michigan. Acting on a tip that these convicted felons were illegally stockpiling large quantities of firearms and explosives on the compound, a U.S. law enforcement task force prepared a raid. As the task force surrounded the compound, the compound leaders made calls to the mainstream media and al Qaeda propagandists who, in turn, reported the unfolding events live to supporters on the Internet. Shots were fired at government agents from inside the compound, and in the ensuing firefight a small girl living in the compound was killed. The media immediately transmitted the image of her lifeless body to a global audience, and graphic video of the tragedy went viral, providing the al Qaeda movement the fuel it needed to transform anger into action. The al Qaeda virtual community exploded with tactical tips, suggested hit lists, and spiritual inspiration.

Without the direction of a single leader, these radicals instead embraced the sowing of chaos as their strategy. They hoped small, constant, and unpredictable attacks would prompt governments to overreact and alienate their Muslim populations, thus mobilizing a global Islamist awakening. Extremists struck everywhere and anywhere.¹¹ In one single day in Dallas, Seattle, and Brooklyn, three men who had never met except online walked into local malls and opened fire on shoppers. A video of a man attacking an Australian cabinet minister with a hatchet went viral, sparking a rash of similar attacks on government officials around the world. Firebombs were hurled at a Western government or corporate office somewhere in the world nearly every day. Hotel guests in Abu Dhabi and in Copenhagen were held hostage and systematically executed as demands to the government were not met. Without the levels of resources and training available to traditional terrorist groups, many of these attacks were crude; yet because they were decentralized the lone-wolf al Qaeda movement seemed almost impossible to stop. As police and other first-responder agencies around the world appeared helpless in the face of the madness, confidence in governments sank precipitously. Assassinations, riots, arson, looting, and vandalism proliferated, with the lone-wolf al Qaeda movement fanning the flames.

Analysis: Key Factors in Paradigm 3

Counterterrorism pressure on al Qaeda core and AQAM may stimulate lone-wolf activism, as traditional leaders are eliminated, geographic safe havens are compromised, and groups' abilities to plan and train become constrained.

Lone-wolf activism, in theory, should eliminate many opportunities for counterterrorism interdiction, giving al Qaeda more chances for operational success, as actors do not require extensive two-way communication with a cell commander; neither do they need to travel or receive tactical training, nor do they even depend on outside funding. In other words, lone wolves lack many of the attributes and requirements that governments rely on to detect and interdict terrorist plots and activities.

11. Precedence for such unsophisticated but widespread attacks can be found in August 2005, when terror group Jamaat-UlMujahideen Bangladesh detonated more than 500 crude bombs across 64 of Bangladesh's 65 districts in the space of a single hour. This attack was intended to bring down the Bangladesh government by creating chaos and panic. See International Crisis Group, *The Threat from Jamaat-UlMujahideen Bangladesh*, ICG Asia Report no. 187 (Dhaka and Brussels: International Crisis Group, March 1, 2010), [www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-asia/bangladesh/187_the_threat_from_jamaat_ul_mujahideen_bangladesh.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-asia/bangladesh/187_the_threat_from_jamaat_ul_mujahideen_bangladesh.ashx).

Some terrorist groups appear to be aware of the vulnerabilities of traditional structures, and several have already started trending toward a more individualized model. Indonesian militants, for example, have been advocating the use of small attack cells and individual jihad instead of large-group structure as a means to ensure survivability if key personnel are arrested or plans are disrupted.¹² Abu Musab al-Suri's theory of individual terrorism jihad posits that warfare carried out by individuals or small cells will pave the way for eventual takeover and control of territory, at which point larger organizations may resume the command-and-control function.¹³ When executed at an accelerated tempo, lone-wolf terrorist attacks are intended to accomplish the same outcome as attacks perpetrated by traditional terrorist organizations: to drain economies and to spread fear and panic on the scale of 9/11. Shoppers will be reluctant to visit shopping malls if they fear random shootings, while tourism in big cities will decline if car bombings are frequent and unpredictable.

Al Qaeda ideologues have already begun to inspire individuals to act by emphasizing that it is incumbent upon all Muslims to participate in armed struggle, even if they are not in a position to travel to obtain training or receive any other direct guidance from an actual terrorist organization. Even without direct contact, al Qaeda considers all Muslims who take up arms against their enemies to be part of the al Qaeda movement. In an October 2010 video, Adam Gadahn, an American al Qaeda spokesman, acknowledged Nidal Malik Hasan, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, Mohammad Sidiq Khan, and Faisal Shahzad, showing that terrorist attacks undertaken by independent cells and individuals are welcomed and will be glorified by al Qaeda leadership.¹⁴

Indeed, the steady call for lone-wolf attacks by al Qaeda ideologues such as Anwar al-Awlaki and Adam Gadahn has already resulted in an increase of such attacks perpetrated by individuals who have no direct ties to al Qaeda core or any other terrorist group except through **information and communication technology**. By and large, independent actors who have already committed or attempted to commit attacks were radicalized and inspired by material they viewed on video-sharing sites, chat forums, and terrorist websites. Examples include Nidal Malik Hasan and Michael Finton, who was arrested after a controlled operation in which he plotted to bomb the federal building in Springfield, Illinois. In July 2010, a 20-year-old member of the Singapore armed forces was arrested under Singapore's Internal Security Act after having been radicalized by Awlaki's online lectures and subsequently producing and posting a video that glorified suicide bombings.¹⁵ In London in May 2010, 21-year-old Roshonara Choudhry, after being radicalized by material she had viewed online, including lectures by Awlaki, stabbed a member of Parliament.¹⁶

12. International Crisis Group, *Indonesian Jihadism: Small Groups, Big Plans*, ICG Asia Report no. 204 (Jakarta and Brussels: International Crisis Group, April 19, 2011), www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/indonesia/204%20Indonesian%20Jihadism%20%20Small%20Groups%20Big%20Plans.ashx.

13. Abu Musab al-Suri, "The Jihadi Experiences: The Military Theory of Open Fronts," *Inspire 4* (Winter 2010): p. 31, <http://info.publicintelligence.net/InspireJanuary2011.pdf>.

14. Nidal Malik Hasan killed 13 and wounded more than 30 others in Fort Hood, TX; Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to destroy a plane over Detroit by detonating a bomb concealed in his underwear; Mohammad Sidiq Khan led the UK 7/7 attack cell; and Faisal Shahzad attempted to set off an explosion at Times Square in May 2010. See Adam Gadahn, *The Arabs and Muslims: Between the Confernces of Desertion and the Individual Duty of Jihad*, part 2 (n.p.: As-Sahab Media, October 26, 2010), www.nefafoundation.org/index.cfm?pageID=32.

15. Mustafa Shafawi and Imelda Saad, "Self-Radicalized 20-Year-Old NSman Detained under ISA," *Channelnewsasia.com*, July 6, 2010, www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1067829/1/.html.

16. Vikram Dodd, "Profile: Roshonara Choudhry," *The Guardian*, November 2, 2010, www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/nov/02/profile-roshonara-choudhry-stephen-timms.

The Internet is being used not only for radicalization but, increasingly, for the dissemination of tactical knowledge and attack planning. Individuals, such as Faisal Shahzad, have used various forms of electronic messaging to communicate about plots and have used online resources to conduct surveillance on potential targets. Khalid Aldawsari, a Saudi Arabian student who was arrested in Lubbock, Texas, in February 2011 after he plotted to bomb targets in the United States with explosives, culled bomb-making instructions from various websites. AQAP's magazine, *Inspire*, available online, provides guidance on how to construct explosives and provides tactical instruction on turning conventional items into weapons. Would-be Portland, Oregon, bomber Mohamed Osman Mohamud wrote a number of articles for the online magazine, *Jihad Recollections*, in which he offered advice on how terrorists could stay in shape.¹⁷

As the architecture needed to disseminate and support extremism online becomes less centralized and the ease with which radical material can be posted persists, the ability of counterterrorism entities to combat this extremism will be increasingly challenged. Because of the Internet's past utility and supposing a growing complexity in monitoring electronic content effectively, those influenced by al Qaeda's ideology will most likely continue to flood the Internet and other communication technology with their messages as well as their operational advice.

Even if support from al Qaeda's larger recruitment populations dries up in the coming years as a result of counterterrorism pressure and public rejection, AQAM's **ideological resonance** will persist among a select group of individuals frustrated by a range of global, local, or personal grievances. With or without al Qaeda core, the al Qaeda ideology will continue to provide aggrieved individuals a framework within which to articulate their frustrations and a road map to a solution.

For the time being, the lone-wolf movement is formed around propaganda that is generated primarily by al Qaeda core and AQAP. *Inspire*, for example, is entirely intended for lone-wolf actors' consumption. As the movement evolves, however, and as the leaders of al Qaeda core and associated groups are eliminated or forced to retreat, the lone-wolf movement may become more scattered, settling around a greater number of ideological hubs. New types of leadership, based on the ability to communicate doctrine, may emerge and establish operational credibility. Lone-wolf actors who have committed successful attacks will be lionized, and the network may broaden to include "average Joes" with innovative ideas, thus creating a free market of militant ideas and a latent ideological base that can easily be mobilized to violence. Individuals will have the capability to broadcast images from their attacks nearly instantaneously, which may inspire others to move quickly to compound the impact by committing more attacks.

The combination of factors, outlined here, supports the case that the lone-wolf movement will continue to thrive. If counterterrorism pressure continues to increase, lone-wolf activism may be the most viable way to sustain AQAM from a strategic and practical standpoint. By 2025, individual jihad may therefore take center stage as the primary tactic used by the al Qaeda movement to advance its goals. What follows is a tabular representation of the key factors that were highlighted in this analysis section, as well as indicators that these factors may be emerging.

17. Mohamed Osman Mohamud, "Getting in Shape without Weights," *Jihad Recollections*, April 2009, reprinted in "Would-Be Portland Bomber Mohamed Osman Mohamud (a/k/a 'Ibn al-Mubarak'): "Getting in Shape Without Weights," *Flashpoint Partners*, 2010, www.globalterroralert.com/images/documents/pdf/1010/flashpoint_portlandbombplotjihadrec1.pdf.

Indicators for Paradigm 3

Factor	Scenario-specific event	Scenario-specific impact	Indicators
Counter-terrorism pressure	Counterterrorism pressure becomes so great on hierarchical AQAM structures that traditional geographic safe havens are no longer viable	AQAM disperses and structure flattens; attack planning and circulation of ideology occur on a grass-roots level	Groups no longer operate out of geographic safe havens; greater emphasis placed on individual jihad by AQAM's leadership
Information and communication technology (ICT)	Rapid advances in ICT allow the growth of truly global individualized movement through online dissemination of propaganda, training, and operational planning material	ICT allows broader participation in the movement; individual terrorists are less reliant on key leaders or personnel; ideology is more widely dispersed; individuals possess the ability to launch attacks that are crude yet difficult to interdict	Rise in traffic on Internet forums and social networking sites that act as hubs for the movement; exploitation of new technologies by participants in the movement; increase in the visibility of propaganda on social media
Ideological resonance	Anger over both global and local grievances persists and feeds into AQAM's narrative, while ICT technology allows individuals to consume more targeted propaganda as well as create and distribute their own	Continued grievances as well as the ability to easily consume and create individualized propaganda mean a wider array of individuals are motivated to attack both Western and local targets	More variations of AQAM doctrine become visible; anger at the West and local governments continues to be on display; uptick in attacks launched by small cells and individuals; adoption of al Qaeda terminology by lone-wolf actors when they express grievances

Paradigm 4: AQAM Becomes a State Actor by 2025

Paradigm 4 explores the defining factors that would enable AQAM to establish itself as a state actor. We premise this on the expectation that a conglomerate—comprising Pakistan-based terrorist and insurgent groups—would continue to pursue AQAM's core objectives, retain its ideology, and expand to assume governing authority over a territory, including provision of some basic social services, formation of a militia, construction of infrastructure, and establishment of a traditional adjudications regime.

Scenario

During the 2012 presidential election, the Obama administration continued a steady withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. By 2015, U.S. forces turned over complete responsibility for security to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). This transition occurred without adequate political progress, and the ANSF faced high levels of insurgent violence.

Radicalization Conundrum

By Arnaud de Borchgrave

Daily Internet traffic is estimated to run at the rate of 650 times the entire Library of Congress with its 32 million books in 470 languages, 61 million manuscripts, 6 million sheets of music, and 10,000 new items every 24 hours for a total of 0.02 petabytes. The jungle of the Internet in cyberspace has also shortened the process of radicalization and training to commit acts of terrorism from two and a half years to six weeks.

It took Osama bin Laden two and a half years to plan and execute attacks against the World Trade Center's twin towers, the Pentagon, and a fourth target that was aborted by passengers in a plane that crashed in Pennsylvania. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian underwear bomber, was contacted, recruited, and trained in six weeks to blow up a passenger plane coming in for a landing in Detroit. The attempt was aborted by a fellow passenger.

Poor young Muslims in Europe and bored young Muslims in the United States spend hours online, where they become malleable for extremist recruiters who dazzle them with prospects for a more exciting life. Trips to novel destinations like Somalia, Yemen, and tribal areas of Pakistan sound a little more venturesome than a slum in Marseilles or a middle-class suburb of Minneapolis.

Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other terrorist-prone groups make extensive use of the Internet in the battle for hearts and minds. Some terrorist organizations have an elaborate infrastructure of up to 20 websites in seven languages—Arabic, English, French, Russian, Urdu, Malay, and Turkish. Meanwhile, cost-cutting VOA and BBC shrink both bureaus and foreign language broadcasts.

The anonymity and speed of the 'Net stack the odds against cyber counterterrorism, let alone cyber counterradicalization. U.S. electronic countermeasures have a good handle on larger groups, both up and downstream. The smaller ones still defy the odds.

As the United States extricated itself from Afghanistan, its relationship with Pakistan deteriorated further. Insurgents assassinated a high-level U.S. diplomat in Peshawar, and only a few months later killed several more Americans in a mortar attack on the U.S. embassy in Islamabad. No longer reliant on Pakistan to provide safe passage for supplies bound for Afghanistan, the U.S. Congress demanded increasingly stringent conditions for continued U.S. aid disbursements. In late 2015, congressional leaders voted to cancel all military aid to Pakistan, citing ongoing ties between the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) and several militant groups. This decision reinforced the narrative within Pakistan that the United States is a fickle partner, further exacerbating anti-U.S. sentiment within Pakistani society to previously unseen levels.

Fearful that India would increase its investment or station security forces in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal, Pakistan's ISI increased military aid to the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Taliban went on the offensive, solidifying control over several key areas in eastern Afghanistan. The United States recognized what was taking place in Afghanistan but, after receiving assurances from Mullah Omar's intermediaries that he would not welcome back al Qaeda core, decided against taking action.

In response to its rival's aggressive new campaign, the Northern Alliance reconstituted its military capabilities. By 2017, the ISI-backed Afghan Taliban had established de facto control over the Pashtun areas of much of southern Afghanistan while the Northern Alliance consolidated its hold in the northern parts of the country. In this sense, control meant that the Afghan Taliban and Northern Alliance held near monopolies on violence in their respective spheres of influence; both entities also sought to regulate regional economic activity and administer tribal justice. The two sides skirmished periodically, but a sustainable status quo emerged.

In most ways the situation in Afghanistan seemed to represent the best possible outcome for Pakistan's military leadership and reinforced to it the value of cultivating armed proxies. Further emboldened by its greatly expanded nuclear arsenal, the Pakistani establishment decided to escalate militant activity in Kashmir with the hope that a reinvigorated campaign there would reorient indigenously based, anti-Pakistan groups, such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), against India.

Backed with fresh support from the ISI, LeT led this new campaign, executing a series of high-profile attacks in major Indian cities. Other groups attacked Indian garrisons in disputed parts of Kashmir while organizations with roots in western Pakistan stepped up attacks on Indian interests in Afghanistan. The Indian military responded by launching targeted raids on suspected LeT camps along with cutting off diplomatic relations with Islamabad, but India avoided a larger-scale response for fear of triggering a nuclear exchange on the subcontinent. Instead, the Indian government spearheaded an international campaign to diplomatically and economically isolate Pakistan. The United States, the European Union, and several East Asian countries, which saw Pakistani-backed militancy as an ever-increasing threat to regional stability, global security, and the West's interests in the region, enacted broad-based sanctions on Pakistani imports and exports and targeted high-ranking Pakistani military and intelligence officials with asset freezes and travel bans. The sanctions put the Pakistani economy in a free fall, and Islamabad found itself in an increasingly precarious position both internally and internationally.

Feeling the strain, Pakistan's leadership sought to rein in militant groups operating against India by cutting funding and publicly calling for a rapprochement between Islamabad and New Delhi, yet the opportunity for a genuine shift in policy had passed. By this point, Pakistan's

state-sponsored militant groups had become self-sufficient enough to reject Islamabad's call for an end to militant violence and tended to view this shift in policy as a betrayal of the Pakistani government's Muslim brethren who had long opposed India. Former Pakistani proxies like LeT joined with groups like the TTP and focused the entire force of their operational capacity on the "traitors" in Islamabad.

By the early 2020s a powerful syndicate of militant groups was waging an increasingly deadly insurgency directly against the Pakistani state. Although there were exceptions, most insurgent operations targeted the Pakistani security forces and government while seeking to avoid civilian casualties. At the same time, the insurgency sought to provide services to disenfranchised communities long ignored by the government. These actions resulted in growing popular support for the insurgency within Pakistani society and even within the military, which had seen decades of growing radicalization among the officer ranks.

In 2024, the insurgency formally merged into a conglomerate named al Mo'mineen (the Believers). Although the insurgency was composed of various elements with differing outlooks and enemy hierarchies, years of operational cooperation had blurred the lines between these groups. Al Mo'mineen began consolidating control over several districts and formalizing their administration. After a massive earthquake hit parts of Punjab, the Pakistani government's response was slow and limited, yet al Mo'mineen stepped in immediately to provide relief, expanding its influence.

Although the majority of Pakistanis were wary of al Mo'mineen's strict enforcement of religious doctrine, they preferred it to the corrupt and ineffective government. After significant units within the Pakistan Army laid down their arms in support of the group, U.S. intelligence grew fearful that the group had penetrated top levels of the Pakistani state. Now in control of much of Pakistan, al Mo'mineen issued a founding charter declaring its territory an Islamic state and stating ambitions to spread its version of Islam throughout the region and, ultimately, the world. Al Mo'mineen's ideology was heavily influenced by al Qaeda core, as for decades a number of senior leaders in the group had fought alongside al Qaeda members. Al Mo'mineen sought to topple what remained of the fractured Pakistani government and acquire control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

Analysis: Key Factors in Paradigm 4

The scenario presented in paradigm 4 describes an environment in which the conditions are ripe for AQAM to establish control over a territory and populace. Such a territory would not only provide sanctuary for that group but would also come with a support base willing to defend its "borders" against mutual enemies. In this scenario, a range of internal and external factors enabled AQAM to establish such a base. Although the specific conditions discussed below are unique to Pakistan, similar circumstances are evident in other parts of the world.

A primary factor that sets the stage for AQAM takeover in Pakistan is **inadequate governance**. From its birth, Pakistan has enjoyed little political or economic stability. The state is fractured along a variety of lines, and its history has been marked by destabilizing cycles of military coups succeeded by weak and corrupt civilian governance. Unemployment and inflation are on the rise, and reconstruction costs from recent floods and earthquakes have placed almost unbearable strains on the Pakistani economy. In the years ahead, the continuation of such political and economic maladies may cause Pakistanis, increasingly dissatisfied with the current system's shortcomings, to reject the legitimacy of the established government. Should an alternative model be offered

by Islamist militants in the future, hostility toward the current government may rise, and AQAM might attain a new level of legitimacy.

Years of systematic neglect in the FATA, in particular, could contribute to the rise of AQAM as a state actor. Historically, the FATA has been governed by the elders of the indigenous tribal groups, with Islamabad unable to exert noticeable control. During the 1980s, as part of a campaign to resist the Soviets in Afghanistan, large sums of monetary aid flowed into the FATA from both Western and Persian Gulf nations. Simultaneously, foreign fighters from a number of Muslim countries traveled to Pakistan to take up the fight. As this conflict came to an end, so too did the flow of money. Within this environment of neglect, the foreign fighters who remained in the area took advantage of the government's absence to spread their radical ideology and ingratiate themselves with local tribes, leading to the spread of militant Islamic radicalism throughout the region.¹⁸ Since then, halfhearted attempts at economic assistance have been sabotaged by corrupt government representatives who divert funds into their own pockets.¹⁹ Efforts by the government to strike peace deals with militant groups have failed,²⁰ and military initiatives to pinpoint foreign terrorists and remove them have not been definitive. The dearth of government influence in the FATA will likely be a problem in the years ahead, as these areas provide AQAM with a solid foothold from which it could grow into a legitimate rival to the government in Islamabad.

Pakistan has a history of **state sponsorship** of terrorist and militant groups, and an intensification of this support might provide these groups an opportunity for a significant expansion of their power. The military sees certain groups as a strategic tool to defend its claimed territory against superior Indian forces. Specifically, Pakistan's ISI has sponsored groups in Kashmir, including LeT, which is believed to be responsible for the November 2008 Mumbai massacre.²¹ Although then-president Pervez Musharraf banned LeT in 2002, there are no indications that Pakistan intends to truly dismantle the group as Pakistan views LeT to be a vital component of the nation's strategic posture. Further, Pakistan maintains significant and long-standing ties to the Afghan Taliban. The Pakistani government has directly sponsored the movement in the past and continues to allow it to operate on Pakistani soil, viewing it as a hedge against Indian influence in Afghanistan.

Through its support of these groups, the Pakistani state has created a dangerous stew of radical militancy within its borders. Pakistani state sponsorship of these groups, some associated with al Qaeda core, has already begun to threaten the nation's stability. Several groups originally created by Pakistan to fight India have already reoriented themselves against Islamabad, and the radicalism tacitly sponsored by the government in Kashmir and in the FATA has increasingly seeped back into mainstream Pakistani society and even into the military itself.²² If Pakistan were to continue or even increase support for Islamist militancy in the future, it is possible that these groups and their radical influence could grow so strong as to allow them to challenge the government for control of both territory and segments of the populace.

18. Rohan Gunaratna and Khuram Iqbal, *Pakistan: Terrorism Ground Zero* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. Jayshree Bajoria and Eben Kaplan, "The ISI and Terrorism: Behind the Accusations" (New York and Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, May 4, 2011), www.cfr.org/pakistan/isi-terrorism-behind-accusations/p11644.

22. *Ibid.*

A lack of **counterterrorism pressure** may further allow AQAM to solidify itself as a state actor in this region. Although they are publicly proclaimed allies in the fight against terrorism, the United States and Pakistan have experienced a growing rift in their relations. The United States has provided more than \$20 billion in aid to Pakistan since 2002, largely to the military, yet has found Islamabad recalcitrant when it comes to meaningfully combating certain violent extremist groups operating within its borders, particularly those it views as assets.²³ Further, Pakistan has become increasingly difficult for the United States to partner with as it has demanded an end to U.S. operations on its soil and ejected a number of U.S. military trainers.²⁴ As long as sponsorship for militant groups remains an integral component of Pakistan's strategic posture, there will continue to be a fundamental discontinuity between Pakistani and U.S. interests.

An end to partnership between the United States and Pakistan could certainly jeopardize U.S. efforts to pursue AQAM. The United States has relied heavily on Pakistani intelligence in the past, and without Pakistan's support for counterterrorism operations the United States and the international community would be left with a weaker lens on the region and fewer options to resolve the threat. If relations between the United States and Pakistan continue to deteriorate, terrorist groups will likely benefit from the lack of sustained counterterrorism pressure; by 2025, AQAM may enjoy a considerably more favorable operating environment to recruit, train, plan, and execute attacks.

Lack of confidence in the Pakistani government coupled with growing antipathy toward the United States may boost the **ideological resonance** of the AQAM narrative within Pakistan. A level of discontent already exists in Pakistan, and AQAM has begun to successfully exploit some of these grievances. For example, AQAM has played up U.S. presence in Pakistan in an attempt to bolster its appeal among receptive segments of the population. Close to 75 percent of Pakistanis have negative opinions of the United States.²⁵ Although negative opinions of the United States do not necessarily translate to support for AQAM, they may at least make the Pakistani population more amenable to some of al Qaeda's core ideological tenets. Furthermore, the Pakistani government is losing legitimacy in the eyes of many of its constituents, and religious radicalization is on the rise. These trends will likely continue, increasing AQAM's ideological support. In the future, AQAM may become even more adept at spreading its ideological appeal into broader segments of the Pakistani population.

The provision of social services has, in the past, been a vehicle with which terrorist groups can boost their ideological resonance. Hamas presents an example of a terrorist group that has successfully utilized its governing responsibility to enhance its ideological appeal. Likewise, LeT, a group that would likely play a significant role in the future of any Islamist movement in Pakistan, currently delivers social services in its area of operation while reaping the benefits in terms of popular support.²⁶ Even al Qaeda core has discussed the provision of services to Pakistanis.

23. Ben Arnoldy and Issam Ahmed, "US Aid in Pakistan: Where's the Money Going?" *Christian Science Monitor*, May 18, 2011, www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2011/0518/US-aid-in-Pakistan-Where-s-the-money-going/How-much-US-money-is-in-Pakistan.

24. Karen DeYoung and Karin Brulliard, "Pakistan Ordered about a Fifth of U.S. Special Forces Trainers to Leave the Country as Relations Deteriorated," *Washington Post*, May 20, 2011, www.washingtonpost.com/world/bomb-targeted-at-us-vehicles-injures-13-in-pakistan-city/2011/05/20/AFryUb7G_story.html.

25. Pew Global Attitudes Project, "U.S. Image in Pakistan Falls No Further Following bin Laden Killing," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, June 21, 2011, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2032/pakistan-public-opinion-osama-bin-laden-india-terrorism-al-qaeda-american-image>.

26. Haider Ali Hussein Mullick, *Al Qaeda and Pakistan: Current Role and Future Considerations* (Clinton Township, MI: Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, October 2010), <http://ispu.org/pdfs/>

Following the 2010 floods that affected much of the country, bin Laden issued a statement calling for the provision of aid and the creation of a “capable relief task force that has the knowledge and experience needed.”²⁷ Given the connection between providing services and building a foundation among the population, the rise of a group such as al Mo’mineen through these means would be entirely feasible. By providing a neglected population with basic amenities, al Mo’mineen could establish a stronghold within Pakistan, bringing it one step closer to al Qaeda’s objective of creating an Islamic state.²⁸

With such a fertile territory in which to operate, dozens of groups have made Pakistan their primary base of operations, and the connections between these various groups appear to be growing. Fighters from LeT, for example, have reportedly trained and fought alongside members of a variety of other groups, including al Qaeda core.²⁹ Although the group has traditionally focused on Kashmir, it is reported to be spreading operations through southern Punjab, Sindh, and eastern Afghanistan.³⁰ In the tribal regions, Saudi fighters, Uighurs, and Uzbeks share the same camps with members of indigenous Pakistani groups. The overlap in personnel and training has been instrumental in the expansion of terrorist operations worldwide. It was **networking** such as this that originally helped give rise to the global jihad movement spearheaded by al Qaeda core. The relationships forged on today’s battlefield are likely to be enduring ones and could catalyze the formation of a resilient conglomerate of Pakistani militant groups in the future. Further, the sharing of resources—including personnel, skills, and weapons—may augment the groups’ capabilities. As these connections metastasize, disparate groups will likely be drawn closer together, increasing AQAM’s power exponentially.

The factors detailed in this analysis highlight conditions that could convincingly lead to AQAM’s emergence as a state actor by 2025. What follows is a tabular representation of the key factors that were highlighted in this analysis section as well as indicators that these factors may be emerging.

Indicators for Paradigm 4

Factor	Scenario-specific event	Scenario-specific impact	Indicators
State sponsorship	The Pakistani military and the ISI support Kashmir and FATA-based groups in order to mitigate Indian influence in Afghanistan and on the India-Pakistan border	Experiencing years of material and financial support from the government allows the groups to become self-sufficient and gain influence over a territory historically neglected by the state	Overt establishment of permanent training camps; free movement of operatives; leaders operating in plain sight are not captured or eliminated; uptick in intelligence reporting of government officials meeting with terrorist operatives

Al_Qaeda_and_Pakistan_Report_-_Haider_Mullick.pdf

27. “Bin Laden Addresses Climate Change,” *Al Jazeera*, October 1, 2010, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2010/10/201010115560631340.html>.

28. Osama bin Laden, “Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,” *Al Quds Al Arabi*, August 1996, www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html.

29. Mullick, *Al Qaeda and Pakistan*.

30. *Ibid.*

Factor	Scenario-specific event	Scenario-specific impact	Indicators
Ideological resonance	AQAM takes advantage of a population that is increasingly radicalized; AQAM uses U.S. and Indian military strikes to create more effective propaganda material; AQAM also steps in to supply relief after natural disasters	AQAM positions itself as viable alternative to state leadership; AQAM harnesses rampant anti-American sentiment, and its ideology resonates among ever-broader segments of the population	Public acknowledgment of AQAM as governing body by populations; spread of AQAM influence beyond immediate regions under its control; increase in travel and immigration to the region of supporters desiring to defend and become "citizens" of AQAM-controlled territory
Networking	AQAM groups engage in joint attacks against Pakistan; they share mutual objectives and harbor the same grievances against the United States, India, Pakistan, and the West	Years of tactical and logistical cooperation cement relationships between Kashmir- and FATA-based group leaders; the groups merge into a terrorist syndicate known as al Mo'mineen	Overlap of operatives from different groups in training camps; joint statements taking credit for terrorist attacks; jointly produced propaganda videos with leaders of different groups sitting together; evidence of new tactics or enhanced capability of groups previously considered less viable; insurgent groups focused on regional conflicts adopt al Qaeda's core ideology and begin attacking outside their region
Reduced counter-terrorism pressure	Pakistan chooses to support rather than pressure terrorist groups; United States no longer supports Pakistan military to eliminate al Qaeda and launches only occasional strikes to eliminate targets	Without substantial or sustained pressure, groups enjoy favorable operating environments to expand their influence and plan and execute terrorist attacks	Expanded recruitment and increased lethality of terrorist groups; convergence of volunteers on region in which militant groups face no oppositional challenge
Inadequate governance	Pakistan fails to provide basic amenities to already disenfranchised communities; Islamist groups provide judicial, social, and educational services to local populations	Pakistani government loses legitimacy in the eyes of local communities, while Islamic governance gains credence; al Mo'mineen provides a system of governance and offers services to local population, which increases support	Provision of social and economic assistance by militant groups to affected communities; public acknowledgment of terrorist patronage by community welfare organizations

Paradigm 5: Collapse of AQAM by 2025

This paradigm envisions the collapse of the AQAM movement by the year 2025. We suggest that AQAM as a coherent movement—that is, a constellation of groups driven by a common ideology—disintegrates because the overwhelming majority of global Islamist terrorists reject al Qaeda core’s overriding focus on the far enemy and deliberately dissociate themselves from the al Qaeda brand. The end of the al Qaeda movement is therefore not synonymous with the end of Islamist militancy per se, but is instead a strategic reorientation of that type of political violence. Paradigm 5 is different from paradigm 2—an affiliate-driven movement—in that it allows for pockets of Islamist militancy throughout the world but posits no unifying ideology or strategy binding together various groups. This paradigm is also unique in that it demonstrates how certain U.S. efforts to dismantle AQAM may be successful only in degrading the group’s operational capabilities.

Scenario

Despite increasingly vocal protests from the Pakistani government, nations continued to conduct operations against al Qaeda core members in Pakistan throughout 2011–2012. These operations maintained consistent pressure on al Qaeda core, making it impossible for the group to mount operations against the West, raise funds, and exert control over the broader movement.

With al Qaeda core increasingly marginalized, a subset of regional affiliates eclipsed bin Laden’s organization as the most significant terrorist threat to the West. AQAP was first among these entities; the group continued to target the U.S. homeland and to incite terrorist violence using online media. By 2013, AQAP had been tied to a total of six mature plots against the United States and a dozen high-profile cases of domestic radicalization.

As the threat to Western interests from AQAP increased, so did counterterrorism pressure against the group. After years of investment, state intelligence services of Yemen and Persian Gulf states developed reliable human intelligence networks within southern Yemen and penetrated AQAP. Thanks to effective targeting intelligence provided by these activities, the United States killed and captured several senior and midlevel AQAP operatives. Surviving members of the group were forced to scatter and assumed low profiles to avoid being killed or captured. Although this counterterrorism campaign did little to address the factors driving AQAP’s recruitment, it did make it nearly impossible for the group to conduct operations abroad or fully consolidate its hold over southern Yemen, which remained effectively ungoverned since the collapse of the Saleh government in 2012.

Across the Gulf of Aden, al Shabaab followed a similar trajectory. Although initially focused on local targets and issues, al Shabaab had increasingly gravitated toward al Qaeda core’s global ideology. The turning point came in 2014, when, outside a National Guard facility in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a U.S. citizen detonated himself using a crude suicide vest. The FBI quickly identified the bomber and discovered he was trained by al Shabaab in a camp outside of Mogadishu. In an effort to satisfy an outraged American public, the president ordered strikes against two al Shabaab training camps in south-central Somalia.

Among the dead were several militia members from two different subclans who were undergoing military training for an upcoming al Shabaab offensive against African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Their deaths enraged the subclans, whose members called for retaliation against the United States. Eager to portray itself as a defender of Somalia from outside aggression

and win the support of the bereaved subclans, al Shabaab agreed to target the United States directly. AQEA leaders in Somalia enthusiastically supported this decision and helped al Shabaab train volunteers from Somali diaspora communities in the United States for operations in their home country. Elements of al Shabaab who opposed conducting operations outside of Somalia were effectively silenced.

After uncovering several plots emanating from Somalia, it soon became clear to the U.S. intelligence community that al Shabaab had expanded operation focus to include global targets, forcing them to consider the Somali crisis as a top counterterrorism priority for the U.S. government. An increased focus on al Shabaab coincided with the meteoric rise of a strong, effective leader within the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Gradually and with increased Western support, the TFG consolidated control over areas of Somalia captured by AMISOM. Alienated by al Shabaab's harsh rule and struck by the competency of the TFG's new leader, many Somalis welcomed the TFG's expanding influence. Slowly al Shabaab lost ground as its clan base began siding with the TFG. Al Shabaab suffered another significant blow when the Kenya-backed Jubaland Initiative³¹ caused it to lose control over the port of Kismaayo, robbing it of its single largest revenue generator. Like AQAP, al Shabaab had paid a heavy price for provoking the West.

As pressure increased on AQAP and al Shabaab, the United States deliberately drew down its presence in other Muslim-majority areas. By 2015 the last U.S. combat troops had left Iraq, Afghanistan, and the southern Philippines. Counterterrorism operations persisted in these areas and beyond, but such activities were conducted exclusively in a low-profile manner. The transition from a large, conventional force presence in Muslim-majority countries and regions to covert counterterrorism operations seemed to mitigate the core grievances that sustained AQAM's stock narrative of the West at war with Islam. No longer able to portray the United States as occupiers of Muslim lands, AQAM increasingly struggled rhetorically to justify ongoing operations against the United States and its allies.

As 2020 drew to a close, a growing number of prominent Salafi-jihadist theorists criticized al Qaeda core's far-enemy strategy. The most notable of these works was "Al Qaeda's Path to Failure," written by Abu Salim al-Ramadi, an Iraqi Sunni who had fought with AQI in the early stages of the insurgency and had subsequently undergone religious training in Pakistan. The central thesis of Ramadi's critique was that al Qaeda core's far-enemy strategy had generated disaster after disaster for the movement. Ramadi argued that the 9/11 attacks had precipitated the collapse of the only Islamic emirate in the world and prompted an overwhelming attack on Islamist militants from Morocco to Mindanao. Ramadi also noted that the 9/11 attacks had led to more Western support for "apostate" governments than at any point prior. The essay also included Ramadi's analysis of AQAP's and al Shabaab's downfall, which he blamed on their decision to reorient themselves against the West. Yemen or Somalia could have become the next Islamic emirate, Ramadi claimed, had they not been seduced by al Qaeda core's toxic ideas.

Other ideologues rejected al Qaeda core's strategy by pointing out more successful forms of activism. The most celebrated success was the Quetta Shura Taliban, which had returned to power

31. Formed as a secular administration by the residents of Somalia's Juba region in 2010, the Jubaland Initiative was created to bring about local stability. Kenya, looking to create a buffer zone between itself and Islamist militants in southern Somalia, was eager to assist in the development of the initiative. "Ethiopia and Kenya Differ on Somalia," *Daily Nation*, December 5, 2010, www.nation.co.ke/News/politics/Ethiopia+and+Kenya+differ+on+Somalia+/-/1064/1067050/-/9cpcmez/-/.

following the collapse of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan after the gradual drawdown of Western aid. Salafi-jihadist thinkers celebrated the reconstitution of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and saw it as evidence that Western influence could be removed through a strategy of exhaustion. Another frequently cited success occurred in the Malay-Muslim provinces of southern Thailand, which were given autonomy from Buddhist Thailand in 2018 in exchange for an end to insurgent violence. The North Caucasus insurgency was also touted as a correct approach to Islamist struggle. By 2020 the insurgency in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria was gaining more local support and had begun controlling swaths of territory.

The rise of viable Islamist political parties facilitated by the Arab Spring also impacted the Salafi-jihadist discourse. Although the most hard-line ideologues rejected the participation of these parties in secular political systems and elections, others took a more pragmatic approach and embraced the notion that power could be achieved through the ballot box. This led to a split among Salafi-jihadists, with those more amenable to political participation rejecting armed confrontation as a means of implementing Sharia.

As this discourse played out throughout the early 2020s, the emerging consensus among Salafi-jihadist thinkers who remained committed to violence was that acting locally was more effective than focusing on the far enemy. Ideologues certainly recognized the failures of some locally focused groups and sought to learn lessons from their shortcomings. Algeria's Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) was frequently cited as an example of why it was important for Salafi-jihadists to be very cautious in their interpretation of *takfir*³² and endeavor to maintain popular support.³³

Salafi-jihadist discourse also stressed the ongoing need to participate in “defensive jihad,” endorsing the arguments articulated by Abdullah Azzam during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This line of thinking rejected bin Laden's expansive interpretation of defensive jihad and viewed such conflicts in discrete, geographic terms. In some cases, such calls for defensive jihad demanded ejecting Western presence from Muslim lands. This resulted in an ongoing desire to target Western interests, but only in response to a physical occupation of traditional Muslim lands. But with the reduction of the U.S. military presence in Muslim-majority countries, venues for such campaigns became extremely limited.

By 2025, the overwhelming number of Salafi-jihadist groups and individuals had rejected al Qaeda core's far-enemy focus and bin Laden's global vision of defensive jihad. Violent Islamist activism was directed locally, and a vibrant discourse supported this strategic reorientation. With al Qaeda's ideology stripped away, AQAM as we knew it in 2011 collapsed.

32. *Takfir* is “the act of Muslims declaring other Muslims to be infidels” and “is an important stepping stone to engaging in violence against secular Muslim rulers and others who are perceived to be supportive of these rulers”; see Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qa'ida and Its Periphery* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2009), www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Self-Inflicted-Wounds.pdf.

33. In the early to mid-1990s, the GIA attempted an aggressive “re-Islamization” of Algerian society through coercion and the practice of *takfir*, which was used to justify vicious, large-scale attacks on civilians and foreigners as well as military and government targets. The magnitude and arbitrary nature of the violence isolated the group from the population, bin Laden, Zawahiri, and other Islamic militant movements. In May 1998, a splinter group called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat [GSPC]) declared its independence from GIA and renounced the group's brutal tactics. See William Thornberry and Jaclyn Levy, *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, Case Study no. 4 (Washington, DC: CSIS, forthcoming).

Analysis: Key Factors in Paradigm 5

The scenario for paradigm 5 offers one vision of how al Qaeda and associated movements might end. This specific scenario aside, there are several alternative pathways that could result in the same basic outcome: the collapse of AQAM by 2025. This analysis seeks to highlight and explore the nominal factors that could contribute to this end state.

In early July 2011, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta noted that the “strategic defeat” of al Qaeda could be achieved if efforts to target key al Qaeda leaders in “Pakistan, Yemen, and other areas” were successful.³⁴ Implicit in Secretary Panetta’s comment is the assumption that killing and capturing AQAM’s **leadership** would help bring about the movement’s defeat.

Although it is plausible that the removal of key leadership could precipitate the ultimate destruction of AQAM, our case studies suggest otherwise. AQI, the Abu Sayyaf Group, and al Qaeda in Yemen—the precursor to AQAP—all withstood the loss of their commanders. Although the removal of these leaders was disruptive and eroded operational effectiveness, particularly in the case of AQI, this decapitation did not lead to the immediate downfall of these organizations. Whether AQAM can survive the death of Osama bin Laden remains to be seen. Early indications suggest that bin Laden’s organization and the broader movement he inspired have withstood his demise.³⁵

Looking forward, it is reasonable to assume that the United States and its partners will continue targeting AQAM’s leadership in Pakistan and beyond. Such actions will help keep AQAM off balance but seem unlikely to defeat the movement on their own. This skepticism is based on lessons collected from our program’s case studies and is also based on the likelihood that new AQAM leaders will emerge from the hundreds if not thousands of low- and mid-level AQAM operatives alive today. Although most of these individuals undoubtedly lack the charisma, rhetorical skill, combat experience, personal networks, and ideological vision to lead, a small subset probably possesses or will develop these characteristics. If the pace at which these younger militants assume leadership positions is equal to or greater than the attrition rate of AQAM’s leadership, the movement will likely persist.³⁶

Similar to efforts to target leadership, **counterterrorism pressure** could theoretically bring about the collapse of AQAM. Since 9/11, improved efforts to capture AQAM-linked individuals, curtail their ability to raise and distribute funds, monitor their communications, and limit their travel have placed significant constraints on several AQAM groups. Although such steps have

34. Leon E. Panetta, “Media Availability with Secretary Panetta en Route to Afghanistan,” U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), July 8, 2011, www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4849.

35. See Rick “Ozzie” Nelson and Thomas M. Sanderson, “What bin Laden’s Death Means for al Qaeda,” in *Global Forecast 2011: International Security in a Time of Uncertainty*, ed. Craig Cohen and Josiane Gabel (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2011), pp. 72–74, http://csis.org/files/publication/110610_nelson_sanderson_GlobalForecast2011.pdf.

36. As described by scholars like Audrey Kurth Cronin, the longevity or decline of AQAM over generations will likely depend on more than attrition alone. Historically, many groups have failed to transition to a second generation on account of “their inability to articulate a clear vision of their goals that could be handed down to successors after the first generation of radical leaders departed or were eliminated.” Looking out to 2025, the fate of AQAM will depend in part on its ability to effectively communicate its goals and ideology to future generations, both within the organization and outside it. See Audrey Kurth Cronin, “How al-Qaeda Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups,” *International Security* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2006): p. 23, <https://webpace.utexas.edu/rmc2289/LT/Cronin%20How%20Al%20Qaeda%20Ends.pdf>.

Ending Terrorism

The research of Audrey Kurth Cronin, professor of strategy at the National War College and senior associate with the University of Oxford Program on the Changing Character of War, provides excellent insight into how AQAM might end. In her book, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton University Press, 2009), Cronin describes six pathways leading to the decline or collapse of terrorist violence: (1) capture or killing of a group's leader, (2) entry of the group into a legitimate political process, (3) achievement of the group's aims, (4) implosion or loss of the group's public support, (5) defeat and elimination by brute force, and (6) transition from terrorism into other forms of violence. These six pathways are not exclusive. Often they combine to weaken and ultimately end terrorist campaigns. Cronin concludes her book by applying these six pathways to al Qaeda.

made it more difficult for AQAM to operate, counterterrorism pressure—as currently executed—has proved incapable of destroying the movement thus far and will likely remain inadequate going forward.

There are several reasons for this. First, certain AQAM entities are innovative, leading followers to circumvent counterterrorism pressure in unforeseen ways. AQAM's increasing reliance on kidnapping for ransom, for example, illustrates how terrorist groups can stay a step ahead of international efforts to combat terror finance. Second, counterterrorism pressure often provides diminishing returns. Employed in moderation, counterterrorism pressure has proven to help decrease the threat from terrorist groups. When counterterrorism pressure is too severe, however, it can inflame the core grievances that give rise to terrorism, perversely exacerbating the threat. The response by many Central Asian regimes to Islamism—both violent and otherwise—illustrates the negative fallout of excessive counterterrorism pressure.³⁷

Another reason that counterterrorism pressure will probably fail to destroy AQAM has to do with **safe havens**. Certain nations lack the capacity or the will to contest AQAM's presence within their borders. These states provide a permissive environment for AQAM, which uses these areas as safe havens and facilitation hubs. As discussed in paradigm 1, it is impossible to predict where and in what form safe havens will manifest in the years ahead. Despite this uncertainty, one can assume that such sanctuaries will persist given the current number of weak and failing states. Future safe havens will undermine international efforts to defeat AQAM through military and law-enforcement means, making it even more unlikely that removing leadership and counterterrorism pressure will lead to the movement's defeat.

37. For further analysis, see Thomas M. Sanderson, Daniel Kimmage, and David A. Gordon, *From the Ferghana Valley to South Waziristan: The Evolving Threat of Central Asian Jihadists* (Washington, DC: CSIS, March 2010), pp. 4, 21–22, http://csis.org/files/publication/100324_Sanderson_FerghanaValley_WEB_0.pdf.

This analysis suggests that, although actions undertaken by the United States and its partners could *degrade* AQAM's operational capabilities, such measures are unlikely to precipitate AQAM's ultimate demise. More plausible pathways to AQAM's collapse include the complete evaporation of its ideological resonance, an erosion of the movement from within, or some combination thereof.

By most measures AQAM's **ideological resonance** has diminished over the past decade. Public opinion polls show significant declines in support for Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, and influential Muslim elites have spoken out against AQAM and its tactics.³⁸ The Arab Spring could also be interpreted as an indicator of AQAM's weak appeal. Those protests drew out hundreds of thousands of young people across the Arab world. This mass mobilization stood in stark contrast with the lack of enthusiasm for bin Laden and his cause. In Egypt, for example, it is estimated that 200,000 people gathered in Tahrir Square to protest the Mubarak regime.³⁹ By comparison, about 200 Egyptians protested outside of the U.S. embassy in Cairo following bin Laden's death.⁴⁰

If the resonance of AQAM's ideology continues to diminish, its longevity will become increasingly tenuous. As its ideological appeal erodes, AQAM will find it increasingly difficult to raise money and attract new recruits. Without human and financial resources, AQAM's capabilities will diminish, making the movement increasingly irrelevant in strategic terms. A lack of ideological resonance will also help empower government efforts to combat AQAM.

As populations become galvanized in opposition to AQAM's ideology, they are more likely to cooperate with counterterrorism campaigns. This pattern occurred in Indonesia, where local communities became alienated by Jemaah Islamiyah's suicide bombings and rejected the group, paving the way for a more effective counterterrorism campaign. In other areas, opposition to AQAM's ideology can result in more direct pressure. In Somalia, for example, Sufis formed a militia called Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jamaa (AWSJ) in order to protect their communities from al Shabaab. AWSJ has clashed with al Shabaab, putting additional military strain on the organization, which in turn helps AMISOM and the TFG.

That leaves internal developments as the final catalyst for AQAM's collapse. Just as an **aligning of interests with al Qaeda core** brought regional militant organizations under the AQAM umbrella during the 1990s and 2000s, shifting conditions could compel groups to distance themselves from the movement in the future. The upcoming withdrawal of U.S. and Western forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, the growing stigmatization of AQAM among Muslims, and the lack of material benefits accruing from an overt association with al Qaeda core, among other factors, could incentivize regional terrorists to dissociate from or avoid ties to AQAM. As this scenario seeks to illustrate, the reorientation of global Islamist militancy away from AQAM could result in the disintegration of the AQAM movement. Other internal developments, such as leadership schisms, ideological disputes, or a turn to criminality could also contribute to AQAM's demise.

In conclusion, it seems most likely that some combination of the above factors would bring about AQAM's end. Efforts to target leadership, counterterrorism pressure, diminished ideologi-

38. Nelson et al., *A Threat Transformed*, pp. 18–19.

39. Jeffrey Fleishman and Ned Parker, "Mubarak Says He Won't Seek Reelection but Will Stay in Office 'for the Next Few Months,'" *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/01/world/la-fg-egypt-crowd-20110202>.

40. David D. Kirkpatrick, "A Scattering of Protests Honoring Bin Laden," *New York Times*, May 6, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/05/07/world/africa/07egypt.html.

cal resonance, and the realignment of interests can be mutually reinforcing in bringing about AQAM’s demise. This has real-world implications for policy: in addition to targeting leadership and maintaining counterterrorism pressure, the United States and its partners must also endeavor to marginalize AQAM’s ideology and manipulate incentive structures such that regional militants no longer find it in their interest to make common cause with AQAM.

Indicators for Paradigm 5

Factor	Scenario-specific event	Scenario-specific impact	Indicators
Ideological resonance	Because of changes in the political climate, AQAM's ideological resonance continues to diminish over time	As its ideological appeal erodes, AQAM finds it increasingly difficult to raise money and attract new recruits	Reduced support for AQAM in public opinion polls; increased public support for counterterrorism activities; decreased recruitment; decreased consumption of AQAM propaganda; diminished charitable donations to AQAM
Divergence of interests from al Qaeda core	Shifting conditions (including withdrawal of U.S. forces from Muslim countries, and lack of material benefits from affiliating) compel groups to distance themselves from al Qaeda core	Al Qaeda narrative no longer resonates because grievances have been eliminated; without political oxygen, AQAM eventually disintegrates	Evidence of ideological disputes between leaders; targeting focuses on near enemy instead of far enemy; militant groups’ public rejection of al Qaeda brand through name changes; issuance of new mission statements that reflect distancing from al Qaeda; changes in operational tactics

4

STRATEGIC SHOCKS ALONG THE ROAD TO 2025

Chapter 2, *The Future Environment*, surveyed a small set of linear trends and their likely impact through 2025 on the environment in which al Qaeda and associated movements (AQAM) operates. This analysis of the future is useful but incomplete. We must also consider how disruptive events or strategic shocks could influence the environments in which AQAM operates and, by extension, the movement itself. Historically, such shocks have played an important role in shaping AQAM's evolution. The rise of al Shabaab, for example, was accelerated by the sudden Ethiopian invasion of Somalia. The U.S. invasion of Iraq gave rise to al Qaeda in Iraq and energized a foreign fighter pipeline into the country. And, as discussed earlier, the Arab Spring has dealt an initial blow to AQAM's ideology after peaceful protestors without reference to or reliance on AQAM unseated dictators long targeted by the movement.

If past events offer any insights, these strategic shocks could profoundly impact the international environment. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the development of nuclear weapons, and the rise of fascism in the 1920s serve as powerful examples of events that altered strategic calculations, environments, and capabilities. Because such developments are unpredictable, questions arise about how they should factor into projections about AQAM, and what their implications are for counterterrorism planning in the year 2025.

We recognize that the possibilities for these seismic shifts are bounded only by the imagination, and we offer the following possible strategic shocks as examples of scenarios that counterterrorism planners could face.

AQAM detonates a nuclear device. AQAM obtains and uses a nuclear device in the United States, resulting in extremely high casualties, enormous global economic damage, and a ferocious backlash against Muslim U.S. citizens and residents. AQAM threatens a second strike absent a withdrawal of U.S. presence from the so-called Muslim world, prompting extremely tight security in U.S. cities and at ports of entry as well as high public anxiety. Muslim Americans suffer widespread assaults, and relations between nation-states are severely strained as travel and trade are sharply curtailed. Forensic analysis of nuclear debris at the attack site reveals the weapon used is Russian in origin, one of the many thousands of tactical nuclear weapons that were decommissioned but not destroyed following the Cold War. Fearing an imminent nuclear attack on its own soil, Russia responds with draconian security measures across the country.

Pakistani and Saudi Arabian governments fall to radical forces and pose a dual threat to the global system. An internal Pakistan Army struggle puts anti-U.S. Islamist officers, who objected to operations against Pakistani insurgent groups, in control of the country. Pakistan Army senior leadership failed to detect the scale of the rising underground extremist currents within the military as well as the support certain officers were gaining from outside extremists. They were therefore unable to head off the growing extremism with dismissals or reassignments. Civilian

leaders are divided and lack any control over the security forces. They are impotent in the face of the newly Islamized junta, which moves to dissolve the civilian government.

Military units engaging the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and other insurgent groups inside Pakistan halt combat operations, while the ISI works with the police to control the media and any signs of open dissent. Western citizens, journalists, and diplomatic staff are ejected from Pakistan, and nuclear weapons facilities appear to come under the control of the new junta. Sunni extremist attacks on moderate and more secular Sunnis and on Shi'ite Muslim citizens increase in number and intensity. India commences a full mobilization of forces and threatens a preemptive strike on Pakistan given the uncertainty over the control of nuclear weapons.

Within weeks of Pakistan's dramatic developments, a succession crisis in Saudi Arabia has enfeebled the Saudi regime and divided the royal family in ways that sharply weaken its control over the nation's security forces. Segments of the military and security forces come to view the royal family as corrupt and no longer deserving of loyalty. Saudi Arabia succumbs to a combination of military, religious, and civilian conspirators who had long awaited the opportunity presented by a period of Saudi turmoil.

The coup leaders take advantage of growing popular unrest and a severe recession precipitated by falling oil prices. They use the forces of the Saudi National Guard and Ministry of Interior to seize key cities, government facilities, oil facilities, and broadcast media. At the same time enough of the army and air force side with the coup to keep Saudi military units deployed in the kingdom's military bases and cities from opposing the coup. The senior-most members of the ruling family are deposed. Cooperation with the West is halted as a variety of demands are pressed by the new leadership, and threats are made to halt petroleum exports. The security services are successfully purged of loyal officers.

Right-wing extremists foment widespread violence against Muslim communities in Europe.

An economic depression across Europe prompts a wave of attacks on Muslim communities by right-wing extremists. Blamed for taking jobs and weakening "traditional" European culture and society, Muslims are assaulted by the hundreds while some states restrict all immigration. Mosques and madrassas are defaced while students and worshippers are harassed. As the number of Muslim deaths in Europe rises sharply, Islamic militants from around the world rally to their fellow Muslims' defense and infiltrate Europe to carry out reprisals. European embassies in Pakistan and the Middle East are burned and diplomats are taken hostage. Numerous Muslim-majority states recall their ambassadors and embargo oil and gas supplies to Europe. Other parts of the world, in particular North America, observe this situation with great trepidation as their economies falter and approach a depression. Widespread anti-Muslim violence in Europe threatens to unleash worldwide ethnic and religious strife.

Israel and Iran go to war. Sensing an imminent Israeli strike on its matured nuclear capabilities, Iran attacks key Saudi Arabian oil infrastructure at Ras Tanura and Abqaiq and lays antiship mines in the Strait of Hormuz. These bold moves are designed to shock the global economy and force the United States and other key nations to restrain Israel. Israel, however, believes that U.S. and Sunni-nation support will be at hand given the strikes on Saudi Arabia and because of Tehran's nearly operational nuclear weapons. Israel attacks Iranian military sites, crossing Jordanian and Saudi airspace in the process. Hezbollah—although its strategies and objectives differ from those of its patron, Iran—retaliates against Israel proper and at Jewish sites worldwide for fear of being isolated after a potential defeat of Iran.

Palestinians achieve statehood and Arab states recognize Israel. The Palestinian territories become a state as Arab nations—led by Saudi Arabia—recognize Israel and establish normal diplomatic and commercial relations. Several major events lead to this remarkable development: Syria and Israel sign a peace agreement in the years after a modicum of democracy emerges from the popular uprisings of 2011; a coalition government in Israel feels secure with the Syrian peace accords and with renewed, good relations with Egypt; Palestinians and Israelis reach agreements on borders, refugees, and Jerusalem—all of which are secured as part of a peace plan brokered by the United States, the European Union, and Saudi Arabia. The string of agreements relegates Hamas to the sidelines, leading it to break with the Palestinian government in order to continue conducting Iranian-supported terrorism.

The dissolution of OPEC combined with advances in hydrocarbon technology marginalize key oil- and gas-exporting states. OPEC collapses after failing to manage growing oil and gas supplies in both Iraq and Venezuela. After an abrupt change in leadership, Venezuela realigns politically and invites international oil companies to develop oil sands resources. Large volumes of oil come on line, which undermines OPEC control.

At the same time, several successive breakthroughs in oil, gas, product efficiency, and natural-gas fuel for vehicles result in a rapid and profound drop in oil imported into North America, Asia, and Europe. Among the possible advances are a leap in fuel cell technology or in a natural-gas fuel for vehicles; the global development of shale oil and gas deposits in North America, Europe, and China; a full opening and development of Mexico's oil and gas resources; full Canadian development of heavy oil in an environmentally friendly manner; and a leap in energy efficiency through a combination of new manufacturing materials and technology (for example, cars, appliances, tires, batteries, buildings). Americans, Asians, and Europeans take advantage of the new technological breakthroughs and their own newly discovered unconventional hydrocarbon supplies. China mandates the use of natural-gas-fueled vehicles after starting to develop its own large, newly discovered shale gas resources. Dozens of states, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Nigeria with their large or majority-Muslim populations, suffer the impact of lower oil demand.

AQAM strikes China. Al Qaeda associates and lone-wolf militants begin targeting Chinese nationals as well as government and corporate offices in several nations. AQAM's shift in targeting priorities occurs for two primary reasons. First, Beijing's unrelenting and massive need for resources have widened and deepened an already heavy footprint in traditional Muslim lands. China renews large, long-term oil and gas contracts in Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia, which support and perpetuate governments seen as illegitimate or detrimental to al Qaeda. Deals with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkmenistan, Nigeria, Indonesia, and many others exemplify AQAM's assertions. AQAM comes to see China's relationships in these states as a far-reaching threat to its ability to operate and to ultimately free Muslim populations of corrupt leaders.

Second, and with this pervasive and powerful impact in resource-rich Muslim nations as a backdrop, China also conducts a full-scale crackdown on persistent and growing Muslim Uighur calls for autonomy in its western province of Xinjiang. China seeks a definitive end to years of intensifying unrest with an overwhelming police and military operation, resulting in thousands of Uighurs killed or imprisoned. Together, the deepening influence of China's resource trade and comprehensive violence against its own Muslim citizens lead AQAM to conclude that China constitutes as great a danger to Muslims and to AQAM's existence as do the United States and other Western powers.

The United States and its allies predicate the success of counterterrorism operations on a certain degree of system stability. Resources are allocated and capabilities and partnerships are developed under the assumption that current dynamics will not be altered significantly. This listing of potential strategic shocks seeks to illustrate that the status quo is clearly mutable. Unexpected changes can have a dramatic impact on AQAM as well as on how the United States and its allies structure their counterterrorism efforts. It bears repeating that just as the Arab Spring exposed a fundamental weakness in al Qaeda's strategy, it also impaired U.S. and European partnerships with intelligence agencies and security services in Tunisia, Egypt, and even Libya. Any strategic shock can cut both ways.

In the future, any number of shocks may emerge, each having myriad implications. Consideration of such future strategic shocks should serve to challenge and stimulate the thinking of counterterrorism policy planners, widen the aperture of possibilities, and improve chances of mitigating the impacts of strategic surprises—or, in some cases, help convert them into strategic advantages and opportunities.

5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Up to now, the AQAM Futures Project has centered on a multifaceted analysis of the threat—a contemporary assessment of al Qaeda and associated movements (AQAM), a series of historical case studies about the various groups, and a handful of scenarios imagining how these groups might evolve. All of these efforts have been geared toward the larger purpose of providing policymakers with a set of recommendations for combating and defeating AQAM. The following is a brief summary of the main conclusions of the portion of the study that addresses possible future threats, which in turn serves as a foundation for a longer series of recommendations.

Conclusions

As demonstrated in *A Threat Transformed*,¹ AQAM today constitutes a dynamic and evolving movement. Even before the advent of the Arab Spring and the death of Osama bin Laden, AQAM was undergoing a diffusion of operational and symbolic strength from a weakened core to a rising set of affiliates and individuals. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), for instance, was fast replacing al Qaeda core as the most urgent terrorist threat facing the U.S. homeland, and Anwar al-Awlaki is now effectively disseminating al Qaeda’s stock narrative to a wider, English-speaking audience.

Although these trends might suggest AQAM will evolve into an affiliate-driven movement, the heavy influence of external events makes the group’s trajectory unpredictable. The five paradigms of the future discussed in chapter 3 account for this unpredictability by envisioning a diverse set of possibilities for the coming evolution of AQAM. Crucially, the paradigms highlight how a handful of key drivers—those factors identified as essential to AQAM’s historical evolution—might influence the trajectories of al Qaeda, its affiliates, and its followers during the next decade and a half.

We surmise, for example, that charismatic leadership will remain essential to the development of any al Qaeda-linked group that hopes to lead a truly global movement in the future. Such a leader would first need to win the loyalty of his close associates, then later cultivate the ability to inspire a far-flung and diverse audience of adherents—as Osama bin Laden did in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Similarly, networking among different AQAM-linked groups could pool crucial resources like funding, materials, personnel, and expertise, thus helping prevent the worldwide movement from devolving into an assortment of individuals or like-minded groups.

In addition, economic instability and regional conflict might combine to create more safe havens—including micro-havens—in which new terrorist groups could take root or existing ones

1. Rick “Ozzie” Nelson and Thomas A. Sanderson, with Amrit Bagia, Ben Bodurian, and David A. Gordon, *A Threat Transformed: Al Qaeda and Associated Movements in 2011* (Washington, DC: CSIS, February 2011), <http://csis.org/publication/threat-transformed>.

could reconstitute capabilities. Aside from being fertile ground for training and operational planning, such safe havens also could provide new networking opportunities for previously unconnected terrorist groups. Both the availability of safe havens and the success of networking would likely underpin the future growth and viability of AQAM and its constituent parts.

Other factors driving AQAM's continued evolution are likely to be heavily influenced by external trends and events. The rapid and continued growth of information and communication technology might allow future al Qaeda leaders to communicate with their associates and would-be recruits in new, remarkable, and even currently unimaginable ways. It is possible that technological innovations will outpace governance structures and intelligence-gathering capabilities, allowing for secure, near-constant contact between individuals conducting illicit activities. The widespread availability of these new forms of social media would be critical to the deepening of AQAM's global network of networks.

Our paradigms of the future also posit that AQAM's ability to maintain its stock narrative of a war between the West and Islam will ultimately determine its longevity and relevance. Ideological resonance has always been al Qaeda's answer to counterterrorism operations that kill or capture key leaders and operatives. The narrative is a source of resilience and has helped replenish the movement's ranks with fresh recruits. In the future, continuing and broadening U.S. counterterrorism operations might perpetuate the narrative and sustain AQAM's appeal. In contrast, a reduced U.S. presence in Muslim-majority countries and the momentum of the Arab Spring might combine with AQAM's continued ruthless targeting of Muslims to further expose the narrative as false, thus diminishing AQAM's ideological resonance. Whatever the outcome, the long-term fate of AQAM's ideological allure will be a key factor in determining whether the movement is able to continue to recruit and radicalize individuals or whether it loses its appeal.

Ultimately, 2025 may not present a singular paradigm and set of factors for AQAM. Instead, an admixture of AQAM future paradigms may emerge, with different manifestations of the ideology and the movement evolving globally and rapidly at the same time. Beyond traditional al Qaeda, a new global platform for violent Islamist extremism could emerge from an "arc of instability" driven by the al Qaeda affiliates in Yemen, Somalia, and East Africa, through the Sahel and North and West Africa. This could be matched by sophisticated terrorist organizations like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Harakat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami taking up the mantle of global Islamist leadership out of South Asia while smaller, ideologically affiliated groups operate in insurgent fashion in places like Southeast and Central Asia. All the while, lone wolves and disaffected subcommunities in the West could further adapt AQAM's ideology to local circumstances, drawing more recruits and networking to wreak havoc on the streets of Western cities. There is no way to predict how AQAM will manifest in 2025, but creative and adaptable counterterrorism policies can help ensure that AQAM no longer has the global reach, capabilities, or allure to directly threaten U.S. national security interests.

Recommendations

Our conclusions suggest that, although the future of AQAM is highly unpredictable, a handful of factors are likely to continue to shape the evolution of AQAM-linked terrorist groups, cells, and individuals going forward. Consequently, the following recommendations are based first on the idea of ensuring maximum flexibility in countering future threats. Our study of AQAM's history and our examination of today's trends tell us that we cannot know for certain where or when

AQAM will manifest itself. The terrorist threat driven by AQAM has proven to be highly fluid and creative, which necessitates an equally agile response capability. At the same time, the United States and its partners should focus on developing or enhancing key capabilities that can be directed against the handful of factors likely to be most important in determining AQAM's continued viability.

The Concept of Global Over-Watch

During the past 10 years, U.S. counterterrorism resources have been devoted—by necessity—to a small number of active combat theaters and trouble spots. Immediately following the September 11, 2001, attacks, the U.S. government directed significant analytical and operational capabilities to root out al Qaeda core and its associates like the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. During the middle of the decade, the growing insurgency in Iraq drove the George W. Bush administration to redirect counterterrorism resources to combating al Qaeda in Iraq and associated militants. As conditions improved in Iraq, Barack Obama's incoming administration reprioritized efforts in South Asia, which led to al Qaeda core's continued degradation. The continuous and often challenging hunt for al Qaeda's most senior leaders ultimately led to the killing of Osama bin Laden. Now, as top administration officials predict al Qaeda core's imminent collapse,² the United States is increasingly shifting its counterterrorism focus to Yemen, where AQAP threatens to seize on deteriorating conditions to reinforce its position as the primary terrorist threat facing the West.

Although the counterterrorism measures employed in each of these trouble spots have been tactically effective, full-fledged attention and resources have tended to come after, rather than before, AQAM has crossed a threshold of intent and capability. This approach constricts policy options, often tipping the scales in favor of direct and kinetic intervention, which is costly and can have the unintended consequence of inflaming public opinion in the given region. Furthermore, the tendency to conduct counterterrorism operations late and heavy appears to have done little to reduce the key upstream factors or core grievances that sustain AQAM. Indeed, such responses may in certain cases exacerbate those conditions and factors.

U.S. counterterrorism officials must remain focused on current trouble spots, like Pakistan and Yemen, which present immediate and pressing threats and are the locus of the most serious elements of the movement. At the same time, the U.S. government and its international partners need to enhance their capacity to anticipate and respond to different and emerging threats in places that do not currently make headlines. They must do so in a way that maximizes policy options, minimizes costs, and ensures the greatest possible support from surrounding populations before AQAM manifests itself.

Importantly, the winding down of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan can provide the Obama administration with an opportunity to broaden the country's counterterrorism focus beyond a small handful of trouble spots. Analytic and operational resources devoted to those two theaters can be reallocated to other countries and regions, like Nigeria and Central Asia, which our field research shows hold the potential for significant instability—and the possibility of AQAM-linked violence—in the coming years.

2. Greg Miller, "U.S. Officials Believe al-Qaeda on Brink of Collapse," *Washington Post*, July 26, 2011, www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/al-qaeda-could-collapse-us-officials-say/2011/07/21/gIQAfu2pbI_story.html?hpid=z2.

Allocating analytical and operational resources in this fashion would not necessarily mean direct intervention in new countries or regions. Instead it would first mean establishing or enhancing the ability to detect and understand emerging threats before they materialize. This effort would involve increased education and training, particularly in-country, of U.S. regional experts—both operational and analytical—along with the development of indigenous intelligence, military, and law-enforcement relationships.

This type of reorientation of U.S. counterterrorism strategy can be thought of as “global over-watch.” Global over-watch can maximize policy options that can address emerging threats and concerns. For instance, the most efficient way to stem the rise of an AQAM-linked terrorist group in a given country may, in fact, be to work with the host government, local leaders, and credible voices to tamp down sectarian tension and grievances that AQAM-inspired groups are using to foment violence and youth recruitment. This could involve encouraging those governments to use existing authorities to arrest would-be terrorists and instigators for committing lesser crimes before violence escalates, while being conscious of the potential for prison radicalization or human rights abuses. This type of preemptive work is extremely difficult to perform amid active conflict zones like Yemen; as a result, the United States must often resort to the sharp edge of counterterrorism. But, given sufficient warning of the emerging manifestation of AQAM and knowledge of how to address the threat, the United States can use its influence to engage a wider variety of parties and choose from a wider range of policy options that would result in lower costs and less potential for blowback.

Within this strategic framework of global over-watch, the United States should focus on developing or enhancing several key capabilities that can be directed against the factors likely to be most important in determining AQAM’s continued viability. These capabilities can be assigned to one of three general categories: directed kinetic, legal, and financial action to reduce the threat; socioeconomic and political reforms to mitigate the environmental drivers of the threat; and strategic measures to puncture and deflate AQAM’s toxic ideology and allure.

Directed Kinetic, Legal, and Financial Action

Denial of leadership. Effective and, especially, charismatic leadership has proven to be a key driver of success for AQAM-linked groups. Beginning with bin Laden’s al Qaeda core and continuing up through today with Nasir al Wuhayshi’s AQAP, strong leaders have succeeded in galvanizing recruits, marshaling financial and material resources, and planning and guiding attacks. Leaders need not fit narrow definitions of field marshals, though; AQAP’s Awlaki has demonstrated effective rhetorical leadership through his online sermons, which radicalize a larger cohort. As important as it may be to view AQAM as an increasingly flat network of networks, leaders continue to play a crucial role in catalyzing and directing these groups’ activities.

Denial of leadership, then, should remain a key tenet of any counterterrorism strategy during the coming years. In addition to targeted strikes, it will be important for officials to hone other, less violent tools to apprehend or neutralize key leaders. Better intelligence and in-country awareness might enable U.S. officials and their international partners to identify terrorist leaders prior to major attacks, leading to arrests of those individuals for lesser crimes as part of a law-enforcement construct. In cases where pure law-enforcement mechanisms are not possible, the United States might increasingly coordinate with local officials to exploit knowledge of terrorists’ familial ties in order to apprehend top leaders, as was done in the case of Noordin Muhammad Top of Jemaah

Islamiyah (JI).³ Finally, policymakers need to more seriously consider how to combat terrorist leadership in virtual spaces like online chat rooms and sites used for posting propaganda. Awlaki and other al Qaeda–inspired ideologues exploit these forms of new social media to great effect, and the United States lacks a clear vision of how to craft its policies to better counter online extremist content and social networking. Empowering credible, non-U.S. government voices online to challenge AQAM adherents and apologists online is one key step to stem the influence of radical ideologues.

Denial of networking. Our research also has shown terrorist networking, or multifaceted cooperation between different militant groups and key individuals, to be a key factor driving AQAM’s growth. Networking often takes root during intense conflicts, when once-disconnected terrorist groups or individuals come together to cooperate on at least some shared goals. Such networking occurred during the 1980s, after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Such short-term cooperation can breed long-term collaboration, including the exchange between groups of money, material resources, expertise, midlevel operatives, and even ideology. Networking serves as a crucial force multiplier for AQAM-linked groups and individuals, allowing them to pool resources to achieve a greater reach and lethality.

Because of the importance of networking, U.S.-directed action must prioritize deterring, interdiction, and destroying ties among al Qaeda core, affiliates, and inspired individuals. The ultimate goal should be to fracture any semblance of an international al Qaeda movement and, in the process, force the activities of AQAM-linked groups and individuals down to local, instead of regional and global, levels. Pursuing denial of leadership can be one effective way to break up networks because official declarations of support are often codified at senior levels. Other individuals to target or undercut include key influencers and ideologues, especially online, within specific disaffected or specialized communities of concern (radicalized technical experts, for example). These individuals tend to serve as key nodes for a broader movement, and it will be important to restrict their illicit activities. This strategy has worked in the past. After certain key operatives who served as conduits between JI and al Qaeda core were killed or captured, the links between the two organizations weakened significantly, eventually forcing JI members still committed to violence to become self-sufficient.⁴

One broad-based measure to deny networking would involve U.S. assistance in coordinating the activities of two or more of its international partners. There have been reports, for example, of cooperation between AQAP and al Shabaab in Somalia. Although the United States remains the indispensable counterterrorism actor in both theaters, the Obama administration might consider ways to enhance communication between countries that share similar interests in regional stability, such as Saudi Arabia and Kenya, in an effort to better pinpoint connections between AQAP and al Shabaab.

The United States must also be cognizant of its own indirect role in networking AQAM. The U.S. invasion of Iraq, for example, catalyzed a tighter relationship among Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s network, other Islamist militants and networks, and al Qaeda core. As the United States and its

3. Scott Atran, “To Beat Al Qaeda, Look to the East,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/13/opinion/13atran.html>.

4. For further analysis, see David A. Gordon, *Jemaah Islamiyah*, Case Study no. 6 (Washington, DC: CSIS, forthcoming).

partners ponder future military and paramilitary operations, they should consider how such actions could unintentionally drive and tie locally focused groups into the al Qaeda movement.

The denial of networking must extend beyond simply disrupting the ties between various components of AQAM. The United States and its international partners must work to develop deterrence and dissuasion strategies to disrupt the external rings and networks, which terrorist groups rely on to build capacity and extend their reach. Doing so would entail more than just the denial of objectives; it would involve the active deterrence of specific actors and networks.

As AQAM continues to evolve, it will likely rely on a variety of external networks, including scientists to develop dangerous weapons; deep-pocket donors and businessmen to fund its activities; religious leaders to provide theological backing; and smugglers, criminals, and money launderers to move personnel, goods, and funds. All of these networks are separate entities and systems that can individually be influenced and their decisionmaking complicated. By targeting, deterring, and dissuading—and even by co-opting the external networks AQAM relies on—the United States and its partners have an opportunity to deny the movement critical support and lifelines for their effectiveness and growth.

Localized Reforms to Deny Safe Havens

A lengthy and varied literature has linked the availability of safe havens with increased terrorism. Here we consider the importance to AQAM of physical safe havens and the tools that the United States and its partners can employ to deny the availability of these spaces. Our research has shown that safe havens categorically facilitate the growth and activities of al Qaeda, its affiliates, and its individual followers, who in the future are likely to seek refuge in traditional, physical safe havens—most often the underdeveloped and undeveloped regions or territories at the substate level that are effectively off-limits to any central government and that often straddle borders. There also may be an increase in the exploitation of micro-havens—smaller, undergoverned enclaves within large urban areas or in refugee camps—especially by small AQAM cells.

Despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of safe havens, relatively little progress has been made on measures to eliminate them. Many experts agree that merely capturing or killing terrorists is insufficient to eliminate safe havens. More extensive efforts are needed to create incentives for local populations to reject the presence of terrorists. Too often, though, government officials and academic experts fixate on poverty reduction and other human development measures as a panacea for reducing the key upstream factors supporting terrorism. Socioeconomic reforms focused on improving governance can mitigate the causes of terrorism and are worthy in their own right, but such initiatives are difficult to implement and, where successful, usually require years to mature. Equally important will be a keener appreciation of the political measures that can help isolate terrorists from surrounding populations.

Such an approach to combating safe havens requires a shift in strategy. Whereas past efforts to deny safe haven have focused on finding and targeting AQAM operatives within safe havens, greater emphasis should be placed on creating incentives for the population to reject the presence of these terrorists. This emphasis on the population over the enemy resembles classical counterinsurgency theory. Although the term “counterinsurgency” conjures images of costly military footprints and ineffective nation-building efforts, it need not. With a nuanced approach, the United States and its allies can leverage local partners, regional enablers, and a host of nongovernment organizations to engage populations living in safe havens and provide compelling incentives that

separate them from AQAM. Without such efforts, nations will be forced to rely on targeted strikes within these areas indefinitely. Over time, such a policy will reinforce AQAM's narrative and risk radicalizing local populations, further embedding terrorist operatives into these environments.

In a general sense, the United States should work with its partners and international governing bodies to enhance capabilities to deny available safe havens. One measure would be to work with the United Nations to reassess the international legal obligations for states to deny safe havens while balancing against the notions of traditional sovereignty. The United States also might consider encouraging the UN and regional groups to develop a formal set of mechanisms for addressing safe havens, as is currently done with peacekeeping missions.

Physical safe havens will likely remain important to AQAM for a variety of reasons, including organization, logistics, and command and control, but the Internet has come to assume several of the purposes previously served by geographic safe havens. Those who desire to fight in support of AQAM no longer need to travel to the tribal areas of Pakistan to receive indoctrination and tactical training, as they can now be radicalized and operationalized from their own homes. The Internet, because of its largely unregulated content and the inherent difficulty of monitoring online activities, has arguably become a virtual safe haven. Any measures to address physical safe havens must be coupled with an effort to address this virtual safe haven. Working diligently to preserve free speech and privacy rights, the United States and its partners must develop strategies to ensure that the Internet does not continue to be a permissive operational environment for AQAM.

Strategic Measures to Deny AQAM's Toxic Narrative

Denial of the narrative. Throughout our research, AQAM's ideological resonance—the positive reception and active popular response to AQAM's propaganda—has enabled groups and individuals to recruit would-be terrorists and conduct attacks. In fact, we assess that AQAM's ideology may be as great a threat over the long term as the array of affiliates that exist today. Ideological resonance has served as a reasonably effective antidote to kinetic operations that capture or kill key leaders. Ideological resonance is also somewhat impervious to improving socioeconomic and political conditions: a belief in AQAM's stock narrative has been common among almost all of the comparatively well-off Americans and Europeans implicated in recent acts of homegrown Islamist terrorism. It has also served as a baseline around which elements of AQAM—such as lone wolves—have adapted their views, approaches, and activities.

AQAM's resonant ideology is not uniform across regions and their respective populations, but most forms of the toxic narrative do have a few common features. According to al Qaeda propagandists, U.S. and Western policies toward Muslim-majority countries constitute a war against Islam. By this logic, Western direct intervention as in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, targeted counterterrorism operations as in Yemen and Somalia, and a history of propping up corrupt Muslim heads of state have all pushed Muslim societies further from the goal of pure, pan-Islamic governance structures. Therefore, according to al Qaeda's leaders, violent resistance against the United States, its Western partners, and complicit Muslim heads of state is the only viable remedy, and defending fellow Muslims is a mandatory, religious obligation. Above all, AQAM's narrative is meant to force Muslims “to embrace a narrow, extreme version of Muslim identity.”⁵

5. Marc Lynch, “Ft. Hood and the Clash of Civilizations: Security vs Political Correctness Revisited,” *Foreignpolicy.com*, November 9, 2009, http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/11/09/al_qaedas_master_plan.

Even if the United States dramatically changes the nature of its involvement or presence in Muslim-majority countries, AQAM leaders will still look to adapt their narrative. Clear evidence of this can be seen in AQAM's messaging in reaction to the Arab Spring; AQAM maintained a focus on the West despite the numerous changes that were occurring in the Middle East. Countering AQAM's ideology must therefore be a central component of U.S. counterterrorism strategy going forward. Among other measures, the United States should:

- Empower, network, and enlist credible voices interested in countering the violent Islamic extremist ideology that underpins AQAM. Doing so will demand that the U.S. government not be central in the ideological engagement. This also requires key Muslim partners, the majority of whom abhor AQAM, to assume leadership roles on the moral, theological, and political dimensions of the AQAM ideology.
- Encourage the private sector and other concerned parties to challenge the narrative and supporting ideology of violent Islamist extremism online and via any other media AQAM seeks to exploit in the future.
- Expand outreach and intervention initiatives to counter radicalization in prisons and among other at-risk populations. Countries with deep experience in the counterradicalization field, like Singapore, should be leveraged.
- Better align the strategic messaging campaign with kinetic counterterrorism efforts. To the extent that kinetic strikes and actions remain necessary, they must be accompanied by the appropriate messaging efforts to prepare the ideological space and mitigate negative consequences and reactions.
- Initiate a global effort to delegitimize the concept of terrorism as an acceptable political tactic. This undercuts the argument for state sponsorship and passive support for AQAM.
- Improve implementation of aid, development, and investments as part of the narrative and messaging battle in trouble spots where AQAM remains relevant. This is not a recommendation to redirect all such efforts in the battle against AQAM, but to leverage those resources and efforts wherever possible to undercut the appeal of the movement and its ideology and quell the conflicts that AQAM will most likely seek to exploit.⁶
- Focus the media resources of the U.S. government, not only on defending and buttressing the image of the United States but also on undercutting the image, message, and ideology of AQAM and its adherents through a wide variety of media and technology, including social media. A major effort should be undertaken in partnership with community leaders and other influential figures to create an alternate narrative that rejects violence.

6. In three Muslim countries known to harbor AQAM members—Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan—citizens of those countries have responded favorably to U.S. humanitarian aid at the same time they oppose U.S. intervention to fight terrorism. In Indonesia, polls have shown increasing and stable approval of U.S. aid following the 2004 tsunami. Of Pakistanis surveyed in May 2006, 75 percent held a positive opinion of the United States following earthquake relief assistance. In Bangladesh, 81 percent of the population looks more favorably on the United States because of U.S. foreign aid. See *Humanitarian Assistance Key to Favorable Public Opinion in World's Three Most Populous Muslim Countries: Results from New Polls of Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan* (Washington, DC: Terror Free Tomorrow, 2006), www.terrorfreetomorrow.org/upimagestft/Indonesia%20Bangladesh%20TFT%20Final%20Poll%20Report.pdf.

The Future of Terrorist Financing

The bin Laden documents found in the Abbottabad compound in May 2011 tell the story of an al Qaeda core struggling economically and relying more heavily on its affiliates for funding. Meanwhile, the al Qaeda affiliates have developed local means of self-financing, as seen in AQIM's kidnapping for ransom and drug trafficking, al Shabaab's levying of taxes and creation of a trade-based money-laundering scheme, and the July 2011 online funding appeals of AQI. Local cells and affiliates are increasingly left on their own to raise money.

Since 9/11, al Qaeda's overall budget and financial infrastructure have been hit hard. Efforts to disrupt and dismantle terrorist financing and support networks have made it harder, costlier, and riskier for al Qaeda and like-minded terrorist groups to raise and move money around the world. Now with Osama bin Laden—the symbolic center and fundraiser for AQAM—gone, the movement will have even greater difficulty raising money.

The intense counterterrorism and regulatory focus on funders, corrupted charities, front operations, and even banks used to facilitate financial flows to terrorist groups has served not just to disrupt but also to deter donations and support. Although efforts to shut down funding pipelines have been largely successful, other channels (traditional *hawala* [trust-based brokers] and cash couriers) and sources (deep-pocket donors and charities) used for terrorist financing remain. The July 28, 2011, revelation by the U.S. Department of the Treasury of Kuwaiti and Qatari funders of a facilitation network in Iran demonstrates the continued flows of funds into al Qaeda's coffers.

AQAM has adapted to this pressure, and its affiliates have grown more independent and innovative in developing self-funding mechanisms while individual members and cells use local means to raise necessary funds. The future of terrorist financing parallels the more fractured and localized nature of AQAM itself and will present new challenges and opportunities for counterterrorism officials.

Fragmented funding. With a weakened and financially feeble al Qaeda core, AQAM is likely to rely more heavily on more diffused and localized funding schemes, often relying on criminal activities such as extortion, kidnapping, and financial fraud that provide fruitful sources of funding. These activities, however, also expose networks and members to attention from local authorities and enforcement. This will also include innovative schemes that take advantage of financial opportunities, as seen with al Shabaab's leveraging of diaspora remittances, making use of port and checkpoint fees, and developing a charcoal trade-based money-laundering operation to raise millions of dollars. More localized financing schemes are less susceptible to international intervention but more sensitive to local intervention by

The Future of Terrorist Financing (*continued*)

both local authorities and communities of interest. Thus, counterterrorist financing work should leverage localized enforcement efforts and coordination explicitly as a way of uncovering and deterring terrorist financing networks.

Growing nexus of financial nodes. Because AQAM is seeking alternative financial sources and efficient vehicles for moving money, it will continue to develop relationships and operations that tie its financing to the infrastructure and operations of other organizations. This is seen already in the case of drug trafficking, where AQIM has profited from the drug trade from South America through West Africa and the Sahel into Europe. In the past, al Qaeda and groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) have benefited from alliances with Indian crime lord Dawood Ibrahim and his organized crime network. The overlaps between the criminal underworld, illicit financial activity, and terrorist operations and funding will continue to evolve as marriages of convenience emerge in common areas of operation. Focusing on key financial conduits, nodes, and networks that serve not just terrorists but transnational criminals will be critical for counterterrorism officials.

New technologies and methods of funding. New technologies and innovations in the storage and movement of money and value are reshaping the international financial landscape. This is especially the case in developing economies and communities without access to formal financial outlets, which are relying more heavily on mobile devices and mechanisms for storing and transferring money. The pace of growth of these systems in the developing world has been staggering. By 2009, the developing world accounted for three-quarters of the more than four billion mobile handsets in use. Some studies estimate that there could be one billion users of mobile banking technologies by 2015. In addition, the development of online, alternative currencies and new mechanisms for virtual barter will further open the Internet for potential exploitation by AQAM and its sympathizers. Tracking the mass volumes of rapid and anonymous money flows around the world and getting in front of new technologies to allow for lawful and appropriate tracking will remain major challenges for law enforcement, intelligence, and regulatory officials, especially because groups and individuals are able to hide and layer their identities and ownership interests.

Old networks and galvanizing events. Although AQAM has been hurt financially, the old funding networks that sustained the Afghan and Arab mujahideen, al Qaeda core, Islamists in Chechnya, AQI, and other elements of AQAM still exist. Sympathizers, deep-pocket donors, and charities and organizations remain, and they can be used to funnel money to AQAM. These networks have been weakened over time, but they have also revitalized around specific causes important to Islamists, like the

The Future of Terrorist Financing (*continued*)

invasion of Iraq, the wars in the Caucasus, and sectarian fighting in Lebanon. Thus, galvanizing events, conflicts, or causes could help resurrect these established networks and means by which they have justified support for Islamist causes and moved money transnationally, often relying on front companies, traditional *hawala*, and cash couriers. Authorities then must maintain vigilance over these networks and financiers and ensure consistent oversight using existing measures to combat money laundering and terrorism financing. This vigilance will require constant pressure with the use of blacklists by the U.S. Treasury and United Nations, along with enforcement actions and deterrence—including the use of local and cultural influence—over existing financial nodes and networks of concern.

“Legitimate” terror groups and state sponsorship. As AQAM adapts, elements of the network could learn lessons from other terrorist groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and LeT, which have leveraged political and social wings to raise money and build popular support and power. In his statement after the devastating Pakistan floods in 2010, Osama bin Laden focused on the need to develop a charitable channel to help Muslims in need. This ethos could take hold as well in certain political environments, with parts of AQAM deciding to exert influence politically—directly or indirectly—if given an opportunity. Elements of AQAM could benefit from continued support from state sponsors of terror or create new alliances of convenience—at a minimum taking advantage of willful blindness by regimes willing to make common cause with terrorist groups. Iran, for example, has supplied hundreds of millions of dollars to Hezbollah to maintain its security and help Hezbollah rebuild its influence and capabilities. Further, Iran has facilitated financing to the Taliban and al Qaeda, according to the U.S. Treasury.¹ Pakistan has historically maintained contacts in and influence over militant networks like the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network with direct ties to al Qaeda. It is critical for the legitimate financial and political world to delegitimize terrorist groups and ostracize those who support their causes—however couched—and to pressure states to renounce support for terrorist proxy movements as a tool of statecraft.

1. Helene Cooper, “Treasury Accuses Iran of Aiding Al Qaeda,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/07/29/world/29terror.html?_r=1&scp=4&sq=iran&st=cse.

Regional frameworks and nontraditional partnerships. International cooperation remains a cornerstone of counterterrorism success against AQAM. We have seen unprecedented cooperation and capacity building over the past 10 years: enhanced transnational information sharing; cooperative and coordinated actions among law enforcement, security services, military, regulators, and diplomats; and regional and international support for capacity building and the framework used to disrupt and dismantle AQAM-related organizations.

The coming years will require not just more of the same but a more aggressive model that relies heavily on regional arrangements to disrupt and contain manifestations of AQAM. A more fractured AQAM that can emerge in local, communal, and regional crises and conflicts also requires countries to rely more heavily on nonstate actors to counter and deny the influence and emergence of AQAM.

To this end, by 2025 the United States should aim to have the AQAM threat addressed at the regional and local levels by regional and local partners. To achieve this goal, the United States should:

- Continue to build regional alliances and frameworks to address the regional and local manifestations of AQAM. This involves a model in which the U.S. government provides capacity building and enablers as needed, but the regional partners (and perhaps one regional leader, such as a country like Australia or Singapore) take a more open approach to leading and building capacity and collaboration.
- Construct more clearly defined regional counterterrorism security frameworks with key allies. Such frameworks may have already been created, but a more explicit construct may be required because of the evolving nature of the threat. In North Africa, for example, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy could take the lead on Libyan reconstruction, thus establishing the roles of such countries in securing the Sahel and the North African arc from al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and associated groups.
- Engage with a variety of actors to encourage pluralistic, democratic systems and processes that undercut the ability of armed militias or groups within a state to coerce or dominate the political and security environment. By supporting pluralistic, democratic political systems, the United States can reduce the likelihood of destabilizing conflict and build more reliable and capable partnerships.

The United States should also work to empower nonstate communities of interest to assume greater responsibility for countering the AQAM threat. The U.S. should consider:

- Developing an engagement strategy for communities and networks of interest that have global or regional reach and an interest in countering elements of the AQAM threat. For example, global law-enforcement communities are ripe for broader engagement on containing the AQAM threat, which would crucially include enhanced burden sharing among law-enforcement communities. Such an approach is critical in battling terrorist financing as it grows more localized in its manifestations.
- Creating new public-private partnerships in the counterterrorism space to empower those willing to combat AQAM and its narrative. This includes building better ties with, and facilitating the understanding of, specific communities of interest—such as scientific communities—where the AQAM presence or narrative proves especially dangerous or problematic. This could take

the form of new early-warning or whistle-blower systems tied to violent extremist threats. Also critical would be efforts to engage key diaspora communities in Western countries to invest in, influence, and partner in order to dissuade radicalization among their own youth and affect communities of interest in their countries of origin.

- Building networks of networks of those aligned against AQAM—in the physical world and virtually. This effort would likely be driven and directed best by nonstate actors like nongovernmental organizations and foundations, and it would empower credible voices and influencers as well as those whose values and missions are antithetical to AQAM’s ideology and mission. The network would include moderate clerics, writers, and academics; victims of terrorism and survivors such as the Global Survivors Network; former militants; human rights groups; and others who are devoted to nonviolent, pluralistic means of addressing conflict in opposition to AQAM’s violently exclusionary worldview. Such networks could then be leveraged to counter manifestations of AQAM’s ideology, messaging, or operations.
- Encouraging a new paradigm whereby other capable and willing actors take the lead in countering international threats. The Colombian government, for example, remains a great source of expertise on countering narcoterrorism and the dangers of a narcostate. This expertise could continue to prove relevant in both the Afghan and Mexican contexts and perhaps in West Africa, where the drug trade has begun to take hold. Thus, Colombia does and should have a major role to play far from South America.

Resources

Policymakers will not deliberate over the above recommendations in a political vacuum. As this study goes to press, the Obama administration and Congress find themselves locked in a painful and high-stakes battle over the future of U.S. fiscal imperatives. While defense and national security will always be a funding priority for both political parties, it has already become apparent that few programs will be immune from budget freezes or cuts in the coming years.

As a result, U.S. counterterrorism officials must prepare to shape and implement policies that are as efficient as possible from a cost perspective. This will entail building greater efficiencies and reducing redundancies within the U.S. government—many of which been created intentionally or have calcified over time. Another way to do this is by sharing costs and responsibilities with international partners, many of which have similar budget concerns. To ensure cost savings and efficiencies that make counterterrorism globally sustainable, it will be useful to embrace the approach described above: intervening before AQAM takes hold in a community, country, or region; focusing on improving and enhancing capabilities and force-multiplying effects of U.S. investment and aid abroad; focusing on relatively lower-cost efforts to undermine AQAM’s ideology and allure; and building and empowering regional and unconventional partnerships.

The preceding recommendations represent viable approaches to countering AQAM in the future. Although we cannot predict with certainty what form the threat may take in the coming years, by ensuring flexibility in the allocation of analytic and operational resources, the United States has an opportunity to address a wide variety of potential threats before they fully develop. In addition, by focusing on denying AQAM the key factors it has historically required to survive, including leadership, networking, safe havens, and an appealing ideological narrative, the United States has a chance to inhibit the future development of the movement, whatever form it may

take. As part of these efforts, closer and better-defined ties between the United States and a variety of partners, at both state and nonstate levels, may ensure the further degradation of AQAM. Although AQAM may transform along a variety of lines and seek to embed itself and leverage various conflicts and crises in the coming years, the adoption of policies informed by the recommendations provided can help mitigate this unpredictability and provide an effective counter to future manifestations of AQAM.



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