

The State of al-Qa`ida Central

By Kévin Jackson

More than a year and a half after the killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul, al-Qa`ida Central has yet to acknowledge the demise of its emir and announce his replacement. After having lost its franchises in Iraq and Syria and after having seen its hegemony on the global jihadi scene hollowed out, the organization now operates without a declared leader, a first in its history. Coupled with the protracted absence of operational success of its own, this track record reinforces the widespread notion that al-Qa`ida Central has become and will remain irrelevant. However, while the challenges facing the group are real, it should not be written off, as it has proved time and again more resilient than expected and can still count on its longstanding network of affiliates and followers to survive and potentially reverse its fortunes.

Ever since the Taliban returned to power in mid-August 2021, the strength of al-Qa`ida Central and the international threat it poses have been much debated topics, entailing contrasting assessments. In its latest reports about the global jihad threat, the United Nations' Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team maintained that the organization was in the process of "rebuilding operational capability" in Afghanistan, considering the latter a "safe haven" for its recruitment and external planning efforts.¹ Benefiting from its "close relationship" with the Taliban regime, the organization is said to have quietly developed its infrastructure in the country, establishing training and housing facilities in eastern and southern areas. Estimated at between "30 to 60" operatives, al-Qa`ida's core cohort in Afghanistan is assessed by these reports as currently unable to "project sophisticated attacks at long range," although the group remains "a threat in the region, and potentially beyond," especially over the long term.²

These views are far from the consensus. U.S. officials criticized some of the U.N. reporting, stating that "these numbers are wildly out of whack with the best estimates of the U.S. intelligence community."³ In the summer of 2023, U.S. senior officials claimed that al-Qa`ida "simply has not reconstituted a presence in Afghanistan since the U.S. departure in August 2021," with only "fewer than a dozen core members" based in the country.⁴ According to U.S. intelligence, al-Qa`ida is now "at an historical low point in Afghanistan ... and its revival (is) unlikely," having "lost target access, leadership talent, group cohesion, rank-and-file commitment, and an accommodating local environment."⁵ In this light, the Taliban's Afghanistan resembles more of "a nursing home for AQ seniors" than a stronghold from which the group could direct international attacks.⁶

Drawing on close examination of public and private materials from al-Qa`ida and historical research, this article aims to shed light on the current status of the central organization. The first section provides background on the group's current sanctuaries and personalities. The second section examines the complications facing al-Qa`ida relative to its main operational areas. The article then outlines the group's vision on international terrorist attacks. Finally, it investigates the nature of its relationship with the broader network of affiliates overseas.

Location of the Core

There is little doubt that, over the past decade, al-Qa`ida's membership in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Af-Pak) has experienced significant losses. As a result of U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts in the region, the group was deprived of many of its most seasoned figures and fighters. The central organization itself acknowledged as much, lamenting that the drone strike campaign had "inflicted major losses in the ranks of the mujahidin in Afghanistan [and] Waziristan," including "leaders and cadres."⁷

The high attrition rate left al-Qa`ida struggling to replenish its talent pool. The issue was compounded by the dwindling appeal of jihad in Afghanistan, eclipsed by the wave of enthusiasm caused by the Arab Spring within jihadi circles. Consequently, fewer new foreign volunteers came to the Af-Pak region, instead choosing to fight elsewhere, especially in Syria. As for al-Qa`ida's members in Waziristan, some ended up disillusioned as the organization was forced to become less active to preserve its ranks. "Brothers that are working they are getting killed, and for those who are not doing anything then why on earth are they still here," an American operative in the group's external wing bemoaned.⁸ The last straw was Pakistan's 2014 military intervention in North Waziristan, where al-Qa`ida had its headquarters. This led the central organization to proceed to "the nearly complete evacuation of the Waziristan arena and Pakistan," according to a leader in the group.⁹ In this light, it is safe to say that al-Qa`ida's longstanding core cadre in the region depleted substantially.

The group, however, has managed to retain a presence in its original safe haven. With the loss of its Pakistani sanctuary, part of its manpower relocated to Afghanistan, a shift initiated in 2010

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by its top leadership, including Usama bin Ladin. Back then, on account of the high number of “brothers” killed by drone strikes in Waziristan, the late leader of al-Qa`ida had ordered his men to leave Pakistan’s tribal areas for eastern Afghanistan, in Kunar and Nuristan provinces, as well as Ghazni and Zabul, in the country’s center and south.¹⁰

The move, completed in the wake of Islamabad’s 2014 offensive, turned Afghanistan from a front primarily used by field commanders and fighters into a territorial refuge for al-Qa`ida as a whole, including high-ranking leaders.¹¹ This underscores that if the 2021 U.S. withdrawal was likely seen by al-Qa`ida as a positive development for its future in Afghanistan, the group had not waited for this to shore up its presence in the country, especially in the south and east. Though the exact size of al-Qa`ida’s current cohort in Afghanistan remains unclear, it appears that the group has returned to its original numbers when it moved to Afghanistan in 1996, with around 60-70 core members based there currently, according to Aimen Dean, a spy for British intelligence inside al-Qa`ida from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, who received information on current numbers from sources in Afghanistan broadly aligning with the aforementioned U.N. estimate.¹²

Since the Taliban takeover, al-Qa`ida has continued to use Afghanistan as one of its main command and control hubs. This was best highlighted by the return of the group’s then emir al-Zawahiri to Kabul’s Wazir Akbar Khan, a neighborhood where he used to live with his family and associates prior to 9/11.¹³ Although the United States maintains that there are fewer than “a dozen core members” in the country, the aforementioned relocation process undercuts this claim. Further, at least one other major player is said to be based there. A Saudi national, Hamza al-Ghamidi used to lead bin Ladin’s security detail and helped found al-Qa`ida’s media arm, As-Sahab. Today, he is one of the most prominent leaders in the central organization, having served in its Shura council for over a decade.¹⁴

Besides Afghanistan, Iran represents al-Qa`ida’s other command center. Its importance significantly increased in the post-Waziristan era, with the arrival of a number of the group’s personnel there. In addition to these “newcomers,” several historical figures returned to the fold after years of detention in the country. These included Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Saif al-`Adl¹⁵ who, after their release in 2015, took a leading role in managing al-Qa`ida’s affairs in the region and beyond. Abu Muhammad was reportedly killed in Tehran in 2020.¹⁶ Al-`Adl, for his part, is believed to be still in Iran and to have assumed command since al-Zawahiri’s death.¹⁷ Described as the group’s “engineer,” ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Maghribi, al-Zawahiri’s son-in-law, appears as the second most senior element in the Iran-based cadre. In charge of As-Sahab since 2003, al-Maghribi then became part of al-Qa`ida’s Shura council before acting as its “general manager.” Long based in Pakistan’s tribal areas, the Moroccan national was among those who relocated to Iran a decade ago or so.¹⁸

Iran’s centrality for al-Qa`ida is further evidenced by the possible survival of other experienced figures like Abu ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Masri,

another member of the Shura council.^a In pre-9/11 Afghanistan, this Egyptian chemist-turned-explosives-expert had been tasked by al-Qa`ida with obtaining weapons of mass destruction and used to conduct “secret experiments” in his laboratory, researching making anthrax and using cyanide gas for terrorist operations. Keen on improving his skills in the field, he intended to travel overseas to re-enroll in university and pursue chemistry studies, only to have his plans canceled by bin Ladin for safety reasons.¹⁹

Aside from these top leaders, al-Qa`ida can rely on a number of more junior, yet noteworthy Arab elements operating between Afghanistan and Iran. These operatives, including a number from the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa dating back to the bin Ladin era, constitute a younger, lesser-known generation of cadres long groomed by their more infamous elders. Among these is Sultan al-‘Abdali.^b Initially engaged in one of al-Qa`ida’s combat brigades in eastern Afghanistan in the late 2000s, this Saudi national is currently active on the media front, having published several pieces for As-Sahab since 2017 under the *nom de plume* “Awab bin Hasan al-Hasani.”²⁰ Underlining his seniority, he is referred to as “Shaykh” inside al-Qa`ida, and one of his latest releases featured a foreword from al-Zawahiri and Abu Muhammad.^c

The Afghan and Iranian Challenges

Al-Qa`ida’s relocation to Afghanistan and Iran, coupled with the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban takeover, may have enabled the group to abandon its longtime “survival” mode and resume a functional routine. This more favorable environment notwithstanding, the central organization still has to face issues specific to each location.

In Afghanistan, the U.S. withdrawal and the fall of the Afghan government bereaved the group of an enemy to fight. Hence, it can no longer capitalize on the anti-occupation narrative it utilized during the two decades of war in Afghanistan to appeal to new recruits looking for armed jihad. This might prove problematic for the group’s recruitment prospects, especially with the younger constituencies primarily interested in fighting opportunities.

Al-Qa`ida’s fortunes will also hinge on its Taliban allies’ willingness and capacity to curtail its activities, the latter having pledged to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a launchpad for terrorist attacks.²¹ If the Emirate’s first iteration had failed to

a Abu ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Masri’s current status is unclear. While the United States maintains that the Egyptian is alive and well in Iran, AQAP’s senior leader Khubayb al-Sudani mentioned him as dead. See Khubayb al-Sudani, *Fragments of al-Qa`ida’s History*, June 30, 2023.

b Among the Abbottabad files reviewed by this author for this article was a letter penned by a Saudi signing as “Sultan al-‘Abdali ‘Qattal’ al-Jiddawi.” In January 2021, the United States designated Sultan Yusuf Hasan al-‘Arif, a Saudi also known as “Qattal al-‘Abdali.” Later that year, Asfandyar Mir stated that among al-Qa`ida’s senior leaders was a “Saudi citizen Awab bin Hassan al-Hassani, also known as Qahtal.” This author assesses that these different names and aliases refer to the same individual. There is contradicting information about his whereabouts. The United States places him in Iran. Mir, for his part, wrote that he relocated to Afghanistan. See Michael R. Pompeo, “United States Takes Action To Counter Iranian Support for al-Qa`ida,” U.S. Department of State, January 12, 2021. See also Asfandyar Mir, “Twenty Years After 9/11: The Terror Threat from Afghanistan Post the Taliban Takeover,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:7 (2021).

c Awab bin Hasan al-Hasani, “Surat al-‘Adiyat: The Inghimasi,” As-Sahab, September 10, 2023. This book is part of a series which al-‘Abdali/al-Hasani began writing more than 10 years ago, explaining that Abu Muhammad al-Masri and al-Zawahiri had time to add a foreword to it before their deaths in 2020 and 2022, respectively.



Saif al-`Adl in Afghanistan before 9/11. (Source: screen capture from a video exhibit available on the website of the Department of Defense's Office of Military Commissions)

contain the group, its subsequent downfall has certainly given the Taliban a strong incentive to enforce constraining regulations on their foreign brothers-in-arms, all the while sheltering and protecting them. Disregarding these restrictions would represent a big risk for al-Qa`ida. While it enjoys friendly relations with the Taliban's most influential circles, from its supreme leader to the Haqqani network, the group is well aware that other officials in the regime do not look so kindly on it. These include Afghanistan's Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Mullah Baradar, who has long been distrusted by al-Qa`ida's leaders, including bin Ladin and al-Zawahiri.²² In the wake of the Taliban takeover, Baradar is reported to have sought to hinder the organization in Afghanistan, an effort eventually opposed by the Taliban's top leader.²³

So far, al-Qa`ida has seemed willing to play ball for the sake of the Emirate's political standing, especially given that the Taliban had conferred with the group on the negotiations with the United States and that the central organization of al-Qa`ida had acquiesced to the wording of the Taliban's counterterrorism guarantees in the Doha agreement.²⁴ Al-Qa`ida's concessions to the Taliban can be seen in the group's media output, which carefully conceals its presence on Afghan soil, notably remaining silent over al-Zawahiri's death in Kabul. This, in turn, enables the Taliban to insist that the "organization has no presence in Afghanistan."²⁵ Notably, al-Qa`ida publicly stated that "our jihadi strikes against Zionist-Crusader America [have ceased] from the territory of Afghanistan," a first in

the group's history.^{26 d}

Yet, al-Qa`ida's current cautiousness does not mean that the group has no room for maneuver to remain active from Afghanistan and build up its capacities. It has already expressed interest in bringing back old timers into the fold.^e Further, the group seems keen to invest time and resources in training, with a focus on specialization, an effort which predates the Taliban return.²⁷ As was the case prior to 9/11, some al-Qa`ida members might end up supporting the Afghan emirate by assisting the Taliban in various

d A similar sentiment was voiced by members of AQIS to CNN in April 2021. They claimed that the organization "did not need Afghanistan [for future external operations] and there is no such intention in the future." See Nic Robertson and Saleem Mehsud, "Al Qaeda promises 'war on all fronts' against America as Biden pulls out of Afghanistan," CNN, April 30, 2021.

e This can be seen in Abu Muhammad al-Masri's book on the 1998 East Africa bombings. In it, the late Egyptian senior al-Qa`ida leader evoked the case of Ridha al-Tunisi, a Tunisian veteran of the anti-Soviet jihad and a founding cadre of al-Qa`ida. Arrested in Karachi in 2002, he was handed over to his home country in 2015. "We hope to see him soon in the fields of jihad to play his role in participating, advising and guiding the younger generations," Abu Muhammad wrote. See Abu Muhammad al-Masri, "The Road to Nairobi and Dar al-Salam," As-Sahab, August 2023.

fields on account of their skills and backgrounds.^f With regard to its activities in the broader region, the central organization will most likely rely on its brainchild, al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which, while opposed to opening a front in Pakistan, has expressed ambitions to initiate a campaign against India.²⁸

In Iran, al-Qa`ida's main hurdle has more to do with outside perception and legitimacy than pressure from the country's regime. To be sure, Tehran has at times cracked down on the group's network. Still, the Iran-based contingent enjoys relatively propitious conditions for its enterprise, being out of reach of drone strikes and benefiting from longstanding connections in the country.²⁹ The issue for the organization is that its enduring presence there has raised suspicions within the broader jihadi milieu, with some dreading the idea of a nexus between al-Qa`ida and Tehran, an actor widely castigated by jihadis for what they deem are its sectarian politics against Sunnis in Iraq, Syria, and the broader region.³⁰

Although the topic has always been a source of embarrassment for al-Qa`ida, it has become increasingly prevalent and costly over the past few years, as shown by the 2016-2017 crisis between the central organization and its then Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra during which the latter group progressively decoupled itself from al-Qa`ida. At the time, al-Nusra rebuffed what they perceived as the excessive influence of a quasi-detained duo, al-`Adl and Abu Muhammad, on the ground that the two were "present in an enemy country (Iran)" whereas al-Qa`ida's own protocols "stipulate that no one can enjoy competencies so long as he is not in one of the branches."³¹ The notion of a collusion or that al-Qa`ida's leaders were virtually detained by Tehran were dismissed by some of the group's officials. With regard to al-`Adl, they maintained, he was simply "prohibited from traveling," otherwise living an "ordinary life" and being "still free to undertake his jihadi work."³²

Despite al-Qa`ida's 'clarifications,' the topic was brought up again in the aftermath of al-Zawahiri's killing. As al-`Adl was reported to have taken over, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) senior leader Abu Mariya al-Qahtani (who was recently assassinated in Syria³³) derided the idea that someone living "under confinement and coercion" could "manage the affiliates of al-Qa`ida."³⁴ Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi also weighed in on the topic. The Jordanian jihadi scholar was adamant that al-Qa`ida "will not choose a leader unless he is in Khurasan [Afghanistan-Pakistan], Yemen, and so on," adding that it was "impossible for them to choose a leader in Iran or under the authority of any government."³⁵ Reflecting the legitimacy issue faced by al-Qa`ida, al-Maqdisi's stance is even more problematic because his opinion still matters to the group, which consults him for advice.³⁶ The central organization's controversial presence in Iran thus constitutes a serious challenge to its stature, leaving it vulnerable to further criticism from jihadi circles.

External Operations

Although al-Qa`ida claimed that it will no longer plan terrorist attacks from Afghanistan, this does not mean that the central

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organization will renounce foreign activities altogether, far from it. The group has made it clear that it is very much committed to continuing the fight against the "far enemy," with its leaders considering external operations as paramount to further its agenda. Discussing terrorist attacks, al-`Adl posited that "the mujahideen must continue [to conduct] their large and small operations in order to achieve their goals," with a focus on political, military, and economic targets. In this realm, al-Qa`ida's presumptive emir favors "a successive series of operations accompanied by a media momentum that affects the psychology of the targeted segment ... giving the impression that there is no safe place and no end to assassinations and bombings."³⁷

Al-Qa`ida further telegraphed its intentions to be creative, notably by obtaining non-conventional weapons, including weapons of mass destruction. "Within a few years, jihadi movements could possess [these] weapons of deterrence," Abu Muhammad al-Masri wrote in 2019, adding that "at that point, the equation will change." To do so, the late Egyptian recommended "allocating budgets for experimental research in non-conventional weapons," "collaborating with scientists" as well as sending selected operatives "to enroll in distinguished scientific universities in the U.S., Europe and Asia," where they would study "physics, chemistry, and relevant specialities." Additionally, he suggested "studying aeronautical engineering" to develop a drone program "for assassination operations in urban environments."³⁸

Furthermore, al-Qa`ida has indicated that its hiatus on external operations from Afghanistan is only temporary, stressing that it was just "for now."³⁹ Here, it is worth remembering that even when the group had decided not to carry out major terrorist attacks during its days located in Sudan, it was still refining its external program, using "the opportunity that Sudan offered to do the groundwork for targeting several American and Jewish interests," according to Abu Muhammad, who added that "the execution of these plans remained on the Organization's watch list as the search was on for the appropriate theater for launching such operations."⁴⁰ Al-Qa`ida may thus capitalize on the opportunity offered by the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan to hone external projects while not acting upon them immediately. Al-`Adl has stated that "great leaders use the period of a truce or reconciliation" to "work on improving the conditions for the upcoming battle."⁴¹

Even if al-Qa`ida continues to hold off from launching attacks from Afghanistan, it has already disclosed that it intends to use other locations to orchestrate attacks, stating that "this blessed jihad against the Empire of Evil will continue from other parts of the world."⁴² These efforts to delocalize its operational capacity when faced with difficulties in a specific area have long been pursued by the group. For instance, as it was experiencing hardships in Waziristan during the late 2000s, al-Qa`ida attempted to shift its external program to other places deemed more accommodating, including Turkey, where it tried to establish an external wing.⁴³ It also looked to develop its capabilities from Iran, where it sent a group of external operatives in 2010 and from where it later plotted

^f According to U.N. reporting, this appears to be already the case: "With the patronage of the Taliban, Al-Qaida members have received appointments and advisory roles in the Taliban security and administrative structures." See "Fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2665 (2022) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan," United Nations Security Council, June 1, 2023.

with a Tunisian national to strike a rail link between Canada and the United States.⁴⁴

When it comes to al-Qa`ida's targeting priorities, the United States continues to feature on the top of the list. Al-`Adl maintains that "operations to target American interests in the entire Islamic world must be conducted, whether it is the occupying state or the one supporting a corrupt regime."⁴⁵ Similarly, Abu Muhammad argued that to weaken "the global leader of disbelief (America)," al-Qa`ida should strike "its military and economic interests." Among the targets he mentioned were American "military bases scattered throughout the Arab and Islamic world" as well as "embassies."⁴⁶

Aside from the United States, al-Qa`ida Central appears keen on striking Europe. Al-`Adl considers that al-Qa`ida's best chance to achieve some of its political goals might be to target "countries that are no longer influential in the world, such as France, Spain, and the United Kingdom, whose union is on the verge of dissolution."⁴⁷

In the group's European hierarchy, France stands out, being viewed by al-`Adl as among "the most dangerous allies" of the United States, together with the United Kingdom.⁴⁸ Largely driven by the Prophet cartoons controversy, the group's messaging dedicated output entirely devoted to France where it urged its audience to "give a befitting response to the French Crusaders who have spearheaded this vile campaign of blasphemy" and replicate the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack.⁴⁹

Scandinavian countries appear to be another top priority for the central organization in Europe. Last summer, in the wake of a series of Qur'an burnings in Sweden and Denmark, al-Qa`ida stated that "Sweden has chosen to take the lead in the war against Islam ... among the European Union countries, thus competing with France, Denmark and others for first position in the race for enmity to God."⁵⁰ The group threatened to attack the two Scandinavian countries as well as their interests and personnel abroad, including its embassies and diplomats.⁵¹

In the wake of the Gaza war, al-Qa`ida likely feels emboldened by what it perceives as a uniquely auspicious geopolitical context to further its global ambitions. Shortly after Hamas' October 7 onslaught on Israel, the group released a communiqué in which it called for a massive mobilization against "the Zionist enemy."⁵²

The group may seek to plot against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad, just like it did after the onset of the Second Intifada in late 2000. At the time, bin Ladin had sent a group of operatives to East Africa, from where they planned the 2002 Mombasa attacks.⁵³ It is also worth remembering that in 2001, while opposed to anti-U.S. attacks, the Taliban had allowed al-Qa`ida to mount anti-Jewish operations from Afghanistan.⁵⁴ Given the Emirate's stance on the Gaza war, al-Qa`ida may attempt yet again to obtain the Taliban's approval to gain more leeway in its external planning.

But al-Qa`ida's Gaza war communiqué clearly shows that the group will try to capitalize on "the opportunity of the century" primarily through attacks against U.S. and Western interests overseas, framing these as its way to support "our people in Palestine." This is reflected in the communiqué's targeting instructions, focused on striking "American bases, airports and embassies in our Islamic region," "Crusader battleships ... in the Muslim seas" as well as "Zionists" in Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco, all countries involved in the normalization process with Israel.⁵⁵

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Core and Franchises

Today, the al-Qa`ida brand no longer enjoys the prestige it had during the bin Ladin era. Having lost its Iraqi and Syrian affiliates, the central organization is now deprived of a foothold in these two major jihadi fronts, once its crown jewels. A decade ago, it had relocated numerous experienced operatives to Syria, only to see most of them killed by drone strikes. If some have survived, their activities have been largely curbed by HTS.⁵⁶ As for Iraq, the group is completely absent from the scene, owing to the Islamic State's monopoly.

However, the central organization of al-Qa`ida still maintains influence, having succeeded in retaining the loyalty of its other franchises in Yemen (al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP), the Sahara-Sahel (al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM), and Somalia (al-Shabaab). Due to the dispersed geography of the al-Qa`ida movement and operational security, the mothership cannot afford to "ask the leadership of the branches to refer to the central command in every matter," a core leader said.⁵⁷ Instead, it follows "a flexible style of management" with its subsidiaries, according to AQIM's current emir Abu `Ubayda Yusuf al-Annabi.⁵⁸ Similar to the approach adopted during bin Ladin's tenure, the central organization "contents itself with outlining the general goals and broad lines of the strategy [to follow]" while leaving "the details of the action plan on the field" to its affiliates, each according to their own "circumstances and capacities," AQIM's emir added.⁵⁹ This framework has long been defined by the central organization's 2013 "General Guidelines for Jihadi Action" outlining the network's "general policy."⁶⁰

In addition to providing instructions and "keeping abreast of their track records," al-Qa`ida's leadership typically consults and seeks the opinion of its franchises on a range of issues. The "General Guidelines," for instance, were issued only "after consultation with the local branches of al-Qa`ida," according to al-Zawahiri.⁶¹ The Syrian experience, however, showed that the mothership was still keen on maintaining its executive powers by having the final say on strategic matters.⁶²

To convey its directives, the central organization resorts to its Iran-based "connections office" headed by al-Maghribi. "For many years we have been entrusted with connecting with all the branches and all sides," the office said in late 2017, specifying that they were the ones handling the correspondence to and from al-Qa`ida's top leadership. At the time, according to the office, it was "possible to connect with the external connections official on an almost daily basis."⁶³

The respective media teams of the core and the franchises also seem instrumental in maintaining contact between the various outfits. This media nexus was notably highlighted in a video released by As-Sahab in September 2021. In it, As-Sahab stated that clips featuring top leaders from both AQAP and AQIM had

been “recorded in cooperation” with the media crews of the two offshoots.⁶⁴ Conversely, al-Qa`ida Central’s members also appeared in its affiliates’ media productions.⁶⁵

Despite sustained lobbying from the Islamic State and others, these subsidiaries have made it clear that they will not leave behind the al-Qa`ida banner. Instead, the successive leaders of al-Qa`ida’s affiliates have repeatedly reaffirmed their allegiance and shown commitment to continue operating within the framework charted by the mothership. AQIM’s emir al-Annabi, for example, stated that even though the group had allied with other factions under the coalition Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), both AQIM and JNIM should be viewed as “a core component” of the broader movement led by al-Qa`ida Central.⁶⁶ This alignment with the mothership’s methodology was further illustrated by a lecture given by AQAP’s late emir Qasim al-Raymi in which he taught the “General Guidelines” to a class of AQAP members.⁶⁷

Projecting the image of a transnational movement under a general command, al-Qa`ida’s franchises have routinely stressed that their action was guided by the central leadership. When endorsing the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, AQAP underlined that while the group had planned the operation, they had done so “in compliance with ... the order of our general emir, the generous Shaykh ... al-Zawahiri.”⁶⁸ More recently, al-Qa`ida’s franchises furthered the unity narrative by carrying out a series of high-profile attacks against Western interests that they framed under the common slogan “Jerusalem will never be Judaized.” In their claims of responsibility, the groups emphasized that this campaign had been launched “in accordance with the guidelines of Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri ... in targeting Western and Zionist interests worldwide.”⁶⁹

Over the past decade, al-Qa`ida Central has been able to leverage these external fronts to ensure its survival in the face of security pressure in the Af-Pak region. If the Syrian experience largely failed, it is worth stressing that the group also dispatched part of its membership to Yemen, where they teamed up with AQAP and served in various capacities. However, this core cadre has experienced some attrition, especially from drone strikes.⁷⁰ A recent loss was that of al-`Adl’s son, Khalid, who is said to have been sent from Iran by his father.⁷¹ With these arrivals and the sustained presence of other core figures, including in AQAP’s top leadership, the central organization has likely secured a lasting legacy in the region.

As al-Qa`ida’s ability to project threats from Af-Pak was declining, these franchises proved key to ensure that the global brand remained relevant and to show that al-Qa`ida was still able to plan international attacks. When it comes to the last decade, AQAP has been the most active subsidiary in this field, as shown by the 2015 Charlie Hebdo and 2019 Pensacola attacks as well as the group’s numerous other external plots. The other franchise

active in external plotting in recent years is al-Shabaab, which notably planned a 9/11-style attack targeting the U.S. homeland that was foiled in 2019.⁷² Both Yemen and Somalia have long been viewed by the central organization as valuable locations from which global attacks could be staged. According to U.S. intelligence, the two affiliates “will continue to expand” and “sustain the global network as the group maintains its strategic intent to target the United States and U.S. citizens.”⁷³ This, in addition to AQAP’s and al-Shabaab’s experience in the international terror domain and the number of core elements in AQAP, may lead al-Qa`ida Central to lobby and subcontract these groups and their resources for future operations.

Conclusion

The ongoing lack of visibility surrounding al-Qa`ida Central’s inner workings makes it difficult to offer a definitive assessment about the group and its strength. Still, this article has shown that the group is intent on navigating a pathway rather similar to that once personified by bin Ladin, with its focus on the United States and its allies. Lacking a leadership symbolizing this new era, the organization seems to have prioritized security requirements and political considerations over media imperatives, even though it remains active on the propaganda front.

While many perceive al-Qa`ida as in permanent decline, it is worth remembering that over its 35 years of existence, the organization has gone through other times of turmoil that it ultimately managed to overcome, underlining its enduring resilience. Besides, if the number of its forces in Afghanistan might be low, the group can count on additional manpower in other places, from Iran to Yemen, ensuring multiple geographic options for the central organization to remain operational and further its transnational agenda.

Faced with overt criticism from jihadi circles and with no recent significant successful operations of its own (in Af-Pak and beyond) and no new absorptions of other jihadi groups, al-Qa`ida Central’s current leadership may feel renewed urgency to develop external plotting against Western targets, by its own means and/or through its subsidiaries. In addition to centrally planned plots, the central organization could resort to comparatively cheaper operations similar to the Pensacola attack. Its main hurdle here will pertain to its capacity to mobilize resources and qualified staff to devise new projects, factors which have long hindered its operational plans. At any rate, al-Qa`ida Central’s leaders have already signaled that they very much intend on continuing to plot terror against the United States and other far enemies. In the wake of the outrage across the Muslim world caused by the war in Gaza, taking ownership of successful high-profile attacks against Western targets may well be seen by these leaders as a way to renew al-Qa`ida Central’s relevance. **CTC**

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