How much of a threat do Al Qaeda and its affiliates pose to the United States, Canada, and other Western countries today? Some analysts fear Al Qaeda is again on the march. The group that perpetrated the deadliest terrorist attack in history has survived a ferocious US counterterrorism response—one of the biggest US counterterrorism successes in recent years—that forced the Islamic State’s caliphate underground and subjugated its last territory in Syria in 2019. Al Qaeda could fill the void, however, and make a comeback. Its affiliates, too, pose a potential risk of swelling the ranks of those loyal to Al Qaeda leader Ayman Zawahiri, giving the organization greater reach. In addition, the United States is considering retreating from the Middle East, which could give Al Qaeda and its affiliates more opportunities in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and other countries where its activities have been opposed by US forces and US-backed governments. A recent UN report also warned about the movement’s growing presence in South Asia and Africa.

Al Qaeda and its affiliates retain some impressive strengths and do have some opportunities to regroup, but on balance, the group is far less dangerous than it was at the time of 9/11 and will face difficulty capitalizing on the decline of the Islamic State and resuming its role as the dominant jihadist organization. Part of this weakness is due to the continuing US-led campaign against Al Qaeda, but many of the group’s problems stem from the increasing localization of the broader jihadist movement. For residents of Western countries, this decline suggests they are safer, but not completely safe, from Al Qaeda-linked terrorism.
However, it bodes poorly for a Middle East already plagued by war and dysfunction.

This article first reviews the status of the Al Qaeda core with regard to terrorist activity and its limits. It then assesses the support Al Qaeda enjoys in Western countries and the question of how to judge its affiliates. The group’s and the overall jihadist movement’s continued strengths are presented, and its many weaknesses are discussed. The article concludes by briefly noting ways Al Qaeda might seek to improve its status.

**Al Qaeda’s Limits Today**

The legacy of 9/11 is still profound. On that day, Al Qaeda carried out by far the bloodiest terrorist attack in history, made more impactful by targeting icons of American power on US soil. The attacks shocked the world and redefined American foreign policy in ways still felt today. In the years that followed, Al Qaeda remained deadly, carrying out several bloody attacks in Europe, the Middle East, and other countries. These include, among other horrific incidents, the March 11, 2004 bombings of commuter trains in Madrid that killed almost 200 people, and the July 7, 2005 transportation bombings in London that killed 52.

Although jihadist-linked terrorism has continued since that time, and spinoffs like the Islamic State have emerged, the Al Qaeda core itself—the organization headed by Osama Bin Laden’s successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, that is based in Pakistan—is far less active. Table 1.0 lists major attacks (15 deaths or more) attributed to the Al Qaeda core in Pakistan, rather than Al Qaeda affiliates such as AQAP (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), discussed below. The core itself has not carried out a major attack in the West for more than a decade.3

As the list of attacks suggests, Al Qaeda has fallen far since its 9/11 peak, and warnings from a decade ago of another mass casualty have proven false.4

Indeed, the devastation of the 9/11 and subsequent attacks prompted a massive and effective response. In other words, US and allied counterterrorism, for all its faults, has made a difference. After processing the ferocity of the US campaign, 9/11 mastermind Khaled Sheikh Mohammad noted later to a US interrogator, “Shit, we’ve awakened a sleeping bear … I think we bit off more than we can chew.”5 Several factors, all of which continue to this day, contributed to this dramatic decline in capacity.
Loss of a Haven

The haven Al Qaeda enjoyed in Afghanistan enabled it to train a miniature army, indoctrinate thousands of recruits, and establish a headquarters safe from outside disruption. US intelligence estimates that between 10,000 and 20,000 foreigners trained in Afghanistan camps in the pre-9/11 era. Bin Laden and other key leaders hid out there, able to plan at leisure because they were safe from most traditional counterterrorism efforts. Recruits entered the camps upset about issues as diverse as Chechnya, Kashmir, Palestine, and the hostility of the United States and the West. Al Qaeda brought these concerns together in an over-arching narrative of a war against Islam and channeled the recruits’ anger and adventurism into a more coherent whole.

In the post 9/11 era, conflict zones such as Iraq, Somalia, and Syria attracted thousands of foreigners, but they were under constant pressure from drones, military raids, and local forces allied to the United States and its partners, making it far harder to plan years-long operations, launch sophisticated attacks, and otherwise build the capacity Al Qaeda developed in pre-9/11 Afghanistan. Indeed, the major post-9/11 attacks in the West, such as Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, involved long-time operatives hiding out in Al Qaeda havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan, not new ones in other fields of jihad. The wars in places like Iraq, Somalia, and Syria provided brutal forms of vetting and training for recruits, but they are not receiving the same sort of structured training as they did in Afghanistan in the 1990s, and much of it is about insurgent warfare rather than clandestine operations in the West. Not surprisingly, the intensity of the conflict also prompts recruits and their leaders to focus on the immediate fight, not on enemies farther from the fields of battle.

Table 1.0.: Major Al Qaeda Core Attacks after 9/11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 11, 2002</td>
<td>Djerba, Tunisia</td>
<td>AQ claims responsibility for synagogue bombing (19 killed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 28, 2002</td>
<td>Mombasa, Kenya</td>
<td>Hotel popular with Israelis bombed (15 killed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 12, 2003</td>
<td>Riyadh, Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Three Western housing compounds bombed (34 killed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 8, 2003</td>
<td>Riyadh, Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Western housing compound bombed (17 killed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 15 &amp; 20,</td>
<td>Istanbul, Turkey</td>
<td>Truck bombs target synagogues, bank, British consulate (57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td></td>
<td>killed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 11, 2004</td>
<td>Madrid, Spain</td>
<td>Four Metro commuter trains bombed (191 killed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 7, 2005</td>
<td>London, England</td>
<td>Underground train system and bus bombing (52 killed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Loss of a Haven
Global Campaign
Before 9/11, Al Qaeda had a presence in Europe, Asia, and even, at times, the United States, with most local intelligence services expending few resources to stop them from recruiting, fundraising, or otherwise building the organization and network as a whole. After 9/11, the United States and other Western countries conducted a global intelligence and police effort to disrupt Al Qaeda. Throughout the world, allied intelligence services arrested Al Qaeda members and forced the remainder deeper underground, disrupting their networks. After the 9/11 attacks, US officials were working with more than 100 countries to disrupt terrorist networks. A senior CIA official testified in 2005 that foreign intelligence services helped with almost every capture or killing of a suspected terrorist outside Iraq. Jihadists themselves would agree. One of their top strategists, Abu Musab al-Suri, lamented that the 9/11 attacks cast “jihadists into a fiery furnace… A hellfire which consumed most of their leaders, fighters, and bases.”

Localization
The loss of a haven and disruption of the global network made it harder for Al Qaeda leaders to operate a transnational organization. If they communicated from Pakistan, they risked detection and disruption, so they were forced to give local cells and organizations more autonomy. In addition, because the 2003 US invasion of Iraq enabled a merging of the “near” and “far” enemies, global jihad became more localized. Muslims furious about the US invasion and US policy in general now only needed to travel to another Muslim country rather than do operations deep in a hostile West. In Iraq, the primary group there also embraced sectarian warfare against the Shiite-dominated Iraqi regime supported by the United States—a decision with lasting consequences, as the sectarian hostility this generated would largely be confined to struggles in the Muslim world.

To be clear, the zeitgeist of the jihadist movement did not return to the period of the 1970s through the mid-1990s, when almost all the leading jihadist causes emphasized the near enemy above all else. Nevertheless, the struggles trending in the jihadist world such as Iraq after 2003 and Syria after 2012 involved fighting primarily against a local regime and only secondarily against Western countries.

Uninspiring Leadership
Ayman al-Zawahiri has not proven to be a charismatic leader, and the affiliate leaders do not have widespread followings outside their areas of operation. This stands in sharp contrast to Bin Laden, whose quiet charisma gained widespread admiration and helped bring the fractious jihadist movement together. Zawahiri’s absence from the field of battle in the post-9/11 period has also
worked against him. New leaders, like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who led jihadist operations in Iraq, gained glory because they were warriors, and the Islamic State as a whole inspired a new generation in part because of its actions on the battlefield. Lacking charisma or recent accomplishments, Zawahiri has struggled to compete. Al Qaeda touted a younger figure in the recently killed Hamza Bin Laden due to his family pedigree, but, even before he died in an airstrike in July 2019, he also lacked the battlefield prowess or other accomplishments that could give him a credible claim to the movement’s helm. It is unclear who might take the helm and revive the movement should Zawahiri find himself on the wrong end of a Hellfire missile.11

Support in West

Al Qaeda and other groups have conducted three types of attacks in the West. Some, like 9/11 (or the 2015 Paris attacks by the Islamic State) involved top-down operations by recruits who were trained and inspired by the group itself at its base and then sent to carry out violence. These foreign fighters proved exceptionally deadly, both in terms of lethality and in carrying out an attack successfully.12 Second, Al Qaeda would carry out remote attacks, directing operatives in the West from afar and using their existing networks, often supplemented with social media contact, to its advantage. Third, Al Qaeda and similar groups inspire locals to attack through propaganda but do not directly control them.

Because of the disruption of Al Qaeda’s haven, it has been far harder for the group to orchestrate attacks outside the region, either ones it conducted from the top or coordinated remotely. Greatly compounding this difficulty are the arrests and monitoring of suspected cells in the West and the increased monitoring of Al Qaeda communications. When intelligence services rooted most of these out by the end of the last decade, Al Qaeda’s operational capacity was greatly diminished.

This leaves inspiring more bottom-up attacks as Al Qaeda’s primary method, though often these are done in conjunction with an operative from a jihadist group or using another mix of different approaches. The jihadist movement, in both its Al Qaeda and Islamic State incarnations, has motivated attacks in the West often by so-called “lone wolves”; although this is, at times, a misnomer, as some have direct, virtual, or indirect links to jihadist groups.13 In recent years, the problem in Europe and the United States has not been returned foreign fighters or
other trained warriors directed by jihadist movements like Al Qaeda, but rather those
inspired to take up arms in their name. Some have proven quite lethal, but many
are ineffective.

As the Al Qaeda core faced problems in Afghanistan after 9/11 and then Pakistan as
the drone campaign heated up in the late 2000s, one danger in both the United States
and Europe is the role of converts, irreligious thugs, and others for whom jihadist doctrine
means little but who are attracted by the promise of violence and defiance—what the
scholar Olivier Roy has referred to as the “Islamicization of radicalism.”

The cause for such militants is their own dissatisfaction with their societies in the West, and they
would express it through ethnic chauvinism, crime, or other violent means if jihadi
fervor declined. However, they often convert to Islam as a way of, in their eyes, choosing a militant path. This problem became especially pronounced with the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014. Its bad-boy image and embrace of horrific violence gave it an appeal to those who cared little about true Islamic teachings and a lot about the use of violence.

In the United States and other Western countries, many jihadists consider the
lineages of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State to be the same, and they rely on
overlapping propaganda and recruitment networks. For example, the Al Qaeda
propagandist Anwar al-Awlaki’s sermons inspired Syed Farook, one of the
December 2015 San Bernardino shooters, although the Islamic State claimed him
and his wife as “soldiers of the caliphate.” Indeed, the Islamic State has portrayed
itself as the true heir to Bin Laden as part of its bid for power, and in Europe it
drew on Al Qaeda facilitators to enable the flow of fighters to Iraq and Syria. Because of this merging, important differences between the Islamic State and Al
Qaeda that lead to bitter recriminations and violent infighting among their various
affiliates and allies in the Middle East matter less for possible attacks in the West.

Currently, there is no compelling conflict for the Western jihadist community on
par with Syria from 2013–2016, when sectarianism and the Islamic State’s allure
generated foreign fighters in the tens of thousands. Conflicts such as Kashmir,
Somalia, Yemen, and also Iraq and Syria themselves, appear to inspire few Westerners
today, and those they do inspire tend to be linked to diaspora communities. This is an
important advance in the struggle against Al Qaeda and other jihadist movements as
high-profile wars and the volunteers they generate often create problems that last
many years. So while the West must handle the legacy of the Syria conflict, there
is not, for now at least, another comparable struggle that is keeping the flame of
jihad burning for a new generation.
In addition, one of the positive effects of the Syrian conflict and the rise of the Islamic State is that Western governments are far more on guard than they were in 2011 when the conflict started. Even Belgium, which had one of the highest numbers of foreign fighters per capita and was exploited as a haven by jihadists who carried out the massive Islamic State attacks in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016, became vigilant and disrupted many cells. Internet and social media companies are also far more willing to take action against extremist content.

Judging the Status of Al Qaeda Affiliates

To assess the danger of Al Qaeda to the West today, much depends on how its affiliates are considered. On one hand, the affiliates are clearly robust. Al Qaeda’s affiliations have slowly but steadily expanded in the post-9/11 era, showing the enduring appeal of the Al Qaeda brand and enabling it to expand or maintain influence throughout the Muslim world. Although each has its ups and downs, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Shebaab all are major players in local civil wars and are forces of regional instability. The affiliation process alters the targeting of local groups, making them more regional in their actions and increasing their likelihood of striking international targets in the local and regional theaters. AQIM, which once focused on Algeria, has carried out attacks in Mali, Niger, and other countries in the region. The Shebaab is more active in Ethiopia and Kenya than in the past.

Despite these benefits for Al Qaeda, the jihadist group faces several problems related to its affiliates. The first is command and control. Al Qaeda has had to surrender substantial autonomy to its affiliates, in part because electronic communication risks interception, and couriers are inefficient and dangerous—Bin Laden’s location was discovered in part by tracking couriers. As a result, affiliates have often pursued their own paths independent of Al Qaeda’s goals. In addition, affiliates might kill Muslim civilians or otherwise damage the Al Qaeda brand.

Localization is another problem. Affiliates are waging local civil wars that are bloody and consume much or even all of their energies. In recent years, affiliates have not emphasized attacks outside their countries and regions. This expands Al Qaeda’s influence, or at least the reach of its ideology, in the Muslim world, but it shifts the focus of the group away from the West.

Al Qaeda faces several problems related to its affiliates.
Divisions also plague the broader jihadist movement. The rise of the Islamic State led to splits among local jihadists in many countries, and even where Al Qaeda retained the upper hand, it divided the jihadist movement. More broadly, the movement is divided on a host of strategic and ideological issues such as whether or not to govern territory, the permissibility of striking at civilians, how to handle Muslim minorities like the Shiites, and other basic concerns.20

The debate over Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is a microcosm of the broader debate about Al Qaeda and its affiliates. Since 2012, the Syrian conflict has been the most important theater of jihad. Some experts describe HTS as the local Al Qaeda affiliate, and the United Nations described Jabhat al-Nusra, a predecessor movement, in the same way.21 However, HTS has publicly criticized Al Qaeda, declared its organizational independence, and emphasized that it does not plan to attack the West. In addition, HTS is one of many groups operating in Syria and has not been able to consolidate its position. This suggests the limits of Al Qaeda’s influence in Syria and how local concerns are dominating the actions of jihadist groups.

Only AQAP, Al Qaeda’s strongest and closest affiliate, has engaged in extra-regional international terrorism in the West, with links to the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris and attempts to bomb US airliners in 2009 and 2010. AQAP, however, also suffers numerous problems. Although it gained strength after the collapse of the Yemeni state and the Saudi and UAE invasion of 2015, it has since suffered numerous battlefield reverses, having lost key commanders in US airstrikes and to UAE-led (and US-backed) military operations. To increase its local strength, AQAP is providing social services, intermarrying among area tribes, and otherwise improving its local position. It may also find more breathing space now that the UAE is reducing its military effort in Yemen. Its local difficulties, however, come at the expense of its international agenda.22

Despite all these shifts to local priorities, no Al Qaeda affiliate has made the transition—as Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah did—to de facto governments that are deeply embedded in their countries. They are not integrated deeply into local political systems, do not work with other groups through a political process, and are kept away from the core of their countries’ politics and societies.

Opportunities for Al Qaeda

The relentless counterterrorism campaign, split with the Islamic State, and increasingly local focus of Al Qaeda has diminished the threat to the West and left the group far weaker than it was after 9/11. Al Qaeda, however, has several opportunities to revive and strengthen itself. The defeat of the Islamic State’s above-ground caliphate, which culminated in March 2019, diminishes a strong
rival. Some of the group’s fighters and other resources may turn to Al Qaeda and its affiliates, and more importantly, potential recruits and funders may again look to Al Qaeda. However, the collapse of the Islamic State and the diminishment of the jihadist cause in Syria also reduces the overall pool of jihadists. So Al Qaeda may be more competitive, but it will be competing over fewer resources unless it can suddenly find a cause that inspires recruits and funding.

The localization of Al Qaeda also occurs at a time when many governments in the Muslim world are weak following the aftermath of the Arab spring. The United States is also reducing its military presence in the Middle East, Africa, and other areas where jihadist groups are present. As a result, jihadist groups and militants of all sorts will have greater freedom of action. At the very least, the risk of kidnapping of and violence against tourists, business people, and diplomats remains high, but it is possible that some groups may use operational space to plot international terrorist attacks as well.

In the United States and Europe, the rise of right-wing movements and associated political divisions present another opportunity for Al Qaeda. The demonization of Muslim communities and violence against Muslims validates the jihadist message. This hostility facilitates recruitment and also makes communities less likely to cooperate with law enforcement.

Despite these opportunities, the most likely scenario is that Al Qaeda will remain weak in its ability to target the West, while its affiliates remain active throughout the Muslim world. Some individuals may act in its name, and the group’s leaders may attempt sporadic extra-regional attacks, but from a US perspective, most of the damage the group does will threaten US interests in the Muslim world more than US and allied lives outside it.

Notes


3. Not included is the October 12, 2002 bombing in Bali that killed more than 200. Jemaah Islamiyya carried out the attack. There are reports that Al Qaeda helped finance it, with Bin Laden approving it. In 2008, a truck bomb exploded outside the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, killing over 50. A key planner was linked to both Al Qaeda and Tehrik-I Taliban.


19. Umarov.


