2. **Al-Qaeda**

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**CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND TO AL-QAEDA**

Terrorism is also a way of seeing the world, of understanding (or, in many cases, mis-understanding) the dominant political paradigm of the particular historical movement. (Miller, 2013, p. 5)

**Ideological Roots**

The roots of the al-Qaeda (AQ) organisation lie in the Islamic resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, but the ideological roots precede this conflict. Much of the inspiration for the ideology of AQ is derived from the writings of Sayyid Qutb, a prominent Egyptian author and Islamic theorist, and Ibn Taymiyah, a 13th century Islamic scholar. The path of AQ’s Islamic theory can be traced backwards through a history that encompasses authors including, but not limited to, Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abdullah Azzam, Sayyid Qutb, Abul Ala Maududi, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Taymiyah.

It was Ibn Taymiyah in the 13th and 14th centuries who first wrote on several concepts subsequently adopted by AQ (and more latterly by the so-called Islamic State, or IS). He provided the taxonomic foundations for the distinctions of some theological categories that we now see in both AQ and IS ideologies. Ibn Taymiyah introduced the concept of Dar al-Islam (‘the house/domain of Islam’) the region in which Muslim rule was present and in which Sharia law was imposed. His second category was Dar al-Kufr (‘the house/domain of unbelievers’), which comprises the areas that reject Islam. In current AQ and IS ideology, much of what is classed as the West is included in this category, with the non-Muslim inhabitants being classed as *kuffar*, or unbelievers. The third category was Dar al-Harb (‘the house/domain of war’), which covered those regions in which there was an ongoing (or even a future, potential) conflict between Muslim forces (or Islam itself) and unbelievers.¹ Recent conflict zones such as Iraq, Syria, Mali, Yemen and Afghanistan are
all usually classed as falling within this zone by AQ and IS (Streusand, 1997; Karim and Eid, 2014).

Ibn Taymiyah wrote of the concept of *takfir*, or ‘apostasy’, which encompasses the idea that a Muslim who does not obey Sharia law and does not live his life according to Islamic rules should be considered an apostate. Ibn Taymiyah’s second major *fatwa*, concerning the invading Mongol Ilkhanids, declared the invaders to be apostate and called for their execution on the grounds of their perceived deviation from the true path of Islam (Wiktorowicz, 2005).

His views on the inappropriateness of Muslims visiting the tombs of famous or devout Muslim scholars, leaders and prophets were extremely rigid. He considered such visits to be *bid‘a* (a ‘heretical innovation’) and nothing more than additions which came after the time of the Salaf, or the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (Wiktorowicz, 2005). In Ibn Taymiyah’s view, Muslims should strive to emulate the behaviour of the Salaf, as they had the best and purest understanding of Islam. He strongly favoured a return to the strict and literal translation of the Quran, especially its rules on how Muslims should live and the continuance of his writings in the contemporary ideology of AQ (and more latterly, IS) are considerable.

Writing in the 18th century, Abd al-Wahhab was the main architect of a revival of the Islamic thinking of Ibn Taymiyah, especially Ibn Taymiyah’s preference for a more literal interpretation of Islamic rules in the Quran. Abd al-Wahhab invoked strict Islamic rules and practices that would later be adopted by the Afghan Taliban, AQ and IS. These included prohibiting men from trimming their beards, banning holidays (including the Prophet’s birthday), destroying tombs and other religious sites of antiquity and even, according to Wright (2011, pp. 72–73), providing his followers with permission to kill or rape anyone who refused to accept his absolute interpretation of Islam. Unsurprisingly, Abd al-Wahhab was eventually forced out of the Najd region of what is now Saudi Arabia. After being given protection by the King Muhammed ibn Saud, the first ruler of the Saudi state, he achieved his greatest and most enduring contribution to Islamic theology. He formed a close collaboration with the Saudi King in around 1744, which led to the adoption of the policy that religion and governance of the state were indivisible, and that ibn Saud would rule in accordance with Abd al-Wahhab’s interpretation of Islam. Henceforth, the Saudi state would have this Wahhabi version of Islam as a central core of its governance mechanisms (Change Institute, 2008, p. 43).

The centrality of al-Wahhab’s thinking was more completely cemented into the Saudi governance model in 1931 when the Saudi King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman bin Faisal al-Saud (usually referred to as Ibn Saud) asked permission from the Saudi religious leadership to wage war against the Ikhwan. The Ikhwan, or the Brothers, were Ibn Saud’s Bedouin troops who he had
previously used to spread Wahhabi Islam across the Arabian Peninsula and to expand territory under Saudi control. The religious leaders gave Ibn Saud permission, and this has been described as the ‘defining political moment of modern Saudi Arabia’ because the act of making the King the only person who could legitimately declare jihad (a ‘struggle’) was instrumental in cementing the importance of the Wahhabi clerics as the real power behind the throne (Wright, 2011, p. 72).

Sayyid Qutb was an Egyptian author who contributed to the corpus of Islamic theology with works such as his 1964 book *Milestones* and was a key member of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation established in Egypt in 1928, initially to encourage piety but which rapidly assumed a political nature and focused largely on ending British colonial rule in Egypt. Qutb was initially on very friendly terms with Gamal Abdul Nasser who played a central role in overthrowing the Egyptian government in the 1952 coup d’état. His strict beliefs soon led to a divergence of political opinion with Nasser and he was arrested and imprisoned by Nasser’s government. In 1966, he was sentenced to death and was hanged (Migaux, 2007b, p. 284). Strongly predisposed to the dogma of Ibn Taymiyah, Qutb’s writings are similarly relevant to the core of AQ thinking, but coming from a more contemporary era than Taymiyah they have enjoyed particular prominence (Mohamedou, 2011, p. 14). Of especial importance is one of Qutb’s central points concerning the necessity for the establishing of an Islamic vanguard, which would ideally emulate the behaviour of the original associates of the Prophet Muhammad.

This thinking was picked up on by Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, in their founding philosophy which underpinned the creation of AQ as an organisation (Migaux, 2007a, pp. 314–315). Also of note was Qutb’s theoretical writings on the notion that Muslims worldwide were in a state of *jahiliya* (‘ignorance’, mostly referring to the time preceding the Prophet Muhammad), because they had not lived in accordance with Sharia law (Wright, 2002). The natural progression from this thinking was Qutb’s assessment that it was permissible under Sharia law to overthrow the government of his time, as he perceived both the government and the country to be in a state of such *jahiliya* (McGregor, 2003).

In December 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, a move that immediately sparked an armed resistance against the occupation. The Afghan nationals who resisted the Soviet occupation were joined by mainly Arab nationals who wanted to take part in the resistance, seeing it as a jihad, in defence of an attack upon Islam and/or a Muslim country. They became known as the Afghan Arabs and they formed a key group within the wider mujahideen in the Afghan conflict. Thousands of young Muslim men travelled to Afghanistan, mainly via Pakistan, to undergo military training and to take part in the jihad.
The man who eventually became the leader of the Afghan Arab mujahideen was a Palestinian national, Sheikh Abdullah al Azzam. He joined the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the late 1960s and took part in operations against the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) after the 1967 war, which saw Israeli soldiers occupy his home village in the West Bank. Disillusioned with the secular approach of the PLO at that time, Azzam left the PLO and went on to complete a Doctorate in Islamic Jurisprudence in Cairo, where he also became a personal friend of the family of the deceased Sayyid Qutb (McGregor, 2003).

In 1980, Azzam and Bin Laden established Maktab al-Khidmat lil Mujahideen al-Arab (Office of Services for the Arab Mujahideen) in Pakistan, which was a funnel for the recruiting, funding and training of fighters from all over the world who wanted to take part in the jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (Burke, 2004, p. 3). Bin Laden personally funded each fighter with a flight ticket, accommodation in a guesthouse and a stipend of around $300 per month (Wright, 2011, p. 117). It has been assessed that more than 20 000 volunteers passed through the Office of Services, going on to be trained as fighters. The majority of them took part in military action against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan (Mohamedou, 2011, p. 17).

While in Afghanistan, Azzam wrote of his vision for a vanguard of combat-experienced soldiers who would form ‘al-qaeda al-sulbah’, variously translated as the ‘solid base’ (Migaux, 2007a, pp. 317–318) and the ‘strong foundation’ (Burke, 2004, p. 2). Once Soviet troops were expelled, this vanguard would continue the fight beyond the geographical confines of Afghanistan, in a campaign to conquer all Muslim lands. While the Afghans were primarily fighting for the freedom of their country, bin Laden had greater plans for the longer term, aimed at freeing all Arab lands from Western influence, in particular from US influence. This would be followed by the restoration of the Caliphate and finally the war with the Kuffar, or unbelievers, which would finish with the Day of Judgement (Wright, 2011, p. 126).

**The Founding of al-Qaeda**

Placing a date on the first known use of the organisational name al-Qaeda is open to question, but the term was already being used by Azzam in 1987, prior to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Writing in *al-Jihad* magazine, he stated that: ‘every principle needs a vanguard to carry it forward that is willing, while integrating into society, to undertake difficult tasks and make tremendous sacrifices … it is al qaeda al sulbuh that constitutes this vanguard for the hoped-for society’ (Azzam, 1988).

According to Migaux (2007a, p. 314), the formal creation of AQ as a de facto organisation may have occurred on 11 August 1988 during a meeting between Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Dr Fadl (Sayyid Imam

While AQ is often considered as a formal organisation when viewed through a traditional Western lens, it is interesting to note that bin Laden himself saw AQ more conceptually. In an interview in Kabul just five weeks after the 9/11 attacks against the United States of America (USA), bin Laden told the interviewer that the West’s depiction of a de facto organisation with the name of al-Qaeda was not really accurate, adding that ‘Brother Abu Ubaida Al-Banjshiri created a military base to train the young men to fight against the Soviet empire … So this place was called “the Base”, as in a training base, and the name grew from this’ (Bin Laden and Lawrence, 2005).

Fadl was the prime mover of the early, ideological platform upon which AQ would be built, and he was already the leader of a powerful Islamist group, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ). The EIJ was behind the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981. It has not carried out active operations inside Egypt since 1993, but has been implicated in a number of actual and planned attacks externally, such as the attempted assassinations of Egyptian Prime Minister Atef Sedky and his Interior Minister Hassan al-Alfi in 1993, and also the bombing of the Egyptian Embassy in Pakistan in 1995 (Fletcher, 2008). Al-Zawahiri would eventually assume control of EIJ and merge the organisation with al-Qaeda in June 2001 (Wright, 2002).

In November 1989, Azzam was killed by a roadside bomb placed in a culvert, which detonated as Azzam drove past the device. The potential suspects, as well as the potential motives for the assassination, were numerous: the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB), alone or in partnership with their former Afghan State Intelligence Agency (KHAD), because of Azzam’s involvement in the ejection of Soviet forces from Afghanistan; rival leadership elements from AQ or from the wider mujahideen, because Azzam was gaining more influence than other leaders; Israeli intelligence (specifically Mossad), because Azzam was one of the instrumental figures in the creation of Hamas (the Palestinian group established in 1987); Iranian elements, either directly or indirectly controlled, as Azzam was a key Sunni figure of power and influence in the region. Even bin Laden himself was a suspect, according to Soufan and Freedman (2012, p. 135) and Baker (2009).

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan began in May 1988 and was completed in February 1989, when General Gromov walked across the Bridge of Friendship from Afghanistan into the Soviet Union, ostensibly as the last Soviet soldier to leave the country (Feifer, 2010). Following the Soviet
withdrawal, AQ leaders voiced a variety of approaches about what the next steps should be. Some wanted to focus on fighting the near enemy, such as the secular Muslim regimes in the Middle East region. Others wanted to continue harrying the Soviets by pressing on to the Central Asian republics. Another suggested approach was to continue the jihad in a more widespread manner, to encourage the spread of Islam through territorial gains. The death of Azzam did ultimately benefit Osama bin Laden directly, as he was able to assume the mantle of leadership in the faction that was pushing for a more global dimension of jihad.

**AIMS AND APPROACH**

The aims of AQ were codified between 2001 and 2003 by Al-Zawahiri, whose writings from that time would eventually form a book *Knights under the Prophet’s Banner* (Zawahiri, 2001). The book was published in serialised format by the Saudi-owned, London-based, Arabic-language newspaper, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (‘The Middle East’). Al-Zawahiri laid out a grand strategy for AQ, beginning with the 9/11 attacks of 2001, and ending with the expected completion of the plan around the year 2020 (Zawahiri, 2001).8

Stage 1, ‘the awakening’, began on 11 September 2001 with the attacks upon the US, aimed at provoking a US attack upon Muslims which Al-Zawahiri hoped would spur a worldwide jihad. Stage 2 was called ‘opening the eyes’ and was slated to occur between 2002 and 2006, focused on putting the West on the defensive. The third stage, ‘arising and standing up’, was planned for 2007–2010 and it planned assaults upon Israel and Turkey. The fourth stage, ‘the downfall of apostate Muslim regimes’, targeted Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the oil-rich Gulf nations and it was planned for 2010–2013. The ‘declaration of the Caliphate’ was the fifth stage, timetabled for 2013–2016 and aimed at mobilising Muslim forces worldwide. The penultimate stage was ‘total confrontation’ and this visualised a total war upon ‘non-believers’ between 2016 and 2020. The seventh and final stage was ‘definitive victory’ which would see the establishment of a global Caliphate in 2020. Like project managers everywhere, it is possible that Al-Zawahiri and bin Laden realised that their timeline was overly ambitious and that their inception was beginning to suffer from ‘jihad drift’.9 In the end, though, Al-Zawahiri did disagree with al-Baghdadi and IS, arguing that it was too soon to declare the Caliphate.

The organisational and managerial approach from the post-9/11 AQ leadership was that of ‘centralization of decision and decentralization of execution’, with bin Laden nominating the targets and choosing the leaders of the attack but leaving the detailed planning and execution of the attack to the cells themselves (Wright, 2011, p. 359). Writing in the same article in which he employed the term ‘*al-Qaeda al-sulbuh*’ (‘the solid base’), Abdullah Azzam
provided eight moral guidelines which he considered binding upon members of this ‘solid base’:

1. One must unhesitatingly face the hardest challenges and the worst difficulties.
2. Leaders must endure, along with their men, the blood and sweat of gruelling marches.
3. The vanguard must abstain from base, worldly pleasures and its distinguishing characteristics must be abstinence and frugality.
4. The vanguard must translate into reality the great dream of victory.
5. Will and determination are necessary for the march ahead, however long it may be.
6. Three things are essential to this march: meditation, patience and prayer.
7. Two rules must be followed: loyalty and devotion.
8. All anti-Islamic plots that are being hatched throughout the world must be foiled.

In writings on ‘the choice of targets and the importance of martyrdom operations’, AQ’s advice in 2003 to global jihadists fighting under the AQ banner was to strive for maximum casualties and for the highest number of deaths in their attacks, as AQ considered this to be a language which the West would understand (Zawahiri, cited by Kepel and Milelli, 2005, p. 203). In terms of the rapid and global support which bin Laden was able to build after 9/11, Fouda believes that this was nothing more than bin Laden speaking ‘the minds of so many people … He dared to ask the right questions’, and not simply because he attacked the US and the West (Fouda, cited in Greenberg, 2005, p. 30). Apart from the 9/11 attacks, major targets attacked by AQ included the US warship USS *Cole* in 2000 (17 dead, 39 injured), the Ghriba synagogue in Tunisia in 2002 (14 dead, 30 wounded), the Bali nightclub bombings in 2002 (202 dead, hundreds more injured), the Madrid train bombings in 2004 (190 dead, more than 2000 injured) and the London transport bombings in 2005 (52 dead, 700 injured).

**ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF AL-QAEDA**

Organisational theory is arguably as important a factor in terrorism studies as it is in the commercial world, and the theory translates neatly across to AQ’s own organisational structure in the post-9/11 world. A 2010 paper by Gunaratna and Oreg (2010, p. 1055) provided a detailed organisation chart of the structural hierarchy of AQ, a structure which the authors considered an advantage, due to its inherent ability to survive attrition. It points out that AQ was still able to re-form and to function despite losing various chiefs of staff, four chiefs of the special (external) forces unit, and a number of senior regional field commanders (Gunaratna and Oreg, 2010).
Over time, AQ morphed from a centrally controlled and hierarchical organisation to more of a network-centric, operational mode. Cebrowski and Garstka (1988) identified three thematic changes in (American) society that changed the nature of how business is conducted and, by extension, how the business of warfare has also changed. These three themes, each highly relevant to the morphing of AQ into a more fluid, less centralised network, are:

1. The shift in focus from the platform to the network.
2. The shift from viewing actors as independent to viewing them as part of a continuously adapting ecosystem.
3. The importance of making strategic choices to adapt or even survive in such changing ecosystems.

Adding substance to this wider network was a loose conglomerate of global franchises which included the establishment of offshoot organisations in Iraq (2004), Algeria (2006), Yemen (2009), Somalia (2010–2012), Syria (2012) and the Indian Subcontinent (2014) (Mendelsohn, 2016, p. 2). Mendelsohn (2016) argues that the AQ franchising was embarked upon from a position of weakness, not strength, and was seen internally as more of a necessity than a choice. A selection of these franchise groups are discussed in the following sections.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

In January 2009, AQ groups in Saudi Arabia and Yemen merged to form al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (Green, 2014, p. 526). Anwar al-Awlaki was extremely active within this group until he was killed by a US drone strike, the first US citizen to be deliberately targeted in this way. AQAP attempted two particularly creative attacks in 2009. In August of that year they targeted a senior member of the Saudi royal family, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who was responsible for counter-terrorism in the Kingdom. In particular, bin Nayef was responsible for the programme aimed at rehabilitating individuals formerly engaged in terrorism (Bergen et al., 2011, p. 72).

The bomber Abdullah Hassan Tali al-Asiri had arranged with Saudi authorities to turn himself in, but insisted he would only do it in person to bin Nayef. Despite having been searched by bin Nayef’s guards, al-Asiri was still able to detonate an improvised explosive device (IED) concealed internally in his body. Al-Asiri was killed instantly, but Prince bin Nayef survived with injuries to one hand. Subsequent investigations showed that the bomber had concealed the explosive device inside his rectum (Rayment and Blomfield, 2010). The second attempt employed the novel use of a so-called underwear bomb worn by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who attempted to detonate the device mid-air.
while he was a passenger on an aircraft about to land in Detroit (Burke, 2013, p. 157). The device ignited but did not successfully detonate (Office of the Attorney General, 2015). The attack on the Charlie Hebdo newspaper in Paris in 2015 by Chérif and Saïd Kouachi was claimed by AQAP, and in 2017, the group was described as being ‘better funded and armed than at any point in its history’ (Horton, 2017). By February 2020, the group was on its third leader, Khalid bin Umar Batarfi, after the first two were killed in US drone strikes in 2015 and January 2020. Johnsen (2020) describes the group in February 2020 as being ‘significantly different from the one Raymi took command of in 2015 ... weaker, more fragmented and less able to conduct international attacks than at any point in its 11-year history ... almost entirely a domestic organization’. While he considers that AQAP may finally be on the verge of defeat, it is still too early to tell whether AQAP will overcome its current setbacks or whether it will eventually wither into insignificance.

**Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)**

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was a Jordanian national who formed an Islamist group called al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (‘Monotheism and Jihad’) sometime in the late 1990s, with the primary aim of overthrowing the Jordanian monarchy. Having been arrested and jailed in Jordan, he was eventually released, whereupon he travelled to Afghanistan and established a terrorist training camp in Herat province in 1998 (Fishman, 2006, p. 20). He fought with the Taliban against the US-led invasion in 2001, and managed to escape from Afghanistan, probably into Iran. At some point before the 2003 invasion, it is believed that Al-Zarqawi eventually arrived in Iraq.12

Shortly after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Al-Zarqawi and his group were active in conducting attacks against US-led Coalition forces, especially against US troops. In 2004, Al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda franchise then re-branded his group as an al-Qaeda group which became known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Pool, 2004; Fishman, 2006, p. 21). The AQI group became one of the most lethal and high-profile terrorist groups of its time, in large part due to Al-Zarqawi’s tactic of kidnapping mainly Western civilians, then releasing video footage of the hostages wearing orange jumpsuits (a reference to the inmates held at Guantanamo Bay), and taunting politicians and leaders with impossible demands, before beheading the hostages on camera.

The relationship between Al-Zarqawi and AQ does not appear to have been an easy one. Although Al-Zarqawi publicly acknowledged AQ as being in overall command of the campaign in Iraq, in practice he followed his own path. Both Al-Zarqawi and Ayman al-Zawahiri (Bin Laden’s deputy) had different visions of the most suitable way to achieve the establishing of the
Al-Qaeda Caliphate. Al-Zawahiri focused on the long game of forcing military defeat on the US and its allies, especially their allies within Muslim lands, and he was content for the Caliphate to be achieved at some point in the future, in accordance with AQ’s grand strategy (Celso, 2015; Byman, 2017).

Al-Zarqawi was not content to wait, and believed that the most suitable way to achieve victory, and the re-establishment of the Caliphate, was to continue attacks upon the Shia population (Al-Zarqawi, 2004) but he also wanted to create a backlash against his own Sunni people. This backlash tactic was aimed at persuading Iraqi Sunnis that Al-Zarqawi’s group was their only real defender, and their best source of protection. To speed up this process, Al-Zarqawi conducted false-flag operations, targeting Sunni areas with attacks to corral the general perception of the Sunnis that they were under sustained attack from the Shia. The viciousness of Al-Zarqawi’s operations resulted in massive global media coverage of his group and their methods, but it also set him in confrontation with the senior leadership of AQ.

A letter in 2005 assessed to be from Al-Zawahiri to Al-Zarqawi revealed the wider, four-stage AQ strategy for Iraq. First, to expel US forces from Iraq; second, to create an Islamic ‘emirate’, ideally encompassing as much of Iraq as possible; third, to spread AQ’s jihad to Iraq’s secular neighbours; fourth, to confront Israel (Whittaker, 2005). The tone of the letter was more condescending than authoritative, asking Al-Zarqawi rhetorical questions about the effectiveness of his strategy of killing the Shia, and querying whether this anti-Shia effort was not a distraction to carrying out the AQ grand plan. The letter made it clear that al-Zawahiri, and also AQ by logical extension, did not agree with Al-Zarqawi’s strategy and tactics (Zawahiri, 2005). Al-Zarqawi was eventually killed in June 2006 by a US air strike on a safe-house he was using near to Baqubah (Caldwell, 2006). Gerges (2009, p. 254) cites Seif al-Adl, the replacement AQ Minister of Defence, as stating that Al-Zarqawi’s differences with core AQ, and in particular with bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri, were ‘tactical, not doctrinal’ issues, and that while Al-Zarqawi on the whole was supportive of core AQ, he did not feel that they were being sufficiently fierce enough to cause the necessary level of pain and suffering to the enemy.

Although the first of the above AQ aims had not been achieved by 2006, it did not stop the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC) and other associated groups from announcing the formation of the ‘Islamic State of Iraq’ (ISI) in October of that year (Kfir, 2015, pp. 7–8). The Shia population continued to be targeted just as severely by AQI, who considered the Shia to be heretical. Al-Zarqawi was replaced by Abu Ayyub al-Masri, an Egyptian jihadist who assumed command of AQI. When the formation of ISI was declared, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi was appointed (reputedly by al-Masri) to run the newly formed entity. Both al-Masri and al-Baghdadi were eventually killed in April
2010, when a joint force of US and Iraqi Special Forces attacked a safe-house outside Tikrit.

**Al-Qaeda in Somalia (Al-Shabaab, merged with AQ in 2010–2012)**

Al-Shabaab (AS) (‘the Youth’) emerged from the security vacuum in Somalia as the armed wing of the organisation called Islamic Courts Union, around 1996–1997. The roots of al-Shabaab came from the resistance to the leadership of Siad Barre and the military regime. Following a civil war in 1991, Barre fled across the border to Kenya, leaving a number of competing militias to fight for the reins of political power in Somalia in that same year, including the United Somali Congress (USC) who seized Mogadishu and the south, and the Somali National Movement (SNM) who seized control of the north of the country. Mohammed Farah Aidid was the Chairman of the USC. Although a leader of a rival faction, Ali Muhammed, had been declared the Somali President in 1995 and recognised as such by the international community, Aidid declared himself Somali President in 1995. Fighting continued between the factions until 1997, from which point Somalia had no President until the formation of the Transitional National Government (TNG) in 2000.

Sometime in 2000, the collection of independent Sharia courts around the country coalesced into the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). An important aside to this Union was that the militias belonging to these Sharia courts (11 in total) also came together under one umbrella force, which created ‘the first significant non-warlord-controlled and pan-Hawiye military force’ (Barnes and Hassan, 2007). The TNG lasted for four years, until an agreement between the key warlords resulted in Abdiqasim Salad Hassan assuming power in 2004. By 2006, Hassan’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the ICU were engaging in armed clashes. By June 2006, the ICU had wrested control of Mogadishu from the transitional government and also seized large tracts of the south of the country. It was also around this time that al-Shabaab began their ascendancy. Beginning as a radical, Islamist splinter group from the Islamist group al-Ittihad al-Islamiya (Islamic Unity, or AIAI), al-Shabaab wanted to spread a stricter version of Islam across Somalia and they became the armed wing of the ICU, and AS was a key actor in the fighting that led to the ICU seizing Mogadishu in 2006. Viewed strategically, AS’s primary aim is ‘to establish an Islamic state and the rule of shari’a law in Somalia and to achieve the removal of foreign influence from Somalia, especially that of Western and/or Christian nations. Territorially, these plans would include Puntland, Somaliland and the Ogaden region’ (Burke, 2019), and in 2017, AS launched a deadly attack on an army base in Puntland, killing around 70 people (Burke, 2017).
In December 2006, the United Nations authorised the use of force to expel the ICU from Mogadishu, and a joint force of Ethiopian Army troops plus militias loyal to various Somali warlords imposed a military defeat on the ICU. The ICU subsequently disbanded but al-Shabaab did not, instead transforming itself into the primary resistance movement in Somalia, conducting attacks on Ethiopian troops, Somali militias and Transitional Government figures. Al-Shabaab is assessed as having been desirous of expanding into a ‘truly regional organisation with membership and horizons that transcend national borders’ since at least 2010 (Intergovernmental Authority on Development, 2016, p. 4). AS joined with AQ in 2010, but apparently the formal announcement of the merger did not occur until two years later (Mendelsohn, 2016, p. 84).

Following a 2013 internal re-structure, two additional units were created specifically for external operations. Jaysh Ayman had the role of conducting attacks against Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, while a second unit was tasked with conducting attacks against Ethiopian targets. Al-Shabaab has carried out terrorist attacks in Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, Uganda and Tanzania, and its active strength was assessed as around 6000–12 000 fighters in March 2016 (Project, 2016, p. 2).

**Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)**

In early September 2014, Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the creation of another AQ franchise: al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Mendelsohn contends that the creation of this particular group was less about an actual expansion of operational capability for AQ, and more about it being a response to the change in the socio-political environment in which AQ found itself in 2014: under pressure, in disarray and increasingly being perceived as an irrelevance. A large part of this environmental flux was down to the so-called Islamic State and their lightning-fast ascendency in the global jihadist sphere.

Al-Zawahiri had already been forced to denounce IS in January 2014, which made public a schism that was unfavourable for AQ’s image. AQ was largely absent from the populist uprisings in the Arab Spring, as the standard AQ position was that political change and the establishment of Islamic rule could only be effected by the ‘Islamic vanguard’ (Turner, 2015). The Arab Spring revealed the flaw in this doctrine, as citizen protests toppled regimes across the Arab world, and this contributed to the perception of AQ’s irrelevance. This image was cemented further by the speed at which IS rolled across and occupied large areas of Iraq and Syria, bringing major conurbations such as Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, under their de facto control. The rapid seizure of territory led to an even more significant event that pushed AQ still further into the margins: the declaration of an Islamic State by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in...
June 2014. Not only was the announcement a surprise to AQ, but it also acted as a powerful magnet for recruitment among those for whom participation in the global jihad was a personal goal.

Zawahiri made the announcement flanked by Asim Umar, the new leader of AQIS, and Osama Mahmoud, the official spokesperson of the new AQ franchise, and he made the point that the establishment of AQIS demonstrated a ‘gradual consensus-building process’, a direct stab at IS’s more aggressive policy of forcing its belief system on others. Mendelsohn (2016, pp. 195–196) thus argues that when a terrorist organisation makes a command decision to establish a new franchise group, the decision to do so is predicated to a lesser degree by a desire to increase operational capacity, and more by a need to respond to something in the political landscape.

Since the announcement of its inception, AQIS was aggressively targeted by the US, with five of the AQIS senior leadership killed in US-led operations in less than six months. The group was not as active as other AQ franchises, but it did carry out successful attacks. In 2014, a Brigadier in the Pakistani Army was murdered by attackers on motorcycles (Nation, 2014), and around six other attacks were directed against bloggers or media figures who were considered to have committed blasphemy or apostasy (Reed, 2015, pp. 10–12). A more audacious but unsuccessful attack against the Karachi naval dockyard was aimed at taking control of two hijacked Pakistani naval warships and then using them to attack US naval assets (Hassan and Houreld, 2014).

AL-QAEDA RECRUITMENT

Terrorist groups such as AQ have employed a sophisticated array of recruitment tools deployed across a wide spectrum of potential environments in their efforts to draw new members into their ranks. Like any large organisation, AQ concentrated on ‘recruiting, retaining, sustaining and expanding’ its membership, especially foot soldiers and lower-level operational supporters (Burke, 2011a). As Bell (2005, p. 48) notes, groups such as AQ and IS are highly aware of likely targets: ‘young men who stand out in mosques and schools, who are devout, intelligent and have skills to offer … the role of the recruiter is to be a talent scout’. A report based on a study of AQ recruitment methods confirms the importance of ‘cultural, social, and historical context’ and expands upon this research track. It also emphasises that there is no single, overarching recruitment process used for a group such as AQ. Instead, the recruiting pitches are tweaked to incorporate regional and other contextual factors. Similarly, the authors note that any recruitment strategy must also have an awareness of the potential counter-recruitment strategies which may be deployed by the authorities, to blunt the initiative of terrorist groups (Gerwehr and Daly, 2006). Sparago and Klarevas (2007, p. 12) identify six factors rele-
vant to the recruitment of an AQ foot-soldier, viz. ‘religion, sex, age, marital status, economic background, and level of education’, and provide a detailed breakdown under each of these categories, attempting to typify these characteristics across a range of contexts.

The technological advances of the 21st century have brought with them new opportunities for terrorist recruitment. The use of social media, either in isolation or in combination with the support of internet sites, has proved to be an effective recruitment tool in the jihadist arena. The internet provides advantages for terrorist recruitment as well as for the wider terrorist sphere of attack planning, communications, operational security, information dissemination and, of course, publicity. The internet has assumed a central role in many terrorist operational activities, especially recruitment. The debate about the relative importance of the internet as a tool of terrorist recruitment continues, but certainly for AQ it has played an important part. Carriere (2016, p. 183), writing in 2016, considered the internet to play the ‘most influential role in radicalization in recent years, especially among the millennial generation’. The internet as a tool has been especially singled out for support by central AQ figures. Anwar al-Awlaki (2009) placed it at number 29 in his treatise ‘44 Ways of Supporting Jihad’, encouraging mujahideen to contribute electronically to the global jihad, by: ‘establishing discussion forums … relating to jihad; establishing e-mail lists to share information … posting or e-mailing jihad literature and news; and establishing websites to cover specific areas of jihad, such as mujahidin news, Muslim prisoners of war, and jihad literature’.

Awlaki’s recommendations were expanded upon by another proponent of online support, Abu Musab al-Suri, who was the author of the jihadist theory of nizam laa tanzim (‘a system, not an organisation’). Al-Suri promoted the concept of a highly decentralised organism and he accepted that there are many people who are unwilling to participate personally in armed actions in support of jihad, but who nevertheless support the ideals of, and the actions carried out by, jihadists around the world. It is this pool of untapped supporters whom al-Suri encouraged to join what he saw as the ‘media or informational battle’ (Nasar, 2004).

The relative weakness of instruments of the state can further contribute to the creation of a fertile area for terrorist recruitment. The absence of an effective police presence, and/or weakened or invisible state presence and control, can allow recruitment efforts to be carried out more overtly, when there is little or no real risk of facing arrest or detention for carrying out these activities; while radicalisation and recruitment inside prisons can be carried out more easily than in civil society. Radicalisation and recruitment efforts can be more difficult to detect in prisons, for example, often due to the closed nature of a prison community, the inability of prison staff to maintain sufficient watch on a population that considerably outnumbers them, the generally high level of
poor education among prisoners, and the fact that many young people have no
direct, political allegiance or affiliation when they are imprisoned for the first
time. There is also an array of social, political and economic factors which are
exploited for the recruitment of new members by groups such as AQ (Rosenau,
2005, p. 2). Ineffective border controls can allow recruiters to easily access
vulnerable individuals or sub-groups, and to directly contribute to the radical-
isation of such persons. Widespread political and/or economic corruption can
be a powerful driver, especially for younger people who may feel marginalised
from day one, and may see no hope of ever gaining proper employment and
being able to provide for their future family. Poverty can feed the sense of
injustice, especially if neighbouring areas are seen to be more affluent, such as

**AL-QAEDA FINANCING**

The Afghan mujahideen were funded by various stakeholders over the years,
including the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Saudi royal family
and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI). One of the most influ-
ential members of the Saudi royal family, Prince Turki bin Faisal bin Abdul
Aziz, is believed to have managed the funding activities of around 20 different
charitable organisations, the sole aim of which were to fund the mujahideen
groups in Afghanistan, and which raised an estimated $2 billion (Corbin,
2003). In the early to mid-1980s, the various disparate armed groups formed
a loose coalition called the Islamic Unity of Afghanistan Mujahideen, in an
effort to present a united front, politically and militarily, against the Soviet
occupation. Initially under US President Carter, then President Reagan, US
funding for the mujahideen began to increase, and the amounts were swelled
by a Saudi agreement, concluded by Prince Turki al-Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, to
match all US contributions (Burleigh, 2009).

At Pakistan’s insistence, it was agreed that all US and Saudi funding should
be channelled through Pakistan’s ISI (Coll, 2009). This theoretically allowed
for a degree of plausible deniability by the US, regarding the direct funding of
the mujahideen. In practice, however, this mechanism handed control of the
spending of such funding to Pakistan, which made the decisions on how, where
and on whom to spend the money, something which did not sit easily with
some elements of the US intelligence community (Bergen, 2002). Even bin
Laden disliked the fact that official Saudi funding was also channelled through
the ISI, as he implicitly distrusted the ISI (Coll, 2009).

When the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan ended, so too did the generous
funding from the USA and Saudi Arabia. While Osama bin Laden’s personal
fortune, variously described as being between $250 million and $300 million,
has been frequently cited as the primary funding source of AQ in its early
years, the 9/11 Commission report provides more detail on bin Laden’s actual, personal contributions, and AQ’s budgetary outgoings (Kean et al., 2004, sec. 5.4).

The report states that between 1970 and 1994, bin Laden received only around $1 million per year as a stipend, and in addition the Saudi government’s actions against him in the early 1990s meant that his personal share of the bin Laden family business had to be put up for sale. The proceeds from that sale were immediately frozen by the Saudi government, effectively removing the bulk of bin Laden’s inheritance from his personal control. Perhaps more importantly, the report also details the estimated annual running costs of AQ in the years prior to the 9/11 attacks, a figure believed to be around $30 million per year, the majority of which came from donations. The 9/11 attacks were well planned and well executed, all with a considerable degree of operational security. The total cost of the 9/11 attacks was estimated by the Commission at around $500 000 (Kean et al., 2004, pp. 169, 170, 172).

The methods core AQ employed to generate funds included both licit and illicit methods. Various charities provided money to AQ, some knowingly through the diversion of funds, and others unknowingly. In the United Kingdom (UK) the Charity Commission investigated and subsequently struck off two charities started by Adeel al-Haq, after finding that the charities had raised money for the purpose of purchasing equipment for use by AQ and the so-called Islamic State (Levitt, 2017, p. 3). Al-Haq was convicted of terrorist offences and jailed for five years (Charity Commission, 2016, p. 5). In a similar vein to charity abuse, street fundraising has also been used to finance a planned terrorist attack. A plot by an AQ cell to conduct suicide bombing attacks in UK in 2012 was funded primarily by the cell members collecting money on the streets during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, with unwitting donors being told that the money was to be used for charitable purposes. The cell netted over £13 500 in their unauthorised collections. They then attempted to increase this figure by doing their own trading on the stock market, but instead they lost £9000 of the funds through poor investment decisions (Whitehead and Marsden, 2012).

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, core AQ was still providing the bulk of primary funding for attacks. The bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 were centrally funded, as was the attack on a US warship docked in Yemen, the USS Cole. The attack against the warship had an estimated cost of $38 000, resulting in the deaths of 17 US Navy personnel (Burke, 2011b, pp. 16–20), putting the vessel out of action for three years and costing around $250 million to repair the damage (Burke, 2014).

The major ‘spectaculars’ carried out by AQ or its proxies after the 9/11 attacks were similarly well planned and well executed, but the centrality of funding was beginning to change and core AQ would gradually become less
involved. The Bali nightclub bombings of 2002 killed 202 people, injured a further 209 and were one of the highest-profile, post-9/11 attacks which were still funded by core AQ. Their estimated cost was £19 000 according to information provided by Ali Ghufron (also known as Mukhlás), the Head of Operations for the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (Lilley, 2003, p. 134; Freeman, 2016, p. 8).

The Madrid train bombings in 2004 killed 192 people and injured almost 2000 others (Baird, 2009). The attacks cost around $70 000 to conduct, mostly derived from the sale of narcotics (Guillen, 2004; Gómez, 2010; UNODC, 2017). The London transport bombings on 7 July 2005 killed 52 people and injured hundreds more (Hallett, 2011, p. 1), and were financed primarily by a combination of credit cards and a bank loan that was never intended to be repaid. The total cost of the attack was assessed by the UK government as being around £8000 (House of Commons, 2006), and by other sources as less than $15 000 (Perri et al., 2009; Bruno, 2010).

The traditional Islamic tax of zakat, one of Islam’s five pillars, is intended to assist the poor but it has also generated funds for AQ and similar groups. This tax has traditionally been considered as 2.5 per cent, or 1/40th, of a person’s net annual wealth, although there are varying interpretations of the exact calculations and responsibilities (Almatar, 2015; Hamat and Mohd, 2017). Some Imams have voluntarily diverted a portion of the zakat collected by their mosques, and made this available to groups such as AQ (Gomez, 2011).

In the years following the 9/11 attacks, there has been much written on the importance of terrorist financing to organisations such as AQ (Lormel, 2002; Basile, 2004; Kiser, 2005; Zarate, 2009; Gómez, 2010; Gunaratna and Oreg, 2010; Torok, 2011). A common theory was that the targeting of finances owned and control by such groups would be an effective method of reducing their capabilities, as finances were the life-blood of these groups. This targeting of finances seemed logical insofar as the interdiction of the flow of funding can result in a reduction in the group’s operational capability, and this type of financial disruption became a key policy plank of the European Union’s counter-terrorism approach (Bures, 2014, p. 207). This rationale was also an underlying premise of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) that was established in 1989, originally to focus on anti-money laundering (AML). Just one month after the 9/11 attacks, an additional focus of combating terrorist financing was added to the original aim of AML work. The objectives of the FATF continued to expand, subsequently including the setting of operational standards and the promotion of more effective measures, especially legal, regulatory and operational ones aimed at AML and countering terrorist financing (FATF, 2017).

In the first few years after the 9/11 attacks, concerted global efforts were made to choke off the flow of funds to terrorist groups such as AQ, with
varies degrees of success. As the Chair of the 9/11 Commission said, ‘You can’t run a terror network without funding because it takes money to train operatives, transport them, and buy equipment … When you cut off those supplies, it becomes very difficult to operate’ (Kean, cited by Benner, 2011).

A captured AQ member put this more succinctly: ‘There are two things a brother must always have for jihad – the self and money’ (Roth et al., 2004, p. 17). In the first wave of targeted financial actions to hamper the flow of AQ funding, 315 separate entities were identified and designated as terrorist organisations, and a total of 1400 accounts were targeted globally, resulting in the seizure of more than $136 million (Kiser, 2005). The global grip on terrorist funding was gradually tightened until, by around 2010, AQ finances were in a lamentable state compared to a decade previously.

Such financial targeting may be appropriate for fully fledged cells wanting to carry out a sophisticated attack, but unfortunately the attack vectors have changed in recent years. More attacks are now coming from so-called ‘lone wolf’ attacks, or smaller, pair or group attacks which are often self-financed. This has reduced the effectiveness of targeting the financing of terrorism as an operational counter-terrorism response. A radicalised individual can now carry out a deadly terrorist attack for little more than the cost of a one-day hire for a vehicle to carry out a ramming attack, such as those witnessed in London (BBC News, 2017a, 2017b) and Berlin (Foster et al., 2016). Anwar al-Awlaki proposed to his followers that they had a religious right in Islamic law to steal from non-believers in order to fund jihad, stating that: ‘Our jihad cannot depend wholly on donations made by Muslims’ (Joscelyn, 2011). The tightening of the AQ financial belt has been attributed to a number of causes, including their reduced financial holdings, international targeting of terrorist financing by governments and regulatory bodies, and much more stringent border controls between countries (Jacobson and Levitt, 2009).

CONCLUSION

In 2020, the relevance and importance of AQ has faded, especially among younger jihadists, many of whom were not even born when the 9/11 attacks against the US took place. The organisation rapidly lost support as many jihadists viewed its stance on establishing the Caliphate as too long-term and too cautious. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s announcement of the Caliphate in 2014 drew much of AQ’s younger base away from it, as more and more people began to view the so-called Islamic State as the group that promised hope of seeing an established Caliphate in their own lifetimes. Ironically for IS, history proved that AQ’s assessment of the medium-term future was more accurate, and the IS dominance of large swathes of Iraq and Syria eventually came to an
end, with IS forced out of their strongholds and territories by crushing military defeats.

A US worldwide threat assessment in 2019 described AQ as reinforcing its command structure and continuing to urge attacks against Western targets (Coats, 2019, pp. 11–12), while a United Nations report the same year viewed AQ as a resilient organisation, stronger than IS in Yemen, Syria, Somalia and large parts of West Africa (United Nations Security Council, 2019, pp. 3, 21). In March 2020, armed jihadists affiliated with both Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) continued to carry out numerous terror raids against the local population and symbols of the state in Burkina Faso, resulting in the displacement of at least 800 000 people in a 12-month period (Safi, 2020). Despite AQ’s waning importance on the global stage, the organisation is not extinct and it will still pose a threat to its traditional targets for the foreseeable future.

NOTES

1. Taymiyah also included a fourth category, Dar al-Ahd (often translated as ‘the house or realm of Covenant’), to denote areas in which non-Muslim leaders rule over non-Muslim subjects, and are not in conflict with Islam. It is also referred to as Dar al-Sulh (usually translated as ‘the realm of peace’) (Streusand, 1997). Unsurprisingly, this realm does not seem to feature much in the ideology of AQ and IS.

2. The Mongol (or Tartar) Ilkhanid dynasty ruled over what is now Iran, and parts of other countries at various times, such as Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, as well as parts of Iraq. The majority of Mongol Ilkhanids converted to Islam as they took over Muslim lands, which raised a religious question about whether a jihad against them could be considered valid.

3. The term ‘jihad’ is commonly misunderstood. While it is often translated as ‘holy war’, the term ‘jihad’ means a struggle or a striving towards something, usually something noble and moral. Thus, while jihad can encompass the defence of Islam if it is perceived to be under attack by unbelievers, it can also include, for example, looking after and supporting one’s parents.

4. ‘The mujahideen’ was the term given to the Afghan (and foreign) fighters who fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, in defence of Islam. It is a plural noun of the singular form mujahid, meaning ‘one who takes part in Jihad’.

5. There are varying figures for the number of recruits processed by the Office of Services. Commins, for example, writes that the organisation processed as many as 35 000 people (Hamdan, cited by Commins, 2006, p. 135). The figure of 20 000 can be considered a conservative estimate.

6. For more information, see this book’s chapters on Hamas (Chapter 4), the Israeli counter-terrorism landscape (Chapter 13) and Palestine–Israel as a zone of conflict (Chapter 9).

7. Feifer contends that the carefully rehearsed departure of the last tank and Gromov dismounting from it was previously planned, and that Gromov had already left Afghanistan, but re-entered the country on the evening before the televised walk across Friendship Bridge. He also contends that a handful of combat units with-
drew from Afghanistan in the following few weeks, also across Friendship Bridge (Feifer, 2010). Both assertions are entirely plausible.


9. Just as projects suffer from ‘project drift’ and military operations suffer from ‘mission drift’, I use ‘jihad drift’ here to highlight the similar challenges and setbacks encountered by Zawahiri and core AQ, in trying to carry out this 20-year plan.

10. Here I am envisioning Cebrowski’s (2001) definition of network-centric operations, ‘the process of deriving maximum military effect through the rapid and robust networking of diverse, well informed, and geographically dispersed forces’, when thinking about core AQ in the first years of the immediate post-9/11 period.

11. For a detailed paper on AQ’s organisational weaknesses, see Forest et al.’s paper ‘Harmony and disharmony: exploiting al-Qa’ida’s organizational vulnerabilities’ (Forest et al., 2006).

12. There are conflicting accounts of Al-Zarqawi’s approximate arrival date in Iraq. Jordanian intelligence reporting places Al-Zarqawi as not arriving until after the invasion. Other sources indicate that Saddam Hussein’s government was aware that Al-Zarqawi was in Iraq, establishing a network of supporters and weapons, even before the US invasion began.

13. The Hawiye are one of the major clans in Somalia.

REFERENCES


