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Examining the Threat from ISIS and Al Qaeda

THOMAS JOSCELYN

Senior Fellow
Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Senior Editor
FDD's Long War Journal

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Chairman Rose, Ranking Member Walker, and other members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. We are living in difficult times. Americans have many threats to worry about. The challenges we face are daunting – from the coronavirus pandemic to domestic terrorists to foreign actors seeking to exploit our divisions to various cyberthreats. This committee has to monitor many different types of issues, so I appreciate that you have not lost sight of the fact that al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) are still active. Even though most of their violence is carried out overseas, both groups are deeply anti-American and would like to exploit any holes in our defenses that they can find.

First, I would like to make several general observations. I will then turn to a brief analysis of recent events. My general points are as follows:

- The U.S. military started pivoting away from the wars against the jihadists in 2011 and 2012. Much of this pivot was already completed by 2016. By the beginning of 2017, the United States retained a small footprint in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, as well as forces in Africa. Since 2012, the United States has attempted to buttress local partners, as they have been responsible for the bulk of the fighting on the ground in these areas. This has worked better in some countries than others. But the point is that America has not been invested in large-scale counterinsurgencies for the better part of a decade. Instead, the United States has complemented partner forces with airstrikes, special operations raids, and other focused counterterrorism efforts. It appears that this ad hoc strategy may be coming to an end, as America's greatly reduced footprint could be withdrawn from several countries by next year. In that event, the challenges for homeland security will not go away. In some ways, the threats may become even more difficult to detect and thwart.
- Even if the United States stops fighting, the jihadists will not. Al-Qaeda's leaders sought to spark a jihadist revolution and, despite suffering many setbacks, they succeeded. The jihadists today are waging insurgencies across Africa, hotspots in the Middle East, and into South Asia. Their stated goal is to build Islamic emirates, which could eventually join together to form a new caliphate. Although some U.S. policymakers dismissed this goal in the past, ISIS proved that this motivation is very real.¹ But it is also al-Qaeda's chief goal and has been since the beginning. A new caliphate is not close at hand, and many obstacles stand in the jihadists' way. Yet an awful amount of violence has resulted from the jihadists' caliphate quest, and they already have nascent emirates in some regions.
- ISIS is not at the zenith of its power. But as many analysts predicted, the end of its territorial caliphate did not lead to the end of the group. ISIS is waging an insurgency across parts of Iraq and Syria. It also has noteworthy "provinces" in Khorasan (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of the surrounding countries), the Sinai, Southeast Asia, Somalia, West Africa, and Yemen. ISIS has terrorist networks in other areas. Many across this network are openly loyal to Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, the successor to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. After Baghdadi was killed last year, ISIS orchestrated a media campaign to emphasize the fealty of its "provinces."

¹ This is not intended to suggest that the jihadists' behavior is monocausal. They can have multiple motivations. But from my perspective, the jihadist ideology, including its caliphate quest, is the glue that binds.

- Al-Qaeda has survived the post-9/11 wars and America’s counterterrorism campaign. The group’s base has spread from South Asia into multiple other countries. Several organizations, often described as al-Qaeda “affiliates,” serve as regional branches. These branches are each led by an emir who swears his allegiance to the head of al-Qaeda. Since Osama bin Laden’s death in May 2011, that leader has been Ayman al-Zawahiri. The official al-Qaeda branches are: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and al-Shabaab in Somalia. To this list we can add the “Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims” (Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, or JNIM), a wing of AQIM. Hurras al-Din in Syria is also part of al-Qaeda’s network, as are other groups based in Idlib. But al-Qaeda’s chain-of-command in Syria has been upset by a number of internal rivalries, power struggles, and arguments over jihadist strategy.² In addition, al-Qaeda works through other groups that are not official al-Qaeda branches but are nonetheless part of its web. Such groups include the Pakistani Taliban. Still other jihadist organizations are closely allied with al-Qaeda.
- ISIS and al-Qaeda remain locked in a competition for the fealty of jihadists around the globe. Much of this competition will take place at the local level, but international terrorism could play a role in the rivalry, as these groups look to outbid one another for the affection of would-be jihadists. While there may be some cooperation between individual commanders, the two mother organizations are at odds. ISIS has developed an institutional hatred for al-Qaeda. In some areas, such as Iraq, ISIS is definitively stronger. In other areas, such as Somalia and Yemen, al-Qaeda has the upper hand. In West Africa, the two are currently close in strength, though that can change. Any assessment of relative strength in Syria is difficult due to al-Qaeda’s management problems and other factors. And an assessment of their relative positions in Afghanistan is complicated by the fact that al-Qaeda and affiliated groups are embedded within the Taliban-led insurgency. Al-Qaeda has deliberately sought to mask the extent of its operations in Afghanistan.
- The Trump administration’s withdrawal deal with the Taliban, signed on February 29 in Doha, has not put an end to the terrorist threats emanating from either Afghanistan or Pakistan. I have critiqued various aspects of the deal at length elsewhere, including during previous congressional testimony, so I will not repeat all of those criticisms in writing here.³ But some basic observations are in order. Nearly four months have passed since that agreement was signed. During that time, the United States has drawn down to 8,600 or fewer troops. It is not clear what, if anything, the United States has received in return. The Taliban went on the offensive against the Afghan government immediately after the accord was finalized. The Taliban has not renounced al-Qaeda. In fact, the

² Those disagreements have centered on Hay’at Tahrir al Sham (HTS), which both the United States and the United Nations continue to consider an al-Qaeda “affiliate.”

³ See: “No Deal Is Better Than a Bad Deal,” *The Dispatch*, March 4, 2020. (<https://thedispatch.com/p/no-deal-is-better-than-a-bad-deal>). See also: Thomas Joscelyn, “The Trump Administration’s Afghanistan Policy, *Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs*, September 2019. (<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20190919/109992/HHRG-116-FA00-Wstate-JoscelynT-20190919.pdf>)

Taliban continues to lie about al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan, claiming the group has not been located in the country since the days of its Islamic Emirate in 2001.⁴ As far as I am aware, the Taliban has not taken a single action against al-Qaeda or any of the al-Qaeda-affiliated groups known to be fighting inside Afghanistan. Only two passages of the February 29 accord specifically mention al-Qaeda, and both of those repeat the same language. The Taliban has supposedly agreed to prevent al-Qaeda from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States or its allies. But the Taliban has made that same claim repeatedly since the 1990s. It was clearly a lie then. Without any verification or enforcement mechanisms – and there are no such provisions specified in the text of the deal released to the public – there is no reason to think the Taliban is telling the truth now. As long as al-Qaeda's decades-long relationship with the Taliban remains unbroken, it will be a source of strength for al-Qaeda's global network, including in its rivalry with ISIS.

- Both al-Qaeda and ISIS spend most of their resources waging insurgencies. But a part of each organization is focused on attacking the West. With that in mind, I turn now to a summary of recent events, focusing on the al-Qaeda threat and how it ties back to terrorism in the United States and Europe.

A brief summary of recent al-Qaeda activity and counterterrorism operations.

The most recent al-Qaeda attack in the United States came on December 6, 2019, when Second Lieutenant Mohammed Alshamrani (Al-Shamrani) opened fire at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida, killing three U.S. service members and wounding eight other Americans. AQAP claimed “full responsibility” for the Saudi's attack in a video released on February 2. AQAP's claim was not empty bluster. After cracking the security on Alshamrani's two iPhones, both of which he tried to destroy, the FBI discovered he had “significant ties” to AQAP.⁵

Alshamrani was a committed jihadist before he entered the United States. According to the Department of Justice (DOJ), Alshamrani was “radicalized” by 2015, “connected and associated with AQAP operatives,” and then joined the Royal Saudi Air Force with the intent of conducting a “special operation.”⁶ As a member of the Royal Saudi Air Force, he entered a prestigious training program that gave him access to U.S. military bases. Throughout his time in the United States, Alshamrani regularly communicated with AQAP members. While in the United States, Alshamrani “had specific conversations with overseas AQAP associates about plans and tactics,” was “communicating with AQAP right up until the attack,” and “conferred with his associates until the night before he undertook the murders.”⁷ Alshamrani also made sure that AQAP could exploit his attack for propaganda purposes. He saved his final will to one of his iPhones and

⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, “Taliban falsely claims al-Qaeda doesn't exist in Afghanistan,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, June 15, 2020. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/06/taliban-falsely-claims-al-qaeda-doesnt-exist-in-afghanistan.php>)

⁵ Department of Justice, Press Release, “Attorney General William P. Barr and FBI Director Christopher Wray Announce Significant Developments in the Investigation of the Naval Air Station Pensacola Shooting,” May 18, 2020. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-william-p-barr-and-fbi-director-christopher-wray-announce-significant>)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

obviously sent a copy to AQAP. AQAP's media operatives displayed it onscreen during its February video claiming "full responsibility" for the shooting.⁸ The United States also used intelligence recovered from Alshamrani's phones to identify his associates, including an AQAP operative known as Abdullah al-Maliki, who was subsequently targeted in an airstrike.⁹ It is possible that the United States stepped up its efforts to kill AQAP's emir, Qasim al-Raymi, as a result of the Pensacola shootings. While the United States and its allies have hunted Raymi for years, he was finally killed in a drone strike in Yemen in January.

Khalid Batarfi succeeded Raymi as AQAP's emir. Like Raymi, Batarfi is an al-Qaeda veteran whose career traces to the 1990s in Afghanistan, where he was trained and indoctrinated. Batarfi is more of an ideologue and thinker than Raymi. Immediately upon assuming AQAP's top post, Batarfi continued to release a religious lecture series that is intended to purify the jihadists' ranks and counter the Islamic State. In addition to his religious work, Batarfi has long managed an operational portfolio that extends far outside of Yemen. According to a panel of experts that reports to the United Nations Security Council, Batarfi was responsible for a terrorist plot that was foiled in Jordan in July 2017.¹⁰ AQAP attacks, such as the one in Pensacola and the 2015 massacre at Charlie Hebdo's offices in Paris, are smaller in scale and focused on specific targets. Though the group is mired in a complex, multi-sided war in Yemen, it is always possible that AQAP will try to execute more deadly attacks abroad. Batarfi is openly anti-American. In a message released in 2018, Batarfi called on al-Qaeda's followers to "rise and attack" Americans "everywhere."¹¹ Batarfi is likely a member of al-Qaeda's senior management, as his predecessors in AQAP's hierarchy have served similar dual roles as both AQAP's leaders and top figures in al-Qaeda's global network.

On June 3, Abdulmalek Droukdel, the longtime emir of AQIM, was killed in a counterterrorism raid in Mali. Florence Parly, France's minister for the armed forces, announced that her country carried out the operation. U.S. Africa Command subsequently confirmed that it played a supporting role, providing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance to the French. Droukdel was a major figure in al-Qaeda's global network. For instance, files recovered in Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad compound show that he reported directly to al-Qaeda's senior leadership, requesting guidance on personnel, hostage-taking operations, negotiations with the government of Mauritania, and other matters.

⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Press Release, "FBI Director Christopher Wray's Remarks at Press Conference Regarding Naval Air Station Pensacola Shooting Investigation," May 18, 2020.

(<https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/fbi-director-christopher-wrays-remarks-at-press-conference-regarding-naval-air-station-pensacola-shooting-investigation>)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: AQAP remains under pressure," *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 26, 2018.

(<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/05/analysis-aqap-remains-under-pressure.php>)

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2018," 2019, page 319.

(<https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2018/>)

France's Parly identified Droukdel as a member of al-Qaeda's "management committee."¹² And the French government described him as Zawahiri's "third deputy."¹³ Therefore, from France's perspective, Droukdel was not only the emir of AQIM, but was also a senior figure in al-Qaeda's global hierarchy. This is consistent with our understanding of al-Qaeda's current organizational structure, as the group's senior managers and decision makers are found in multiple geographic locales.

While most of AQIM's efforts are focused in North and West Africa, there is some connective tissue between the al-Qaeda arm and the group's global terrorist ambitions. An operative known as Younis al Mauritani helped broker the merger of AQIM's predecessor organization, the Salafist Group for Call and Combat, with al-Qaeda in 2006. Mauritani went on to play a senior role in al-Qaeda's external operations arm, planning attacks against American and European targets. Mauritani was captured in Pakistan in 2011 and repatriated to his home country. But I always point to his biography as an example of how AQIM's men are not entirely focused on Africa. It is possible that some other AQIM figures will follow a similar career trajectory. As of this testimony, AQIM has yet to announce a successor to Droukdel. But there are multiple capable replacements. And his demise is not the end of al-Qaeda's war-fighting capacity in North and West Africa. Both AQIM and its spawn, the "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims" (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, or JNIM), will continue to fight on. So will their rivals in the Islamic State's local "province."

In mid-June, two senior al-Qaeda operatives were targeted in a drone strike in Syria's Idlib province.¹⁴ One of them, Abu al-Qassam (also known as Khaled al-Aruri and Abu Ashraf), was an al-Qaeda veteran whose jihadist career dates back to the 1990s. He was one of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's closest companions, as the two grew up together in Jordan and then worked side-by-side from the early 1990s until Zarqawi's demise in 2006. He was also Zarqawi's brother-in-law. The other was a jihadist known as Bilal al-Sanaani, a *nom de guerre* indicating that he was from Yemen. Abu al-Qassam was a top figure in Hurras al-Din (HAD), an al-Qaeda group that was established after months of jihadists infighting in Syria. HAD's leadership objected to the moves made by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an organization formerly known as al-Nusra Front, which was an official branch of al-Qaeda until July 2016. As result of various intra-jihadist disputes and other setbacks, al-Qaeda's chain of command in Syria remains murky. Multiple groups fighting inside Syria have ties to al-Qaeda. And as the unclaimed airstrike in mid-June demonstrates, the United States continues to target those terrorists who are thought to be especially worrisome.

It should be noted that Abu al-Qassam was one of five senior al-Qaeda figures set free by Iran in 2015. The five were reportedly exchanged for an Iranian diplomat who was held hostage by

¹² "French forces kill al-Qaeda's North African commander," *Associated Press*, June 5, 2020.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/french-forces-kill-al-qaeda-north-africa-commander-1.5601037>)

¹³ The French military's statement, claiming Droukdel was Zawahiri's "third deputy," can be found here: French Ministry of the Armed Forces, "Point de situation des opérations du 05 au 11 juin [Update on operations from 05 to 11 June]," June 11, 2020. (<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/points-de-situation/point-de-situation-des-operations-du-05-au-11-juin>)

¹⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, "U.S. reportedly targets 2 senior al Qaeda figures in airstrike in Syria," *FDD's Long War Journal*, June 14, 2020. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/06/u-s-reportedly-targets-2-senior-al-qaeda-figures-in-airstrike-in-syria.php>)

AQAP in Yemen. Abu al-Qassam and two of the others made their way to Syria, where all three have now perished in the U.S. drone campaign. The other two, Saif al-Adel and Abdullah Abdullah (a.k.a. Abu Muhammad al-Masri), evidently decided to stay in Iran, and from there they have weighed in on the jihadist controversies inside Syria. During one online squabble, Abu al-Qassam himself wrote that the two al-Qaeda veterans “left prison and they are not imprisoned” inside Iran. Abu al-Qassam claimed that Adel and Abdullah “are forbidden from traveling until Allah makes for them an exit,” but “they move around and live their natural lives except for being allowed to travel.”¹⁵ Unlike their brethren in Syria, Adel and Abdullah are safe from America’s drones inside Iran, because the United States has never launched airstrikes against al-Qaeda there. The Iranian regime has a complex relationship with al-Qaeda. Although the two are often at odds, the Iranians have also allowed al-Qaeda to maintain a “core pipeline” on their soil. This facilitation network allows al-Qaeda to shuttle operatives and communications across the Middle East and South Asia.¹⁶

The mid-June airstrike in Idlib was the latest in an infrequent drone campaign in northern Syria. The targets have been select al-Qaeda leaders and operatives thought to pose a threat to the West. In February 2017, one of Ayman al-Zawahiri’s top deputies, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, was killed in a drone strike. It appears that an R9X missile was used in that targeted airstrike and then again earlier this month in Idlib. In late 2018, Iyad Nazmi Salih Khalil (a.k.a. Abu Julaybib al-Urduni), was killed in an airstrike in late 2018. Like Abu al-Qassam, Abu Julaybib was close to Zarqawi. The United States then conducted airstrikes against al-Qaeda targets in June and August of 2019. And in December 2019, another senior HAD official, Bilal Khuraysat, was killed. Khuraysat was a significant ideological figure, as he penned tracts defending al-Qaeda and criticizing the Islamic State, among other topics.

Al-Qaeda’s senior leadership retains a presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In September 2019, American and Afghan forces killed Asim Umar, the first emir of AQIS, during a raid in the Musa Qala district of Helmand.¹⁷ Umar and his comrades were embedded within a Taliban stronghold and they were protected by one of the Taliban’s “shadow governors.” Umar’s courier was also killed during the raid. According to the Afghan government, that same courier ran messages back and forth to Ayman al-Zawahiri.

That same month, the White House confirmed that Hamza bin Laden, Osama’s biological and ideological heir, had been killed in a “counterterrorism operation.”¹⁸ The White House did not explain when or where, only saying that Hamza had met his demise somewhere “in the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Some commentators have claimed that merely pointing to Iran’s “agreement” with al-Qaeda is part of some conspiratorial scheme to start a war. That claim is nonsense. The formerly “secret deal” between the Iranian government and al-Qaeda was documented by the Obama administration in a series of terrorist designations and other official statements by the Treasury and State Departments. See: Thomas Joscelyn, “State Department: Iran allows al Qaeda to operate its ‘core facilitation pipeline’,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, September 19, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/09/state-department-iran-allows-al-qaeda-to-operate-its-core-facilitation-pipeline.php>). In addition, it should be noted again that Iran and al-Qaeda are often at odds, including in Syria and Yemen.

¹⁷ Bill Roggio, “Afghan intelligence confirms death of AQIS emir,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, October 8, 2019. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/10/afghan-intelligence-confirms-death-of-aqis-emir.php>)

¹⁸ White House, “Statement from the President,” September 14, 2019. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-from-the-president-10/>)

Afghanistan/Pakistan region.” The Trump administration added that Hamza “was responsible for planning and dealing with various terrorist groups,” but did not name those organizations. In my view, it is likely that Hamza was working with the Afghan Taliban, among other groups. Like his father and Ayman al-Zawahiri, Hamza swore his own oath of fealty to the Taliban’s emir. A monitoring team that works for the UN Security Council recently reported that a Taliban delegation met with Hamza in the spring of 2019 to “to reassure him personally that the Islamic Emirate would not break its historical ties with Al-Qaeda for any price.”¹⁹ The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is what the Taliban calls its totalitarian regime. Similarly, the UN team reported that Ayman al-Zawahiri met with a Haqqani Network delegation in February 2020 to discuss the agreement struck between the United States and the Taliban.²⁰ The Haqqani Network is an integral part of the Taliban.

The UN monitoring team cited intelligence and reporting from member states. It is not possible for me, as an outsider, to inspect these sources. But it is likely within the purview of this committee to ask the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies about these reports and the current status of Taliban-al-Qaeda relations. Such questions are especially important given that the head of U.S. Central Command, General Kenneth McKenzie, recently claimed that Zawahiri is based in eastern Afghanistan.²¹

This brief synopsis of al-Qaeda shows that the organization maintains a cohesive international network nearly 19 years after the 9/11 hijackings. Its leadership is distributed across several countries. And while much of al-Qaeda is focused on wars ‘over there,’ some part of the organization remains focused on carrying out attacks over here.

¹⁹ United Nations Security Council, “Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan,” April 30, 2020, page 12.

(<https://www.undocs.org/S/2020/415>)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ U.S. Central Command News Transcript, “MEI engagement with General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr.,” June 11, 2020. (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2216473/mei-engagement-with-general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr/>)