



**Scowcroft Institute
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Scowcroft Paper No. 23

TERRORISM IN A PERIOD OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION



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April 2023

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By: Bruce Hoffman

"You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you."

-- Attributed to Leon Trotsky

Few occasions are capable of producing as melancholy a remembrance as the recent twentieth anniversary of America's invasion of Iraq. Robert Draper, who has written one of the best book-length treatments of the deliberations that culminated in that fateful event,¹ has described the invasion as "a towering moment of hubris in a foreign policy misadventure tragically replete with them."² The flaws in intelligence, policy, and the anticipated regional and global security benefits that would accrue from the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and Iraq's Baathist regime are thus manifold. But pales in comparison to the nearly half a million Iraqis who lost their lives and the 8,500 American military personnel and contractors who perished as a result of "Operation Iraqi Freedom" and the eight-year occupation that followed.³ Often forgotten amid these many failures were the many assurances that the invasion and removal of Saddam from power would also deliver a signal victory in the global war on terror (GWOT).

¹ Robert Draper, *To Start A War: How the Bush Administration Took America into Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2020).

² Idem, "Iraq, 20 Years Later: A Changed Washington and a Terrible Toll on America," *New York Times*, March 20, 2023.

³ Ibid.

This triumphal drumbeat commenced even before the first American airstrikes on Baghdad. Eighteen days earlier, on March 1st, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind behind the September 11th 2001 attacks, was captured in Pakistan. "Al-Qa'ida's Top Primed To Collapse, U.S. Says," read the front page headline in the *Washington Post* three days before the invasion. "I believe the tide has turned in terms of al-Qa'ida," Congressman Porter J. Goss, then-chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Intelligence Committee and himself a former CIA case officer who became its director a year later, declared. "We've got them nailed," an unidentified intelligence expert quoted in the same article agreed. "We're close to dismantling them."⁴ The ease with which the United States deposed Saddam and initially occupied Iraq bred renewed confidence that the war on terror had also been won. Citing the prevailing view among senior Bush administration officials, a *Washington Times* article on April 24, 2003 reported that al Qaeda's "failure to carry out a successful strike during the U.S.-led military campaign to topple Saddam Hussein has raised questions about their ability to carry out major new attacks."⁵

⁴ Dana Priest and Susan Schmidt, "Al-Qa'ida's Top Primed To Collapse, U.S. Says," *Washington Post*, 16 March 2003.

⁵ David R. Sands, "Al-Qa'ida's credibility 'on the line' as war in Iraq winds down," *Washington Times*, 24 April 2003. See also, Dennis Pluchinsky, "Al-Qa'ida Identity Crisis," *Washington Times*, April 28, 2003.

Despite significant international terrorist attacks in Jakarta, Indonesia⁶ and Istanbul, Turkey⁷ during the latter half of the year coupled with the escalating insurgency in Iraq fueled by al-Qaeda's man there, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi,⁸ this optimism continued into 2004. "The Al Qaida of the 9/11 period is under catastrophic stress. They are being hunted down, their days are numbered," Ambassador Cofer Black, at the time the U.S. State Department's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, argued.⁹ Then, six weeks later, on March 11, 2004, the most serious international terrorist attack since 9/11 occurred. Al-Qaeda struck in Madrid, Spain bombing four commuter trains killing 191 persons and injuring nearly 1,800 others.¹⁰

Regardless, the dominant narrative of the war on terror, like that of America's interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, was one of progress, if not incremental success. "Al Qaeda," President Bush confidently

stated in October 2006, "is on the run."¹¹ In fact, every U.S. president since has declared victory over al-Qaeda and an end to the war on terror. "Al Qaeda's core leadership has been decimated," President Barack Obama asserted in 2012.¹² "We are ending the era of endless wars," promised President Donald Trump at the U.S. Military Academy's Class of 2020 commencement. "In its place is a renewed, clear-eyed focus on defending America's vital interests."¹³ This was perhaps the only issue that Trump and his Democratic Party rival, Joe Biden, could agree on during that year's presidential campaigns. In an article that appeared in *Foreign Affairs* shortly after the former vice president clinched his party's nomination, Biden wrote that, "It is past time to end the forever wars, which have cost the United States untold blood and treasure. As I have long argued, we should bring the vast majority of our troops home from the wars

⁶ A suicide bomb attack on the JW Marriot Hotel killed twelve persons and injured nearly 100 others. See Mark Rivett-Carnac, "These Are the Last Six Major Terrorist Attacks in Indonesia," *Time*, January 14, 2016.

⁷ At least 30 persons were killed and more than 300 wounded in four, successive suicide attacks using truck bombs in Istanbul on November 15, 2003. The targets included two Jewish synagogues, the British Consulate General, and the HSBC bank offices. See Ulkumen Rodoplu, et al., "Mass-casualty terrorist bombings in Istanbul, Turkey, November 2003: report of the events and the prehospital emergency response," *PubMed: NIH—National Library of Medicine/National Center for Biotechnology Information*, vol. 19, issue 2 (April-June 2004), p. 133.

⁸ The group originally founded in 1999 and known as *Jama'at al Tawhid wal Jihad* (The Group of Unification/Oneness/Monothesisism) that in 2004 re-branded itself *Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidian* (The Organization of

the Base of Jihad in the Lance of the Two Rivers"), also known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

⁹ "U.S.: Al Qaida is 70 percent gone, their 'days are numbered'," *World Tribune.com*, January 23, 2004.

¹⁰ For the most complete and authoritative account of this attack, see Fernando Reinares, *Al-Qaeda's Revenge: The 2004 Madrid Train Bombings* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

¹¹ Quoted in Peter Baker, "Bush Is Reassuring on Iraq But Says He's 'Not Satisfied'," *Washington Post*, October 26, 2006.

¹² Quoted in Pam Benson, "CNN Fact Check: Is al Qaeda's core decimated or is the group growing?" *CNN Politics*, October 23, 2012.

¹³ Quoted in Steve Holland, "Trump to West Point grads: 'We are ending the era of endless wars,'" *Reuters*, June 13, 2020 at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-wars/trump-to-west-point-grads-we-are-ending-the-era-of-endless-wars-idUSKBN23K0PR>.

in Afghanistan and the Middle East . . .”¹⁴

Once in office, President Biden moved quickly to fulfill that pledge. “Bin Laden is dead, and al Qaeda is degraded in Iraq—in Afghanistan,” he stated in April 2021. “And it’s time to end the forever war.”¹⁵

Four months later the United States left Afghanistan and, for all intents and purposes the war on terror also ended.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy had of course already signaled a major shift in America’s defense and national security priorities. As Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis, who oversaw the strategy’s codification, explained, “We will continue to prosecute the campaign against terrorists that we are engaged in today, but Great Power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security.”¹⁶

Winston Churchill, however, famously cautioned that, “However absorbed a commander may be in the elaboration of his own thoughts, it is sometimes necessary to take the enemy into consideration.”¹⁷ A point Secretary Mattis himself made in 2013 when he was commander of the U.S. Central Command. “No war is over until the enemy says it’s over,” he said. “We may think it [is] over, we may declare it over, but in fact, the enemy gets a vote.”¹⁸

¹⁴ “Joseph R. Biden, Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020 at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

¹⁵ White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” *Speeches And Remarks*, April 14, 2021 at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

Nonetheless, it may be that the most accurate assessment of al-Qaeda’s longevity was the one offered twenty years ago by the group itself. “The Americans,” Thabet bin Qais, its chief spokesperson at the time explained in May 2003, “only have predictions and old intelligence left. It will take them a long time to understand the new form of al-Qaida.”¹⁹ We are still arguably struggling to understand the changing character and nature of terrorism in the 21st Century, the shifting dimensions of an evolving threat, and the new forms that al-Qaeda as well as its splinter and rival ISIS—also known as the Islamic State (IS), the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or by its Arabic acronym, Da’esh—have taken.

How should we therefore sift through these myriad claims and assess the terrorist threat as it exists today—in this period of great power competition when the attention and resources of the U.S. national security establishment is preoccupied with threats from Russia in Ukraine, China with Taiwan, and Iran’s nuclear ambitions, among the many of contemporary foreign policy, global health, and climate challenges?

¹⁶ “Transcript: Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy,” U.S. Department of Defense, January 19, 2018.

¹⁷ Quoted in Colin S. Gray, *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace, and Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac, 2007), p. 69.

¹⁸ Quoted in Jonah Goldberg, “Our Enemies Get a Vote,” *National Review*, May 29, 2013 at: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2013/05/our-enemies-get-vote-jonah-goldberg/>.

¹⁹ Sarah el Deeb, “Al-Qaida Reportedly Plans Big New Attack,” *Associated Press*, 8 May 2003.

Reflecting on then-General Mattis' observation about the enemy having a say in any struggle, one might usefully look at the international terrorism threat today from the perspective of both the United States and al-Qaeda. Two key questions thus emerge:

- From the United States' perspective:
are we safer today than we were on September 11th 2001?
- And, from al-Qaeda's perspective:
what would bin Laden think if he were alive today?

ARE WE SAFER TODAY?

The United States is indisputably better prepared and more capable of keeping the homeland safe and countering terrorist threats than we were on September 11th, 2001. There was no Department of Homeland Security then nor a National Counterterrorism Center. In addition, according to a 2010 *Washington Post* investigative report, "at least 263 organizations [were] created or reorganized as a response to 9/11."²⁰ The U.S.

²⁰ Peter Bergen and David Sterman, "Terrorism in America After 9/11: What is the Threat to the United States Today?" *New America Foundation*, September 10, 2021 at: <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/terrorism-in-america/>.

²¹ ODNI New Release No. 19-22, "DNI Releases Appropriated Budget Figure For 2022 National Intelligence Program," October 31, 2022, at: <https://www.odni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/press-releases-2022/item/2338-dni-releases-appropriated-budget-figure-for-2022-national-intelligence-program?tmpl=component&print=1>. See also Priest and Arkin, "A hidden world, growing beyond control."

²² See https://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/f

Intelligence Community's budget is more than double (\$65.7 billion) than it was on 9/11.²¹ And, as of 2017, the FBI's Terrorist Screening Database contained approximately one million person records: of whom 81,000 were on the so-called no-fly list.²² On September 11, 2001 by comparison, there were a total of sixteen persons on what was then called the "No Transport List."²³

In terms of the elimination of key terrorist leaders and commanders the answer is also obvious. Bin Laden is dead and so is ISIS' founder and leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Their successors and almost all their senior commanders have also been eliminated. Indeed, within the past four years alone, the United States or its allies have killed eight key al-Qaeda leaders, including:

- Hamza bin Laden, Osama's son and heir apparent;
- Murad al-Shayeb, a senior commander of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb;

</b/fb745343-1dbb-4802-a866-cfdfa300a5ad/BCD664419E5B375C638A0F250B37DCB2.nctc-tsc-numbers-to-congress-06172016-nctc-tsc-final.pdf>; and, "Gosar Introduces Legislation to Reform the No Fly List," November 22, 2021 at: <https://gosar.house.gov/news/email/show.aspx?ID=MQGUK5NLSFBZ5DRBN2II6I2NBM>.

²³ "TSA Watch Lists, December 2002," TSIS:Transportation Security Intelligence Service, Slide #3 at: https://web.archive.org/web/20110716144311/http://www.aclunc.org/cases/landmark_cases/asset_upload_file371_3549.pdf; and Laura K. Donohue, *The Cost of Counterterrorism: Power, Politics, and Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 254.

- Qaasim al-Rimi, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's emir;
- Abdelmalek Droukdal, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's emir ;
- Khaled al-Aruri, the commander of al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, Hurras al-Din;
- Abu Muhsin al-Masri, a leading figure in both al-Qaeda and its Indian Subcontinent affiliate;
- Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, the movement's reputed then-al-Qaeda second-in-command; and, most recently,
- Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's successor and al-Qaeda co-founder.

The Islamic State's senior leadership has suffered grievous losses as well. Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, who succeeded al-Baghdadi was killed by U.S. special operations forces in 2022. In February 2023 two more senior ISIS leaders—Ibrahim al-Qatani and Hamza al-Homsi, its commander in eastern Syria, were killed. And, two months later the ISIS commander responsible for planning the group's operations in Europe and the Middle East, Abd-al-Hadi Mahmud al-Haji Ali, was the target of a successful raid by U.S. Special Operations forces in Syria. That

brought to a total of eleven prominent IS figures killed or captured over the past year.²⁴

Nonetheless, despite these losses, the most recent report of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team paints a gloomy picture of protean enemies and enduring challenges. "The threat posed by Al-Qaida, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant . . . and affiliated groups and individuals," it states, "remains high in conflict zones and neighboring Member States Both Al-Qaida and ISIL (Da'esh) continue to aspire to project threat beyond conflict zones." Even more ominously the report describes how leadership losses in the Islamic State have become "normalized" to the extent that the "pool of potential leaders in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic who could be presented as having the right lineage and operational experience is sufficiently deep to weather the steady attrition in the group's leadership" for the foreseeable future.²⁵

The U.S. State Department in January 2022 had also cautioned that, "While the Coalition has severely degraded ISIS's ability to conduct attacks, the group continues its attempts to destabilize" the

²⁴ Jeff Seldin, "US Hammers Islamic State With Multiple Raids," *VOA News*, February 17, 2023; and, Associated Press, "US helicopter raid in Syria kills Islamic State leader," *Yahoo News*, April 17, 2023.

²⁵ "Thirty-first report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team" in Letter

dated 13 February 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, p. 5.

Levant.²⁶ This point was driven home by Christine Abizaid, the National Counterterrorism Center's director, in a January 2023 interview when she observed that, "We have still got to be really vigilant about the threat posed by those organizations that are based overseas that want to conduct attacks against Americans here in the homeland. And that's principally, an al-Qaeda and ISIS threat. Those two threats, even after the years post 9/11, even after the sustained pressure, those threats still exist."²⁷

The United Nations report was also among the first credible sources to confirm that Saif al-'Adl had likely succeeded al-Zawahiri as al-Qaeda's emir.²⁸ To this day, little is known about al-'Adl.²⁹ Even his true identity is shrouded in mystery. For years, al-'Adl was thought to be a former Egyptian Army colonel named Mohammed Makkawi. But as former FBI agent and terrorism expert Ali Soufan discovered, al-'Adl's real name is Mohammed Salahuddin Zeidan. Graduating from a local university with a business degree, Zeidan trained as a paratrooper in an Egyptian Army reserve unit--where he also likely acquired additional skills in demolitions and

intelligence operations. In 1987 he departed Egypt on pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, where he was reported to have died in a road accident. Thereafter the trail of Mohammed Salahuddin Zeidan goes cold and someone named Saif al-'Adl—an Arabic *nom de guerre* meaning "Sword of Justice"—surfaces. It is not clear when, where, and how al-'Adl first met bin Laden. What is known is that he found his way to Afghanistan during the final phase of the mujahideen's struggle against the Soviet Union's occupation of that country. Al-'Adl reportedly instructed his fellow holy warriors on the use of Stinger surface-to-air missiles against Russian Hind helicopters--much as a few years later he would teach Somali militiamen to use rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) to shoot down U.S. Black Hawk helicopters in Mogadishu.³⁰

Al-'Adl's subsequent trajectory is something akin to an al-Qaeda Forrest Gump. He was commander of the nascent terrorist organization's important al-Faruq training camp in Afghanistan, where his charges included Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, the architect of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York and L'Houssaine

²⁶ Ned Price, "ISIS Attacks in Syria: Press Statement," *U.S. Department of State*, January 22, 2022 at: <https://www.state.gov/isis-attacks-in-syria/>.

²⁷ Matthew Levitt, "A Survey of the 2023 Terrorism Threat Landscape" Christine Abizaid, Director, U.S., National Counterterrorism Center, *Event Transcript*, January 10, 2023 at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/6141>.

²⁸ "Thirty-first report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," February 13, 2023 pp. 3 & 6.

²⁹ Ali Soufan, "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-'Adl," *CTC Sentinel*,

vol.14, no. 2, February 2021. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CTC-SENTINEL-022021.pdf>; "Image Allegedly Showing Presumed Zawahiri Successor in Iran Intended to Sow Controversy Among Jihadists," *SITE Intelligence Group*, September 2, 2022, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Chatter/image-allegedly-showing-presumed-aq-chief-saif-al-'Adl-in-iran-intended-to-sow-controversy-among-jihadists.html>.

³⁰ Ibid.

Kertchou, who was later implicated in al-Qaeda's 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya. Al-'Adl went on to train under Hezbollah's tutelage in Lebanon's Bekka Valley before playing a crucial role in the aforementioned tragic events on October 3, 1993 when eighteen U.S. Army Delta Force commandos and Rangers were killed and 84 more wounded. Al-'Adl was meanwhile drawing personally closer to bin Laden. He was responsible for providing personnel security details for the al-Qaeda leader and at one time or another commanded the group's intelligence, counter-intelligence, and communications support units. Key al-Qaeda operatives trained by al-'Adl executed the simultaneous August 1998 suicide attacks on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam. Al-'Adl was also responsible for mentoring a new arrival in Afghanistan, a Jordanian jihadi who had adopted the kunya (Arabic name usually derived from one's oldest child) Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.³¹ Al-'Adl also played a key oversight role in the 1999 suicide attack on the *U.S.S. Cole* as well as the assassination of Afghan Northern

Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud on September 9, 2001.³²

Ever the pragmatist, al-'Adl objected to the so-called "Planes Operation"—the epochal 9/11 attacks. He thought the plan imprudent—calculated to result in disaster for al-Qaeda by bringing down the full weight of the world's remaining superpower on the movement whether in Afghanistan or elsewhere. But bin Laden did not heed this warning. Regardless, ever the good soldier, al-'Adl simply saluted smartly and threw himself into helping with the preparations for the spectacular operation. Al-'Adl also prudently began preparations for the inevitable U.S. military response.³³ He distinguished himself leading al-Qaeda's overwhelmed forces in combat around Kandahar during the U.S. invasion and then, after being given a battlefield promotion to group's military field commander, in effecting the escape of the surviving al-Qaeda leaders and fighters from Afghanistan.³⁴

Al-'Adl himself found sanctuary of sorts in Iran. Despite being in-and-out of prison or

³¹ Ibid.; Brian H. Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, And The Jihadi Strategy For Final Victory* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 2, 17-19 & 30; and, Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Exile: The Stunning Story of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 62-63.

³² Soufan, "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-'Adl." See also, United States District Court, South District of New York, "United States Of America v. Usama Bin Laden, et al.," S(9) 98 Cr. 1023 (LBS), November 4, 1998, p. 16, <https://webarchive.loc.gov/all/20011110104742/http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/reports/pdfs/binladen/indict.pdf>.

³³ Soufan, "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-'Adl." See also, Peter Bergen, *The Rise And Fall Of Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 141-142 & 172; Fishman, *The Master Plan*, pp. 33-34; and, Scott-Clark and Levy, *The Exile*, p. 87.

³⁴ Soufan, "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-'Adl." See also, United States of America v. David Matthew Hicks, March 1, 2007, p. 8, at: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bd/David_Hicks%2C_charge_sheet%2C_Guantanamo_military_commission_%282007-02-02%29.pdf.

under house arrest,³⁵ he nonetheless was able to make a singular contribution to al-Qaeda's preparations for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In early 2003, just as the American attack plans were being finalized, al-'Adl wrote a series of articles for al-Qaeda's online magazine, "In the Shadow of the Lances." The battle-hardened veteran encouraged foreign fighters to converge on Iraq not to defend the apostate regime of Saddam Hussein but to resist yet another U.S. conquest of Muslim territory. Al-'Adl also provided practical information on how guerrilla warfare could be effectively employed against the invaders.³⁶ He also oversaw al-Qaeda's short-lived 2003 terrorist campaign in Saudi Arabia and became tutor and mentor to bin Laden's son and later would-be heir, Hamza, during their time in Iran.³⁷ Following bin Laden's killing, Iran granted Al-'Adl and the other

al-Qaeda detainees along with various families their freedom. Perhaps because of al-'Adl's longstanding ties with Iran, dating to the 1990s when he was al-Qaeda's chief liaison with Tehran,³⁸ he was tasked by al-Zawahiri on special missions that included frequent travel between Iran and Syria.³⁹

As an architect of the 2005 "Master Plan" or seven-stage strategy to victory that bin Laden adopted,⁴⁰ al-'Adl is thus very well placed to helm al-Qaeda's on-going war against the United States and all those who oppose the movement. Instead of the nearly thousand page, didactic treatise that al-Zawahiri produced shortly before his death, al-'Adl—as his entire history with al-Qaeda suggests—will embrace a more practical, building-block, approach to the continued prosecution of al-Qaeda's local, regional, and international terrorism

³⁵ Fishman, *The Master Plan*, pp. 18, 22-23, 29-30, 44, & 162-163; Nelly Lahoud, *The Bin Laden Papers: How the Abbottabad Raid Revealed the Truth about Al-Qaeda, Its Leader and His Family* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 59 & 302; Scott-Clark and Levy, *The Exile*, pp. 147-154 & 281-287; and, Soufan, "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-'Adl."

³⁶ MEMRI, "Special Dispatch—Jihad and Terrorism Studies," April 11 2003, no. 493 quoting <http://www.cubezero.net/vhsvideo/imagis/?subject=2&rec=1043>. Accessed April 13, 2003.

³⁷ Soufan, "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-'Adl." See also, Peter Bergen, *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad* (New York: Crown, 2012), 62; and, Scott-Clark and Levy, *The Exile*, pp. 149-150. Lahoud, however, disputes al-'Adl's role. See Lahoud, *The Bin Laden Papers*, p. 68.

³⁸ Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 33; and, Soufan, "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-'Adl."

³⁹ "Al-Quds Al-Arabi: Senior Al-Qaeda Operative Saif Al-'Adl Arrived In Syria To Mediate Between ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra," November 5,

2015 accessed at: <http://www.memrijttm.org/al-quds-al-arabi-senior-al-qaeda-operative-saif-al-'adl-arrived-in-syria-to-mediate-between-isis-and-jabhat-al-nusra.html>; Rukmini Callimachi and Eric Schmitt, "Iran Released Top Members of Al Qaeda in a Trade," *New York Times*, September 17, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/18/world/middleeast/iran-released-top-members-of-al-qaeda-in-a-trade.html>; J.J. Green, "Mysterious al-Qaida figure emerges in Syria," *wtopnews*, November 5, 2015, <https://wtop.com/national-security/2015/11/mysterious-al-qaida-figure-emerges-in-syria/>; Lahoud, *The Bin Laden Papers*, 242-245; and, Soufan, "Al-Qa'ida's Soon-To-Be Third Emir? A Profile of Saif al-'Adl."

⁴⁰ Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 34-37; Yassin Musharbash, "The Future of Terrorism: What al Qaida Really Wants," *Spiegel Online International*, 12 August 2005, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/the-future-of-terrorism-what-alqaida-really-wants-a-369448.html>; and, Bill Roggio, "The Seven Phases of The Base," *The Long War Journal*, 15 August 2005, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2005/08/the_seven_phase.php.

campaigns. His excellent and often deeply personal relations with many of the movement's franchises, including in Syria, East Africa, and Afghanistan, will smooth his presumed transition into the top leadership post. Al-'Adl is likely to eschew spectacular operations such as the 9/11 attacks and instead refocus al-Qaeda's targeting on embassies and consulates, tourist destinations, and commercial aviation.⁴¹

In sum, both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State remain remarkably resilient. In the case of the Islamic State's caliphate it is worth noting that it took five years and an 85-country coalition to eliminate its rule over a territory that comprised 282,000 miles and over some ten million people.⁴² But while the core of the Islamic State was being eroded and its Caliphate dismembered, the group was growing and expanding elsewhere. According to the 2018 U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism, "The group's global reach remains robust, with eight official branches and more than two dozen networks regularly conducting terrorist and insurgent operations across Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East."⁴³

⁴¹ The author's assessment derived from extensive discussions with U.S. government officials, August 2022.

⁴² See Joseph V. Micallef, "A Year After al-Baghdadi's Death, ISIS Is Alive—and Growing," *Military.com*, November 6, 2020, at: <https://www.military.com/daily-news/opinions/2020/11/06/year-after-al-baghdadis-death-isis-alive-and-growing.html>; and, "Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps," *BBC News*, March 28, 2018, at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>.

The terrorist threat situation today thus evokes Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's famous lamentation from December 2003: "We know that we're killing a lot, capturing a lot, collecting arms. We just don't know yet whether that's the same as winning."⁴⁴ Over two decades later we arguably still don't know. It is certainly true that the United States homeland is safer from a major international terrorist attack than it was on September 11th 2001.⁴⁵ But, at the same time, our terrorist enemies today are both more numerous and more dispersed, and unlike in the past we now also have to contend with domestic as well as foreign terrorist threats, and new security challenges from authoritarian states and great power rivals.

WHAT WOULD BIN LADEN THINK IF HE WERE ALIVE TODAY?

If bin Laden were alive today, he would likely be a happy man. The enterprise he embarked upon thirty-five years ago continues. And, for both terrorists as well as guerrillas that's arguably all that counts. As Henry Kissinger famously observed of American's defeat in Vietnam,

⁴³ National Security Council. *National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America*, October 2018, p. 8 at: https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NSCT.pdf

⁴⁴ Quoted in Vernon Loeb, "Rumsfeld Seeks Better Intelligence on Iraqi Insurgents," *Washington Post*, December 11, 2003.

⁴⁵ <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/terrorism-in-america/what-is-the-threat-to-the-united-states-today>.

We fought a military war; our opponents fought a political one. We sought physical attrition; our opponents aimed for our psychological exhaustion. In the process we lost sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla war: the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win.⁴⁶

Moreover, not only has al-Qaeda survived the greatest collective, multi-national onslaught ever directed against a terrorist group but it has done so against the most technologically advanced and sophisticated military in the history of mankind. As Medal of Honor winner Sergeant Salvatore Giunta presciently observed in 2008 after an especially intense battle in Afghanistan's dangerous Korengal Valley, "The richest, most-trained army got beat by dudes in manjammies and A.K.s [AK-47 assault rifles]." ⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Henry A. Kissinger, "The Viet Nam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs*, vol 47, no. 2 (January 1969), p. 215.

⁴⁷ Specialist Sal Giunta quoted in Elizabeth Rubin, "Captain Kearney's Quagmire," *New York Times*, February 24, 2008.

⁴⁸ "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State at: <https://www.state.gov/acting-coordinator-for-counterterrorism-landbergs-travel-to-pakistan/>. See also Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, *Violent Islamist Extremism: A Global Problem*, September 13, 2018, pp. 9 & 13-14 at: <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/violent-islamist-extremism-global-problem> and Seth G. Jones, et al., *The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat: Current and Future Challenges from the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and Other Groups* (Washington, DC: CSIS Transnational Threats Project, November 2018). p. iv at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-salafi-jihadist-threat>.

Indeed, the Salafi-Jihadi uprising that bin Laden inspired has grown and spread rather than contracted or disappeared. Today, there are at least five times as many Salafi-Jihadi terrorist organizations as there were on September 11th 2001.⁴⁸ In 2018, both the London-based Tony Blair Institute for Global Change and the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. reached the same conclusion using different metrics and data.⁴⁹ Similarly, Georgetown University's Dr. Amy Sturm used data from the U.S. State Department's *Country Reports on Terrorism* to show how as of the end of 2018 the number of Salafi-Jihadi terrorists had grown to nearly 72,000 persons from only 2,200 in 1998.⁵⁰

With the Taliban's reconquest of Afghanistan and the resurrected al-Qaeda safe haven there, we are arguably back where we started on September 11th 2001: with the Taliban in power, and al-Qaeda back in Afghanistan. "You have the

[jihadist-threat](#), which both use different metrics to arrive at the same general conclusion of a net increase of Salafi-Jihadi terrorists since 9/11.

⁴⁹ See Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, *Violent Islamist Extremism: A Global Problem*, September 13, 2018, pp. 9 & 13-14 at: <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/violent-islamist-extremism-global-problem>; and, Seth G. Jones, et al., *The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat: Current and Future Challenges from the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and Other Groups* (Washington, DC: CSIS Transnational Threats Project, November 2018). p. iv at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-salafi-jihadist-threat>.

⁵⁰ Amy Sturm, "Assessing The Global War On Terror: Measuring The Impact of U.S. Foreign Terrorist Organization Designation on Salafi Jihadist Group Behavior, Thesis submitted to the School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, March 2023, p. 77.

watches. We have the time,”⁵¹ a captured Taliban fighter reportedly explained at the height of America’s military presence in Afghanistan. Writing on the tenth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, *Newsweek* correspondent Sami Yousafzai observed,

The insurgents seem utterly confident that both God and time are on their side. Everything else is irrelevant detail: the anniversaries, deadlines, and timelines, and all the economic, financial, and political constraints that occupy the waking hours of U.S. policymakers. The insurgents show no interest in numbers or statistics or schedules; they focus only on the victory they're sure will someday be theirs.⁵²

And, that victory came in August 2021. The Taliban and al-Qaeda outlasted both the United States and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—which was disbanded in 2014.⁵³ In the process, al-Qaeda got everything it desired. The Taliban was restored to power. Its Afghan sanctuary was resurrected. Thousands of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Taliban fighters—including

senior leaders and commanders—were freed from the previous Afghan government’s prisons at Bagram Air Base and Pul-e-Chari.⁵⁴ And, al-Qaeda’s closest friends now control the country’s key ministries.

Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the notorious Haqqani Network, which since 2012 has been designated by the U.S. Department of State as a foreign terrorist organization,⁵⁵ serves as Minister of Interior in the Taliban’s government. Accordingly, he controls the country’s police, border security forces, and internal security and intelligence apparatus. The State Department has long offered a \$10 million reward for information leading to Sirajuddin’s apprehension. Like Sirajuddin, his uncle, Khalil al-Rahman Haqqani, the Taliban’s minister of refugees, has also been officially designated as a terrorist by both the United Nations and the U.S. State Department—which advertises a \$5 million reward for Khalil’s capture. Another Haqqani, Yahya, has been cited by the United Nations for his role managing relations between the Taliban with al-Qaeda for the past decade-and-a-half.⁵⁶ Both Abdul

⁵¹ Quoted in Sami Yousafzai, “10 Years of Afghan War: How the Taliban Go On,” *Newsweek*, October 2, 2011.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ See Resolution 1386 (2001)/adopted by the Security Council at its 4443rd Meeting, *United Nations Digital Library*, December 20, 2001 at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/454998?ln=en>; and, “ISAF’s mission in Afghanistan (2001-2014),” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, May 30, 2022 at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm

⁵⁴ Sophia Ankel, “Video shows thousands of prisoners, reportedly including Islamic State and al-Qaeda fighters, freed from Kabul jail by the Taliban,”

Business Insider, August 15, 2021; Jake Epstein and John Haltiwanger, “The Pentagon says thousands of ISIS-K prisoners went free after the Taliban seized Afghanistan,” *Business Insider*, August 27, 2021; and, “ISIS causing unrest in Afghanistan: Taliban,” *The Times of India*, July 29, 2022.

⁵⁵ Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” U.S. Department of State (no date), at: <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.

⁵⁶ “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

Haq Wasiq, the current director of intelligence, and Khairullah Khairkhwa, the minister of information and culture, were imprisoned at Guantanamo. They were among five senior Taliban leaders freed in 2014 to obtain the release of U.S. Army deserter Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl.⁵⁷ Both men have been identified as terrorists by the United Nations: in Wasiq's case because of his role in overseeing al-Qaeda's foreign fighters in Afghanistan prior to the September 11th 2001 attacks.⁵⁸ Khairkhwa was reportedly a close associate of bin Laden's.⁵⁹ As a 2021 United Nations analysis observed of the Taliban and al-Qaeda's longstanding ties:

Relations between the Taliban, especially the Haqqani Network, and Al-Qaida remain close, based on friendship, a history of shared struggle, ideological sympathy and intermarriage. The Taliban regularly consulted with Al-Qaida during negotiations with the United States and offered guarantees that it would honour their historical ties. Al-Qaida has reacted positively to the agreement, with statements

from its acolytes celebrating it as a victory for the Taliban's cause and thus for global militancy.⁶⁰

Al-Qaeda's Central Asian affiliates played a particularly pivotal role in the Taliban's return to power. The Islamic Jihad Union, Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Jammāt Ansarullah, and the Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari each contributed to the Taliban's lightning reconquest of Afghanistan. The Taliban has in turn showed its gratitude by appointing commanders of these groups to senior provincial governance posts along the northern border and across the country. Accordingly, along with al-Qaeda's franchise in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), these groups have a presence in at least eight of Afghanistan's provinces—Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Zabul, Ghazni, Nangahar, Kunar, and Nuristan provinces.⁶¹

Evidence of al-Qaeda plotting new attacks to undermine the security and stability of the Indian subcontinent surfaced even before the Taliban marched into Kabul. In July 2021 Indian authorities arrested three al-Qaeda operatives in Lucknow who were planning to carry out a series of suicide bomb attacks

a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan," *United Nations Security Council*, April 30, 2020, 12 at:

https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2020_415_e.pdf.

⁵⁷ Mujib Mashal, "Once Jailed in Guantanamo, 5 Taliban Now Face U.S. at Peace Talks," *New York Times*, March 26, 2019 at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/world/asia/taliban-guantanamo-afghanistan-peace-talks.html>.

⁵⁸ "Abdul-Haq Wassiq," United Nations Security Council (not date) at: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1988/m>

[aterials/summaries/individual/abdul-haq-wassiq](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/opinion/taliban-new-government.html). See also, Toby Harnden, "The Taliban Are Telling Us They Haven't Changed at All," *New York Times*, 10 September 2021 at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/opinion/taliban-new-government.html>.

⁵⁹ "Khairullah Khairkhwa," *Counter Extremism Project* (no date) at: <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/khairullah-khairkhwa>.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 3

⁶¹ Various discussions with U.S. government analysts, January through April 2022.

across India in advance of that country's independence day celebrations the following month.⁶²

A potentially far more dangerous scenario would envision AQIS in concert with the Taliban and its Pakistani counterpart, the Tehrik-e Taliban (TTP), attempting to steal a nuclear weapon from Pakistan. Such a prospect is by no means far-fetched. As far back as 1998, bin Laden had declared, in a statement titled, "The Nuclear Bomb of Islam," that "it is the duty of Muslims to prepare as much force as possible to terrorize the enemies of God."⁶³ He boasted of al-Qaeda's intentions in this regard some months later in an interview with a Pakistani journalist. "I would say that acquiring weapons for the defense of Muslims," bin Laden stated, "is a religious duty."⁶⁴ On the eve of the 9/11 attacks, bin Laden had

hosted a Pakistani nuclear scientist at an al-Qaeda base in Afghanistan. Although al-Qaeda's efforts to fulfill this objective never materialized, it was not for lack of trying.⁶⁵ As then-Senator Joe Biden warned in 2002

our assumption about radiological and nuclear weapons in the hands of al-Qaeda and other fanatic groups must be revisited and revised, and that we had thought that extremely radioactive sources were self-protecting in that they were difficult to handle, and people would be unwilling to handle them. We had thought that no terrorist would use them because his own death was guaranteed by exposure, from the radiation emitted. We now know that is not true. Today there is a new reality. Today we know that radiological and

⁶² See "After Kerala and Bengal, now Lucknow: Another Al-Qaeda module busted within a year," *Hindustan Times*, July 12, 2021; Press Trust of India, "Three Suspected Al Qaeda Terrorists Arrested In Uttar Pradesh: Police," *NDTV*, July 14, 2021; and, "UP ATS busts al-Qaida module in Lucknow, arrests two terrorists," *Times of India*, July 11, 2021. The group's focus on the region was exemplified by the announcement by al-Zawahiri in September 2014 of the existence of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent—one of the few franchises within the al-Qaeda universe actually established by the parent organization. See al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS): Overview," Stanford University, Center for International Security and Cooperation, Freeman Spogli Institute (no date) at: https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/al-qaeda-indian-subcontinent-aqis#_ftn4.

⁶³ U.S. Department of State, "Fact Sheet: The Charges against International Terrorist Usama Bin Laden," January 20, 2001 at: https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/sa/bin_laden_charges.html. See also, Graham Allison, "Nuclear Terrorism Fact Sheet," *Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center*,

April 2010, at: <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/nuclear-terrorism-fact-sheet>; and, Gary Ackerman and Michelle Jacome, "WMD Terrorism: The Once and Future Threat," PRISM: National Defense University—The Journal Of Complex Operations, vol. 7, no. 3 (May 15, 2018) at: <https://cco.ndu.edu/News/article/1507339/wmd-terrorism-the-once-and-future-threat/>.

⁶⁴ "Osama bin Laden—Interview—23 December 1998, Rahimullah Yusufzai Interview," in Ben Venzke and Aimee Ibrahim, *The al-Qaeda Threat: An Analytical Guide to al-Qaeda's Tactics and Targets* (Alexandria, Va.: Tempest Publishing, 2003), p. 53.

⁶⁵ Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004), pp. 20-23. See also, CNN.Com, "Live from Afghanistan—Was Al Qaeda Working on a Super Bomb?" January 24, 2004, at: <http://www.isis-online.org/publications/terrorism/transcript.html>; and, Dafna Linzer, "Nuclear Capabilities May Elude Terrorists, Experts Say," *Washington Post*, December 29, 2004.

nuclear attacks in the United States are not only possible, but there are enough screwballs out there who are willing to risk their lives or give their lives in order to use them or other potential weapons against the United States.⁶⁶

Indeed, evidence that the movement's nuclear ambitions have not diminished surfaced in 2022 with the publication of al-Qaeda leader Abu Mohammad Al-Masri's book, *The 9/11 Operations: Between Truth and Uncertainty*. In addition to promising future al-Qaeda attacks against the continental United States, al-Masri explained that its ambitions include targeting nuclear facilities here. "[W]e plan to fly hijacked planes loaded with flammable material into the nuclear plants and reactors," al-Masri wrote.⁶⁷

A more immediate threat is both movements' continued interest in targeting commercial aviation. For over a decade, the

international community had consistently thwarted terrorist attempts to target passenger aircraft flights around the globe. The last successful terrorist attacks on commercial flights had been the simultaneous 2004 bombing of two Russian aircraft by Chechen separatists in which 89 persons perished.⁶⁸ That changed on October 31, 2015 when ISIS' franchise in the Sinai peninsula managed to smuggle a bomb onto a Russian charter flight departing from Sharm el-Sheikh bound for St. Petersburg. In the ensuing explosion, 224 persons were killed.⁶⁹ Then, on February 2, 2016, al-Shabaab—arguably the least technologically adept of all al-Qaeda's franchises—attempted to bomb a Dalo Airlines flight en route from Mogadishu to Djibouti with 74 persons on board.⁷⁰ Since that time, two members of the same group have been arrested in the Philippines and an undisclosed African country after they had enrolled in the same type of flying lessons that the four al-Qaeda pilots had undertaken prior to the September 11th, 2001 attacks.⁷¹

⁶⁶ "Dirty Bombs And Basement Nukes: The Terrorist Nuclear Threat," *Hearing Before The Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Seventh Congress, Second Session, S. Hr. 107-575*, March 6, 2002, at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-107shrg80848/html/CHRG-107shrg80848.htm>.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Sara Harmouch, "Al-Qaeda's Nuclear Dream and a Potential Opening in Pakistan," unpublished paper, 2023. Made available courtesy of the author.

⁶⁸ Steven Meyers, "Explosive Suggests Terrorists Downed Plane, Russia Says," *New York Times*, August 28, 2004.

⁶⁹ Jason Hanna, Michael Martinez and Jennifer Deaton, "ISIS publishes photo of what it says is bomb that downed Russian plane," *CNN World*, November 19, 2015.

⁷⁰ Hamza Mohamed, "Al Shabab claims Somalia plane bomb attack," *AlJazeera*, February 13, 2016.

⁷¹ United States Department of Justice, "Kenyan National Indicted for Conspiring to Hijack Aircraft on Behalf of the Al Qaeda-Affiliated Terrorist Organization Al Shabaab," *Justice News*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/kenyan-national-indicted-conspiring-hijack-aircraft-behalf-al-qaeda-affiliated-terrorist>; Eric Schmitt and Abdi Latif Dahir, "Al Qaeda Branch in Somalia Threatens Americans in East Africa--and Even the U.S.," *New York Times*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/21/world/africa/al-qaeda-somalia-shabab.html>; and, Benjamin Weiser, "Kenyan Planned 9/11-Style Attack After Training as Pilot, U.S. Says," *New York Times*, December 16, 2020,

CONCLUSION

Today, the Salafi-Jihadi terrorist movement—including al-Qaeda, ISIS, and its various franchises, branches, and affiliates—is better situated to prosecute the war that bin Laden first declared against the United States in 1996 and again in 1998 and 2001. Back then, we essentially faced one terrorist enemy, for the most part based in one country. The situation today is vastly different given the spread of Salafi-Jihadism, the multiplicity of terrorist groups motivated and inspired by that ideology, and the rise of domestic terrorism on top of the challenges from hostile peer competitor nation-states. The diversion of personnel and resources away from foreign terrorism to these other threats already leaves the United States in a perilous position. Coupled with the fact that, however much we wish to deprioritize counterterrorism, our foreign terrorist enemies have nonetheless chosen to continue their war, thus leaves the United

States in a more dangerous situation than at any time in the recent past.

Success in counterterrorism is measured by how good a country's national security policy is at preventing the next attack. In a period of great power competition the stakes are arguably higher. A major terrorist attack targeting the United States homeland would almost certainly divert attention from serious threats posed by rival or enemy powers—with potentially unforeseen consequences. For that reason alone, the United States must remain vigilant against terrorist adversaries that have incontestably demonstrated their ability to adapt and therefore overcome even the most formidable counterterrorism initiatives. The lesson they took from the Taliban's reconquest of Afghanistan is that time is indeed on their side—and that their persistence and perseverance will pay off as it did for the Taliban in 2021.

Bruce Hoffman



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NOTES

Based on a lecture given by Bruce Hoffman on April 3, 2023 at the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs at the Bush School, Texas A&M University.