Al-Qaeda Still Threatens Europe: How the U.S. Can—and Should—Help

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Abstract

The threat to Europe from al-Qaeda is ongoing. The fact that al-Qaeda has not struck with the frequency of ISIS is a tactical, rather than strategic, shift and does not reflect a diminution in the danger posed. The U.S. and Europe have a broad range of shared values that are threatened by al-Qaeda, and defeating the group should remain a top counterterrorism priority for both. In order to safeguard collective security, the U.S. must build more capacity abroad—while taking military action where necessary—in areas of strategic priority to weaken al-Qaeda and to ensure that the terror group is not able to present itself as a viable form of alternative governance. The U.S. must also capture al-Qaeda fighters in order to discover future plans, while focusing on shutting down its fundraising operations. The U.S. should encourage European governments to maintain surveillance on suspected al-Qaeda operatives and to pay particular attention to defending those accused of Islamic “blasphemy,” whom al-Qaeda has already identified as future targets.

Al-Qaeda killed more than 120 Europeans on 9/11 and has struck within Europe on multiple occasions since. Most recently, terrorists trained by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen murdered 12 people at Charlie Hebdo magazine’s offices in Paris. There is little doubt the group will attempt to strike at Europe again.

This is also the assessment of U.K. Defense Secretary Sir Michael Fallon. In an October 2016 interview with The Times of London, Sir Michael stated that al-Qaeda remained a “very direct threat” to the U.K. and Europe, and that “Al-Qaeda is still alive and kicking...
in Afghanistan, in Syria, in Yemen and elsewhere.” U.K. government sources told the same newspaper that “Al-Qaeda has been quietly rebuilding itself. They watched ISIS become the big kid on the block. Al-Qaeda is biding its time. It will still be there when ISIS is done.”

In the wake of multiple attacks in Belgium, Germany, and France, there is an understandable emphasis on the threat that ISIS poses to Europe. Yet al-Qaeda continues to flourish across parts of the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, increasing the danger that Europe faces from the group in the long term. While ISIS remains the most powerful Islamist group, it would be a severe mistake to underestimate the risk from al-Qaeda.

The U.S. can—and must—assist Europe in this fight by keeping up the military pressure on al-Qaeda and its affiliates in strategically important areas, while continuing intelligence and law enforcement cooperation; and by undercutting al-Qaeda’s local bases of support by strengthening good governance in relevant regions. After all, it is from these bases that al-Qaeda will train its next generation of recruits able to strike in the heart of the West. The U.S. must do this while showing a willingness to capture and interrogate al-Qaeda fighters to learn of its future plans; strongly urging European governments not to pay the ransoms al-Qaeda demands for civilians it kidnaps; and undermining the group’s ideology.

**Context**

In the 1990s, al-Qaeda had a strong track record of recruitment in Europe. Part of the reason for this was that European governments essentially turned a blind eye to radical mosques in their midst. Perhaps most notorious from a U.S. perspective was the al-Quds Mosque in the northern German city of Hamburg, which served as a base for three of the 9/11 hijackers. Yet this was just one of several mosques where Islamist terrorists could blend in with ease. In October 2001, for example, the U.S. Treasury Department labeled the Islamic Cultural Institute in Milan as “the main al Qaeda station house in Europe.”

Al-Qaeda even carried out an attack on European soil in November 1991. Paulo José de Almeida Santos (a Portuguese convert to Islam) stabbed and hospitalized Zahir Shah, the Afghan king living in exile in Rome. Years later, an al-Qaeda plot involving an ex-soccer player, Nizar Trabelsi, was afoot. Trabelsi was to drive a car bomb into the canteen at Kleine Brogel air base in Brussels, which housed U.S. personnel. He was arrested on September 13, 2001.

Overall, however, al-Qaeda was more concerned about the authoritarian Middle East and North African states from which much of their membership came (the “near enemy”) and the U.S. (the “far enemy”). This meant that European intelligence agencies did not view al-Qaeda and its supporters as an urgent domestic threat.

Al-Qaeda’s attacks on 9/11 shook this perception, but it took the bombings in Madrid (March 2004) and London (July 2005) to shatter the myth of al-Qaeda as a non-threat once and for all. In total, almost 250 people were killed in these attacks. While the counter-terrorism response from Europe was not as aggressive as it should have been, the governments were not idle. Al-Qaeda plots were thwarted across Europe, while European allies supported U.S. military efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, provided counterterrorism training to government forces in Somalia, intelligence assistance for U.S. drone strikes on al-Qaeda targets in Yemen, and took on Islamists militarily in Mali.

The unfolding chaos in Syria, and then ISIS’s territorial gains throughout Iraq in the summer of 2014, meant that counterterrorism priorities were shifted to this new threat. This has helped give al-Qaeda the opportunity to regroup and, ultimately, allows it the opportunity to pose an even greater threat to the West than it did before 9/11.

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Al-Qaeda Attacks on Europe

The current al-Qaeda threat to Europe can be broken down into five separate categories:

1. Plots in Europe directed or blessed by al-Qaeda;

2. Freelancers inspired by al-Qaeda through *Inspire* magazine;

3. Al-Qaeda’s work alongside the broader Sunni Islamist network;

4. European targets in al-Qaeda’s regional strongholds; and

5. Kidnap-for-ransom operations in the Middle East and Africa.

1. European Case Studies: Al-Qaeda Directed or Blessed. The following attacks have either been directed or claimed by al-Qaeda, or there is compelling evidence that they were blessed by the group or one of its regional affiliates. These plots have either been successfully executed or led to convictions in court, the deportation of the suspects, or military action against the perpetrators:

- In March 2004, a British cell that had discussed bombing various locations in the U.K., including nightclubs and a shopping mall, was arrested having acquired approximately 600 kilograms of nitrate fertilizer. **(Al-Qaeda, Pakistan)**

- On July 7, 2005, four suicide bombers launched attacks on the London transportation network, killing 52 people. **(Al-Qaeda, Pakistan)**

- In August 2006, a highly complex al-Qaeda plot was thwarted, which, using British citizens, targeted transatlantic flights with liquid bombs. **(Al-Qaeda, Pakistan)**

- In June 2007, two car bombs placed in central London, including one outside a nightclub, failed to detonate. The next day, the perpetrators carried out a suicide attack against Glasgow Airport. **(Al-Qaeda in Iraq)**

- In April 2009, an al-Qaeda cell planning to carry out multiple suicide attacks in a shopping mall in Manchester, England, was disrupted. **(Al-Qaeda, Pakistan)**

- In the summer of 2010, al-Qaeda’s plan for “Mumbai-style” operations across various European countries was discovered and disrupted. **(Al-Qaeda, Pakistan)**

- In December 2010, a terrorist trained in Iraq planted a car bomb and carried out a suicide attack in Stockholm, Sweden, killing himself and injuring two others. **(Al-Qaeda in Iraq)**

- In September 2011, a plan for three British terrorists to detonate eight bombs placed in backpacks in Birmingham, England, was thwarted. **(Al-Qaeda, Pakistan)**

- On January 7, 2015, two AQAP-trained gunmen raided the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, shooting and killing twelve in another al-Qaeda-blessed attack. **(AQAP, Yemen)**

Studying these high-profile attempts by al-Qaeda to commit attacks in Europe provides an insight into the nature of the risk they pose and how their *modus operandi* has changed over the years.

Initial Threat to Europe from Al-Qaeda mainly from Pakistan. While al-Qaeda’s affiliates around the globe have posed a danger to Europe, the majority of plots have their roots in al-Qaeda’s base in Pakistan. The apex of this attack planning was between 2003 and 2006. Since then, as a result of U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts, al-Qaeda and its affiliates’

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4. This group is sometimes known as al-Qaeda “core” or al-Qaeda “central.” However, as Thomas Joscelyn from the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies has explained, this is a misleading way to think of the organization, since “core” al-Qaeda members are dispersed throughout its regional affiliates. Joscelyn helpfully provides the term “General Command” for its operation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. For example, see Thomas Joscelyn, “Global al-Qaeda: Affiliates, Objectives, and Future Challenges,” testimony before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, July 18, 2013, http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20130718/101155/HHRG-113-FA18-Wstate-JoscelynT-20130718.pdf (accessed September 23, 2016).
ability to plan major, complex plots has declined somewhat, and from 2010 they have tended to “bless” operations in Europe and provide training to those who want to carry them out—as opposed to taking a hands-on approach in actually executing them.

The threat from al-Qaeda in Pakistan diminished as three separate factors coalesced: U.S. drone strikes and counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda’s leaders there began to take their toll (killing senior leaders, making it less appealing for recruits to travel to Pakistan, forcing the leadership to focus on surviving rather than executing attacks); the group’s leader, Osama bin Laden, was killed; and the Arab Spring diverted al-Qaeda’s attention to new possibilities for influence arising from the chaos.

**Intent Did Not Match Capability.** The al-Qaeda plots listed above resulted in the death of 64 civilians (52 in London, 12 in Paris). These were horrendous attacks, yet the body count could have been so much higher. The transatlantic liquid-bomb plot, for example, would have been the most cataclysmic attack since 9/11 had the plot not been thwarted by U.K. and U.S. authorities.

Yet for all the counterterrorism successes in Europe—and there have been many—authorities failed to detect not just 7/7 and Paris 2015, but also the Glasgow and London 2007 plots or the Stockholm 2010 attack. Despite these terror operations, the only people killed were two of the suicide bombers (one of the two operatives in Glasgow, the lone suicide bomber in Stockholm). Only two civilians were wounded: both by the car bomb in Stockholm. An element of luck in al-Qaeda’s inability to kill more people has accompanied the sterling work of intelligence agencies.

**Al-Qaeda: Prefers Control of Plots But Struggles to Provide It.** For U.K.-centric plots hatched in the years shortly after 9/11, al-Qaeda was able to work alongside British-Pakistani facilitators.

In the fertilizer bomb plot, Salahuddin Amin acted as the link between senior al-Qaeda terrorists in Pakistan (in this case Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi, currently detained at Guantanamo Bay) and the U.K.-based recruiters planning the attacks. For the 7/7 attacks, Rashid Rauf, a key al-Qaeda figure, facilitated Mohammad Siddique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer’s introduction to al-Qaeda’s leaders and bomb-makers in the tribal regions of Pakistan’s northwest.

With the transatlantic liquid-bomb plot, Rauf arranged training in Pakistan for Abdulla Ahmed Ali Khan and two other cell members once they had arrived in Britain.

Once training was complete, Rauf was also on hand to provide guidance on carrying out an attack. With the 7/7 cell, Rauf provided operational expertise from Pakistan in helping cell members construct bombs—particularly when the cell had trouble manufacturing hydrogen peroxide. A key Rauf accomplice—Mohammed Gulzar—was also allegedly sent to the U.K. to oversee final preparations for the liquid-bomb plot.⁵

Amin was arrested in February 2005 and convicted in the U.K. alongside the other fertilizer-bomb plotters. Rauf was killed in a U.S. missile strike in Pakistan in November 2008. Rauf’s death, in particular, was a blow to the U.K.–al-Qaeda–Pakistani nexus.

**Not All Al-Qaeda Plotters Are Al-Qaeda-Trained.** When it comes to planning attacks in Europe, al-Qaeda trains the small number of individuals that can make it to their camps and then relies on them to pass on this training to other cell members in their country of origin. Not all cell members in the fertilizer-bomb plot of 2004, the 7/7 terrorists, or those planning to detonate bombs concealed in backpacks in 2011 had received terrorist training. Yet the starkest example was in the transatlantic liquid-bomb plot of 2006: Despite its complexity and large size, only three cell members—Abdulla Ahmed Ali Khan, Assad Sarwar, and Tanvir Hussain—were trained by al-Qaeda in Pakistan.

**Al-Qaeda Has Broad Terror Networks from Which to Recruit.** Those who have tried to carry out attacks in Europe on al-Qaeda’s behalf had sometimes previously passed through other terrorist groups.

For example, a Hamburg cell that was tied to plans for “Mumbai-style” attacks across Europe in 2010, initially trained and fought in South Waziristan alongside the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). This was an al-Qaeda-linked group whose leaders have held senior positions within the group, and which Osama bin Laden helped fund. Members of the Hamburg cell pledged allegiance to IMU’s then-emir, Tahir Yuldashev (who was killed in a drone

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strike in October 2009), before moving on and receiving training from al-Qaeda. It was also the case that Irfan Khalid and Irfan Naseer from the 2011 Birmingham backpack-bomb cell had trained with the Kashmiri terrorist group, Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, before having the plot blessed by a member of al-Qaeda.

Such vetting is useful for al-Qaeda, which has likely become increasingly paranoid that the only Westerners now capable of safely reaching their training camps are government spies.

**Al-Qaeda: Blessed Recent Plots Without Controlling Them.** Al-Qaeda has taken a more hands-off role in attack planning in recent years, giving its blessing to plots while seemingly accepting that it is now practically difficult and operationally unsafe to exert much control over them.

For example, the backpack-bomb plot of 2011 was certainly blessed by al-Qaeda, having been signed off by either Abu Zaid al-Kuwaiti, a senior member of al-Qaeda who was killed in a drone strike in December 2012, or by one of his lieutenants. Yet this was a cell that did not have a Rauf-style or Amin-style handler assigned by al-Qaeda and, once it had been approved, the perpetrators were acting independently of the group. This was also the case with the Kouachi brothers’ assault on the Charlie Hebdo offices. AQAP deferred to the Kouachis when it came to tactics and timing of the operation, but senior AQAP figure Nasser bin ali al-Ansi claimed credit for the attack on the group’s behalf following its execution.

**Rise of ISIS: Giving Al-Qaeda a Fresh Window of Opportunity.** The Kouachi brothers—Cherif and Said—were part of the notorious Buttes Chaumont terror network based in the 19th arrondissement of Paris. Cherif served time in jail for attempting to travel to Iraq in January 2005; and both brothers were on the French intelligence radar after their return from terrorist training in Yemen. However, as French intelligence resources became increasingly stretched as a result of the returning fighters from Syria, monitoring the Kouachis’ activities lapsed in the spring of 2014. This meant that they were not under surveillance and were able to commit their AQAP-sanctioned attack.

ISIS understandably remains the top counter-terrorism priority for Europe, as it does for the U.S., but that cannot mean that a blind eye is turned to al-Qaeda-trained terrorists. There may be more recruits in similar situations to the Kouachis, waiting for the opportune time to commit an al-Qaeda-blessed attack.

**2. Generation Inspire.** In the summer of 2010, AQAP attempted to construct a template for smaller-scale, less operationally complex attacks via its English-language online magazine *Inspire*. This publication was edited by one American member of AQAP, Samir Khan, with the intellectual and theological firepower provided by another—Anwar al-Awlaki. *Inspire* encourages a do-it-yourself approach to terrorism in the West, giving instructions on how to make simple homemade bombs and encouraging other crude forms of attack (such as arson, use of butcher’s knives, or mowing down members of the public with a truck).

The call was taken up by some in Europe. For example:

- The Birmingham backpack-bomb plotters arrested in September 2011 possessed considerable amounts of Anwar al-Awlaki material, including *Inspire*.
- In February 2012, a U.K. cell was jailed for plotting to bomb symbolic London venues, such as the Stock Exchange and Big Ben. This cell had taken instruction from *Inspire*.
- In April 2013, a cell in the U.K. was convicted for its plan to bomb a Territorial Army (volunteer reserve force) base. This cell had also taken instruction from *Inspire*.
- Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale, the British terrorists who murdered a British soldier in London in May 2013, are known to have read *Inspire*.
- *Inspire* also placed the editor of Charlie Hebdo, Stéphane Charbonnier, on a hitlist in May 2013. Charbonnier was killed in the January 2015 AQAP raid on the magazine’s offices in Paris.

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Inspire has proved an extremely popular publication, distributed widely online throughout Islamist circles and been used by terrorists in the past. However, in Europe at least, it has not inspired the large volume of attacks that ISIS propaganda has.

There are several possible reasons for this. Inspire has been around for over six years now, and can appear dated in the face of ISIS’s high-volume and high-tech output. Inspire’s popularity may be working against it: Its accessibility may have made the publication too mainstream for today’s aspiring terrorists. Inspire also suffered when Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan were killed in a U.S. drone strike in September 2011. In an instant, the magazine lost both driving forces behind it. It is also worth remembering that Inspire has proved controversial within al-Qaeda itself. Documentation discovered in Osama bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound highlighted, ironically, his supposed dislike of the indiscriminate nature of killing that the magazine called for. Presumably bin Laden is not alone in feeling that way.

Whatever the reason, the result is the same. Aspiring terrorists in Europe who are not plugged into terrorist networks abroad but are looking to commit an attack at home—no matter how unsophisticated—are currently doing so in tribute to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and ISIS, not Ayman al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda.

3. Al-Qaeda’s Broader Network. There is a large Sunni network to which al-Qaeda can provide guidance, expertise, training, and money. Indeed, it has done so to devastating effect against Europe in the past. For example:

Madrid, Spain, March 2004. On March 11, 2004, multiple bombs were detonated on four different rush hour trains in Madrid. A total of 191 people were killed. It still stands as the deadliest terrorist attack to have taken place in Europe’s history.

The attack was carried out primarily by Moroccans based in Spain. Professor Fernando Reinares assessed in the CTC Sentinel that “the Madrid bombing network included four separate, though partially overlapping clusters of individuals.” This included several members of an al-Qaeda cell named after a Syrian al-Qaeda member, Abu Dahdah, which operated in Spain from the 1990s through 2001; Jamal Zougam, also connected to the Abu Dahdah cell; a Moroccan Islamic Combat Group faction, a group affiliated with al-Qaeda; and local criminals who became radicalized.

Oberschlehdorn, Germany, September 2007. In 2006, three German citizens and a German Turkish dual national trained in an Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) training camp in Waziristan. IJU has financial and ideological ties to al-Qaeda and has carried out operations alongside both it and the Taliban in the past. These four recruits, later known as the Sauerland Group, after the German region where they lived, planned—at IJU’s behest—to attack German airports and U.S. Army installations in Germany. The three German cell members were arrested in September 2007 in Germany; the fourth, in November in Turkey.

Toulouse, France, March 2012. Mohammed Merah killed seven individuals in Toulouse before he was shot and killed by French forces. He had targeted soldiers and Jewish civilians. It was al-Qaeda operatives in Pakistan that first suggested to Merah that he target France.

Merah was trained in Waziristan at some point between 2010 and 2011. He claims to have been trained by Tehrik-i-Taliban, the Pakistani terror group; he is also thought to have received instruction from Moezeddine Garsallaoui, a Swiss citizen and al-Qaeda–connected operative who headed up Jund al-Khilafah (JaK). JaK was a terrorist group formed in September 2011 that carried out attacks in Afghanistan and Kazakhstan. (Garsallaoui was killed in a drone strike in North Waziristan in the fall of 2012.) JaK claimed credit for the attacks in Toulouse hours after Merah’s death.

4. Attacks on Europeans in Regional Strongholds. Europeans based in, or visiting, parts of North and West Africa face a heightened risk from al-Qaeda. For example:

In Amenas, Algeria, January 2013. Over three dozen civilian hostages were killed during a four-day siege of a natural gas complex in eastern Algeria. The attack was carried out by terrorists commanded by Moktar Belmokhtar, who claimed the attack in al-Qaeda’s name. Thirteen Europeans were killed during the hostage situation before it was brought to an end by Algerian special forces. The victims were from France, Norway, Romania, and the U.K.

Nairobi, Kenya, September 2013. It is thought that 67 civilians were murdered during al-Shabaab’s assault on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi. Four men armed with guns and grenades were assigned by al-Qaeda’s Somali affiliate to carry out the attack in a shopping mall. Security forces eventually killed the perpetrators. In total, seven civilians from Europe were killed, with victims from the France, the Netherlands, and the U.K.

Bamako, Mali, November 2015. Armed terrorists raided the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako, taking 170 hostages and murdering 20 (including a Belgian citizen). Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) carried out the attack alongside forces aligned with Moktar Belmokhtar. The hostage situation ended when Malian security agencies raided the hotel and killed the perpetrators.

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, January 2016. Over two dozen people were murdered during an AQIM/Belmokhtar hostage-taking assault in Ouagadougou on the Splendid Hotel, a luxury hotel frequented by Westerners, and a café opposite it. Among the dead were ten Europeans, with the victims from France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland, and Ukraine. The situation was brought to an end by government forces, with three of the perpetrators killed and a further six arrested in June 2016.

5. Kidnap for Ransom. Kidnappings of Europeans and demanding ransom is a tactic commonly employed across North Africa, as well as in Nigeria, Syria, and Yemen. Al-Qaeda has gained at least $125 million since 2008 via this route, kidnapping dozens of European citizens in order to extract ransoms from their governments, which are paid by various third parties. Austria, France, Spain, and Switzerland are some of the countries that have been willing to make such payments, which have contributed significantly to al-Qaeda’s finances and subsequent ability to recruit, acquire weaponry, and train operatives.\(^\text{11}\) When a government does not pay the ransom—as was the case with the U.K. government and British hostage Edwin Dyer in May 2009—al-Qaeda has been willing to murder the hostage.

Assessing the Relevance of Al-Qaeda Today

European governments are not treating the defeat of al-Qaeda with the same urgency as defeating ISIS. This is largely due to the lack of attacks that al-Qaeda has carried out there recently.

It is worth clarifying why exactly al-Qaeda’s tempo of attacks has slowed down. After all, the group has historically had great success in recruiting from Europe and yet, in recent years, has not commonly deployed them in operations there. Al-Shabaab in Somalia has consistently received European (and American) recruits and used them for operations locally. The story is the same with al-Qaeda’s group in Syria, the al-Nusra Front (ANF, now rebranded as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham).

The explanation for this is that, for tactical reasons, attacks within Europe itself are not currently the group’s top priority. At present, al-Qaeda instead seems determined to gain the trust and loyalty of locals in the Middle East and Africa, laying down ideological roots within these communities. As a December 2015 New America paper argued, “Popular support has become essential to al-Qaeda’s organizational survival and growth.”\(^\text{12}\)

In a Syrian context, that means that al-Qaeda’s priority is to make itself an indispensable part of the war against Bashar al-Assad. As Jennifer Cafarella from the Institute for the Study of War


has pointed out, al-Qaeda is “using its involvement in the Syrian war to unite Syria’s rebelling Sunni population under its leadership.” ANF carrying out an attack in Europe would inevitably bring significant international pressure on the group and jeopardize local alliances it has fought hard to build. An ANF spokesman has even clarified, “We in Nusra emphasize that [our] interest is maintaining a strong and standing Jihad in As-Sham (Syria), and all other desired interests to target the U.S. and the West will be marginalized and absent.”

This was not necessarily always the case. Earlier on during the conflict (in approximately 2012), ANF had established a specific cell stocked with al-Qaeda veterans that did plan foreign operations: the Khorasan Group. Targeted in a series of U.S. airstrikes beginning in September 2014, the current status of this cell is unknown.

Now, by focusing on retaining the support of local Syrian groups, Caffarella argues that al-Qaeda is “building a significant fighting force to use in a future war with the West.” ANF’s challenge will be translating this local, Syria-centric support into support for international operations against the West.

It is a similar story in Yemen, where AQAP has recently held back from international attacks. This is due to the gains it has been able to make locally while so much of the international community’s attention is currently fixed on ISIS. According to Katherine Zimmerman of the American Enterprise Institute, “The absence of an AQAP attack does not mean that the group cannot conduct attacks, nor that it has abandoned the idea of attacking the U.S. It means only that al-Qaeda’s leaders are smart enough to take advantage of American distraction to prepare themselves for future struggles.”

Al-Qaeda is also keen to downplay its presence in certain theaters. For example, the emir of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel, has previously instructed followers in northern Mali: “We should not be at the forefront. Better for you to be silent and pretend to be a ‘domestic’ movement that has its own causes and concerns. There is no reason for you to show that we have an expansionary, jihadi, al-Qaeda or any other sort of project.” It was a similar story in Yemen, where AQAP would introduce itself locally as “Ansar al-Sharia.” AQAP cleric Abu Zubayr Adel al-Abab has said that “the name Ansar al-Shari’a is what we use to introduce ourselves in areas where we work, to tell people about our work and goals.”

It was an attempt to rebrand the al-Qaeda name and present it in a more positive way, tying its aims into a basic and basically uncontentious goal among locals: the advancement of Islamic law.

Pointing to a previous statement from bin Laden that cautions against al-Qaeda formally declaring its presence, due to the opportunity this then provides its enemies to act against it, a New America paper correctly assesses that “[al]-Qaeda’s covert and deliberate approach allows the group to quietly build its network, waiting until its adversaries have been weakened before revealing its full strength.”

This should provide European governments with particular concern in the context of the presence of

clearly al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Sharia groups on their doorstep in Libya and Tunisia.21

In financing its activities, al-Qaeda has relied not just on its kidnap-for-ransom operations, although these have been vital. It has also earned millions via criminal operations related to illicit trade. A prominent example of this is its control of cigarette-smuggling routes in West Africa, where AQIM can either be paid for facilitating the passage of illegal goods or charge a tax on those who want to use its smuggling routes.22

When it comes to attack planning, there is fear among government officials that if the opportunity arises for al-Qaeda operatives to carry out a mission in Europe on what they regard as a theologically defensible target the group will still be willing to strike. The desire to do so is ideologically ingrained in al-Qaeda. Therefore, the selection of the perceived blasphemers of *Charlie Hebdo* offers a template for future al-Qaeda attacks in Europe. It was a targeted operation, using operatives known to them and trained by them, that appeals to al-Qaeda’s supporters and can be theologically defended to the fellow Islamists and locals it wants to curry favor with regionally. (Even in the U.K., for example, more than a quarter of British Muslims sympathized with the motivations behind this attack.23)

This opportunism from the group should be no surprise; it is their modus operandi. Al-Qaeda will rely on this opportunism in order to gain new recruits in the future: It has a history of signing up recruits to fight in foreign conflicts and then diverting them to plot attacks in their countries of citizenship. For example, Abdulla Ahmed Ali Khan (transatlantic-liquid bomb plot) and Mohammad Siddique Khan (7/7) both initially aspired to achieve martyrdom while fighting in Afghanistan before being persuaded to launch bomb plots in the U.K. This is a common theme for Western plots. Four of the 9/11 hijackers initially intended to fight in Chechnya before being drafted into what was known as the “planes operation”; Binyam Mohamed, assigned by al-Qaeda to be part of a second wave of attackers in the U.S. after 9/11, also first connected with al-Qaeda due to his interest in Chechnya. This is not a tactic restricted to al-Qaeda; those groups it works alongside employ it as well. In 2006, the German citizens trained in an IJU camp in Waziristan originally intended to fight in Afghanistan before IJU instructed them to carry out an attack in Germany.

It is true that when it comes to inspiring attacks in Europe, ISIS currently corners the market. The strength of its brand allows it to provide no operational guidance to terrorists living in Europe while still inspiring them to attempt attacks based on its ideology and propaganda. Not that such attacks are al-Qaeda’s preferred method anyway: One EU official described ISIS as being like a trawler, sweeping up all the recruits it can. Al-Qaeda is somewhat more discerning and patient. Its preference is for a well-planned, high-impact attack. Therefore, while the two groups have huge amounts in common ideologically, they also appeal to subtly different audiences. ISIS has an ability to recruit heavily among young criminal networks in Europe, for example; al-Qaeda appeals more to European veterans of past conflicts in Bosnia and Afghanistan.

While there are a plethora of reasons to be highly concerned about the risk al-Qaeda poses and will continue to pose, the situation is not all negative. One area where al-Qaeda has struggled recently is in its ability to find English speakers who can easily communicate with a Western audience. The Arabic messaging by al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri comes across as dense and obscure. Yet the presence of just one eloquent and theologically plausible English speaker in al-Qaeda’s ranks—Anwar al-Awlaki—gave a significant boost to the group’s reach. Awlaki’s death in a drone strike on September 2011 exposed al-Qaeda’s lack of depth in this regard.

U.S. drone strikes have also made it that much harder for al-Qaeda to plan operations in Europe. While it is true that some Europeans have still managed to connect with al-Qaeda’s leadership in Paki-

21. *The Long War Journal* website has provided significant detailing of the variety of links that Ansar al-Sharia groups in North Africa have to al-Qaeda.


stan or Yemen in recent years, U.S. strikes have made it significantly more hazardous for them to do so. Furthermore, al-Qaeda figures who could help facilitate it have been killed. The role played by Rashid Rauf, for example, was crucial to connecting British recruits to al-Qaeda’s leadership in Pakistan who may have not have been able to do so otherwise (again, highlighting the importance of English speakers to the group).

The U.S.’s ability in taking such figures off the battlefield has also made it more difficult for al-Qaeda to assign a trusted commander to take a hands-on role in planning attacks in the West. This is one of the positive contributions to the war made by U.S. drone strikes: It has raised the stakes for aspirational recruits to al-Qaeda. For them to be able to initiate contact, travel to its far-flung training camps, and then return to Europe—all the while remaining undetected—has become extremely difficult.

The pressure must continue. Al-Qaeda has lost a tremendous amount of experience and institutional knowledge thanks to U.S. kill-or-capture operations over the past 15 years, but it has also proved itself to be remarkably resilient. While the U.S. cannot and should not commit ground troops to every country where al-Qaeda has a presence, it must assess what the group’s areas of strategic priority are and focus resources on them as required.

Impact on the United States

There are certainly those within al-Qaeda that will always view the U.S. as a more appealing target than Europe. A document discovered in Osama bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound (possibly written by himself), compared al-Qaeda’s enemies to “a malicious tree with a huge trunk,” with NATO countries making up various branches on this tree. Ideally, the author said, al-Qaeda would “cut this tree at the root.” However, the author lamented, “our strength is limited.” Therefore, they needed to go for the trunk—meaning the U.S. Practically, that meant that “[e]ven though we have the chance to attack the British we should not waste our effort to do so but concentrate on defeating America, which will lead to defeating the others, God willing.”

Despite this, al-Qaeda’s general command and its affiliates continue to sanction plots against Europe, so there certainly remains a threat to Americans based there. One American was killed and four wounded during the attacks on 7/7, and there is the potential for a much greater loss of life. Many Americans have made Europe their home and millions more take trips there every year. Numerous American companies are based in Europe while the U.S. also has military bases throughout the continent. Indeed, al-Qaeda has attempted to hit such targets on European soil before: the aforementioned plot by a Tunisian member of al-Qaeda, Nizar Trabelsi, and American targets being assigned to the IJU-trained Sauerland cell arrested in Germany in 2007.

Outside the security realm of defending American citizens abroad, the U.S. also shares an interest in defending those values it shares with much of Europe: a belief in freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. These are values that America has committed blood and treasure to protecting in Europe for several decades, and must continually protect and promote wherever possible.

Policy Recommendations

The U.S. government can reduce al-Qaeda’s strength in a host of ways, boosting both its security and that of its European allies. To do so, however, these policies must primarily focus on areas of the globe outside Europe. The U.S. should:

- **Reject the one-size-fits all approach to defeating Islamist terrorism.** Al-Qaeda follows a different strategy from that of ISIS. While ISIS gains momentum and strength from publicizing its growth and its activities, al-Qaeda wants to hide its true intentions and minimize its presence. Furthermore, al-Qaeda and ISIS do not communicate to a Western audience in the same way or even necessarily to exactly the same constituency. Allowances must be made for the fact that a strategy that works for defeating ISIS will not necessarily work against al-Qaeda.

- **Discredit the ideology.** Al-Qaeda is part of a broad Islamist movement animated by a particular interpretation of Islam and a clear political ideology. Exposing the bankruptcy of the intellectual forces that animate Islamism, inflicting

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military defeats upon it to prove that it is failing on the battlefield—and then communicating that failure to key audiences—is vital to defeating al-Qaeda in the long run.

- **Do not measure al-Qaeda’s strengths by the tempo of its attacks in the West.** Al-Qaeda’s current strategy focuses on local conflicts, courting favor with other Sunnis in particular regions and trying to obscure its presence (by working under the banner of Ansar al-Sharia, for example). Its potency cannot solely be measured by its number of attacks in the West, as this is not a current priority for the group. However, just because al-Qaeda is not carrying out attacks in Europe at the pace of ISIS, does not mean that it will not strike given the opportunity.

- **Encourage European governments to continue monitoring suspected al-Qaeda operatives.** European counterterrorism officials acknowledge that the threat from al-Qaeda has been put on the back burner due to the rise of ISIS. One consequence of this was the Charlie Hebdo attack of January 2015: A counterterrorism focus on foreign fighters from the Syrian conflict meant that surveillance on the Kouachis was stopped, in preference for focusing on recent returnees. European governments must be encouraged to devote resources to dealing with all Islamist terror threats, especially those from al-Qaeda, and not just ISIS.

- **Encourage European governments and businesses to take al-Qaeda’s threats seriously.** As the murder of Stéphane Charbonnier proved, when al-Qaeda publically identifies individuals for murder, it is not making an idle threat. The security arrangements for threatened organizations and individuals should reflect this.

- **Encourage European governments and businesses to pay particular attention to protecting those that al-Qaeda claims have committed blasphemy.** Al-Qaeda is aware that operations targeting people for “blasphemy” do not risk fracturing their local support bases, such as indiscriminate attacks have done. Prominent individuals critical of Islam and Mohammed make especially appealing targets for al-Qaeda if it wishes to attack in the West without provoking an overwhelming response, and retain regional alliances.

- **Accompany capacity building in areas of strategic priority with military action.** Al-Qaeda remains a consistently resourceful and deceptively strong organization that has embedded itself across the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. A range of hard-power and soft-power options are available and the U.S. must consistently assess what is the most effective in weakening al-Qaeda. It is certainly vital that al-Qaeda is not able to credibly present itself as a viable form of alternative governance in areas where it has a presence. This means that focus must be placed on attempting to strengthen good governance and address problems that the group exploits to gain popularity. This is an enormous challenge, as al-Qaeda is strongest in countries racked by war.

- **Diminish al-Qaeda’s fundraising abilities.** Al-Qaeda continues to generate funds through kidnapping and illicit trade. Therefore, the U.S. must continue its tough line on not paying ransoms and press its European partners to do the same, since paying ransom is an incentive for further kidnapping and boosts al-Qaeda’s coffers. A joint strategy between the U.S. and Europe must also be formulated in order to combat al-Qaeda’s terrorist financing through illicit trade, particularly in Africa.

- **Capture al-Qaeda fighters.** The U.S. learned a great deal about al-Qaeda in the months and years after 9/11 by lawfully interrogating thousands of its members. Lawful interrogations produced information about al-Qaeda’s structure, leadership, financing, operational plans, communications capabilities, and more. The United States’ tremendous success using drone strikes should not obscure the fact that crucial intelligence can, and has been, gathered by capturing and interrogating terrorists.

### Conclusion

Al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and those it has trained have all executed attacks in Europe since 9/11: in
London, Madrid, Stockholm, Toulouse, and Paris. Today, al-Qaeda poses an ongoing danger to Europe. It can carry out attacks within Europe itself or train others to do so; kidnap Europeans and use them as bargaining chips to boost their cash flow; or target areas popular with Westerners abroad, which has already led to the death of dozens of Europeans.

The attacks on Charlie Hebdo proved that there were still those operating in Europe who had been trained by al-Qaeda and were determined to carry out attacks on their behalf. Yet al-Qaeda has become increasingly reliant on the approach of blessing such operations rather than providing guidance, due to the success that the U.S. and its allies have had in killing or capturing some of those al-Qaeda operatives best qualified to play a hands-on role in Western attack planning. This trend should be expected to continue in the future.

Al-Qaeda has certainly been challenged by the rise of ISIS and the rupture that rise has caused within Sunni terror networks. Yet it has also provided it with an opportunity. The West has been forced to address the threat posed by ISIS and, inevitably, there has been a diminution in the focus on al-Qaeda. Zawahiri’s group has cannily taken advantage of ISIS’s exploits and various governments’ responses to it by strengthening its position in local conflicts of strategic importance to it across the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. Al-Qaeda has also helped its own cause by displaying a strategic patience not shared by ISIS, embedding its operatives among local populations and attempting to curry favor with them.

An effective strategy against al-Qaeda will make allowances for both kinetic operations against the group in its regional strongholds (with both a kill component and a capture component) while trying to address the circumstances there that allow the group to flourish in the first place. This will have both an ideological and practical component (working with partners to improve local governance, for example). The U.S. government seems to recognize this but must be wary of al-Qaeda’s shifting tactical priorities. Any lack of attacks in the West at present should not lull Americans or Europeans into a false sense of security about the group’s course of action in the future. Al-Qaeda’s attitude toward the U.S. and Europe is no more favorable now than it was on September 11, 2001. The only shift has been in what it currently regards as its best tactical course of action.

A pre-emptive response is needed. Al-Qaeda is planning further bloodshed and it is vital that the West take the fight to the group immediately. Defeating al-Qaeda should remain a top counterterrorism priority both for the United States and Europe.

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