Is Al Qaeda on the Ropes or Still a Serious Threat?

Ten years after 9/11, there is a remarkable lack of consensus among analysts’ assessments of al Qaeda’s current condition. Officials in Washington say that al Qaeda is “on the ropes,” the United States is “within reach of strategically defeating al Qaeda,” al Qaeda’s core could be degraded to a mere “propaganda arm” within 18 to 24 months. While agreeing that al Qaeda is weaker than it was in 2001, others warn that it still poses a serious terrorist threat.

The differences among assessments derive mainly from the fact that al Qaeda is many things at once and must therefore be viewed in all of its various dimensions. It is a global terrorist enterprise, the center of a universe of like-minded fanatics, an ideology of violent jihad, an autonomous online network. It is a virtual army. Increasingly, it is a conveyer of individual discontents.

For ten years, the United States has pounded on al Qaeda’s operational capabilities, which clearly have been reduced. The organization’s Taliban protectors were toppled in Afghanistan. Its easily accessible training camps, at one time the destination for jihadist volunteers worldwide, have been dispersed. Al Qaeda attacks in Indonesia, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey between 2002 and 2006 prompted those governments to dismantle local terrorist networks.

The architects of 9/11 have been captured or killed. Al Qaeda’s founder and titular leader is dead. Its remaining leadership has been decimated. The group’s wanton slaughter of Muslims has alienated much of its potential constituency. Cooperation among security services and law enforcement organizations worldwide has made its operating environment more hostile. Al Qaeda has not been able to carry out a significant terrorist operation in the West since 2005, although, as demonstrated on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, it is still capable of mounting plausible, worrisome threats.

Pushing plausibility, some still worry about al Qaeda’s nuclear ambitions. Just three years ago, the Director of the CIA described al Qaeda as “the agency’s number one nuclear concern.” Even if al Qaeda is not believed to be capable of acquiring and detonating a nuclear bomb, concern remains that it might be nearing a workable dirty-bomb capacity. Some worry that it could launch a biological attack.

The heaviest blows have fallen on al Qaeda’s central core in Pakistan. As a result, al Qaeda’s regional affiliates in Iraq, Algeria, and especially Yemen, the base of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), currently pose the greatest threat. Al Qaeda survives best where it can
attach itself to deeply rooted local movements, which it then proceeds to radicalize. Over time, al Qaeda’s partners move from being allies to being affiliates, adopting al Qaeda’s ideology, incorporating its tactics, eventually assuming the al Qaeda brand name.

Al Qaeda’s allies in South Asia—the Pakistan Taliban, Lashkar-e-Toiba, and others—have increasingly adopted its vision of a broader war against the West. Al Qaeda in Iraq continues to follow a strategy of attempting, through a campaign of indiscriminate terror, to provoke a sectarian civil war between Iraq’s Sunni and Shia communities, especially as the remaining American forces are withdrawn. The West’s biggest concern is that these experienced, technically savvy veterans of al Qaeda’s terrorist campaign in Iraq will slip into the West to create a new terrorist threat.

Several of the recent terrorist attempts on the West were launched or inspired by AQAP, which also has forged a close relationship with al Shabaab, an Islamist insurgency in Somalia. Recently, some Pakistani officials have asserted that surviving members of al Qaeda’s core have relocated to Yemen, but that assertion is suspect, as Pakistani officials regularly deny the presence of any al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan despite all evidence to the contrary. Further west, al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) has sought to expand its area of influence in the Western Sahara. Finally, Boko Haram, a radical Islamist group in northern Nigeria, may be receiving instruction and indoctrination from al Qaeda elements.

There is no evidence indicating that al Qaeda’s determination to continue its campaign has diminished. The state of the group’s determination would be hard to discern anyway. Terrorist membership is neither formal nor fixed; it is always transient. We have no way to measure decisions not to join al Qaeda or desertions from al Qaeda, let alone gauge the morale of individual followers or know their constant calibrations and recalibrations.

Al Qaeda today is far more decentralized than it was ten years ago and far more dependent on its autonomous field commands, its affiliates, its allies, and its ability to inspire homegrown terrorists. It has moved from centrally directed and supported strategic terrorist strikes, which culminated in the 9/11 attacks, toward individual jihadism and do-it-yourself terrorism. This means a more diffuse terrorist threat—less destructive but still dangerous scenarios that often are harder to detect.

This decentralized organization is supported by an extensive online communications effort aimed at inspiring and instructing would-be jihadist warriors. It is a distributed effort. Official websites carry messages from Ayman al-Zawahiri and other al Qaeda commanders and spokesmen, increasingly in local languages. These are augmented by communications from a second tier of jihadist theorists and commentators. A third tier of websites embellishes these messages and provides opportunities for widespread discussion. These are the forums where followers endlessly fantasize about terrorist scenarios, exhort one another to action, threaten their foes, and boast of what they intend to do. Most of it remains talk.

What is the Effect of Bin Laden’s Death?

Osama bin Laden’s death by no means spells the end of al Qaeda’s terrorist campaign, but it does have a profound effect on the future of the jihadist enterprise. His terrorist triumphs behind him, no longer striding through the mountains among adoring acolytes or riding his Arabian steed across the sands, bin Laden spent his last days watching himself on video, filling his journal with terrorist schemes—a pathetic figure awaiting the inevitable in Abbotabad, Pakistan.

Although he led al Qaeda in name only by the time he was killed by American forces in May 2011, his inglorious death weakens the movement. Bin Laden never claimed to be a successor to the Prophet, as leaders of some previous jihads had done, but the narrative of his personal life transcended the movement’s ideology and inspired admiration beyond the
movement’s own orbit. He was al Qaeda’s face and its most powerful communicator. His death was a psychological blow, especially to the adherents who had interpreted his ability to survive America’s intensive manhunt as a sign of divine protection.

It was a further blow to the organization’s already depleted core leadership, which has continued to suffer losses. In a culture where fealty remains personal, those who swore loyalty to Osama bin Laden may consider themselves less bound to his successor. The Taliban and other allies that provided protection on the basis of family connections, tribal code, or personal relationships are free to recalibrate al Qaeda’s value to them.

Osama bin Laden was also al Qaeda’s main link to its financial sources. It is not certain that wealthy supporters in the Gulf will continue to contribute to al Qaeda with bin Laden gone.

Although bin Laden was undisputed as al Qaeda’s supremo, his decisions were not without internal challenge. He managed, however, to impose a unanimity of focus on an inherently fractious movement—that, perhaps, was his greatest contribution. No successor will speak with bin Laden’s moral authority. Zawahiri reportedly is seen by jihadists as rigid and doctrinaire, someone who seems better suited to the role of political commissar than knight commander, and Zawahiri is viewed as an Egyptian, while bin Laden, although a Saudi, had ascended beyond national identification.

Zawahiri’s elevation means that bin Laden’s strategy of concentrating al Qaeda’s central effort on attacking the United States will continue. But all of the group’s adherents may not agree. In al Qaeda’s warrior subculture, a leader assures his command through heroic victories. Bin Laden was gunned down by infidels, a death that demands revenge. Pressure is on al Qaeda to demonstrate to al Qaeda’s foes—and, more importantly, to its followers—that his death does not end al Qaeda’s campaign. However, al Qaeda operates at capacity; it has no surge capability. Promises of retribution flooded the Internet, but despite the bellicose chest thumping, there was no mass rush to martyrdom, not a single attack in the West. Any post mortem or future attack that would have occurred anyway may be labeled retaliation, but the passage of time without a spectacular response underscores al Qaeda’s weakness.

The Effect of the Arab Spring

As in all long contests, surprises are inevitable. The street protests that sparked revolutions across North Africa and continue in the Middle East are changing the political landscape. Like everyone else, the jihadists are scrambling to correctly interpret the events and adjust al Qaeda’s message. Al Qaeda saw the overthrow of its enemies, especially the despised Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak, as a positive development, but at the same time, the protests highlighted al Qaeda’s irrelevance. Demonstrators called for an end to political oppression and corruption; they demanded greater political freedom and economic opportunity. None echoed al Qaeda’s calls for violent jihad against the West or the restoration of a seventh-century caliphate. Al Qaeda’s leaders could do little more than preach from the sidelines.

On a more practical level, however, the turmoil that accompanied the upheaval presented al Qaeda with some new opportunities. Jihadists who are feared to be close to al Qaeda participated in the fighting against Colonel Qadafi in Libya, giving them experience, access to arms, and perhaps a voice in Libya’s future politics.

Distracted by political developments, the Egyptian government has seen its authority in the Sinai erode, giving freer rein to gangs of smugglers and radicalized Bedouins who were suspected of involvement in previous al Qaeda attacks. Israel recently agreed to allow Egypt to deploy troops in the Sinai, a demilitarized zone, in order to restore order.

In Yemen, AQAP and like-minded jihadists have exploited the chaotic situation to gain control of several towns, creating a new jihadist front that will attract international recruits. With Saudi and U.S. assistance, Yemen’s army
has pushed back, recovering some lost territory, but the situation in the country remains fluid.

Many Middle East analysts see the downfall of the Syrian government as merely a matter of time. This could lead to the dissolution of Syria itself, with the currently dominant Alawites holding out in their mountainous stronghold in the western part of the country, a Kurdish enclave bordering the Kurdish territory in Iraq, and Sunnis finding common cause with Sunnis in Iraq arrayed against an Iran-backed Shia-dominated government—a de facto erasure of arbitrary national borders drawn in the sand nearly a century ago. Over the longer run, if the political aspirations of the protestors are crushed, al Qaeda may find new reservoirs of recruits. Al Qaeda’s terrorist movement in Iraq could spread west into Syria.

Faced with immediate political and economic problems, none of the new governments in the region seem likely to put counterterrorism at the top of their agendas. The United States cannot make this the sole note of its foreign policy.

**How Much of a Threat Do Homegrown Terrorists Pose?**

Al Qaeda and its allies have increased their efforts to inspire and recruit homegrown terrorists. Much of this effort takes place online, where the number of jihadist websites has dramatically increased. American-born spokesmen—including Adam Gadahn, who communicates for al Qaeda central; Anwar al-Awlaki, who communicates for al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula; and Omar Hammami, who speaks for Somalia’s al-Shabaab—appeal to would-be warriors, urging them to take up arms. *Inspire*, an online magazine edited by Samir Khan, a young Saudi who was raised in America and is now affiliated with AQAP, offers inspirational articles about jihadist warriors, accounts of adventures in jihad, and instruction in weapons handling and bomb-making.

Thus far, however, the increased number of “retail outlets” and American salesmen has produced only a tiny turnout. Al-Awlaki, al Qaeda’s most skillful communicator, has inspired several terrorist plots, including Major Nidal Hasan’s deadly assault on his fellow soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas; and Omar Hammami persuaded a few Americans to try to join him in Somalia. Overall, however, while the websites are well-attended, al Qaeda’s virtual army has remained virtual.

Between 9/11 and the end of 2010, 176 persons were arrested in the United States for providing material support to jihadist groups, attempting to join jihadist fronts abroad, or plotting terrorist attacks in the United States. This is a very tiny fraction of an estimated American Muslim community of approximately three million, several thousand of whom serve honorably in the American armed forces.

The evidence indicates that America’s Muslims have rejected al Qaeda’s exhortations. The exceptions, for the most part, are individuals or tiny conspiracies of two or three. There is no army of sleepers, no terrorist underground. Joining jihad is a purely personal decision made without community support. Between one-third and one-half of the investigations that have led to arrests reportedly began with tips from the community.

The numbers of arrests of homegrown terrorists show an uptick in 2009 and 2010, but this is mostly the result of increased recruiting in the Somali diaspora and the FBI’s increased use of sting operations. Ethiopia’s invasion of Somalia provoked strong sentiments among America’s Somalis, who regard Ethiopians as historical enemies. Fund-raising and recruiting began soon after, which U.S. authorities became aware of when American Somalis turned up in Somalia. This discovery led to a nationwide effort involving federal agents and local police working with cooperative Somali communities to prevent further recruiting.
Fortunately, few of America’s jihadists have proved to be very dedicated or competent. They are not determined, cunning “lone wolves;” they are skittish stray dogs. Most of the 32 jihadist terrorist plots uncovered since 9/11 were immature expressions of intentions. Only ten had what could be described as an operational plan, and of these, six were FBI stings. The seventh and perhaps most serious interrupted plot was Najibullah Zazi’s plan to carry out suicide bombings in New York’s subways. Only three plots led to actual attempts. One was Faisal Shazad’s failed bombing in Times Square. Only two resulted in fatalities: Carlos Bledsoe’s shooting at an Army Recruiting Center in Arkansas and Nidal Hasan’s attack at Fort Hood. Active shooters are currently considered the most worrisome threat.

By comparison, the United States saw an average of 50 to 60 terrorist bombings a year in the 1970s and a greater number of fatalities. The passage of ten years without a major terrorist attack on an American target abroad or at home is unprecedented since the 1960s.

**Al Qaeda’s Views Differ From Western Views**

Al Qaeda does not share America’s assessment of its diminishing power, not simply because it sees the battlefield from the opposite side, but because its worldview, views of the struggle, and concepts of war are completely different from our own. Al Qaeda sees itself engaged in an existential struggle with Western infidels, a struggle currently led by an America that is determined to destroy Islam. In contrast to Americans, who see warfare as a finite undertaking, al Qaeda’s leaders see war as a perpetual condition—for them, this conflict began centuries ago and will continue until Judgment Day. There are no timetables.

Al Qaeda believes that its superior spiritual commitment eventually will defeat America’s superior military technology. God decides the outcome of battles. Being on God’s side guarantees victory. What al Qaeda’s leaders must do is align themselves with God’s will. To al Qaeda, strategy is a matter of revelation and reinterpretation as events unfold. Strategy does not envision a sequence of military operations leading to victory. Operations are the strategy. Terrorist attacks need not be connected to one another. Each attack awakens Muslims, spreads al Qaeda’s message, builds an army of believers, and brings new recruits. It is a jihadist’s duty to demonstrate his conviction, his commitment, by fighting to defend Islam, to be worthy of God. Al Qaeda’s jihad is process-, not progress-oriented. Participation provides its own rewards. Death in God’s cause brings paradise.

With this mindset, how would al Qaeda assess its current situation? An al Qaeda brief might begin by pointing out that the organization has survived the infidels’ mightiest blows. Moreover, al Qaeda has checked the infidels’ presumed plans to occupy the Middle East and destroy Islam. Exposed to the world as an aggressor, America now finds itself engaged in costly military efforts that ultimately will fail. It has left Somalia and will not go back. It is withdrawing its forces from Iraq. It is weary of the war in Afghanistan and losing its allies—and, like the Soviet invaders, it too will leave in defeat.

Al Qaeda’s communications have increased and improved, enabling it, in the view of its followers, to build a worldwide army of believers. New fronts have been opened in Yemen, Algeria, Somalia, and West Africa. The United States lives in fear of jihadists on its own soil and pours billions of dollars into security. God has punished America’s materialism with financial crisis, increasing pressure on it to retreat and retreat. Only small blows will be needed to provoke overreaction and cause America to bankrupt itself with security measures that will not succeed.

In al Qaeda’s view, the overthrow of Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, Qaddafi in Libya,
and soon Salah in Yemen—all henchmen of the infidels—is the direct result of events al Qaeda set in motion on 9/11. People in these countries, free from political oppression, can now recover true Islam.

How Does the War End?

Every war must end, or so we would like to think. No one expects the campaign to defeat al Qaeda to end in formal surrender. Given al Qaeda’s view of a struggle that began centuries ago and will continue to Judgment Day, it is not likely to ever admit defeat. So how will America decide when the war is over?

Terrorist groups have been destroyed—Germany’s Red Army Faction, Italy’s Red Brigades, America’s Weather Underground, the Symbionese Liberation Army, New World Liberation Front, Omega 7, to name a few. But a global terrorist enterprise like al Qaeda, with fronts from North Africa to South Asia, will be difficult to uproot entirely.

Some terrorist-producing conflicts persist for decades. Colombia’s insurgency has persisted for nearly a half-century. The Palestinian issue remains unresolved. Terrorist attacks continue. The terrorist campaign carried out by Spain’s ETA (Basque Fatherland and Liberty) is in its fifth decade. America could be chasing al Qaeda for decades.

Some terrorist campaigns have ended in political negotiations, but this is not likely to happen with al Qaeda. Conceivably, the organization could fade away, its ideology increasingly irrelevant, its members turning to organized crime, its stream of recruits slowing to a trickle, its terrorist campaign gradually subsiding.

Ten years have passed without another significant terrorist attack on the United States. Osama bin Laden is dead. Some suggest that America should declare an end to its war on terror now. But what exactly does this mean?

The term “war on terror” has already been dropped, although the effort has not been fundamentally altered. Few argue that efforts to pursue al Qaeda, including, if necessary, the use of military force, should cease entirely, but formally rescinding the 2001 Congressional resolution that began the effort would alter the legal framework. If the United States were not at war, what would be the legal basis for killing al Qaeda’s leaders?

Some believe that declaring an end to the war would alter perceptions at home and abroad, signaling at least a reduction of the military component of the effort abroad while discouraging expansion of the military’s role in domestic security. Others see the end of the war exclusively in terms of withdrawing American forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, costly efforts which, they argue, the United States can no longer afford. American efforts could then be concentrated on homeland security, but a totally defensive strategy would entail significant risks, might be no less costly, and could lead to security measures that seriously curtail civil liberties.

Unable to chart progress, uncertain of the score, Americans characteristically seek to impose an end to the conflict. While al Qaeda seems unlikely to comply, that does not mean that the United States cannot explore strategies that would significantly reduce its troop levels abroad, and adopt more sustainable counterterror strategies.