Shadow orders: clandestine non-state power in the international system

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CHAPTER 7 – al Qaeda 'core'

Al Qaeda rose to the forefront of the Western national security agenda in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States World Trade Centre and Pentagon, heralding the era of the 'global war of terror'. The organisation catalysed military interventions and lengthy counter-insurgency campaigns, sparked the biggest manhunt in history and triggered the (re)allocation of billions of dollars of government spending, alongside the development of counter-terrorism and counter violent extremism doctrine. On the opposite side of the playing field, 'AQ' (as the organisation tended to be referred to in policy and intelligence circles) inspired countless violent non-state actor groups wishing to join what was rapidly becoming a highly popular ideological franchise. These ranged from so-called 'home grown' cells carrying out attacks on the streets of London and Madrid to armed insurgencies and jihadist groups spanning from the Sahel to Iraq. During this time, intelligence analysts, military planners and academics alike burned the candle, attempting to fully understand and capture the inner-workings of what appeared to be one of the most effective transnational terrorist groups in modern history. In turn, the sheer ambition of 'the terrorist organisation which took on a superpower' makes it a highly relevant case study, including with respect to this thesis' research question, the latter of which is centred around clandestine non-state challenges to state authority.

To that effect, this chapter offers a revised and consolidated take on the organisation. Its design and approach to data collection, treatment and synthesis is guided both by the analytical framework described earlier in this thesis and by the case study research methodology detailed in chapter 1. As such, it placed a heavy emphasis on identifying credible primary data sources, including by drawing on troves of declassified documents. The latter, most of which were seized by US Navy Seals in the course of their raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad (Pakistan), offer a unique window into al Qaeda's inner sanctum. Indeed, these provide insights relating to the group's strategic vision as formulated by its senior leadership, financial activities and internal management challenges as well as shedding light on communication between members operating across the wider transnational terrorist franchise. These sources, which are threaded across the analysis, are augmented by further primary sources, such as court indictments, intelligence reporting and digital resources such as group statements, *fatwas*, and social media content. Secondary sources used to contextualise the analysis include academic journals, investigative journalism accounts and evidence uncovered in the production of the United States' '9/11' Commission Report. Its findings, which are (once again) organised around the analytical framework provide a basis not only for further testing the thesis' hypotheses, including with respect to the ways and means available to modern clandestine non-state actors seeking to project power and influence at scale. As such, and while the overall focus of the analysis is on the original and central al Qaeda kernel (interchangeably referred to in the literature as 'al Qaeda core' and 'al Qaeda centre'), the chapter also touches on offshoots and partners situated within the group's wider network of influence.

7.1 Overview: historical evolution of al Qaeda

Those wishing to adopt a historical perspective might argue that the origins of al Qaeda could be traced back at least to the mid-eighteenth-century teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the 'founding father' of modern Wahabbi Islam, whose radical theology would later inspire Osama bin Laden. In his Book of Unity (written in the 1740s), al-Wahhab rejected modernity, whilst advocating for both the destruction of infidels and the pursuit of violent jihad. Al-Wahhab's influence grew under the protection of Muhammad Ibn-Saud from the Royal House of Saud and the two applied the tenants of the Wahabbi dogma and jihad within the

context of an ongoing feud with Ottoman Turks.[657] Commentators preferring a slightly shorter time horizon, may instead point to the legacy of the 1916 Sykes Picot agreement, which effectively curbed ambitions for a unified Arab state – an enduring grievance reflected in the narratives of subsequent groups and movements across the Arab world.[658] Others still may highlight the continued rise and morphing character of the movement for Arab Identity (al-Nahda, or 'cultural awakening') following World War II,[659] as well as the significance of the 1948 proclamation of Israel and the 'Palestinian question' relating to the rights and claims of displaced Palestinian located in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Gulf States.[660] This paved the way for the creation of, *inter alia,* Fatah in 1959, whose mission was to unite disparate Palestinian communities under the common aim of liberating Palestine through armed activity, as well its radical offshoot, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which shaped the character of modern terrorism in the Middle East and beyond.[661]

However, it was the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, ostensibly to avert the collapse of the country's deeply unpopular communist government, that created the *specific* conditions conducive to the birth of al Qaeda. By the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union was embattled in a stalemate against a loose coalition of armed resistance groups fighting under the banner of Mujahideen ('those engaged in Jihad'). The Mujahideen were deeply committed fighters who benefited from external support, including that of the United States, the latter of whom notoriously provided insurgents with Stinger anti-aircraft missiles channelled through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI).[662] In a dynamic loosely resembling that of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the Mujahideen's call to arms drew in foreign fighters from across the world. Such individuals were often recruited, placed and funded through specialist organisations, one of which was the Peshawar-based 'Office of Services' (Maktab al-Khidmat, or 'MAK') led by the Palestinian-born Abdullah Azzam.

Azzam's own story was singular. He had earlier in life moved to Jordan to join the Palestinian resistance against Israel but found little in common with the largely secular PLO. Instead, he became drawn to the teachings of Muslim Brotherhood leader Sayyid Qutb, becoming a strong advocate of 'internationalising' the Islamist movement.[663] The MAK provided Azam with an

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[657] L. Erickson, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad by Allen Charles (Reviewed Work)*, Journal of Strategic Security, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2010, pp. 78-80.

[658] The 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement saw Britain and France agree, with Russian approval, to carve up the Arab territories by way of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, whilst the 1917 Balfour Agreement sought to support the idea of a 'national home' for the Jewish people. The legacy of these agreements continues to transpire through the grievance narratives of various of movements in the region.

[659] P. E. Pormann, T*he Arab 'Cultural Awakening (Nahḍa)', 1870-1950, and the Classical Tradition*, International Journal of Classical Tradition, Vol. 13, No. 1, Summer 2006, pp. 3-20.

[660] See C. Shindler, *A History of Modern Israel (Second Edition)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, pp.44-55. See also J.A. Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question: Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians*, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 114-135.

[661] The PLO was noteworthy both with respect to its devolved structure – its headquarters were located in Damascus before relocating to Amman and subsequently to Beirut and Tunis – and as a regional ideological network connecting separate minority pockets located across state boundaries. See for example *"The PLO Offices in Tunis and Amman: Possible Roles, Links and Conduct in Fatah Operations"*, Central Intelligence Agency, Released in April 2014, pp. 2-4. See also K. Katzman, *The PLO and Its Factions*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, The Library of Congress, June 2002; and See also K. Katzman, *The PLO and Its Factions*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, The Library of Congress, June 2002.

[662] Some of the commanders who benefited from this support – a case in point being Jalaluddin Haqqani, founder of the Haqqani network – went on to serve in the Taliban government after the movement came to power in 1996 and would become a thorn in the side of NATO forces two decades later. See for example M. Rosenberg, *Founder of Haqqani Network Is Long Dead, Aide Says*, New York Time, July 2015.

[663] Sayed Qutb (1906-1966) was and remains a galvanising figure as one of the most influential advocates of modern, fundamentalist interpretations of jihad. Abdullah Azam articulated his own

opportunity to implement this ambition, drawing on far-ranging donations from wealthy Gulf-based individuals, Islamic charities and the Saudi Intelligence Services.[664] He later remarked that the "small band of Arabs" recruited through the MAK, "whose number did not exceed a few hundred individuals, changed the tide of battle, from an Islamic battle of one country, to an Islamic World jihad movement, in which all races participated and all colours, languages and cultures met."[665] The MAK, in turn, issued a range of products aimed at promoting recruitment, fund-raising and awareness, including the monthly *Jihad Magazine*[666] and the *Mawsu'at al-jihad al-Afghani* (or Encyclopaedia of the Afghan jihad) – a multi-volume manual describing a combination of bomb-making and guerrilla tactics, complete with accompanying illustrations and diagrams. Ironically, significant sections of the manual were drawn from American materials such as CIA paramilitary training guides – or 'black books' – produced in the 1950s as well as other partisan and guerilla materials.[667] When Azzam was himself killed in a mysterious explosion in 1989, the organisation came under the *de facto* control of his wealthy Saudi protégé and fellow MAK alumni: Osama bin Laden.

Even though bin Laden, the seventeenth of fifty-seven children of a Saudi construction magnate family, had joined Azam at the young age of twenty three, his own ideology had gradually begun to differ from that of his mentor.[668] This split was in some respect a reflection of the growing influence of the small group of Egyptian radicals, including Dr Ayman Al Zawahiri, who surrounded bin Laden.[669] Whilst Azzam had advocated the reclaiming of previously Muslim lands such as Palestine, the Egyptians took a more radical stance, calling for the overthrow of governments deemed 'apostate' across the Muslim world.[670] This bolder aim, along with the overlapping aspiration of removing American troops from Saudi Arabia, became the central mantra of bin Laden's new organisation, now renamed al Qaeda (or 'the base').[671] When Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, bin Laden and his Arab cohorts refocused their operational structures and support networks, including the continued patronage of Jalaluddin Haqqani – the hardline founder of the Haqqani network who had himself been a beneficiary of US support against the Soviets – on a more global mission.[672]

In the following years, the group worked on exporting al Qaeda's ideology to new territories such as Somalia and Yemen, whilst also forging connections with groups in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Mali and Indonesia. The organisation, moreover, funded volunteer militias to bolster Bosnian Muslim units fighting the Serbs in the Bosnian War from around 1992, some of whom also benefited from Iranian, Turkish and US clandestine arms shipments

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thoughts in a series of works, including two books: *Join the Caravan* and *The Defence of Muslim Lands.* See A. McGregor, *Jihad and the Rifle Alone: 'Abdullah' Azzam and the Islamist Revolution*, Journal of Conflict Studies, Vol. 23, No. 2, February 2006, https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/219/377.

[664] *Ibid*.

[665] Sheikh 'Abdullah 'Azzam, "*Martyrs: The building blocks of nations*," Extracts from the lectures of Sheikh 'Abdullah 'Azzam titled "Will of the Shaheed" and "A Message from the Shaheed Sheikh to the Scholars," Internet source: http://www.azzam.com (29 January 2003) In *Ibid*.

[666] The magazine started out as an amateur production but became increasingly professional and polished over time. See P. L. Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader*, Free Press, New York, p. 32.

[667] A. McGregor, *Jihad and the Rifle Alone: 'Abdullah' Azzam and the Islamist Revolution*, Journal of Conflict Studies, Volume 23, Number 2, Feb. 2006.

[668] *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States* (Authorised Edition), W.W. Norton & Company Inc., New York, p. 55.

[669] Al Zawahiri's own organisation, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, would later be formally merged with al Qaeda.

[670] P. L. Bergen, p. 74; pp. 92-94.

[671] The term had already been used by Azzam in a 1988 copy of *Jihad Magazine* which, interestingly (and like Che Guevara, referred to the concept of a 'vanguard'. *Ibid,* p. 74.

[672]A. Gopal, M.K. Mahsud *et al.*, *The Haqqanis and al-Qaeda*, Foreign Policy, June 2010, http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/30/the-haqqanis-and-al-qaeda/.

delivered through independent arms dealers and a pipeline of covert 'black flights.'[673] Bin Laden himself spent time personally building organisational roots in Sudan before its government came under increasing pressure to expel the al Qaeda leader. Although distrustful of bin Laden, the Taliban, who had come to power in 1996, subsequently provided al Qaeda with a safe haven for operational planning and training in return for financial contributions. Al Qaeda now continued to build its (already widespread) funding platform into a complex network of NGOs and private donors. It also developed an effective 'force multiplier' model that retained only a small core focused on providing equipment, training and recruitment advice to affiliated groups. However, the organisation's lethality and threat to Western interests soon become apparent. After releasing an official *fatwa* declaring war on the United States in 1996, it carried out attacks against US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam in 1998 and bombed the USS Cole naval warship in Aden in 2000. Planning for the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington D.C began in earnest around 1998 under the delegated supervision of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed who had himself fought in Bosnia.[674] In the era of globalised mass media, the eyes of the world were now literally set on the group, which rapidly became the symbol of the US-led War on Terror.

7.2 Policy choices and strategic direction

Strategic aims, interests and spheres of influence

The task of deciphering al Qaeda's overarching policy goals is made easier by the plethora of statements, broadcasts, interviews and *fatwas* conducted or issued by the organisation over the last two decades. Indeed, these were largely intended at socialising and 'selling' the organisation's vision to potential sympathisers as well as increasing support for the organisation's cause. Additional nuance, moreover, can be obtained through the analysis of detailed internal correspondence within the higher echelons of the organisation. At a very high level, and as previously highlighted, al Qaeda's primary aim consists of the overthrow of apostate, Western-backed regimes across the Muslim world, particularly those "subsidiary to America."[675] This would in turn pave the way to the creation of a unified Ummah (or supra-national Islamic community) "of a billion and a half, which [would be] alone among the Nations and possesses laws from the Creator of the world," therefore constituting "the largest Nation in [the history of] mankind."[676] The idea of a pan-Islamic State, essentially a modern and consolidated take on the traditional Caliphate, is fundamentally political in nature, hinged upon the imposition of Sharia law and associated governance systems under the ultimate leadership of an Islamic council, the latter of whom would promote "knowledge and the right understanding of Islam."[677] Such a state would also constitute "the fastest way to resolve the [existing] issues of the Muslim community."[678] To a large extent therefore, the organisation's overarching policy position appears to have been nothing less than presenting itself as the saviour of Islam.[679] .

Whilst al Qaeda's desired sphere of influence can perhaps be loosely described as flowing outward from Mecca, Saudi Arabia and the wider Arabian Peninsula across the Islamic world,

[673] The Bosnian jihadi volunteers were largely comprised of veterans from the Mujahideen campaign against the Soviet Union. Moreover, al Qaeda contributions were funded in part through the Advisory and Reformation Committee based in London. See M. Curtis, *A Covert War in Bosnia*, edited extract from *Secret Affairs: Britain's Collusion with Radical Islam*, October 2016.
[674] B. O. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future,* Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C, 2008, p. 7.
[675] *Note on leadership*, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), Declassified January 19, 2017, p. 4.
[676] *General instructions*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017, pp. 4-5.
[677] *Note on leadership*, ODNI, p. 4.
[678] *Letter from Abu Yahya*, Declassified January 19, 2017, ODNI, p. 2.
[679] This sentiment also appears to also be held privately at the highest levels of the organisation.

the organisation evolved towards an 'outside in' policy calculation that involved growing the Ummah by connecting different sub-regions or epicentres that were ripe for change and/or political disruption. A letter containing general instructions most likely written by bin Laden thus explains that "every continent has a state that is the key to its revolution."[680] For example, Yemen, a country in which al Qaeda established an early presence, was often cited as one such epicentre with the potential to catalyse a wider revolution (we will return to this sequencing theme in a subsequent section).[681] Other localities, meanwhile, would serve different strategic purposes, such as staging posts for force projection or, as in the case of the mountainous regions of Pakistan, as safe havens for the purposes of training and planning offensive operations.[682] Similarly, more marginal theatres in "far flung regions of the Islamic world, such as Chechnya, Afghanistan, Kashmir and Bosnia" could still play an important role in laying the "groundwork and [providing] the vanguard for major battles."[683]

In a related trend, the organisation's strategic interests and, therefore, operational focus have long included securing control over resource-rich localities, production centres, infrastructure and waterways. This included an emphasis on "the rivers in our lands", including "the Nile River, Jordan River, al-Asi, al-Litani, Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, not to mention the large valleys in the Arabian Peninsula."[684] Al Qaeda's leadership also highlighted that "the amount of oil produced in the Gulf (of Algeria) is astonishing," whilst pointing to the fact that the Nile River not only ran throughout the year but that its "High Dam capacity is seven billion square meters, and the length of its lake is 400 Kilometres."[685] In turn, control over such resources and areas of significant economic importance would be achieved through a quasi-federal system of governance allowing for devolved control over large swathes of strategically important territory.

External relations and alliances

Al Qaeda's leadership understood that securing influence and access to critical territories required strategic alliances and partnerships, particularly in periphery territories situated on the edges of the organisation's perceived sphere of influence. The group's approaches to building such relations often involved emissaries and representatives dispatched to identify, shape and/or broker strategic relations in new territories. Such an approach typically consisted of either direct negotiations with prospective partners or the establishment of 'forward deployed' cells in countries like Yemen and Sudan that effectively amounted to a variation on the theme of a (highly clandestine) embassy network acting as the group's eyes and ears in different geographic contexts. Indeed, true to their roots and to the experience of the MAK, the organisation's core very much viewed its role as that of an enabler capable of augmenting and harnessing local grass-roots movements through strategic advice and catalytic contributions such as finance, specialist training and advice. The organisation thus provided support in response to specific requests by *inter alia* Sahelian jihadists and considered aiding the Nigerian Boko Haram before the latter opted to declare its allegiance to al Qaeda's offshoot and eventual competitor, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[686]

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[680] *General instructions*, ODNI, pp. 4-5.
[681] Opportunities in Yemen, according to al Qaeda's leadership, were also amplified by "a shortage of water and the poverty rate of 40 percent." *General instructions*, ODNI, p. 8.
[682] See *9/11 Commission Report: The Official Report of the 9/11 Commission and Related Publications*, Washington, 2004, p.171; and Z. Laub, *The Taliban in Afghanistan*, Council on Foreign Relations, July 2014.
[683] *Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi*, published by Institutional Scholarship, July 9, 2005, p. 2, https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/handle/10066/4798.
[684] General instructions, ODNI, p. 5.
[685] Ibid.
[686] Boko Haram subsequently changed its name to the Islamic State West African (ISWA). See for example J. Schanzer, *Al-Qaeda's Armies, Middle East Affiliate Groups & Next Generation of Terror*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005. pp. 99-105.

The task of seeking out and securing alliances was also aided by a sprawling alumni network of battle-hardened ideologues harking back to the days of the Afghan resistance. One such example consisted of the Algerian Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA), an Islamist terrorist group that emerged in the early 1990s following the splintering of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and which comprised a considerable number of ex-Mujahideen fighters amongst its ranks.[687] The GIA, which amongst other sensationalist acts hijacked a French airliner in 1994, enjoyed privileged access to al Qaeda's core leadership by way of a standing representative.[688] Hardliner jihadists within the alumni network also formed the backbone of subsequent (splinter) groups in the country, including the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC). Indeed, the GSPC formalised its ties with al Qaeda in 2007 when it changed its name to al Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) following sustained diplomatic contact and discussions between jihadist envoys.[689] Targeted discussions and dialogue with prospective affiliates constituted not only a means of building new partnerships but also "the most ideal way to solve problems."[690] Envoys and representatives were given clear instructions with respect to negotiating positions as well as 'lines to take' – an approach (once again) not overly dissimilar to how embassies receive diplomatic instructions from their foreign ministries in capital cities. Examples of such instructions included persevering with negotiations in Somalia "until an agreement that will satisfy Al Shabaab is reached,"[691] mediating between disagreeing parties in Iraq and recognising tribal structures in Yemen.[692] At the same time, the organisation realised that dialogue should be accompanied by tangible incentives, such as financial or technical assistance, and that diplomacy should therefore be applied in tandem with these to achieve maximum effect.

At times, this assistance extended to technical advice on development projects. Illustratively, it sought to sell to Somali affiliates the idea of creating irrigation systems that could "provide water for 40,000 acres," while highlighting the value of "strategic plants, such as dates and fruit trees" that could "provide for people very quickly."[693] The organisation's development advice was also fundamentally transnational, urging partners to consider "mutated and [...] more economically rewarding" palm and olive trees imported from countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia.[694] Al Qaeda considered employment opportunities as central to agricultural projects, advising partners that crops should be "manually harvested so as to keep jobs."[695] The organisation also became an early advocate of measures aimed at curbing climate change, which, it argued, was "causing drought in some areas and floods in others."[696] Moreover, it emphasised the value of establishing flooding early warning systems in Pakistan, whilst warning Somali associates of the risks of "cutting down trees on a large scale [including] for the purpose of creating charcoal, without replacing them."[697]

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[687] A. Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups*, Cambridge University Press, October 2020, pp. 27-62.
[688] *United States of America v. Usama Bin Laden et al*, United States District Court Case S(7) 98 Cr. 1023, Southern District of New York, 6 February, 2001, p. 297.
[689] See for example J.P. Filiu, *The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib*, Middle East Journal, Vol. 63, No. 2, spring, 2009, pp. 213–26.
[690] *Letter from Abu Yahya*, ODNI, p. 3.
[691] *Letter dated 07 August 2010*, ODNI, p. 15.
[692] *Letter dated 18 July 2010*, ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 1.
[693] *Letter dated 07 August 2010*, ODNI, p. 4.
[694] *Ibid*.
[695] *Ibid*.
[696] *Ibid*, p. 6.
[697] Furthermore, such development of advice was clearly calibrated at helping to achieve al Qaeda's longer-term objectives as indeed, "once the suffering of millions of Muslims would vanish, [then] people would start protecting the existence of the Islamic emirate." *Ibid*, pp. 5, 6,15.

Still, relations and negotiations with jihadist groups within the franchise did not always go smoothly. In some case, and perhaps unavoidably, al Qaeda core also found itself competing with some of its affiliates. This dynamic became most apparent within the context of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), forged by ex-al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) fighters and former members of the Baathist regime, whose vision and strategic principles increasingly began to differ from those of the original al Qaeda leadership. Previously, al Qaeda's central leadership had disagreed with AQI's rogue Jordanian leader, Ahmad Fadhil Nazzal al-Khalaylah, a once-petty criminal who went by the 'nom de guerre' of Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi.[698] The most fundamental point of divergence between the two camps consisted of al-Zarqawi's instance that triggering a sectarian war within Iraq, including through the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, constituted the best approach to securing strategic gains in the country, a philosophy considered by al Qaeda core to be both a strategic distraction and "chauvinistic".[699] Similarly, al Qaeda centre could do little to steer the conversations and strategic brainstorming sessions held in US prisons in Iraq during which jihadis, including future ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, discussed the shape of the new Islamic State.[700] Competition would also arise subsequently between ISIS and other offshoots of al Qaeda such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), the official al Qaeda (AQ) affiliate operating in Syria.[701]

Strategic logic and sequencing

The group's policy choices and partnerships hint at some of the more granular characteristics of its strategic logic, including with respect to where and how to focus its efforts. As already alluded to, the organisation's calculus had long gravitated around the notion of "preparing an environment in Saudi Arabia [and beyond] for a revolution" through a wider chain-reaction of revolts and revolutions mobilising and connecting the peoples of separate enclaves of support.[702] Documents seized in Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad compound provide further detail on what essentially amounts to a 'three stages' approach. The aim in the first stage consisted of defeating the 'greatest' foreign enemy (specifically the US) through sustained attrition in theatres such as Afghanistan,[703] "[keeping him] in open fronts"[704] and "directly exhausting him until he breaks and becomes too weak to interfere in the affairs of the Islamic nation."[705] Al Qaeda's second stage then consisted of "exhausting the local enemy," specifically regimes in the region considered to be puppets of America.[706] Finally, the third stage would involve building the new Islamic State.[707] At the same time, the organisation

[698] Al Zarqawi was one of the more infamous recruits from Azzam's office in the days of the MAK.
[699] Such scepticism was expressed by Al Zawahiri in a letter written to Al Zarqawi in July of 2005. See *Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi*, July 9, 2005, p. 4.
[700] These camps, moreover, offered an opportunity for the jihadists to develop relations with secularist albeit disillusioned former senior members of Saddam Hussein's government with real-world technocratic expertise, organisational skills and statecraft. As one commentator noted, the Jihadis' "time in prison deepened their extremism and gave them opportunities to broaden their following. [...] the prisons became virtual terrorist universities: The hardened radicals were the professors; the other detainees were the students." T. McCoy, *How the Islamic State evolved in an American prison*, The Washington Post, November 4, 2014. See also M. McBride, *Unforced Errors: ISIS, The Baath Party, and the Reconciliation of the Religious and the Secular*, Politics, Religion & Ideology, Vol. 20, May 2020, pp. 1-22.
[701] Jabhat al-Nusra's approach remained closer to that of al Qaeda core, including with respect to a greater emphasis on avoiding the alienation of the Syrian civilian population.
[702] *General Instructions*, ODNI, p. 3.
[703] *Three Stages Letter*, ODNI, Declassified on January 19, 2017, p. 1.
[704] *Letter to Abu Bashir*, ODNI, Declassified March 1, 2016, pp. 2-6.
[705] *Letter to the Islamic nation*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017, p. 4.
[706] *Letter to Abu Bashir*, ODNI, p. 6.
[707] Students of guerrilla and irregular warfare might perhaps point to a loose resemblance to previous generations of revolutionaries and, more specifically, to Mao's Tse-tung's three phases of guerrilla warfare (strategic-defensive, stalemate and strategic-offensive). Whilst Mao's concept of the strategic defensive differed slightly from al Qaeda's more ambitious first stage of expelling external forces, the

placed a heavy emphasis on both strategic patience and concentration of effort, seeking to avoid quagmires and/or being pinned down by the adversary. "Avoid minor fronts, right and left, and avoid engaging in skirmish" its leadership thus advised its followers.[708] Moreover, whilst gains in Libya were considered important in terms of unlocking the group's objectives, it nevertheless assessed that activities in the country should only involve "specific types of operations" and that the country should not be "an open front for constant and continuing operations whether they are against intelligence centres, the police, the military, or anything of that nature."[709] The group's leadership similarly stressed "the importance of timing in establishing the Islamic State," as well as being aware that "planning for the establishment of the State begins with exhausting the main influential power" (namely America), "exhausting and depleting them until they become so weak that they can't overthrow any State that we establish."[710]

Bin Laden and his fellow senior leaders also warned against attempting "to control [territory] just because we have the military power to do so, [when] we still do not have the power to sustain the people in their livelihood."[711] Seizing and controlling resources and production centres was thus a necessary condition for the longer-term political control of territory. Indeed, the ability to *provide* for populations living in controlled territory became a central consideration for the group, who realised that this was an important means of maintaining their consent. This strategic logic further helps to explain the group's focus on covert approaches and the gradual infiltration of new 'political markets', either through the proactive growth of local cells, or by encouraging more spontaneous lone wolf operations. Illustratively, its leadership concluded that the "battle [...] does not require large numbers," instead placing the emphasis on small groups of operatives in strategic locations to further the organisation's cause.[712] This thinking bears similarities with the thinking of revolutionaries such as Ernesto Che Guevara (outlined in Chapter 3), not least given, once again, its emphasis on the catalytic role of vanguards as a means of shaping the decisive conditions for change.

7.3 Organisational structure

Al Qaeda increasingly evolved into a fluid, networked and horizontal organisation with limited direct control from the central leadership over the day-to-day activities of various entities, franchises and cells. This dynamic, which Jessica Stern once described as 'protean', [713] was partly a deliberate decision by the original founders to adopt a devolved operating model and partly a result of attrition within the al Qaeda core following two decades of counter-terrorism operations. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the role of the group's central leadership in shaping the overarching narrative, brand, and operating ethos of the movement, particularly in its early years. Indeed, in the decade that followed al Qaeda's birth, its leadership structures were more cohesive and visible. Thus, 'Sheikh' Usama bin Laden held the position of Emir, sitting at the helm of the group, with the final say over its decisions. He and his number two,

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two strategies share increased resemblance in subsequent steps. Indeed, Mao's stalemate phase (guerrilla warfare) reflects al Qaeda's focus on enemy exhaustion, whilst both Mao and al Qaeda espoused the merits of transitioning towards more conventional tactics and, ultimately, gaining control of territory in the third phase.

[708] *Letter to Shaykh Mahmud*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017, p. 3.

[709] *Letter from Abu Yahya*, ODNI, p. 4.

[710] *Letter Addressed to Atiyah*, ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 4.

[711] *Three Stages Letter*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017, p. 2.

[712] Al Qaeda *'Letter about Logistics'*, Bin Laden's Bookshelf, declassified on January 19, 2017, https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf?start=1.
Following the Soviet withdrawal of Afghanistan, al Qaeda's worked on exporting its ideology as far as Somalia and Yemen whilst forging connections with groups in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Mali and Indonesia as well as Bosnian Muslim units fighting the Serbs in the Bosnian War.

[713] J. Stern, *The Protean Enemy*, Foreign Affairs, Council on Foreign Relations, Vol. 82, No. 4, July-August 2003, pp. 27-40.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, adopted a hands-on approach to leadership, making regular appearance at jihadi training camps where they gave lessons on "religion […] and the importance of martyrdom and obedience" as well as "the enemy's developed technology, Massud's role in the Crusader's war, booties of the Northern Alliance, [and] the Al Sa'ud family conflicts."[714] Even in the days leading up to the September 11, 2001 attacks, bin Laden was described by trainees as having "a big entourage around him."[715]

Analysis of the organisation's activities throughout the 1990s also points to other prominent figures who were active in coordinating activities, preparing operations and overseeing training. Illustrative of these is Saif al-Abdel, a veteran of the Mujahideen years, who had once served as a Colonel in the Egyptian Special Forces, and who advised on terrorist training programmes in Sudan, Kenya, Somalia and Yemen before fleeing to Iran in the wake of the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.[716] Similarly, Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, who was best known by the 'nom de guerre' of Abu Muhammad al-Masri and who for years was considered as the organisation's 'number three' before being killed by (likely) Israeli agents in Iran in 2020, played a central role in organising the August 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, using skills he had once acquired in a Hezbollah explosives training programme.[717] Further adding to this pattern was the much publicised trial of Omar Abdel-Rahman, 'the blind Sheikh', which highlighted the latter's direct involvement in the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing in New York. Thus, members of the al Qaeda's core organisation were very clearly involved not only in providing strategic direction but also in coordinating tactical-level operations before being increasingly forced to work through affiliates.

For years, the closely knit circle of Mujahideen veterans that formed the kernel of al Qaeda met and discussed the movement's strategic direction and activities via its Shura command council, the 'Majlis Al Shura.'[718] This decision-making and command body was originally chaired by bin Laden as the organisation's Emir and brought together senior members with responsibility for individual committees, each of whom covered a particular area of responsibility. Key committees included those for political affairs, religion, military activities, administration and finance, security and the media. Some of these committees also had sub-functions and structures such as the training and special operations wings that sat below the military committee.[719] However, sub-unit commanders were not typically invited to the higher Shura council, with decrees and orders instead communicated to them following deliberations by the senior leadership group.[720] The Shura body, according to internal correspondence, allowed for different views to be aired and for "everyone from the consultative body [to] offer his opinion and present evidentiary proof."[721] It was also rather flexible and, if required, mobile, with the ability to be convened in different localities.
Once again however, the ability for even al Qaeda's core leaders to convene council meetings and exemplify this kind of cohesive approach to leadership became increasingly difficult when

[714] *Letter dated 09 August 2010*, ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 3.
[715] *Ibid*.
[716] Al-Abdel would later be apprehended by the Iranians but released as part of a prisoner exchange in March 2015. See for example S. M. Gohel, *Deciphering Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda's Strategic and Ideological Imperatives*, Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 11, Issue 1, February 2017, p. 60.
[717] See A. Goldman *et al*, *Al Qaeda's No.2, accused in U.S. Embassy Attacks, was killed in Iran*, New York Times, November 13, 2020, and B. Roggio, *Rare photo surfaces of al Qaeda leaders inside Iran*, Long War Journal, September 2, 2022.
[718] *Alleged al Qaeda associated charges with conspiracy to kill Americans and other terrorism offenses*, Unites States Department of Justice, January 17, 2018, https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/alleged-al-qaeda-associate-charged-conspiring-kill-americans-and-other-terrorism-offenses.
[719] See R. Gunaratna, p. 1055.
[720] *Ibid*, p. 1056.
[721] *Letter of guidance on leadership*, ODNI, p. 4.

pushed into hiding. By the time bin Laden was killed, his deputy Ayman Al-Zawahiri had little choice but to accept a more limited, symbolic and distanced approach to leading the movement (a trend which is likely to continue following his own death in July 2022). Nevertheless, it remains useful to briefly examine some of the additional governance and coordination structures that the organisation *aspired* to introduce within its new Islamic State, had its campaign led to more tangible gains. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the roles and personality traits of bin Laden, al-Zawahiri and other senior associates served as the blueprint for the highest level of governance within new territories. Thus, the Emir should be a man of "superior faith" who, ultimately, would be "the one who decides" and with the ability to "remain constant" and "advance the [strategic] situation."[722] He was also expected to "adopt a correct, clear path in making such decisions" and to "fully consult on [matters], consider changing views, and dig into the depth of research."[723] Added to this list of qualities was the ability to "stay clear from favouring those who he feels comfortable with and rebuffing those who disagree with him" and "establish a totally transparent environment" before "pressing on with his endeavours and proceed with his decisions."[724]

It was envisaged that the new Islamic State would adopt a decentralised structure bringing together the various Emirates – essentially devolved states – that were to be erected in reclaimed territories.[725] These entities would require the creation of "councils of trustees" led by *Walis (provincial leaders)*, which would already be formed "before the revolution erupts, and [...] which [would] become part of the country's Administration throughout the transitional stage."[726] Further localised governance structures and systems would then be established, including "popular committees in neighbourhoods, in coordination with the Imams of the mosques and notables in every neighbourhood."[727] Additional judicial structures, chief amongst which would be an Islamic Law Committee (presumably with its own more devolved structures), were also proposed, alongside the creation of panels of Muslim scholars with responsibilities for jurisprudence.[728] Senior judges, in turn, would "provide rulings on all areas of life, except for trade issues" (the latter of which would require a specially-trained judge with technical expertise).[729] In a variation on the notion of policy think tanks, consideration was also given to creating a dedicated "centre for research and studies" supporting the central leadership group, which would help to identify key developments in international affairs and implications for the movement's response.[730]

Out of all of al Qaeda's franchises and offshoots, it was ISIS who came closest to implementing the type of governance systems envisaged by the organisation's original core, including in Raqqa, Fallujah and Mosul, and who, in so doing, demonstrated their practical application and viability. Indeed, ISIS's structures were conceptually similar to those proposed by al Qaeda: not only did the organisation have an Emir at its head in the form of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi; it also opted for a devolved (effectively federal) model comprising of *wilayat* ('provinces' or 'states'), each with their own governor as well as local, and at-time-cumbersome, bureaucracy and technocrats.[731] In a similar vein to al Qaeda's concept of a constellation of Emirates, ISIS's

[722] *Letter about revolutions*, ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 1.
[723] *Ibid*, See also *Letter to Abu-Musa b Abd-al-Wadud*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017, p. 7.
[724] *Ibid*, ODNI, p. 1.
[725] See for example *Letter from Abu Yahya*, ODNI, pp. 1-4.
[726] General Instructions, ODNI, p. 7.
[727] *Ibid*, p. 6.
[728] *Letter of guidance on leadership*, ODNI, p. 2.
[729] *Letter dated 07 August 2010*, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 1.
[730] *Letter about revolutions*, ODNI, p. 1.
[731] One of the advantages of this governance model was that it could also be applied to geographically dislocated *wilayat* as far away as Libya, Algeria and Afghanistan.
See J. Stern and J.M Berger, p. 51. See also K. Bauer (ed.), *Beyond Syria and Iraq: Examining Islamic State Provinces*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC, 2016, pp. 15-40.

governance model could also be applied in geographically dislocated *wilayat* as far away as Libya, Algeria and Afghanistan.[732] Moreover, the organisation developed a relatively complex system of administrative departments, or councils, responsible for activities such as religious outreach (*Da'wa*), military affairs and public information as well as courts and Sharia 'law' enforcement arms such as the infamous *Hisba* religious police.[733] Still, other members of the al Qaeda franchise opted for their own variations on the structural blueprints and ready-made 'general policy' guidance available to new branches,[734] as was the case with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) which, in 2006, adopted a localised structure organised around *katiba* (brigades) and *sariya* (companies) that enabled it to better infiltrate local communities in northern Mali, Niger, and southern Algeria.[735] Meanwhile, *Jama'a Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen* (JNIM), which subsequently evolved out of AQIM, adopted a strategy that involved delivering basic public services and even building schools in northern Mali.[736]

Overall, al Qaeda core's deliberate policy to opt for a franchise-based model carried both strategic benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, it offered a relatively simple mechanism to harness the combined strength of local armed groups, starter-cells and lone wolves in different localities around the world, placing these under the overall umbrella of the movement. The efforts of affiliated groups could be further supported by opening offices – effectively quasi-embassies – in key territories and/or by dispatching centrally selected advisers, envoys and representatives to augment the efforts of start-up organisations.[737] At the same time however, such a devolved approach also complicated the ability of the original leaders to directly shape the direction and structural characteristics of the different franchises, the latter of whom did not always heed to the instruction of ensuring an "abundance of consultation" with the organisation's centre.[738] Indeed, whilst establishing a network of offices and envoys was seen as a means of building a bridge to the centre, such efforts were often mired in logistical and administrative constraints associated with finding appropriate representatives and dispatching these to various affiliates.[739]

Identity, membership and recruitment

Patterns relating to recruitment into, and support for, al Qaeda over the years were fundamentally intertwined with the organisation's ideological narrative and its resonance within different target communities. Its narrative drew on the themes of historical and current injustices, oppression and social marginalisation as the basis for both explaining and justifying

[732] See J. Stern and J.M Berger, p. 51. See also K. Bauer (ed.), *Beyond Syria and Iraq: Examining Islamic State Provinces*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC, 2016, pp. 15-40.
[733] See for example C. C. Caris and S. Reynolds, *ISIS Governance in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, Washington DC, 2014, pp.15-17. Critical elements of al Qaeda's governance models could also be recognised in Somalia, where Al Shabaab-controlled regions were administered by local governors under the authority of the organisation's executive *shura* (governing council) and where justice was provided through district level courts overseen by a cadre of judges (*Qaali*). See for example S. J. Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012*, Hurst & Company, London, 2013, pp. 83-90.
[734] *Gist of Conversation - October 2011*, ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 3.
[735] K. Zimmerman, *Salafi-Jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel*, American Enterprise Institute, April 2020, p.2
[736] *Ibid,* pp. 2-5.
[737] This approach involved "distributing brothers" in key localities, including in "Tunis, and Syria and other locations [..], waiting until the revolution succeeds [..] and the country falls into chaos." Letter dated 5 April 2011.
[738] *Letter on Shura*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017, pp. 1-8.
[739] Illustratively, the leadership complained in one letter that "we have been trying to open another office in Turkey, but we unable to find the suitable brother for this office, and we had sent a brother to Iraq, but he has not arrived yet." *Report on External Operations,* ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 3.

the organisation's response. As already alluded to, this highlighted the "afflictions that had impacted the Muslim countries: [...] first, the existence of American-Western hegemony over us" and "second, the presence of rulers that have abandoned the provisions of Shari'ah and have become part of this American hegemony." [740] Another recurrent as well as related theme within this narrative was that of a "Zionist-Crusader alliance" which had subjugated "a million and a half of our Muslim brothers in Gaza, [and] claimed the lives of women and children",[741] which was characterised by "infidelity, tyranny, injustice [...], abuse, arrogance, and disdain for the people, [reaching] an unbearable state."[742] Building on this diagnosis of the problem, al Qaeda's narrative then progressed to the response and ways to "remedy the problem of injustice", including by legitimising the adoption of violent jihad to overthrow apostate regimes and free the Ummah.[743] Its manifesto, moreover, drew heavily on selected theological works and scriptures, including prominent thinkers within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood such as Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) and Sa'id Hawwa (1935-1989). [744]

It is clear that al Qaeda core's leadership closely followed geostrategic developments in an attempt to both sound-out new constituencies of support and ensure that the organisation's narrative was relevant to current events. Thus, a letter to bin Laden written by a close associate around the time of the Arab Spring spoke about opportunities following "the fall of the tyrants in Tunis and Egypt" and the extent to which the group was "watching the situation in Libya, Yemen and Syria."[745] The organisation's leadership was similarly adept at getting ahead of events, including by issuing statements and communications that were aimed not only at mobilising potential followers but also at guiding and educating them.[746] These included "instructions and reminders to the youth and entire nation", which contained messages aimed at "urging people to continue on the path of jihad", whilst taking the opportunity to remind them of "the deceitfulness of the Americans [and] that the Jewish state is about to end and so on."[747] The organisation also took a broad view to building political support bases and consent – one that required "a much deeper vision than just talking about the issue of pledging allegiance."[748] Thus, envoys and representatives sent to recruit and mobilise followers in various countries were reminded that whilst pledges of allegiances should be encouraged where possible, those who did not make such pledges should not be shunned because "with the passage of time they will appreciate your tolerance, which will make them close to you and they will join you."[749] This pragmatism and ability to tailor the organisation's messages to different audiences as well as inject these at key times of political change and unrest arguably constituted one of the most important mechanisms for maintaining relevance over the course of four decades.

Unsurprisingly thus, the group's narrative also contributed to the recruitment and indoctrination of rank and file members and formed a key component of training camp curricula.[750] For this reason, senior trainers within the organisation places a particular emphasis on establishing basic and intermediate Sharia training courses "that all Mujahideen [must] pass through, so that they may gain a general understanding of [...] Jihad" before progressing to military

[740] *Letter to the Islamic nation*, ODNI, p.4
[741] *General Instructions*, ODNI, p. 5.
[742] *General Instructions*, ODNI, p. 8.
[743] *Note on leadership*, ODNI, p. 2.
[744] See for example *Studies into Violent Radicalisation; Lot 2: The beliefs ideologies and narratives,* The Change Institute for the European Commission, February 2008, p.34. See also Letter on Shura, ODNI, p.4.
[745] *Letter dated 5 April 2011,* ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 3.
[746] *General Instructions*, ODNI, p. 1.
[747] *Letter dated 5 April 2011,* ODNI, p.3
[748] *Letter from Abu Yahya*, ODNI, p. 4.
[749] Letter Addressed to Atiyah.pdf (dni.gov) p. 2.
[750] This pattern can be recognised in the accounts of fighters who had graduated from such training. See for example Letter dated 09 August 2010, ODNI, p.3.

training.[751] Admittedly however, the selection, recruitment and training of active operatives working directly for al Qaeda core followed a much more formal and scrutinised process, particularly when this involved individuals appointed to positions of responsibility. Indeed, the organisation did not just take anyone onto its payroll, vetting operatives and assessing the family backgrounds, education, language skills and personality traits of individuals assigned to sensitive tasks and missions. Loyalty, as well as "energy, [...] good intuition and determination" were particularly valued.[752] The ideal senior member, meanwhile, was a "savvy person, mature, confident, and [understanding] the subject matter of renting, selling, and purchasing homes, including all necessary procedures to lead a civilian life" as well as "knowing how to behave in cities." [753] Individuals wishing to be considered for high administrative positions would also have to compete via selection boards, submitting resumes and writing "something about their vision of the jihadi work in general and providing their opinions and suggestions regarding any of the jihadi fronts."[754]

Al Qaeda developed a clear policy stance relating to the salaries of core members, including the need to "pay them on time."[755] The value of such remuneration packages would later be recognised by ISIS, who offered foreign fighters wages that were five times higher than the average salary in Syrian-controlled territory as an incentive to join its ranks.[756] At the same time, al Qaeda's human resources position did not extend to giving members advances on their salaries in so far as "they could spend the money and come back and ask for a loan," which would put the group "in an uncomfortable position with [respect to] other brothers."[757] Meanwhile, analysis of accounting documents and balance sheets reveals financial contributions towards members' medical costs,[758] whilst the organisation gained a reputation for supporting the families of those who were killed in service.[759] Interestingly, elements of the group's remuneration strategy were extended to jihadi fighters recruited into other loosely affiliated groups operating in Pakistani tribal areas, such as the Haqqani network and Tehrik e-Taliban. The organisation's leadership saw a clear logic in this approach, arguing that "we have to support people. Everyone has heard the deal."[760]

Although these were never fully realised, the organisation also had plans to harness a wider range of professionals and skilled workers in order to sustain the movement, including "engineers, doctors, biologists, pharmacists, researchers" as well as technologically-minded persons with expertise in "laser-guided weapons and how to make death in the form of explosions [...] in an easy, practical and improvised way anywhere on earth." [761] The organisation further broadened the aperture, pointing to the value of "hobbyists, handymen, women, experimenters, discoverers, [and] the courageous" as well as (much more generally) "experts in all fields."[762] Once again, it is perhaps ISIS that came closest to achieving such recruitment objectives through the sheer range of technical and professional roles that were

[751] *Letter from Abu Yahya*, ODNI, p. 11.
[752] *Letter dated November 24*, 2010, ODNI, p. 3.
[753] *Ibid*. The group's leadership also monitored the career progression of those rising through its ranks, keeping reports and commentary on the performance of different members.
[754] *Letter dated 07 August 2010*, ODNI, p. 9.
[755] *Ibid*, p. 12.
[756] E. Solomon, *The Isis economy: meet the new boss*, The Financial Times, January 5, 2015.
[757] *Letter dated 07 August 2010*, ODNI, p. 12.
[758] See for example *AQ Accounting Ledger*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017, pp. 1-4,
[759] See for example: S. Stalinsky, *Saudi Royal Family's Financial Support to the Palestinians, 1998–2003: More than 15 billion Rials ($4 Billion U.S.) Given to 'Mujahideen Fighters' and 'Families of Martyrs*, Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) Special Report 17, July 3, 2003.
[760] Word of the organisation's contributions would therefore spread, generating further support and positive sentiment for al Qaeda amongst wider affiliate organisations. See also *Letter dated 5 April 2011,* ODNI, p. 3.
[761] *Terror Franchise*, ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 1.
[762] *Ibid*.

involved in running the its Islamic State. Illustratively, the group employed legions of professionals, clerks and administrative staff, whilst at the same time commissioning the mass production of bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in specifically designed factories. These combined technical experts with a workforce that included mechanics (whose job it was to make metal screws and bomb parts) and an assembly crew of forced labourers.[763]

7.4 Levers of power

Violence

The above example of bomb-making expertise introduces the topic of one of al Qaeda's – and, in fact, most terrorist groups' – primary lever of power: violence. As we have seen, violent jihad formed a cornerstone of the organisation's strategy and narrative and was correspondingly pursued in various geographic and political contexts. Over the years, al Qaeda targets included a combination of symbolic civilian and economic landmarks, such as the World Trade Centre (in 1993 and again in 2001); government facilities, such as the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam (1998); military targets, such as the US military housing complex Khobar, Saudi Arabia (1996), the USS Cole warship in the Yemeni port of Aden (2000), and the Pentagon (2001). [764] Further attacks from affiliated groups and cells against primarily civilian targets were conducted in London, Madrid, Casablanca, Algiers, Baghdad and in the beach resorts of Bali. Many more attacks were either considered and abandoned or foiled, including against senior political figures such as, slightly bizarrely, the President of Uganda.[765]

The main feature of the catalogue of attacks conducted by or in the name of al Qaeda would once again be a reliance on different forms of explosives alongside the use of suicide operatives. This latter choice of tactic constituted the culmination of an evolution in violent non-state actor *modus operandi* in the region which dated back to Hezbollah's bombing of the US embassy in Beirut in 1983. The tactic subsequently migrated to Sunni Palestinian groups, and more specifically, Hamas – a group whose own ideology also grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood and who employed the tactic from 1993 onwards.[766] The rationale behind this choice of tactic was relatively straightforward in so far as it offered a means of inserting operatives close to various targets and, in doing so, inflicting considerable damage, whilst not having to burden oneself with the intricacies of safely exfiltrating individuals from the scene of the attack once this had been executed. The frequency with which the tactic was deployed also further explains al Qaeda's emphasis on the ideological narrative as well as on building a pool of individuals who might willingly be sent to their deaths in the name of the cause.

As already alluded to, al Qaeda increasingly majored on transferring its terrorist expertise and know-how, including with respect to suicide tactics, to affiliated groups around the world. In this respect, the organisation reflected a wider trend within the clandestine international system in which knowledge itself was becoming a prized commodity as well as a strategic

[763] E. Solomon and S. Jones, *Isis' bomb-making expertise leaves lethal legacy*, The Financial Times, October 2016.
[764] The USS Cole blast ripped a 40-foot-wide hole near the ship's waterline, killing 17 American sailors. USS Cole Bombing, History, Federal Bureau of Investigation, https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/uss-cole-bombing.
[765] *Letter dated 07 August 2010*, ODNI, p. 3.
[766] The 1990s would of course also witness the use of suicide attacks elsewhere, including by the (this time secular) Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam - or 'Tamil Tigers' - in Sri Lanka as well as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). These tactics had of course previously been used by Japanese Kamikaze pilots during World War II. See for example R. A. Pape, *The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, American Political Science Review, Vol. 97, No. 3, August 2003, p. 348.

lever of influence.[767] Meanwhile, this migratory dynamic sparked fears within the Western intelligence community that al Qaeda would itself look to acquire expertise from other 'external' specialists such as the rogue Pakistani Nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer (aka 'AQ') Khan, who had proliferated uranium enrichment technology to Iran, North Korea and Libya.[768] The group's emphasis on building expertise in specific areas such as bomb-making was subsequently emulated by affiliates in contexts such as Iraq, where forensic and fingerprint evidence gathered as part of counter-IED efforts demonstrated how multiple devices could be traced to the same manufacturer.[769]

(Counter) intelligence

High-profile attacks represented the culmination of a chain of components that spanned from the aforementioned recruitment and indoctrination of recruits to meticulous intelligence gathering for the purpose of pre-attack planning. Thus, tactical intelligence-gathering methods included the use of covert surveillance assets such as unmarked cars (that should preferably be used on cloudy days to avoid aerial surveillance); fake identity documents; enemy pattern of life analysis; and canvassing access routes to targets.[770] However, the organisation's intelligence work extended beyond simple target selection, to include strategic assessments produced by a team of analysts perusing materials collected from a range of sources, such as leaked Pentagon documents. These were then disseminated to the organisation's leadership, initially via dedicated online portals.[771] Such assessments were, *inter alia*, used to understand the intentions and strategy of the enemy in the region.[772] Inevitably, the group also placed significant emphasis on open source and media reporting such as "TV news channels to know new ideas and the enemy's tactics and tricks, and also to follow up on the international situation and discover weak points."[773]

Al Qaeda similarly placed significant emphasis on counter-intelligence and operational security (OPSEC), not least because these were considered essential to the survival of the movement. Critically, and perhaps not unwisely, the group had a deep mistrust of even allegedly secure modern communication methods. "We should be careful not to send big secrets by email, especially in Waziristan and the areas around it," a senior al Qaeda member once commented, adding that "we should assume that the enemy can see these emails and only send through email information that can bring no harm if the enemy reads it."[774] The same member also argued that "[we] should not trust [communication technology] just because it is encrypted, because the enemy can easily monitor all email traffic."[775] Al Qaeda's basic reasoning, furthermore, appeared to be that "computer science is not our science" and that "encryption systems work for ordinary people, but not against those who created email and the Internet."[776] Instead, the organisation turned to a small, tightly controlled network of couriers (sometimes referred to by the organisation as "carriers") for the purposes of internal

[767] See also B. Lia, *Al-Qaida's Appeal: Understanding its Unique Selling Points*, Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol.2, No.8, Terrorism Research Initiative, University of Leiden, 2008, available online at: http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/44/html.
[768] See for example C. Collins and D. Frantz, T*he Long Shadow of A.Q. Khan: How One Scientist Helped the World Go Nuclear, Foreign Affairs*, January 2018.
[769] See for example: C. Dillow, *To Catch a Bombmaker*, Popular Science, September 2015, available online at: https://www.popsci.com/to-catch-bomb-maker.
[770] See for example *Letter to son Hamzah*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017, p. 1.
[771] *Report on External Operations*, ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 4.
[772] *Letter dated 07 August 2010*, ODNI, p. 13.
[773] *Report on External Operations*, ODNI, p. 4.
[774] *Letter dated 07 August 2010*, ODNI, pp. 9-10.
[775] *Ibid*, p. 10.
[776] *Ibid*, p. 10. This fear may have been further confirmed by the revelations of Edward Snowden, the former U.S. defence contractor-turned-whistleblower who provided details of digital mass-surveillance techniques by intelligence and security services.

communication and for dispatching correspondence and instructions, dealing only with "trusted companions of complete confidence."[777]

Over time, members in positions of responsibility were increasingly asked to take secrecy oaths and to "keep movement low for security reasons."[778] Meetings and gatherings were discouraged, particularly in public spaces, and drivers carrying operatives and/or leaders were instructed to carry "plenty of gas and food before leaving the city to avoid stopping on the road," as intelligence services were assessed to be prone to placing officers in petrol stations as well as "rest areas, restaurants [and] coffee shops."[779] The organisation also conducted lessons learned analysis on the various reasons that led to the compromise or failure of specific operations. These reasons, according to the group's analysis, included penetration by the security services (particularly the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence, ISI), a lack of variation in routine and pattern of life, unnecessary gatherings, the use of the internet and/or telephones, and a failure to blend in with local environments.[780] Such analysis was also used to inform tactical guidance such as the need to avoid being "stingy in the quantity of explosives to be used or the number of martyrs."[781]

Media and communications

Like most terrorist organisations, external communication with potential supporters and sympathetic constituencies via the use of the mass media constituted a key pillar of the organisation's strategy: a means of "gaining the maximum potential leverage [required] to effect fundamental political change."[782] Indeed, the majority of violent terrorist acts conducted by the group over the last three decades – airplane hijackings, high profile attacks and suicide bombings – have been calibrated towards attracting media attention as a means of striking fear amongst some audiences, whilst attracting sympathy from others. What is noteworthy, however, is the sheer sophistication of the group's media strategy which, *inter alia*, involved a longer-term public relations and messaging campaign combining statements, announcements and pre-produced, media-friendly video content. Indeed, the organisation's leadership considered "a huge part of the battle [to be] in the media," with "cable channels today playing a stronger role than [traditional] poets."[783] The media, according to the group's internal correspondence, could decide on the success of a cause and constituted an essential conduit for recruitment and support, "guiding millions of youths in the countries that have revolutions launched in them and in the countries that do not."[784] Letters describing the range of tools available to the organisation similarly highlights the extent to which the media had become "part and parcel [al Qaeda's] fight with [its] criminal enemy," and an integral means of "achieving the objective of incitement to fight."[785] Whilst admittedly the media could not "behead nor shed blood; [...] destroy a base nor dig a trench," it could nevertheless "defeat an army by destroying its morale, defeating the souls of enemy commanders, instilling despair in the depths of their hearts, and turning people against them."[786]

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[777] *Honourable Brother Letter*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017, p. 1.
This approach was used, *inter alia*, to distribute and dispatch documents and pre-recorded tapes containing important content such as orders to subordinates, statements and Fatwas.
[778] *Letter to Abu Bashir*, ONDI, p. 4.
[779] *Ibid*.
[780] *Lessons Learned Following the Fall of the Islamic State*, ODNI, pp. 1-2.
[781] *Letter Addressed to Atiyah*, ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 2.
[782] A. Spencer, *Lessons Learnt: Terrorism and the Media*, AHRC Public Policy Series No. 4, Arts and Humanities Research Council, March 2012, p. 8.
[783] *Letter to Abu Bashir*, ODNI, Declassified March 1, 2016, p. 18.
[784] *Al Qaeda letter about efforts in other regions*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017.
[785] *Letter of guidance on leadership*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017, p. 6.
[786] *Ibid*.

Bin Laden, moreover, saw significant opportunities in the spread of satellite television. Whereas television was previously "controlled by the regimes" as a "tool to use to occupy our minds", satellite television and new, independent channels such as Al Jazeera meant "people [could] see with their own minds what is going on instead of having to hear about things from others."[787] Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, the group issued strict instructions, guidance and protocols on content generation as well as on how to engage with television journalists as well as convey a positive impression of the organisation.[788] Creating engaging and effective media content thus required "patience, repetition, variety, simplicity, good delivery, paying attention to the varying levels of education among people and their various inclinations and tendencies."[789] This also called for an ability to produce high-quality video, audio and written content, drawing on the skills of "brothers who are good with poetry."[790] Moreover, the group closely followed news stories and broadcasts within which it featured, sometimes complaining when channels such as Al Jazeera altered or edited statements and messages.[791]

Over time, the organisation sought to increase its presence and messaging online, including through the publication of its magazine, *Inspire*, which would later be emulated by ISIS's *Dabiq*. Available in the English language, both online publications focused on identity and developing a jihadi 'culture' that could be "embraced in total by followers,"[792] providing guidance to readers on lifestyle choices alongside terrorist instructional material.[793] The online magazine format offered dual benefits, allowing widespread circulation, whilst at the same time presenting a coherent, carefully edited vision and accompanying content (i.e. a party line) "without the distortion found in more interactive forms of online media such as chat rooms and forums".[794] However, despite such attempts at controlling the content and narrative of materials prepared for media dissemination, the group's narrative would nevertheless be reinterpreted and discussed across a range of platforms, including social media, inevitably shaping the ways in which these messages were interpreted.[795] Al Qaeda offshoots also developed their own communication style, some of which differed from the parent organisation. ISIS, for example, implemented a communications strategy that involved a sizeable presence on platforms such as Twitter (now *X*). The latter's approach consisted of disseminating a steady stream of propaganda, accelerating Tweets and posts at times of significant developments via a team of activists employed specifically for the purpose of "flooding the internet with content at high pace"[796] as part of a coordinated effort to create a resounding narrative.[797]

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[787] *Afghani Opportunity*, ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 2.
[788] *Gist of Conversation - October 2011*, ODNI, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 2.
[789] *Letter of guidance on leadership*, ODNI, p. 6.
[790] *Letter dated 07 August 2010*, ODNI, p. 14.
[791] *Letter to Zamaray Sahib*, ODNI, Declassified January 19, 2017, p. 2.
[792] R. J. Bunker and P. L Bunker, *Radical Islamist English-Language Online Magazines Research Guide, Strategic Insights, and Policy Response*, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, August 2018, p. 3.
[793] H. J. Ingram, pp. 4-5.
[794] R. J. Bunker and P. L Bunker, pp. 1-2.
[795] See for example A. Meleagrou-Hitchens and N. Kaderbhai, *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation: A Literature Review 2006-2016*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), King's College London, 2017, p. 9.
[796] J.M. Berger, T*he Metronome of Apocalyptic Time: Social Media as Carrier Wave for Millenarian Contagion*, Terrorism Research Initiative, Perspectives on Terrorism 9, No. 4, August 2015, p. 63, http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/444/875
[797] Tweets also often included links to other external media content (which, typically, was also produced by the organisation) 'confirming' or strengthening messages. See M. Berger, T*he Metronome of Apocalyptic Time: Social Media as Carrier Wave for Millenarian Contagion*, Terrorism Research Initiative, Perspectives on Terrorism 9, No. 4, August 2015, pp. 63-65, http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/444/875.

Finance

Throughout the years, al Qaeda developed sophisticated arrangements for both acquiring funds and transferring these to affiliated groups. Indeed, money not only constituted a means of sustaining the organisation but also (in a similar vein to its terrorist expertise) a strategic lever that could be harnessed to augment the efforts of local franchises, thus ensuring scalability. Jason Burke thus once compared the organisation to a wealthy university "disbursing research grants and assisting with facilities such as libraries," thus allowing "the ambitions of its pupils, particularly those star pupils who have attracted the attention of the chancellor or the senior lecturers, to be fulfilled."[798] Whilst bin Laden's vast inherited wealth played a catalytic role in the early years, further funds were inevitably required to pursue the full range of the group's ambitious objectives. This meant building on the MAK's network to secure donations from sympathisers and re-distribute these according to operational needs. In turn, payments to affiliates were made using a variety of methods, including charities such as the Benevolence International Foundation (BIF), which was linked to wealthy donors in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, and which held international bank accounts in Switzerland and elsewhere.[799] The 9/11 Commission Report would later reflect on the efficacy of this network, which it referred to as a "golden chain," describing it as a collective of financiers connected through a web of charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).[800]

Detailed edgers, statements and internal memos outlining the group's financial transactions highlight the extent to which the organisation considered solid accounting processes as critical to its operational efficacy.[801] Through instructions that might resemble those of financial audit committees within government bureaucracies, operatives we reminded that one "should always be aware of the movement of money and the remaining amounts" as well as the need to produce "semi-monthly reports for the financial official."[802] Guidance was also issued with respect to ways of evading financial surveillance, including by "exchanging money for another currency at a bank in a large city, such as euros and then exchanging the euros into dollars at another bank," whilst "amounts [to] be kept by individuals should not be more than they can handle."[803] As already alluded to, sizeable allocations were paid "directly in support of several jihadi groups" including to the "Haqqani [network] Tehrik e-Taliban Pakistan and others."[804] Ultimately, the group took pride in its financial management systems, with its leadership once congratulating itself on the fact that "we do not have many debts, praise be to God."[805]

7.5 Bringing it together

To no small degree, the principles developed by al Qaeda 'core' represented a pivotal juncture in the evolution of clandestine and, more specifically, terrorist non-state actors. Admittedly, many of the group's ideas and tactics, ranging from airliner hijackings to the use of suicide tactics, were inspired by previous movements.[806] Moreover, its narrative borrowed heavily

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[798] J. Burke, *Al Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, Penguin Books, London, 2004, p. 232.
[799] *Ibid*, pp. 250-251.
[800] *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (Authorised Edition), W.W. Norton and Company Ltd., New York, p. 55.
The use of grassroots charities in the movement of funds linked to wider extremist organisations was further highlighted by the so-called 'embassy cables' leak of 2010. See *US embassy cables: United Arab Emirates and terrorist funding - the Pashtun connection*, The Guardian, December 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/223330.
[801] See for example *Letter directing allocation of funds*, ODNI, Declassified, January 19, 2017.
[802] *Letter dated 07 August 2010*, ODNI, p. 12.
[803] *Letter dated 07 August 2010*, ODNI, p. 11.
[804] Letter dated 5 April 2011, Declassified May 20, 2015, p. 3.
[805] *Ibid.*
[806] Airliner hijackings, the first of which went back to the early 1930s, became a semi-regular feature of international terrorism from 1968 onwards following the commandeering of an Israeli El Al airplane

from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the group was only one amongst a long lineage of organisations recognising the power of the mass media in reaching and mobilising potential supporters.[807] However, what was perhaps novel was the way in which these same ideological, operational and communicational levers as well as accompanying organisational blueprints were *combined* and applied in concert over increasingly large distances, paving the way for a new era of insurgencies, including, as in the case of ISIS, terrorist 'proto-states'.

As such, the case study bears direct relevance to this thesis central research question, particularly with respect to the ways in which clandestine non-state actors configure themselves to challenge the authority of states. Chapter 2 posited that non-state actors demonstrated the propensity to establish alternative power structures, including through shadow governance networks. In turn, al Qaeda, whilst not always achieving its aim of supplanting the state, showed how core concepts and intellectual frameworks could be tailored to disparate geographic and political contexts via offshoots and selective partnerships. Indeed, the organisation placed a heavy emphasis on doctrine and guidance, almost acting as a strategy incubator or governance think tank, complete with publications and exportable political templates. The case study also demonstrates how even ideologically conservative groups are capable of exploiting global connectivity and acting as knowledge-distribution nodes facilitating the flow of specialist knowledge (financial, terrorist tactics and so on). In this respect, the group also conceptually approached the notion of a supra-non-state military, security and political entity – an atomised or smaller scale variation on state-led organisations such as NATO or the European Union. Of course, coordinating a devolved network of power also introduced challenges for the organisation, including with respect to exerting more direct control across the franchise (a parallel might be drawn to states seeking to reign in overseas territories seeking increased autonomy).

Even then, and returning to the central investigation, the case study broadly supports the thesis' first hypothesis, relating to clandestine non-state actors' ability to formulate policy, including, as we have seen, by way of templates that could be used by other groups. The group's thinking on both challenging and eroding the authority of states largely hinged on identifying and exploiting rife ecosystems – typically pockets of instability, marginalisation and discontent – and using these as footholds from which to gradually expand its political influence. Turning to the thesis' second hypothesis, the case study reflected a tendency to adopt a structural configuration that could generate resilience against disruption. Al Qaeda achieved this by reducing overall reliance on individuals and placing the emphasis on catalytic ideas that could outlive the organisation, even if the latter was entirely depleted. [808] Finally, and of direct relevance to the thesis' third hypothesis, is the fact that the group not only developed but also applied instruments of power in support of its political objectives. These ranged from its cadre of envoys (a non-state derivative on diplomats) to its complex financial systems built to avoid regulatory detection. As explained, such levers were key to geographic scalability, particularly when injected into offshoots. As such, and perhaps ironically given its anti-American ideology, al Qaeda showed many of the characteristics of a venture capitalist incubator or 'angel fund' seeking to support (political) entrepreneurs showing potential.

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by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), whilst the use of suicide tactics and explosives in the Middle East was catalysed by Hezbollah.
See for example D. L. Byman, *The 1967 War and the birth of international terrorism*, Brookings, May 30, 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/05/30/the-1967-war-and-the-birth-of-international-terrorism/.

[807] Indeed, the use of sensationalist acts in the age of the modern media was already apparent at the time of the 1972 Munich Massacre, in which members of the Black September Palestinian group took eleven members of the Israeli Olympic team as hostages.

[808] As one Ayman Al-Zawahiri obituary argued, by the time of his death, al Qaeda's affiliates ranging from "Syria and West Africa to Somalia to Pakistan [already] enjoyed local autonomy, while adhering to the leader's overall strategy." See P. Baker *et al*., U*.S. Drone Strike Kills Ayman al-Zawahri*, Top Qaeda Leader, New York Times, 01 August 2022.