

A RESILIENT AL-QAEDA IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN



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Although al-Qaeda has suffered severe blows in recent years, it has managed to remain entrenched in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and is poised to strengthen its position and expand its activities in the region. The withdrawal of the bulk of international combat forces and the Afghan military's limited capabilities have given al-Qaeda the opportunity to regain its safe havens lost since 2001. The staying power of al-Qaeda is rooted in its ability to draw from and coordinate with allied local groups embedded in multiple networks on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border. Through increased collaboration with the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and other militant groups, al-Qaeda has been able to capitalize on the deteriorating security situation to grow its infrastructure and bring its strategic focus back to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

KEY POINTS

- ◆ Al-Qaeda's leadership is working more closely with the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan in setting strategy and orchestrating attacks
- ◆ One of al-Qaeda's key victories in Pakistan was its ability to reframe the jihad in Pakistan as one that is both local and global
- ◆ Al-Qaeda has acted as a mediator and unifier among Pakistan's myriad militant groups
- ◆ Although the number of al-Qaeda Core members has remained stable at fewer than 300 since 2010, by working together with local allies, the forces committed to al-Qaeda's strategy or reliant on its networks number the many thousands
- ◆ Denying al-Qaeda the alliances that are the key to its longevity and effectiveness will be critical to marginalizing and ultimately defeating the group

INTRODUCTION

As described by U.S. defense officials, al-Qaeda Core—the central leadership and fighters located in Afghanistan and Pakistan—is on the rebound, and said to be in 2016 “very active” and a “big threat” not only to Afghanistan but to the region as a whole.¹ Al-Qaeda’s presence and influence is reportedly greater than Western intelligence officials had previously thought and is growing. Its leadership is working more closely with the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan in setting strategy and orchestrating attacks. Evidence suggests that al-Qaeda is rebuilding roots on its home turf and is intent on spearheading those Islamic forces challenging regimes across the region and beyond.

Over recent years, al-Qaeda has appeared, at times, to have faded into irrelevance. By 2009, U.S. military intelligence assessed that there were only around 300 al-Qaeda fighters left in Pakistan and only 100 fighters still in Afghanistan.² The following year, Michael Leiter, the director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, determined that al-Qaeda Core was “weaker today than it has been at any time since 2001.”³ Many of its top leadership, most notably, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Mohammad Atef, Ilyas Kashmiri, and, of course, Osama bin Laden had been captured or killed in raids or drone strikes. Al-Qaeda’s branches in the Middle East and North Africa appeared to surpass al-Qaeda Core in terms of leadership, lethality, and the level of threat to the U.S. homeland. Recently, the Islamic State, a



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former affiliate of al-Qaeda, appeared to be overtaking its parent organization in several regions within Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Despite apparent setbacks, al-Qaeda Core has shown resilience in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. By 2012, the departing commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, General John Allen, argued that al-Qaeda had “re-emerged” inside Afghanistan through raising funds and recruitment, and is continuing to fight U.S. troops.⁴ In 2014, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahi-

ri established a new affiliate—al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)—for the purpose of carrying out attacks throughout South Asia. But it was not until a year later when U.S. forces destroyed a major al-Qaeda training camp in Kandahar—the largest al-Qaeda training camp discovered in Afghanistan since 2001—that the group appeared clearly on the rebound.

Even after suffering major blows, al-Qaeda Core has been able to ensure survival by retaining its status and influence with local allies. These relationships go back decades and have helped to cement ties to militant groups operating on both sides of the border. The deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, coupled with the organization's long history and comprehensive understanding of the region, has also given al-Qaeda an edge in its efforts to reclaim its position and expand its activities in the region.

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AL-QAEDA CORE ROOTS IN THE REGION

The seeds of what would become al-Qaeda in Afghanistan were laid during the war against the Soviet Union. The jihad drew nearly 35,000 foreign combatants from 43 different countries, mostly in the Middle East.⁵ In the course of training and cooperating against the Soviets, foreign and local militants formed ideological, strategic, and tactical connections. This cooperation between mujahideen groups, mainly from the rural Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and interaction with globally minded Islamist thinking was key to al-Qaeda's establishment and growth. The Palestinian teacher Abdullah Azzam, who led the Arab Services Bureau that coordinated foreign jihadist fighters and international funding in Peshawar, inspired scores of radical Muslims across the Middle East to join the Afghan mujahideen. Azzam's teachings connected the battles fought by militants in their home countries to the Afghan jihad in order to unite a diverse array of jihadists.⁶ Azzam's ideology and students, including Osama bin Laden, would eventually form the cornerstone of al-Qaeda's ideology and formation in 1988.⁷

During the anti-Soviet jihad, mujahideen groups that had ties to Arab Islamist groups from the early 1960s set up reception committees to house and train new fighters and

encouraged them to join local mujahideen militias.⁸ For instance, in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Afghanistan's southeastern Loya Paktika region, a group led by Jalluddin Haqqani facilitated local and foreign fighters in gathering, training, and planning attacks in Afghanistan. Haqqani and his cohorts had an established operational network of fighters and supporters with financial ties to Arab states, and this early outreach made them ideal and willing hosts for Arabs fighting in the Afghan jihad. Even after the Soviet departure from Afghanistan, the relationship between Arab militants and groups like Haqqani's only grew.⁹

By 1996, Osama bin Laden himself returned to eastern Afghanistan and formed close relations with the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar shortly after the movement captured Kabul.¹⁰ The power vacuum left behind by the Soviets had allowed security to completely deteriorate in Afghanistan. It also afforded the Taliban the opportunity to consolidate territorial control, first in the southern and eastern provinces and then across nearly all the rest of the country. While the Taliban and al-Qaeda had their differences in priorities and ideology, Mullah Omar saw bin Laden as "an important connector to the wider Muslim world."¹¹

From its early days, the Taliban and al-Qaeda's relationship was mostly transactional, with al-Qaeda providing a network of re-

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sources and connections in exchange for a platform from which it could launch attacks. Even Mullah Omar's decision not to hand bin Laden over to the United States after September 11, 2001 was not an indication of Omar's support for the attacks, but a reflection of the interdependence of their organizations and Omar's reluctance to violate the cultural and religious custom of protecting one's guests.

Taliban ties to al-Qaeda were crucial to the Taliban's growth as an insurgency after its routing from Afghanistan during the U.S. invasion of October-November 2001. Taliban fighters, along with those from al-Qaeda Core, found refuge across the border in Pakistan. Also finding sanctuary were fighters from the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (I.M.U.) and the Islamic Jihad Union (I.J.U.). Together with the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda, these and other foreign groups would also soon contribute to the emergence of a Pakistani Taliban insurgency that would by 2007 become known as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (T.T.P.).¹²

The porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan allowed al-Qaeda Core to operate in both countries. Al-Qaeda would

use Pakistan in the way its fighters did during the 1980s, as an operational safe haven from which it could plan international as well as regional terrorist attacks, particularly in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda fighters found sanctuaries in Afghanistan's eastern provinces like Kunar and Nuristan, and Pakistan's North and South Waziristan. The staying power of al-Qaeda became rooted in its ability to draw from and coordinate with allied groups embedded in multiple

regional allied governments. In particular, al-Qaeda fighters have been involved in planning and carrying out suicide attacks, developing improved explosive devices, and helping conduct operations against high-value targets. Al-Qaeda has also run a number of training camps and provided financial resources for groups. It has additionally played a role in establishing and coordinating militant groups' propaganda efforts.¹⁴

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networks on both sides of the border. Its key affiliates include the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)—a jihadi organization active in Indian Kashmir and Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda core members have also formed important ties at the tribal levels, including among Mehsud sub-tribes in the T.T.P., Zadrans sub-tribes of the Haqqani Network, and the Salarzai and other sub-tribes in eastern Afghanistan.¹³

Al-Qaeda has been able to provide many types of assistance to these allied groups in exchange for sanctuary. It established a number of shuras to coordinate strategy, operations, and tactics against the West and

Al-Qaeda has suffered severe blows in recent years, especially owing to the increased intensity of the U.S.'s drone campaign in Pakistan's tribal areas beginning in 2009. The killing of bin Laden in 2011 aside, the death and arrest of several mid- and senior-level al-Qaeda Core leaders in Pakistan disrupted al-Qaeda's communication and finances and somewhat curtailed its ability to facilitate insurgent attacks. In Afghanistan, it may have dimmed al-Qaeda's appeal, affecting its recruiting power. But despite these gains against the organization, the United States and its partners have fallen far short of being able to expel al-Qaeda entirely from the region.

THE STRATEGIC EVOLUTION OF AL-QAEDA CORE

Since launching its military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, the United States has struggled to define al-Qaeda as it has

evolved beyond the South Asia region. Despite its involvement in attacks against Western targets prior to 2001, al-Qaeda only formally began to shift from its hierarchical structure into one comprised of several formal affiliates across the world after the start of the war. After the bulk of al-Qaeda in South Asia was driven into Pakistan, al-Qaeda formalized affiliates in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, Iraq, the Maghreb, and Somalia. As U.S. and NATO forces degraded the South Asia Core group, the organization began to adopt an increasingly decentralized structure. This allowed for some of al-Qaeda's formal branches, especially in Yemen, to exceed the Core in their lethality and take over some Core leadership positions based outside of South Asia. By 2010, bin Laden declared that all regional al-Qaeda affiliates would have to consult with "al-Qaeda Central" in Pakistan before carrying out operations, possibly as an indication that the Core was losing control of the periphery.¹⁵

A 2014 RAND report assesses that al-Qaeda likely decentralized its organization and leadership structure for survival reasons. During a meeting in Iran in 2002, al-Qaeda leaders recognized that the loss of key leaders following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan had made it necessary to abandon the organization's hierarchical structure in order to protect its existence.¹⁶ In 2010, Zawahiri ordered al-Qaeda operatives to disperse into small groups outside of its traditional sanctuaries and cease most ac-

tivities up to a year in order to ensure the organization's survival.¹⁷ After the death of Osama bin Laden, leaders similarly warned their fighters that the organization's survival would mean "taking precautions, working in total secrecy, and making sure of all means to do damage to the enemy."¹⁸

The durability of al-Qaeda owes much to its ability to retain its strategic presence in the border area between Afghanistan

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and Pakistan. Only nominal attempts have been made by Pakistan to dislodge al-Qaeda from its strongholds. Along with other elements at war with the Afghan state, al-Qaeda fighters proved able to move with near impunity throughout Pakistan's tribal region and across the border. Al-Qaeda's only serious fear on Pakistani soil has been its losses from U.S. drone strikes. A short time before his death in 2011, bin Laden reportedly ordered as a means to avoid the U.S. drone campaign in North and South Waziristan that elements of al-Qaeda relocate back into Afghanistan. While most of the Core leadership may have continued to reside in Pakistan, with the decrease in the number of Western troops after the surge in 2009-12, al-Qaeda is thought to have grown its infrastructure in Afghanistan.¹⁹

At the same time, al-Qaeda Core became more involved in providing strategic and operational support to Pakistan-based affiliates. Al-Qaeda Core leaders, commanders, and facilitators established networks outside of their border region safe havens to major Pakistani cities including Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, and Karachi. In forging links with the Pakistani Taliban, al-Qaeda also contributed to attempted assassinations of then-Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and the overall discrediting of the government. Stephen Tankel has referred to this as the “Pakistanization” of the Taliban, and al-Qaeda has given special attention to carrying out attacks against the Pakistani state as a way to bolster ties amongst its Pakistani allies.²⁰

Al-Qaeda has also acted as a mediator and unifier among Pakistan’s myriad militant groups. According to a West Point report, one of its key victories in Pakistan was its ability to “re-frame the jihad in Pakistan as one that is both local and global,” thereby uniting a conglomerate of militant groups previously more narrowly involved with

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sectarian strife and the conflicts in Afghanistan and Kashmir.²¹ These alliances provided al-Qaeda more maneuverability and strengthened its strategic and tactical support in the region. It also allowed al-Qaeda to replenish some of the Core Arab leaders killed, captured, or driven away by air strikes with local militant commanders. Furthermore, al-Qaeda gained a large boost in support and recruitment efforts after the Pakistani army’s heavy-handed actions in routing Islamic extremists from Islamabad’s Red Mosque in 2007. Following the incident, Osama bin Laden released a statement regretting al-Qaeda’s “failure to prioritize jihad in Pakistan.”²²

Several military campaigns by Pakistan in the last several years have focused on anti-state groups. In the most recent Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched in June 2014, Pakistani military sources have repeatedly claimed to clear T.T.P. as well as foreign militant groups and al-Qaeda from FATA. Many of these fighters, however, received advanced warning from Pakistani intelligence and simply crossed over into Afghanistan’s northern and eastern provinces.²³ From there they are well positioned to cross back into Pakistan and launch attacks.

The withdrawal of the bulk of international combat forces and the Afghan military’s limited capabilities have undeniably given al-Qaeda the opportunity to regain its safe havens lost in 2001. But while al-Qaeda

Core's attention remains focused on facilitating and supporting jihad in Afghanistan, in September 2014, Zawahiri announced the creation of AQIS. He stated that it had taken more than two years "to gather the mujahedeen in the Indian subcontinent into a single entity" and stressed that the group would be focused on nations like Myanmar, Bangladesh, and parts of India and the Kashmir region.²⁴

Overall, this newest affiliate's attacks have been limited. Its first major operation was the September 2014 high-profile attempt to hijack a Pakistani naval frigate in the port of Karachi. Several assassinations of popular secular figures in Bangladesh, as well as training camps discovered in Afghanistan, have ties to AQIS. Its members have become a principle target of U.S. drone strikes in the tribal belt. AQIS has reportedly regrouped in southern Pakistan where, through alliances with LeT and T.T.P., it has found fertile ground for new recruitment in Karachi.²⁵

The creation of AQIS seems mostly designed as part of al-Qaeda's plans to bring its strategic focus back to Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is also most likely part of an effort by al-Qaeda Core leadership to unite a South Asian jihad by organizing its regional allies under one affiliate. This is supported by the fact that AQIS leadership is mostly comprised of long-time commanders in Pakistan and Afghanistan, with very few

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hailing from countries like Bangladesh.²⁶ The creation of AQIS additionally serves Zawahiri's attempts to promote the al-Qaeda brand against an advancing rival in the Islamic State, which is competing with al-Qaeda for jihadist leadership in the region as well as across the Islamic world.

AL-QAEDA ALLIANCES IN SOUTH ASIA

Al-Qaeda's strategy in South Asia since 2001 has relied extensively on the local groups with whom it shares safe havens and collaborates for attacks. These are especially important as al-Qaeda numbers dropped significantly after 2001, and more so since al-Qaeda's expansion outside of the region. Anne Stenersen at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment previously assessed that the number of al-Qaeda Core members has remained stable at fewer than 300 since 2010.²⁷ Local groups, therefore, have not only been key to al-Qaeda's staying power in the region, but also drive al-Qaeda's influence in the region.

While al-Qaeda's relationship with the Afghan Taliban has always been extensive, despite two decades of cooperation and a shared vision of jihad in Afghanistan, their affinity can also be overemphasized. The Taliban and al-Qaeda remain distinct in their membership, agendas, and ideologies. In particular, the Taliban has adopted goals that focus on national identity and the rejection of the Western-backed Kabul government, and it has shown little interest in

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al-Qaeda's vision of global jihad against the West. Al-Qaeda's strategy in South Asia also promotes sectarian violence and mass-casualty attacks against Muslim civilians, something the Taliban fears could alienate the population from which it recruits. A lingering, yet strong, sentiment for many Taliban is that, by inviting U.S. intervention in 2001, al-Qaeda's actions on 9/11 had spoiled the Taliban's opportunity to defeat their Afghan enemies and consolidate power in Afghanistan.²⁸

Al-Qaeda has appreciated the Taliban's willingness to provide safe haven to both its Core members as well as its foreign affiliates, such as I.M.U., and to support some of their operational networks. The Taliban's

acceptance of these groups operating in Afghanistan as guests makes them a valued ally in return. Al-Qaeda's leadership continues to recognize the leader of the Taliban as Emir al-Mumineen, or Commander of the Faithful, and was quick to announce their ongoing support for Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour after the announcement of longtime leader Mullah Omar's death in July 2015.²⁹ Following the U.S. drone strike that killed Mansour ten months later, al-Qaeda leader Zawahiri pledged allegiance to his successor Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada and announced his organization's renewed partnership with the Taliban.³⁰ Al-Qaeda leaders continue to consult with Taliban leadership based in Pakistan, and some field commanders in Afghanistan are “dual-hatted” leaders in

both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, who serve to strengthen the strategic and operational relationship between the groups.³¹ Al-Qaeda's ideology has also begun to resonate with some Taliban commanders, especially younger ones who do not have the personal history of fighting with the mujahideen against the Soviets, but were raised in refugee camps and madrasas in Pakistan.³²

Although al-Qaeda donors continue to provide or direct funds to the Taliban, monetary ties between al-Qaeda and the Taliban have changed in recent years. Analysts contend that al-Qaeda's ability to raise funds for the Taliban has become a less influential part of the relationship. Most Taliban field commanders can increasingly handle their

monetary needs through the drug trade, taxation in Taliban-controlled areas, and partnerships with crime syndicates.

While al-Qaeda maintains important links with the Taliban's Quetta Shura, its connections with other militant groups, including the Haqqani Network and the T.T.P., have created additional opportunities for explicit cooperation. Al-Qaeda and various insurgent groups share communication and transportation routes, coordinate attacks, and even utilize the same explosive and suicide-bomber networks.³³ They provide al-Qaeda safe haven and allow al-Qaeda to conduct attacks from their controlled territory in Pakistan. The Long War Journal asserts that allying with these groups has been key in giving al-Qaeda "strategic depth" throughout the region.³⁴

Al-Qaeda's history of working together with the Haqqani Network and its leadership makes for a lethal alliance. Operational and tactical cooperation has increased the ability of the Haqqani Network to carry out sophisticated attacks in Kabul and against Western military targets. Similarly, according to documents found in bin Laden's Abbottabad compound, al-Qaeda was able to infiltrate and attack U.S. and NATO forces in Bagram and Kabul through operations planned together with Sirajuddin Haqqani, the Haqqani Network's present leader, and his commanders.³⁵ In another study from West Point, the Haqqani Network's ties

with al-Qaeda, as well as affiliated Pakistani militants, are described as "deeply integrated and interdependent."³⁶

The Haqqani Network also holds a special position as somewhat of an intermediary between the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. After the death of Mullah Omar and during Mullah Mansour's struggle to secure his leadership, Sirajuddin was asked to take on the position of the second deputy commander of the Taliban.³⁷ U.S. military

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officials assert that Sirajuddin has assumed an active role in the Taliban, and that he "increasingly runs the day-to-day military operations for the Taliban, and . . . is likely involved in appointing shadow governors."³⁸ Even with the death of Mansour, Sirajuddin continues to have responsibility for the Taliban's military operations. His influence among both Taliban top leadership and commanders on the ground in Afghanistan's south and north could foster stronger ties with al-Qaeda and assist in creating new spaces for al-Qaeda to expand its influence.

Al-Qaeda also maintains a strong relationship with the Pakistani Taliban (T.T.P.), having played an instrumental role in the T.T.P.'s formation in 2007. Al-Qaeda is said to have provided “motivation, strategy, militant training, and finances to organize and launch the T.T.P.” In exchange, T.T.P. fighters staged attacks in both Pakistan and Afghanistan and worked to “cultivate [al-Qaeda’s] local support and acceptance.”³⁹ As al-Qae-

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da became more involved with militant groups in Pakistan focusing on domestic terrorism, these bonds deepened. Many Pakistani Taliban leaders even appear alongside al-Qaeda in propaganda videos.⁴⁰ The T.T.P. has openly collaborated with al-Qaeda for operations in Afghanistan, including most infamously, the attack in 2009 on CIA’s Camp Chapman near the Pakistani border.⁴¹

Al-Qaeda has been able to create local alliances based not only on cooperation in staging attacks but also through the intermarriages and business relationships it has forged with these groups.⁴² When pressure from the Pakistani army against the T.T.P. increased, in the form of greater attacks on strongholds in North Waziristan beginning in mid-2014, al-Qaeda was instrumental in relocating many of T.T.P. fighters into Af-

ghanistan, where al-Qaeda has used them to bolster the firepower of the Afghan Taliban.

Other militant groups on both sides of the border continue to contribute to al-Qaeda’s goals in South Asia. For instance, Pakistan’s Harakat ul-Mujahedeen, which has conducted operations against Indian troops and civilians in Kashmir, maintains train-

ing camps in eastern Afghanistan provinces like Kunar and Nuristan that welcome al-Qaeda fighters.⁴³

The Turkistan Islamic Party, a Uighur jihadist group, has also advertised camps in this region since 2014.⁴⁴

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Jaish-e-Mohammad, and a number of others in the region all have some degree of al-Qaeda ties by virtue of operating in the same space and within the same networks.

One of these groups, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), has a particularly strong relationship with al-Qaeda, with some reports predicting that LeT could become “the next al-Qaeda.”⁴⁵ Al-Qaeda has utilized LeT safehouses while in Pakistan, and LeT has proven to be the strongest ideological ally of al-Qaeda in the region.⁴⁶ LeT has also been among the groups working with al-Qaeda to carry out operations in Afghanistan. LeT has become known for “technological sophistication, [broad] global recruiting and fundraising network, its close ties to protectors within the Pakistani government, and the fact that it is still a less high-profile target of Western intelligence,” all of which afford

the group an advantage over nationally-focused groups in the region.⁴⁷ One Pentagon official warned that LeT is poised to “shift operational focus to the Indian Subcontinent in the next one to three years” as coalition forces continue to draw down in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ LeT could capitalize on its ties to al-Qaeda, as well as the unity of regional jihadist groups under AQIS, to meet these goals.

Altogether, these groups brought together or bolstered by al-Qaeda’s influence and established networks have worsened the security situation in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite al-Qaeda’s limited numbers, by working together with local allies, the forces committed to al-Qaeda’s strategy or reliant on its networks number in the many thousands. The history of cooperation and mutual assistance among these groups makes them a formidable threat to the region. Their alliances have facilitated al-Qaeda’s survival in the region and will continue to be instrumental in al-Qaeda’s strategy for expansion.

AL-QAEDA IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN: BEYOND 2016

Al-Qaeda has remained entrenched in the region and, despite setbacks since 2001, is poised to strengthen in both Afghanistan

and Pakistan. Al-Qaeda Core as a regional threat has grown as Afghanistan’s security has deteriorated. The Taliban’s territorial gains following the international drawdown of troops have presented new opportunities for al-Qaeda. Additionally, the Pakistani army’s operation in Zarb-e-Azb has pushed many al-Qaeda allied groups, sympathizers, and foreign militant groups into Afghanistan. U.S. officials indicate that the presence

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of these al-Qaeda-linked groups in Afghanistan could “present a bit of an accelerant for the Taliban [by providing] capabilities and skills.”⁴⁹

Dedicated al-Qaeda Core members have occupied well-established strongholds in eastern provinces like Kunar and Nuristan, as well as those further south in Zabul and Ghazni. Other al-Qaeda militants uprooted by Operation Zarb-e-Azb have relocated to traditional al-Qaeda safe havens in Khost, Paktia, and Paktika provinces, as well as northern provinces like Badakhshan and Kunduz.⁵⁰ Afghan and U.S. forces have also conducted operations against al-Qaeda in Logar province, and a camp in Paktika province provided security forces the in-

telligence to uncover the larger camps in Kandahar and Helmand province found in late 2015.⁵¹ Prior to the discovery of these camps, al-Qaeda members were thought to have little, if any, presence in these areas.⁵² The southern camp covered at least 30 square miles and held around 150 militants, an alarming harbinger of al-Qaeda's current ambitions for the region.

“Destroying al-Qaeda Core in Afghanistan and Pakistan will not be enough to dismantle the organization internationally.”

Al-Qaeda is therefore in a position to regain some lost ground and influence in Afghanistan by exploiting security gaps and expanding the operations of AQIS. Although this threat is nothing new, al-Qaeda's expansion could still have dramatic effects on the region, from creating a more ideological and radicalized insurgency to discouraging groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan from pursuing negotiations with their respective governments.

Although the region is not about to succumb to these threats, security in both Afghanistan and Pakistan will remain a challenge. Continued targeting of al-Qaeda militarily will need to figure prominently in any successful counterinsurgency. Denying al-Qaeda the alliances that are the key to its longevity and effectiveness will also

be critical to achieving al-Qaeda's marginalization and then defeat. This will require greater resolution, particularly by Pakistan, to give no quarter to any of those groups with which al-Qaeda has a mutually beneficial relationship. Culling militant networks and denying their leaderships safe havens in both Pakistan and Afghanistan will prevent al-Qaeda Core and AQIS from conducting operations and realizing their strategic vision for a united jihad. Destroying al-Qaeda Core in Afghanistan and Pakistan will not be enough to dismantle the organization internationally but is essential to removing the region's most important enabler of insurgency. Greater cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan and continued U.S. and international engagement in the region will also be required to prevent the emergence of a bolder, more formidable al-Qaeda.

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