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# Al-Qaeda in Hot Spots

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At the end of the phase known as the “Afghan Jihad”, most Arabs and Muslims who participated in the Afghan war returned to their homelands. Some formed the nucleus for the dissemination, in their countries, of the ideas that they carried or developed during the “jihad” period. The al-Qaeda organisation, based on the principle of global jihad, is the most prominent embodiment of these “new” ideas; new when compared to the ways that other Islamic organisations have evolved.

Differences exist in the manner in which the various al-Qaeda “branches” emerged; they vary not only in the means and methods of work but even, in some cases, in their objectives. These differences depend on circumstances prevailing in the countries where each al-Qaeda member organises. Nevertheless, there has been a common understanding that the original birth home – Afghanistan – provides the fundamental guidance to the organisation.

This paper examines al-Qaeda in three critical locations, which recently rose to prominence, in the Islamic world. It discusses the movement and some of its members; the methodology and activities of the organisation; its local and periodic objectives; its ideologies and influence; and will chart future trends for the organisation. The three locations studied here are: Pakistan and Afghanistan, Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula, and Somalia.

## **Pakistan and Afghanistan**

Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan is the nucleus of the global organisation. It represents the symbol of the network and provides the inspiration for al-Qaeda branches or their allies across the world. From the outset, it sought to set the norm for the global network and for the Taliban, thus making the Taliban a carrier of its ideas and proposals. Al-Qaeda received a positive response from the Afghan Taliban, which allowed it to work among Afghan youth, and to recruit the best elements. This factor reflects the extent of the relationship and interdependence between the two groups. In general, there are three important phases (some brief) in the development of al-Qaeda from its establishment to the present.

### ***Phase 1: Establishment, training and identification of priorities***

This period extended from the formation of the first al-Qaeda group in 1987, and included the move to Somalia after the outbreak of fighting between the various factions of the “Afghan Mujahideen” in the middle of 1992. Al-Qaeda distanced itself from these internal battles and focused on recruiting suitable Arab youth to its ideology and operations, and to ensure allegiance to Usama bin Laden. During this period, it also conducted the necessary training, and identified the main objective of the struggle: to confront America as the enemy that replaced the collapsed Soviet Union. Therefore, it made sense for al-Qaeda to move to Somalia to fight the U.S. there after the latter was implicated in intervening in Somalia.

At the time, al-Qaeda’s membership included almost all nationalities that participated in the Afghan jihad, thus providing the organisation with a golden opportunity to connect with different parts of the world, and giving it a global dimension.

### ***Phase 2: Confrontation with the United States***

Al-Qaeda worked according to the theory of the common enemy, and resorted to fighting the U.S. using a simple and easily understandable slogan: “expel the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula”. It carried out operations named “The High” and “The New”, and others in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, then bombed the American Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998. After these, it launched the attack on the American destroyer, the USS Cole, in Aden, Yemen, in October 2000. The confrontation reached a climax with the events of the 11 September 2001.

This stage was followed by an escalation in terms of the American response, including the invasion of two Muslim countries: Afghanistan, followed by Iraq. After the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda started preparing for a guerilla war similar to the war with the Soviet Union but with an important difference: the absence of a state custodian of such “resistance”. While there had been countries which had embraced the resistance during the Soviet invasion, such support does not exist in the new phase. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban then began to foster grass-roots support in the tribal areas and the Pashtun east of Afghanistan.

### ***Phase 3: Tribal Adoption***

After the fall of the Taliban, both it and al-Qaeda withdrew their fighters to the tribal areas, and began a new phase of recruiting Pakistan Taliban and tribal members. They resorted to the Waziristan area which has historically had great hostility to foreign occupiers. The Taliban then re-organised itself until late into 2003, when Pakistan, under U.S. pressure, launched military operations in the tribal areas. Despite this development, the military groups of al-Qaeda, Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban were able to organise in these areas. Notably, al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban distanced themselves from the confrontation with the Pakistani military. But the Pakistani Taliban carried out this task in parallel with the strengthening of Uzbek groups, with an estimated number of more than two thousands fighters, and a group of Chinese Eastern Turkestan Muslims who, according to informed sources, number a few hundred.

## **Taliban and Pakistan**

The Pakistani Taliban set up what looked like a shield for al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, and provided them a safe haven. This despite the strikes launched by the U.S. or, through pressure from the U.S. which called for military operations in Waziristan and the border areas, by the Pakistani army. Pakistan was aware that it was not in its interest totally to eliminate the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda because that would be advantageous to India and pro-Afghan parties. In addition, Islamabad did not trust American intentions, especially after it allowed the pro-Iran and pro-India former Northern Alliance to take control of Kabul and impose its own vision. This concern was strengthened recently when U.S. President Barack Obama received Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the White House before Obama declared his new Afghanistan strategy.

Because of these factors, it is expected that al-Qaeda’s strength will increase and its influence will spread further into both Afghanistan and Pakistan in the near future. This expectation is based on the following:

- The absence of trust between the Pakistani Army and the American forces might enable al-Qaeda, Pakistan’s Taliban and the Afghan Taliban to obtain support from some Pakistani military leaders and Pakistani Military Intelligence in order to wear down the American forces operating there; and
- With India and Iran seeking, either individually or collectively, to fill the vacuum that will be created by any U.S. withdrawal, it is not in Pakistan’s strategic interest to eradicate al-Qaeda completely. Al-Qaeda might be useful in Pakistan’s struggle against India, especially on the issue of Kashmir, or even to curb Iranian expansionism in Afghanistan, which is indispensable for the security of Pakistan.

## **Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula**

Yemen is of particular importance to al-Qaeda because of its proximity to the Arab Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, from which Usama bin Laden hails, and because of al-Qaeda’s call for the “infidels” to be expelled from the Arabian Peninsula.

## ***Historical phases***

Al-Qaeda in Yemen passed through four historical stages; some were common to other al-Qaeda branches, while some were unique to Yemen.

### **Phase 1: Establishment**

This phase was crucial for the development of al-Qaeda in Yemen, as it was for other branches, and extended from the mid-1980s until the beginning of this decade. The most significant characteristic of this phase was the mobilization of youth for training camps in Afghanistan, with an emphasis on the notion that the battle will not end with the Soviet departure, but that these youth will have to be prepared to fight a wider battle.

### **Phase 2: Explorations**

In this phase, al-Qaeda attempted to locate the most suitable conflict regions of the world. Somalia became the first field of operations of al-Qaeda outside Pakistan, after the fall of Soviet Union. During this phase, Yemeni and Saudi youth clashed with American forces in Somalia, using the strategies of al-Qaeda, which were also translated in June 1996 to the Riyadh Operation, which targeted the headquarters of U.S. Forces. This operation, even if it did not belong to Usama bin Laden, was blessed by him. This phase continued into the 1990s with the February 1998 launch of the International Front to fight the Jews and Crusaders. The rhetoric of this group focussed mainly on the Arabian Peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia and Yemen. It referred to the American presence in the region as an occupation of the country's two holy mosques and shrines. Al-Qaeda described the American presence as the second occupation after Palestine. The main features of this phase was the appointment of local leadership for Al-Qaeda. An example of this was Abu Ali Al-Harithi, 40, who was killed by a U.S. spy plane in the beginning of November 2002. On the international level, this phase was characterized by the attack on the USS Cole. The success of this operation helped the organisation attract new recruits for the next stage.

### **Phase 3: Organisational structure**

Phase 3 witnessed the first organisational structuring of Al-Qaeda in the region, and coincided with the American Invasion of Iraq in 2003. The main function of this phase was the establishment of the al-Qaeda organisation in the Arabian Peninsula as a local organisation with declared and known leadership. However, there is not even one recorded event of the organisation outside the border of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with the exception of attempts to supply the Iraqi front with fighters, money, and media support. The most significant result of this phase was the academic activity and research conducted by scholars who helped to enrich the ideological library of al-Qaeda through interpretations of Islam, according to modern requirements and events, that were favourable to al-Qaeda.

### **Phase 4**

This is the current phase, characterised by an al-Qaeda which is waging a major war against world powers, and sometimes described as a war of attrition with the U.S. in Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia.

## ***Al-Qaeda Second Generation***

The beginning of 2006 witnessed the flight of 23 of the most dangerous elements of the Yemeni al-Qaeda. This year is considered the year of major transformation in al-Qaeda's evolution in Yemen, and the beginning of the second generation of the organisation in Yemen. Although the authorities had announced the surrender of 10 fleeing al-Qaeda members, and the killing of five others, it was revealed in 2007 that one of the eight who had

escaped from the Political Security Prison was the Commander of al-Qaeda in Yemen, Naser al-Wahishi, alias Abu Basir. Al-Wahishi, a Yemeni citizen, had been in Afghanistan and had served as bin Laden's personal secretary.

After the American invasion of Afghanistan he had fled to Iran, where he was arrested and handed over to Saudi Arabia and then to Yemen. Al-Wahishi is the only person besides Qassem al-Rimi (currently the fourth most important person in al-Qaeda) who belongs to the so-called first generation of al-Qaeda. Elements of the first generation formed the majority of those who fought in Afghanistan at various stages, and earned themselves the title of "Arab Afghan". They were those who had been recruited into al-Qaeda immediately after its establishment at the end of the 1980s.

It is necessary to mention that the major al-Qaeda operations in Yemen were carried out by elements of the first generation. These began, at the beginning of the Bill Clinton era in 1990, with an attack on an Aden hotel – which the U.S. had used as a station from which to launch its "Return of Hope" operation into Somalia. Other operations included the bombing of the USS Cole in October 2000, an attack on the British Embassy in the same month, an attack on a French oil carrier in October 2002, and the killing of American Doctors in Yemen's IBB province in December 2003. Days earlier, on 3 November 2003, a rocket was fired at a plane belonging to an oil company after the plane took off from Sanaa Airport. Al-Qaeda was also accused of planning the assassination of former U.S. Ambassador Edmund Hull. Targets were mostly American or Western, with minor exceptions, such as an April 2001 attack on the building belonging to Yemeni Intelligence in the capital Sanaa.

Most second generation members of al-Qaeda do not know Afghanistan, but were recruited and trained inside Yemen or Saudi Arabia, most probably by the fugitive elements who escaped from the Political Security Prison. This generation was bolstered by 40 to 50 men from Saudi Arabia, who escaped to Yemen after a crack-down against them in Saudi Arabia. It was, thus, unsurprising that the wings of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and Yemen united under the banner of Jihad Organisation in the Arabian Peninsula. The group chose al-Wahishi as its leader in November 2008. In one video recording, al-Wahishi appears next to Saudis Said al-Shahry and Mohammed Aloufi and the Yemeni Wasim al-Rimi. Al-Wahishi's leadership was confirmed after Usama bin Laden praised him in an audio recording.

Al-Wahishi publicly announced the Saudi-Yemeni alliance in January 2009, revealing its objective of targeting the presence of Westerners – especially Americans, and to attack American interests and the ruling authorities who protect Western interests in the Arabian Peninsula. Second generation members seemed more rigid and more hostile to the authorities. In a 2007 audio recording, al-Wahishi called on elements of the al-Qaeda first generation to join him by not appeasing the authorities nor entering into agreements with them. In the recording, al-Wahishi appeared angry at the killing of his fugitive comrades, especially Fawaz al-Rabeiee and Mohammed al-Dilme, and outraged by the torture and ill-treatment suffered by imprisoned members of the organisation. It is possibly because of this that Yemeni interests became the target for most of his operations, starting with attacks on oil facilities in Hadramout and Maarb, and including attacks on security points and premises.

With this approach, the second generation rejects any dialogue with the authorities, unlike some elements from the first generation, including 600 who entered into dialogue with the authorities while they were in prison in the period between 2003 and 2006. These men left prison having given a commitment to avoid violence and to live under Yemen's constitution

and law. Some, however, did return to al-Qaeda, although most of these worked outside the country – specifically in Iraq – so as to avoid any operations within Yemen.

From 2007 to 2009, al-Qaeda targeted Spanish, Belgian and Korean tourists, and attacked the American embassy twice; the first was a failed attempt using missiles, the second utilised two car bombs and six suicide bombers in September 2008. Apart from an attack on a residential complex for experts working in a foreign oil company, and a failed attempt to bomb the Italian embassy, the majority of the second generation targets were local (oil and security). They were centred in the eastern region of the country (Hadramaut and Maarb) where the oil and gas installations are found, in an apparent bid to cultivate a sphere of influence in an area characterised by an already-weak state presence, large, poor population, and a predominance of tribal relationships.

### *Al-Qaeda and Southern Mobility*

The operations of al-Qaeda in Hadramaut raise doubts about the Southern Mobility Movement, which emerged in late 2006, and expanded in subsequent years in the four main provinces in the south.

Southern Mobility believes that the Yemeni government claim that Southern Yemen is a bastion of al-Qaeda is an attempt by the government to disrupt Southern Mobility – because such claims would attract a Western response – and to obfuscate and ignore its demands for a disengagement of the South from the North. There is no doubt that this situation will create more chaos and division which will benefit al-Qaeda. It is noteworthy that Al-Wahishi, in an audio recording in 2009, announced al-Qaeda's support for Southern Mobility and for the southern case. His support aimed at different objectives than those of Southern Mobility, and was consistent with his vision of an Islamic state in a post-independence South. It is also noteworthy that while one of the leaders of the Mobility welcomed an alliance with al-Qaeda (and even, in his words, with the devil) in order to win the right to control the south, most of the leaders and factions of the Mobility refused to declare an alliance with al-Qaeda and considered the matter a conspiracy against them by the Sanaa regime.

Southern Mobility has contributed to clearing the field for the expansion, deployment and proliferation of al-Qaeda in the south in, for example, the governorates of Abyan and Shabwa which have been characterised by intense violence targeting not only everything that represents the state, government headquarters, and members of the security, police and soldiers, but also all that represents the north, including traders, workers, and ordinary citizens. That resulted in the withdrawal of the organs of state from these regions, except for the presence of a few random camps and departments operated by Southerners from the same area.

Al-Qaeda exploited the vacuum to consolidate its forces from within and outside Yemen. In 2009, newspapers published reports and people were echoing stories of al-Qaeda training camps in Shabwa and Abyan. In December 2009, these camps were the targets of air strikes. Some victims of the strikes were from al-Qaeda, but the majority were civilians. Yemeni authorities referred to the strikes as Yemeni operations conducted with American help. On the other hand, the media and American newspapers referred to them as American operations facilitated by Yemen.

The strikes came after al-Qaeda extended its operations beyond Yemen's borders in its attempt to blow up an American airliner over the city of Detroit. The bomber, Nigerian Omar al-Faruq Abd al-Mutalib, allegedly confessed that he had received training in Yemen and,

particularly, in Shabwa. Prior to this operation, al-Qaeda attempted – also through an operation planned in Yemen – to assassinate the Saudi Minister of Defence.

### ***Potential and the future of al-Qaeda***

The war against al-Qaeda in Yemen became an international war after the attempt against the American aircraft. It seems that the enemies of al-Qaeda are not the only ones preparing for a confrontation in Yemen, but that al-Qaeda too is mobilizing its ranks and its energies. Al-Qaeda, however, preceded everyone when it began to mobilise its members, taking advantage of the situation of failure that Yemen began heading towards in 2007. With the explosion of the situation in the South, the return of war to Sa'ada in the form of the fourth and fifth rounds, and the sixth which crossed the Yemeni border to reach Saudi Arabia. These circumstances were compounded by the deepening political crisis between the government and the opposition. Yemen reached a stage of estrangement and a deteriorating security situation due also to the preoccupation of the security forces with fighting the Mobility and the Houthis.

For the following reasons, there are expectations that al-Qaeda will increase its strength in Yemen:

- There are many Yemeni regions that don't fall under the control of the central authority of the state. For example, neither the Yemeni army nor the security forces have any control over Dali, Lahj, Abyan, Marib, Al Jawf, Shabwa, and Saada provinces. Currently, the control of many regions is divided between tribal authority and armed groups which resist the government in Sanaa;
- The loss by President Ali Abdullah Saleh of a large part of his tribal custody represented by the Hashid tribe, especially after the emergence of the powerful opposition voice of Sheikh Hamid Bin Abdullah al Ahmar, son of the late Abdullah al Ahmar from Bayt al Ahmar;
- The conflict within President Ali Abdullah Saleh's family which is reflected, to some extent, in the divided loyalties of the military between the President's son Ahmad and his nephew Ahmad Ali Mohsen Saleh;
- Fierce chaos in state institutions due to an increasing number of cases of administrative and financial corruption, which weakened its legitimacy and authority; and
- Weakness of the two factions of the two main opposition parties, Islah and the Yemeni Socialist Party.

## **Somalia**

In 1993, the battle between Somali warlord General Muhammad Aidid and U.S. forces in Mogadishu began. This led to the horrific scene published by the international and American media of American soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, a scene that led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia after the election of Bill Clinton as U.S. president.

Many suspected that al-Qaeda was already present in Somalia at that time, and running bombing operations against the American forces, but that it decided not to declare itself as an independent entity fighting the Americans due to tribal considerations which would not allow a second party to appear beside the force led by General Aidid and backed by al-Hawaya tribe with broader alliances in Somalia. Aidid aspired to ascend to the presidency of Somalia.

This was the period in which al-Qaeda developed familiarity with Somalia. But the beginning of the practical relationship between al-Qaeda and Somalia dates back to the time when

Usama bin Laden was living in Sudan, where there were talks to set up camps for people who believed in a jihadi ideology and would follow bin Laden's organisation. Shaikh Hasan al-Turki was the most important Somali personality reportedly to visit Sudan to make contact with the al-Qaeda leadership. (Al-Turki is currently in the forests of lower Juba, and is suffering from an illness that sometimes make him lose consciousness.) The relation then developed to an agreement to build camps for training fighters in this region. Since that period, al-Qaeda never left Somalia, even if its forms, presence and methods of cooperation with active parties in the Somali arena were different and in the light of the civil war that continues to date.

Al-Qaeda considers the Horn of Africa region as the most important region of conflict with the United States. Kenya is home to the American embassy which is responsible for Somalia and the South of Sudan. The region also enjoys a depth of popular Islam. These are all regarded as attractive factors for al-Qaeda. Most attractive, however, is the chaotic state of Somalia, which allows al-Qaeda free movement, and planning whenever and wherever it wants.

### *Nature of al-Qaeda presence in Somalia*

Al-Qaeda's ideology is spreading among large groups of young people. This is well-indicated by the Somali Young Mujahideen Movement (al-Shabab) which believes, in toto, in the ideology of al-Qaeda and looks for acknowledgement and accreditation from bin Laden. It also takes instructions from some non-Somali residents – who belong to al-Qaeda – for the implementation of many business and operations. This is the most powerful movement on the ground and controls nine out of the 18 regions in Somalia.

Currently, al-Qaeda is represented in Somalia through members who belong to the organisation. The U.S. administration regularly publishes some of the names of these people, and tracks their movements inside and outside Somalia. Most famous among these is Abu Talha al-Sudani, who was killed in mysterious circumstances in Juba region, South of Somalia, during the fall of the Islamic courts; Saleh Ali Nbhani, a Kenyan who was killed months ago in a U.S. raid in South Somalia; and Muhammad Fadil Harun – also known as Fazul, who is still at large. The American and Kenyan intelligence services said that Fazul wanders in Somali regions and Kenyan cities. According to some reports, there are others who belong to al-Qaeda and who still live inside the Somali territory. Juba region in the south is a safe haven for al-Qaeda and allows for free movement; forests are abundant, unlike most of open Somalia. This region is controlled by al-Qaeda or, at least, by an authority that is not antagonistic to al-Qaeda: Somali Young Mujahideen Movement and the Islamic party.

It is important to mention, despite rumours to the contrary, that there is no relation between al-Qaeda and the Islamic party. It is widely believed that al-Qaeda wants to exclude the Islamic Party (at least at this stage), but wishes to maintain strong relationships with some prominent members such as Shaikh Hasan al-Turki, first deputy of the party. No doubt, one of the big challenges facing al-Qaeda is that other Somali political parties are in a state of feud with al-Qaeda's ideology, particularly that demonstrated through the Somali Young Mujahideen Movement.

### *Objectives and future of al-Qaeda in Somalia*

In some instances, al-Qaeda's objectives in Somalia are no different from other al-Qaeda branches: it tries to recruit supporters and target primarily youth groups, particularly young people aged between 13 and 24 years, as this group can be influenced intellectually, many have no family ties or any other interests that could hinder the formation of their religious

and intellectual motives or prevent the completion of developing them to fulfil their obligations imposed by the organisation's vision of carrying out operations, and so forth.

Somalia is one of the arenas where the presence and interests of the West and the U.S. have been targeted by al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda's presence in Somalia opens the door for it to access all African countries – especially in the Eastern and Central parts of the African continent. The organisation also has the capability strategically to strike the Ethiopian regime and to provide armed organisations within the region, which is largely inhabited by Muslims, with supplies and support.

Somalia, according to al-Qaeda literature, is a fertile ground for the implementation of current and future goals. Bin Laden's speeches always mention the importance of the Horn of Africa region to the liberation of Jerusalem, and as one of the battlefronts against Israel and against "the expansionism and domination of the American pole, the unilateral global force". It is not unlikely that al-Qaeda power and activities in Somalia will increase. However, this will be subject to the conditions mentioned below:-

- That bin Laden confers al-Qaeda's full organisational legitimacy on the Somali Young Mujahideen Movement. This has not yet occurred.
- That the moderate Islamic trends – which could stand against al-Qaeda – continue to weaken. These include the pro-Shaikh Sharif Ahmed group, the Ahl al-Sunnah group, and the group which enjoys the backing of Ethiopia and has more followers but lacks the political vision and strategic objective.
- That the government of Shaikh Sharif and the African Union forces (about 5,000 soldiers) responsible for its protection continue to weaken, or the government loses regional and international support.

## Summary

In light of the above, a number of points can be summarised about the al-Qaeda organisation in the hot spots.

### *From the objectives perspective*

The objectives of the organisation vary according to the countries it is in. In Afghanistan, al-Qaeda's goals are to help the Taliban in their fight against the Americans in preparation for the return of the Islamic state, which was ousted in 2001. In Pakistan, al-Qaeda – in alliance with the Pakistan Taliban – aims to inflict maximum losses on the United States to thwart attempts to control this country. In the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda works for the "expulsion of the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula", and to bring down the regimes cooperating with the U.S., mainly the Saudi regime. The goal in Somalia does not vary much from these.

### *From the organisational perspective*

The al-Qaeda organisation is flexible and changes according to the quality of the environment. It is active in countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen where there are hierarchical organisational structures tightly constructed. But in Somalia the work is done by attracting people to their ideology and through individuals rather than through organised groups.

### *From the proliferation perspective*

Al-Qaeda chooses the countries in which to operate, in accordance with certain conditions, including that these countries should be "soft and fragile", in which the ruling elite lacks the power to exert influence on all areas. Al-Qaeda is also keen to choose countries with a complex geographical nature. Hence it is attracted to a place with numerous mountains such

as Yemen, Afghanistan and the border regions of Pakistan, or to the sprawling vast desert stretching between Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and Mali. This assists it in carrying out its tasks in camouflage, hiding and smuggling arms operations.

There is no doubt that should the U.S. persist in its interventionist policies and in its support for corrupt regimes – the main reason for countries becoming soft, fragile and failed, the present justifications of al-Qaeda will remain and its activities may be increased in the foreseeable future, while it benefits from the environment of political and financial crises which have ravaged many countries within the region.