

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

M. Mandl

Al Qaeda In 2017: Slow And Steady Wins The Race

Scott Stewart
1/7/2017

In 2016, al Qaeda defied expectations and managed to hang on. Last year, we wrote that the al Qaeda core organization led by Ayman al-Zawahiri was weak. That assessment was based on the fact that the core group had mounted no attacks, and statements by leaders of franchises such as Jabhat al-Nusra (now Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula appeared to carry more weight than those of the central leadership.

However, the course of events in 2016 made it clear that this assessment was misguided. We noted in June 2015 that al Qaeda had managed to gain some small advantage by maintaining a low profile, portraying itself as a moderate jihadist alternative to the Islamic State and viewing its struggle through the lens of insurgent strategy as a "long war." Al Qaeda's game plan worked in 2016 and will continue to pay dividends in 2017, enabling the group to make inroads with militants at the local and regional level.

The Bin Laden Method

A gradualist philosophy, which we call "bin Ladenism," is at the center of al Qaeda's ideology. This long-term strategy holds that it will be impossible for jihadists to overthrow Middle Eastern governments and establish a caliphate as long as the "far enemy" (the United States and its European allies) are active in the region. Based on historical examples in Lebanon and Somalia,

Osama bin Laden believed that Americans and Europeans were soft and could be dissuaded from meddling in the Middle East by terrorist attacks against their deployed forces. But until the far enemy was sufficiently cowed, he was certain that it would be impossible to seize and hold territory.

In the eyes of al Qaeda leaders, the soundness of bin Laden's strategy was validated in 2006 during al Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) botched attempt to declare its own Islamic state; in 2011 and 2015 when al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) experienced major setbacks after seizing large portions of Yemen; and in 2012 when al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) experienced losses after it declared a jihadist polity in northern Mali. The ongoing coalition efforts against the Islamic State group in Iraq, Syria and Libya support al Qaeda's conviction that an Islamic caliphate will not be tenable until the West is exhausted and can no longer intervene.

To exhaust the West, bin Laden sought to lure the United States and its allies into direct combat, finally succeeding in this effort thanks to the 9/11 attacks. With the West embroiled in a regional quagmire, Bin Laden and al Qaeda then counseled a low key approach to jihad, one designed to secure bases of operation by working with local opposition or insurgent groups - hiding al Qaeda's nefarious hand by operating under other names. The group also stressed the importance of "dawa," or the preaching and spreading of jihadist ideology. Once established, bases of operation and influence could be used to continue prosecuting jihad against the "far enemy," driving it out of the Middle East for good.

We know from documents captured when bin Laden was killed in May 2011 that the core leadership even considered abandoning the name "al Qaeda" because of its negative connotations and the attention the brand attracted from its enemies. Several franchises have already pursued this tactic. Al Qaeda-linked jihadists in Yemen, Tunisia and Libya, for example, use the name Ansar al-Sharia to conceal their association with al Qaeda. Likewise, al Qaeda's long-time affiliate in Syria operated under the moniker "Jabhat al-Nusra" to give it freer rein. In 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in a renewed effort to publicly disassociate itself from al Qaeda. (The truth behind this disavowal is not hard to discern: Jabhat al Nusra denied links to al Qaeda for two years of its existence yet more recent public disassociation with the core group has not led to an abandonment of al Qaeda's ideology or operational principles.)

The General Guidelines for Jihad, released in September 2013 and widely circulated, clearly articulated a set of purposely restrained tactics. The document was approved by al Qaeda's Shura Council as well as the leaders of its franchises and then signed by al Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri. The document called for al Qaeda to embed itself in the local community and abstain from attacks against noncombatants. It also called for the group to maintain its primary focus on the United States and Israel along with their allies, with a secondary emphasis on local partners. These guidelines manifested successfully in the activities of groups such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, helping make al Qaeda look restrained and reasonable compared with the Islamic State.

Al Qaeda has succeeded in triggering the direct warfare with the United States and its Western allies that bin Laden sought. Washington and its wider coalition are now involved in actively

fighting jihadist insurgencies in regions as diverse as the Sulu Archipelago and the Sahel. Al Qaeda now believes that while it is useful to continue to inspire and direct attacks in the West to provoke further intervention, such attacks are no longer critical because U.S. and allied troops are already within reach of the group's core areas of operation. Instead, al Qaeda is focusing most of its efforts on strengthening and equipping its local franchise groups and partners rather than carrying out spectacular attacks overseas. This means that it is no longer valid to judge al Qaeda's health and effectiveness merely on the basis of successful attacks.

The measure of al Qaeda's strength can only be made by looking at its progress in embedding within regional insurgencies and preparing them to fight long war struggles against the West. By this gauge, al Qaeda's influence has only grown stronger despite the heavy pressure they have been under for the past 15 years. It will be very difficult to root al Qaeda elements out of the bases it has established in places such as northwestern Syria, Libya and Yemen as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan. With this in mind, we will examine the status of those regional franchise groups and their allies.

The Franchises

Jabhat Fatah al-Sham

Al Qaeda's moderate, gradualist approach has enabled the group's Syrian project, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham to set itself apart from the Islamic State in the Syrian civil war. While the Islamic State has adopted an adversarial "us or them" stance, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham has shown itself willing to work alongside other rebel groups in Syria, non-jihadists included. It has emphasized the struggle in Syria, noting that it will turn its attention to external operations against the "far enemy" only once it concludes its fight against the government of Syrian President Bashar al Assad. This focus has enabled the group to find external funding and support, much to the consternation of the United States. In the process, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham has proved itself to be one of the most effective Syrian rebel organizations and the help it has provided other groups during joint operations has earned it a reputation as a critical opposition force.

Libyan Affiliates

The successful mainstreaming of groups such as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham will help ensure the survival of the al Qaeda wing of the jihadist movement. Al Qaeda's affiliates have become deeply embedded in several different regions. In Libya, Ansar al-Sharia, the Mujahideen Shura Council in Derna and other al Qaeda-linked militias are among the most effective forces combatting the Islamic State. This has given them room to more broadly promote themselves in much the same way Jabhat Fatah al-Sham has done in Syria. In fact, the critical role played by al Qaeda forces in ousting the Islamic State from Sirte gives the core another reason to believe in the validity of its approach.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

While al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula lost control of the Yemeni port city of Mukalla in April 2016, they managed to obtain massive resources from its occupation. This was in contrast to

their failed 2012-2013 attempt to seize and control ground in southern Yemen, when al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and their Ansar al-Sharia arm decided to fight a bitter battle to maintain control of the areas they had conquered, suffering terrible losses at the hands of the Yemeni military and U.S. airstrikes. Learning from that lesson, this time they retreated from Mukalla, taking whatever they could and relocating forces back to the tribal areas that have long served as their refuge. In doing so, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula avoided the heavy losses they sustained in 2013. Instead, the group departed Mukalla with abundant finances and a large stock of weapons and still retain considerable freedom of movement inside Yemen.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al Qaeda's Algeria-based franchise, splintered in 2013 and suffered additional losses in 2014 when some of its members defected to the Islamic State. However, the group was reinvigorated in 2016 when Mokhtar Belmokhtar returned to the al Qaeda fold with his al-Mouribitoun group. Al-Mouribitoun has operated across the region, not only conducting attacks but becoming embroiled in the kidnapping of a number of foreigners. Their ransom demands will help boost the finances of the organization as they have done for many years now. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb retains capable sub-groups in Mali, Tunisia and Libya and has also been expanding in Burkina Faso in recent months. In 2016, the group claimed credit for high-profile attacks against hotels and resorts, targeting foreigners in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso and Grand-Bassam in southern Ivory Coast. With no stability in sight for northern Mali, coupled with the ability to raise funds through smuggling and kidnapping operations and the large quantities of weapons still available for sale in Libya, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb should be able to continue to gain momentum in 2017.

Al Shabaab

In Somalia, 2016 has been a hard year for al Shabaab. The increasing capability of some Somali military units has led to better intelligence operations and heightened cooperation with U.S. special operations forces. Consequently there has been a marked increase in strikes directed at high-value al Shabaab targets. But despite these successes, al Qaeda's Somali franchise still poses a significant security threat both as an insurgent and terrorist force. The group continues to launch terrorist attacks in Mogadishu and beyond. In February, al Shabaab conducted an attack against an airliner using a bomb concealed in a laptop computer that narrowly failed to take the plane down. Al Shabaab also regularly amasses forces capable of overwhelming the positions of Somali and African Union forces in southern Somalia, providing the group with a robust supply of arms, vehicles and other materiel. The group remains in a position where it could surge back to power in large portions of Somalia if the African Union troops withdraw.

Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent

Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent never really became what it was envisioned to be. The core had imagined the franchise as an organization that could connect the many transnational, regional and local jihadist groups across South Asia. On paper the group claims to unify the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban and a large number of Pakistani, Kashmiri and

Bangladeshi groups. However in practical terms, only a few attacks in Pakistan and Bangladesh have been claimed in the name of al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent.

This dearth of attacks does not mean that the umbrella group's purported members have been inactive. In Afghanistan, the Taliban made numerous gains in 2016 and, like last year, have continued fighting even after the end of the traditional fighting season in the summer. This indicates that the Taliban has established a robust presence inside Afghanistan and does not need to move men and weapons across the snowed-in passes on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border to conduct attacks. The Taliban has made headway in almost all parts of Afghanistan in 2016 and is not likely to lose momentum in 2017.

Survival is the primary goal of any organization pursuing a long war strategy, and al Qaeda has achieved this goal against heavy odds. Under the leadership of Ayman al Zawahiri the organization has shown itself to be crafty, resilient and opportunistic. In September 2001 it took advantage of gaps in air transportation security to pull off the 9/11 attacks against the United States. Today it is taking advantage of gaps in U.S. foreign and national security policy - and battlefield ambiguity in places such as Syria, Yemen and Libya - to embed itself in those regions and create bases that it can use to conduct future attacks against the West and eventually attempt to create a caliphate. In 2017 they will continue their efforts to wear down the U.S. and its Western and regional allies and dissuade them from involvement in the Muslim world.