

## Jihadist Terrorism: Al-Qaida is Down, But Far From Out

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THE numbers tell the story: America's counter-terrorism campaign is gradually shifting from Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan to Yemen, Somalia and other parts of Africa. In just six weeks, drone attacks in Yemen against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have killed around 90 fighters. According to the *Long War Journal*, a website, America launched four attacks in April, including one this week that is believed to have killed five fighters in the Azzan district of Shabwa province. In March America carried out six strikes with Predator or Reaper drones, probably flying from a still-secret new CIA airbase in the region.

That contrasts with the falling tempo of drone attacks against “core” al-Qaeda in its North and South Waziristan sanctuaries. On current trends these will be down a third on last year, which saw barely half the 117 strikes of the peak year, 2010. In that year they killed

over 800 insurgents and terrorists (and 14 civilians, too).



One reason for the drop is that America halted most drone strikes to calm a spat that followed the killing by American forces of 24 Pakistani border troops in November. Another is success: high-value targets have become rare. The last big one was Aslam Awan, an al-Qaeda leader killed on January 11th.

Western intelligence officials believe that the number of al-Qaeda operatives in the Pakistan tribal areas has fallen to the “low hundreds”, most of them on the

run or in hiding. With nearly all its best people killed in recent years, the group's ability to plan big attacks or to direct Islamist zealots is constrained. Amid the documents and computer files seized after the killing of Osama bin Laden were “laughable” and “pie in the sky” plots, the spooks say.

Bin Laden's chosen successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Yahya al-Libi, a fiery Libyan ideologue, are regarded by intelligence sources as the only significant figures left in the organisation. Mr Zawahiri, a dour Egyptian, has struggled to adapt al-Qaeda's message to the Arab spring, whereas the more charismatic Mr Libi has been restricted to putting out the occasional video on militant websites. If either is killed, no replacements are in sight. Core al-Qaeda may try a comeback once foreign combat troops leave Afghanistan. But American special forces are staying, and the drones will maintain their deadly gaze.

Even as the core shrinks, however, the periphery is growing. Many al-Qaeda recruits who originally travelled to Pakistan now reckon they should carry on the fight elsewhere, in loosely affiliated groups such as AQAP in Yemen, Somalia's al-Shabab or north Africa's al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). For these often fractious groupings al-Qaeda may provide practical expertise, cash, weapons and communications skills. An American-born cleric, Anwar al-Awlaki, used AQAP as a base for global jihadist propaganda until he was hit by a drone attack in September.

Of the three affiliates, AQAP, founded when the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda merged in 2009, is reckoned by Western spooks to be most dangerous internationally. It trained and equipped Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Christmas Day “underpants bomber”. In 2010 it attempted to send bombs disguised as printer cartridges to Chicago synagogues.

AQAP may have only a few hundred fighters, but in alliance with local tribes it is carving out a sizeable redoubt in Yemen, a near-failed state with a fragile new government. The *Washington Post* reported this week that the CIA wants permission to be able to strike suspected terrorists in Yemen using its drones even if it does not know who they are.

AQIM officially merged with core al-Qaeda in 2006. Ever since it has been energetically “Africanising”, as the European Union's counter-terrorism co-ordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, put it last year. Having spread from its original patch—Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger—it is now trying to get going in post-Qaddafi Libya and to form ties with the militant Salafist Boko Haram movement in Nigeria. This reappeared in 2010 after the death of its leader Mohammed Yusuf. The group's increasingly violent attacks and use of suicide-bombings suggest it has technical and material help from AQIM. That is terrible for Nigeria, less so for Europe and North America: AQIM often targets foreign aid workers and contractors (usually to raise ransom money), but it has shown little interest in targets outside north-west Africa.

The third affiliate, al-Shabab, has been edging closer to al-Qaeda for four years. But it completed its formal merger only in February. A largely tribe-based grouping that emerged from Somalia's Islamic Courts Union in 2006, al-Shabab has successfully recruited diaspora Somalis from both neighbouring countries and the West. Among several thousand local fighters are about a hundred from America and Europe. Nearly half of the Europeans are British, intelligence sources say.

Like AQIM, al-Shabab's interests are primarily local. Under pressure from foreign forces supporting Somalia's government, and riven with disagreement over its relations with al-Qaeda, al-Shabab has been pushed out of Mogadishu into the semi-autonomous Puntland. It may now link up across the Red Sea with AQAP. A big question is whether the group is willing to divert resources to strike at the “far” (Western) enemy. Intelligence agencies fear it could send British and American passport-holders home with the expertise and motivation to launch terror attacks.

Experts agree that al-Qaeda is now a decentralised federation, but disagree about its future. The attrition of its leadership and the Arab spring's undermining of its legitimacy suggest to some that it is slowly dying. Others see it as resilient and hydra-headed, fomenting an “arc of instability” from the western Sahel to the Horn of Africa, and still capable of radicalising and training many dangerous people.