

Introduction

Al-Qaida's first recruitment video was issued in early 2001.¹ It showed footage from al-Qaida's training camps in Afghanistan. It showed groups of masked men marching in the desert, raising the black banner of the Prophet. It showed the men running obstacle courses in the day and jumping through rings of fire at night. It told the story of how two of these men, armed with nothing but a glassfiber boat and a pack of explosives, had destroyed one of the mightiest warships in the world, the *USS Cole*. Joining al-Qaida sure looked exciting, at least judging from the content of their propaganda.

In reality it was a rather tedious process. All recruits arriving in Kandahar from mid-2000 had to register at the Office of Mujahidin Affairs. They had to fill out a five-page form stating their nickname, country, hometown, date of birth, and mother tongue. There were questions about education, occupation, and level of religious knowledge. Recruits had to detail the circumstances of their leaving for Afghanistan, previous militant training, and their goals for the future. They had to sign the form accepting a list of "regulations and requirements" for attending training.² Then, they had to move to the guesthouse and wait for an appropriate training course to start. The initial process could take days or weeks.

Literally thousands of books have been written about al-Qaida since September 11, 2001, when the group carried out one of the deadliest

¹ *The Destruction of the American Destroyer USS Cole*, al-Sahab, 2001, accessed via FFI's *Jihadi Video Database*, Kjeller, Norway, videos no. 647 and 648.

² AQ-PMPR-D-001-837, "Al-Qa'eda recruitment and new personnel forms," April 25, 2001, Conflict Records Resource Center, Washington, DC.

terrorist attacks in history of the United States. Yet, there is one particular aspect of al-Qaida that remains understudied – namely, the history of al-Qaida in Afghanistan. New primary sources suggest that al-Qaida was involved in a range of activities in Afghanistan not immediately connected to international terrorism. It organized the influx of foreign volunteers to Afghanistan. It facilitated training for other militant groups. It sent some of its most senior commanders to the frontline north of Kabul to fight for the Taliban. This does not add up with the standard image of al-Qaida as an international terrorist network bent on destroying the United States, or at least forcing it to change its policies toward the Middle East. It appears there are still gaps in our knowledge about al-Qaida, and subsequently, about the broader phenomenon of militant Islamism of which al-Qaida is a part.

This book explores the following paradox: If al-Qaida was an international terrorist network bent on destroying the United States, why did it spend so many resources on training and fighting in Afghanistan? The answer is that al-Qaida in 1996–2001 followed a dual strategy. Although a small part of al-Qaida carried out international terrorist attacks, the larger part was involved in building a resilient organization. Having a strong organization would be helpful if the United States decided to invade Afghanistan, but this was not the main goal. Rather, bin Laden envisioned that the organization he was building in Afghanistan would play a crucial part in the next stage of al-Qaida's battle, which was to oust Arab dictators in the Middle East and install Islamic regimes in their place. Al-Qaida did not believe that revolution in the Arab world would happen by itself. Al-Qaida saw itself, from the beginning of its existence, as a revolutionary vanguard whose main task was to train and educate cadre for the Islamic world.

In other words, I argue that al-Qaida was more bureaucratic and had a more revolutionary, Middle Eastern-focused agenda than previously assumed. I argue that al-Qaida's goal was to establish Islamic rule across the Muslim world, but with the Middle East as its main priority. I derive these findings from a detailed case-study of al-Qaida's actions and priorities in Afghanistan over a period of thirteen years – from 1988 to 2001, using al-Qaida's internal documents as a main source. This book differs from previous studies of al-Qaida, that tend to interpret al-Qaida's goals and strategies based on a few, select primary sources – such as bin Laden's public statements and interviews – or a few, select actions – such as the 9/11 attacks.

The findings presented here have three main implications. First, it has implications on how we understand al-Qaida's strategy. Today there are two dominant and irreconcilable interpretations of the strategic rationale behind 9/11. One camp argues that the purpose of 9/11 was to drag the United States into war in Afghanistan. The other camp argues that the purpose of 9/11 was to make the United States crumble and collapse. Both these views represent thoughts and desires of bin Laden at the time of 9/11 but none of them accurately describes al-Qaida's pre-9/11 strategy. Al-Qaida's strategies were never fixed. They were constantly adjusted to make use of opportunities that arose. I argue that at the time of 9/11, bin Laden did not know how the United States would react. He envisioned a range of scenarios, from US collapse to a full-scale US invasion of Afghanistan. He was hoping for the first, but he did not rule out the second. When the United States decided to invade Afghanistan and destroy the Taliban regime, al-Qaida had to adjust its strategy accordingly. When the United States made the ill-advised decision to invade Iraq in 2003, al-Qaida again adjusted its strategy. The ability to adapt, to pursue short- and long-term goals, and to pursue multiple strategies at the same time are core characteristics of al-Qaida's strategic behavior.

Second, the findings presented in this book have implications for how we understand al-Qaida. This book takes a clear, and perhaps controversial, stance in that ubiquitous debate about what al-Qaida actually *is*: Is it an organization, a network, or an ideology? Does it have a fixed membership or not? I argue that al-Qaida was not only an organization with a clearly defined hierarchy and membership. It saw organization building as a central part of its strategy – at least prior to 9/11.

Third, the findings have implications for how we theorize jihadism and militant Islamism. The findings suggest that international terrorism against Western targets is a temporary strategy subject to change. I, therefore, question the usefulness of labels such as “global jihadism” to describe al-Qaida's ideology and rationale for fighting. I believe a different categorization is needed, at least if the purpose is to understand the strategic behavior of militant Islamist actors. I will not present a new theoretical model of militant Islamism in this book, but I believe my case study can serve as a starting point for such a theorizing in the future.

Some readers might wonder why I wrote a book about al-Qaida pre-2001, if the purpose is to understand modern militant Islamism. Why not write a book about the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) instead? ISIS is a more contemporary phenomenon and is certainly viewed as a more

urgent threat to the West. The answer is simple. At the time of finishing this book, ISIS had existed for three years. Al-Qaida had existed for almost thirty years. By studying the history of al-Qaida over time and in a confined geographical area, I aim to identify and explain changes in al-Qaida's strategic behavior and, ultimately, lay the groundwork for theorizing on when and why militant Islamists change their strategic priorities over time.

There are several things that his book is not. This is not a book about the Taliban or about Afghanistan in general. It looks at Afghanistan and Taliban through the eyes of the Arab militants who spent time there in the 1980s and 1990s. It sheds light on some of the decision-making processes of the Taliban, but it is not a complete analysis of the Taliban's political behavior. Thus I will not answer questions such as: "Why did the Taliban refuse to expel bin Laden?" or "To what extent was the Taliban regime complicit in the 9/11 attacks?" However, I will discuss certain aspects of the relationship between al-Qaida and the Taliban.³ I will argue that the Taliban regime actively supported al-Qaida's training camps in Afghanistan and allowed for Arabs to volunteer fighting on the Taliban's frontlines, because this is amply documented in the primary sources reviewed in this study. Moreover, I will argue that the Taliban had a *laissez-faire* attitude toward bin Laden's suspected involvement in terrorism, because this is also fairly well documented. However, I stop short of concluding that the Taliban was somehow complicit in bin Laden's international crimes. This would be beyond the purpose of this book, which is to tell the history of al-Qaida in Afghanistan and to theorize on al-Qaida's strategies pre-9/11.

Moreover, this is not a book about al-Qaida's development after 2001. I limit myself here to studying al-Qaida's strategies prior to 9/11, both due to space limitations and because the US-led invasion of Afghanistan brought about a fundamental change in al-Qaida's strategic behavior. After 2001, al-Qaida abandoned the strategy of building strong bases on the periphery of the Muslim world – in countries like Sudan and Afghanistan. Instead, al-Qaida established "franchises" in the center. These franchises were not statelike entities with large territorial control, but insurgent groups that were fighting a central government for control

³ For a more thorough discussion of the al-Qaida–Taliban relationship, and in particular the question of why the Taliban refused to expel bin Laden from Afghanistan, even when faced with an existential threat, please consult author's PhD dissertation from 2012. The main argument is that the Taliban protected bin Laden because they believed the domestic controversies caused by his expulsion would be more harmful to the Taliban than the international pressure. Anne Stenersen, *Brothers in Jihad: Explaining the relationship between al-Qaida and the Taliban, 1996–2001* (PhD dissertation, University of Oslo, 2012).

over population and territory. In the epilogue, I briefly discuss these post-2001 developments, which may serve as a starting point for further study. Al-Qaida's strategic behavior post-2001 merits separate treatment beyond the scope of this book.

EXISTING LITERATURE

Existing literature on al-Qaida in Afghanistan can roughly be divided in two categories: Literature on al-Qaida,⁴ and literature on Afghanistan and the Taliban.⁵ The two topics have traditionally been studied within different academic disciplines. Al-Qaida has been treated within Middle Eastern and terrorism studies, whereas the Taliban has been dealt with within history and Asian studies. After the US-led invasion of Afghanistan

⁴ Michael Scheuer [Anonymous], *Through our enemies' eyes: Osama bin Laden, radical Islam, and the future of America* (Washington DC: Brassey's, 2003); Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the secret world of Osama bin Laden*, 4th ed. (London: Phoenix, 2003); Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside al Qaeda: Global network of terror* (New York: Berkley, 2003); Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda: The true story of radical Islam* (London: Penguin, 2004); Steve Coll, *Ghost wars: The secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004); Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I know: An oral history of al-Qaeda's leader* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Abdel Bari Atwan, *The secret history of al-Qa'ida* (London: Saqi Books, 2006); Lawrence Wright, *The looming tower: Al-Qaeda and the road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Brynjar Lia, *Architect of global jihad: The life of al-Qaida strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Camille Tawil, *Brothers in arms: The story of al-Qa'ida and the Arab jihadists* (London: Saqi Books, 2010); Michael Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden* (New York: Oxford, 2011).

⁵ Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, religion and the new order in Afghanistan* (London: Zed Books, 1998); William Maley, ed., *Fundamentalism reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (London: Hurst, 1998); Michael Griffin, *Reaping the whirlwind: The Taliban movement in Afghanistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2001); M. J. Gohari, *The Taliban: Ascent to power* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, oil and the new great game in central Asia* (London: Tauris, 2002); Neamatollah Nojumi, *The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass mobilization, civil war, and the future of the region* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State formation and collapse in the international system*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution unending: Afghanistan 1979 to the present* (London: Hurst, 2005); Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and laptop: The neo-Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007); Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi, *The Taliban and the crisis of Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); James Fergusson, *Taliban: The unknown enemy* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010); Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An enemy we created: The myth of the Taliban/Al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan, 1970–2010* (London: Hurst, 2012); Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of jihad: The Haqqani nexus, 1973–2012* (London: Hurst, 2013).

in 2001, al-Qaida and Taliban have also been studied within the insurgency and counterinsurgency literature, but these books rarely cover the period prior to 2001.⁶

Studies of the Taliban regime in the period of 1996–2001 have tended to focus on macro- and mesolevel dynamics. For example, Ahmed Rashid's account of the Taliban from 2000 continued to pursue the classical paradigm of the "Great Game" – that Afghanistan's history is shaped by external actors and that the Taliban, to some extent at least, was a product of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).⁷ Newer studies, for example, Dorronsoro's book on the modern history of Afghanistan from 2004, point to domestic factors, such as tribes, culture, and ethnicities as drivers for the rise of the Taliban.⁸ These studies are supplemented by literature that analyzes the impact of Taliban rule on the microlevel (i.e., village and personal).⁹

Common to most Taliban-focused literature is the omission or simplification of the impact of Arab militants in Afghanistan. This may be justified by the fact that the Arabs played a marginal role in Afghan society. The Arabs were small in number and largely kept to themselves. They had their own housing complexes, training camps and fighting units, with relatively sparse interaction with the local population. However, it is beyond doubt that the presence of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida in Afghanistan played a direct role in shaping the history of the region. Bin Laden's presence in Afghanistan was the main justification for the US-led invasion of the country and the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001. The Taliban's decision to host bin Laden in Afghanistan prior to 2001 continues to haunt the movement today – the fear that al-Qaida might return to a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is, arguably, the *raison d'être* for continued international military presence in the country. The Afghanistan-focused literature acknowledges that the Taliban's decision to protect bin Laden in 1996–2001 was a fatal one. And yet,

⁶ See, for example, Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008); David Kilcullen, *The accidental guerrilla: Fighting small wars in the midst of a big one* (London: Hurst, 2009).

⁷ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). For a classical account of the "great game," see Peter Hopkirk, *The great game: The struggle for empire in central Asia* (New York: Kodansha, 1992).

⁸ Dorronsoro, *Revolution unending*; see also Crews and Tarzi, *The Taliban and the crisis of Afghanistan*, 59–89.

⁹ See, for example, Kristian Berg Harpviken, *Social networks and migration in wartime Afghanistan* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

the background for the decision has rarely been subjected to close scrutiny, the main reason probably being the lack of insider sources to the decision-making processes within the Taliban. A dominant narrative is thus that bin Laden was protected by a group of “hardliners” within the Taliban.

Al-Qaida-focused literature contains several rich and detailed accounts of al-Qaida’s history in Afghanistan. However, most of the literature sees al-Qaida as an international terrorist network bent on attacking the United States. There has been a tendency to look on all of al-Qaida’s activities in Afghanistan in this light. For example, the literature describes al-Qaida’s killing of Ahmed Shah Massoud on September 9, 2001 as a “preparation” for the 9/11 attacks, rather than seeing it in its proper local context.¹⁰ A different interpretation, which will be presented in Chapter 7 of this book, is that Massoud’s assassination was a special operation behind enemy lines, designed to give the Taliban a strategic advantage in the war. Moreover, the literature gives disproportionate attention to al-Qaida’s anti-American ideology and activities related to international terrorism – failing to see the broader aspects of its ideology and activities in Afghanistan. While the Taliban-focused literature rarely consults Arabic primary sources, al-Qaida-focused literature often fails to see al-Qaida as part of a local, Afghan context.

As a result, the existing literature represents a simplified understanding of al-Qaida’s history in Afghanistan. With a few notable exceptions, discussions of al-Qaida in Afghanistan are seldom based on systematic use of Arabic, Pashto, and Persian primary sources.¹¹ In contrast, this book uses a range of primary sources that were previously not accessible to researchers, including a collection of thousands of internal al-Qaida documents. It contributes to existing perspectives on al-Qaida in Afghanistan by explaining the history from al-Qaida’s point of view, as opposed to previous books that see history through the eyes of al-Qaida outsiders – the Taliban, other Arabs in Afghanistan, the Pakistanis, or Western observers. This book analyzes al-Qaida’s goals and strategies on al-Qaida’s own terms, using al-Qaida’s own definitions as a starting point.

¹⁰ See, for example, Tawil, *Brothers in arms*, 172; van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An enemy we created*, 209.

¹¹ There are some exceptions such as: Lia, *Architect of global jihad*; Tawil, *Brothers in arms*; van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An enemy we created*; Brown and Rassler, *Fountainhead of jihad*; Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at war in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2015).

AL-QAIDA'S GOALS

There is no consensus in the literature on what al-Qaida's goals and strategies are. Al-Qaida's goals have been described broadly – to establish a worldwide Islamic caliphate – and narrowly – expelling American military troops from Saudi Arabia. On a different level, al-Qaida's goals have been described as political and rational – make the United States disengage from the Middle East – to irrational – that mass-violence framed as holy war or *jihad* is somehow a goal in itself.

This study aims to analyze al-Qaida on its own terms. Thus I use al-Qaida's own internal documents as a starting point, in order to see how they perceive their own goals and strategies. Al-Qaida's foundation charter from 1988 stated that al-Qaida's general goals are “to establish truth, get rid of evil and establish an Islamic nation” and the methods are fourfold:

1. Spread the sentiment of jihad in the Islamic nation.
2. Prepare the cadre through training and participating in fighting.
3. Back and support the jihad movements in the world, according to ability.
4. Coordinate between jihad movements in the world, according to ability.¹²

The charter contains important clues to understanding al-Qaida's strategic thinking. It indicates how al-Qaida should prioritize its resources by differing between obligatory and voluntary activities. Activities in direct support of al-Qaida's aims, such as “spreading the sentiment of *jihad*” and building a strong organization, are obligatory. Activities that indirectly support al-Qaida's aims, such as assisting other jihadist movements, should be carried out “according to ability.” This suggests that al-Qaida may at times engage in activities that do not have a direct strategic purpose, such as training and supporting others. Frontline fighting may thus have an idealistic purpose (helping Muslims) and a strategic purpose (test and train new cadre). Al-Qaida differs from a regular army where every action should serve a strategic or tactical purpose.

Al-Qaida most certainly developed its strategic thinking over time. The 1988 charter stated that al-Qaida's strategies should be to spread the sentiment of *jihad* and educate the cadre. In 1996, al-Qaida adopted a strategy of international terrorism. Al-Qaida's strategy of international

¹² J. M. Berger (ed.), *Benevolence International: Court documents concerning an al-Qaeda-linked charity front based in Chicago, Ill.* (N.p.: Intelwire Press, 2006): 345.

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terrorism was known as the “far enemy” doctrine. Al-Qaida believed that the “far enemy,” the United States, should be removed before the Muslims could succeed in their struggle against the “near enemies” – the Arab regimes. In June 2001, bin Laden himself provided an outline of this strategy:

[Our] intention is to expel (*ikbraj*) the infidels from the lands of Islam, and to expel their agents (*al-umala'*) and on their ruins and on the ruins of their agents, establish the truth, and establish Islam, and establish the religion.¹³

The quote clarifies three important points. First, bin Laden specifies a time frame for al-Qaida's fight. Al-Qaida does not want to fight until the end of time, as they have sometimes claimed in propaganda and official interviews. Al-Qaida wants to oust local rulers who do not rule according to Islam, and install Islamic government instead. Al-Qaida is fighting toward a goal; it does not see fighting as a goal in itself.

Second, bin Laden narrowed the geographical area of al-Qaida's fight. Al-Qaida did not want to establish a worldwide caliphate. Al-Qaida cared about “lands of Islam” – territories inhabited primarily by Muslims, and that, in al-Qaida's view, should be run according to Sharia law. I believe “lands of Islam” refers to the modern Muslim world rather than a historic caliphate because al-Qaida in 1996–2001 supported Islamist movements in East Asia – areas that were not part of the traditional caliphate. I also do not believe that al-Qaida saw it as a priority to conquer the Andalusian part of Spain. I believe however, that al-Qaida's strategic priority was the Middle East, not the whole Muslim world.

The third point is that bin Laden described al-Qaida's struggle as a three-phased process. Each phase should be completed before the next is begun. First, the Americans had to be expelled from the Middle East. Then, the local regimes must be removed. Then, Islamic rule can be established. Al-Qaida was against the idea of declaring an Islamic state before the territory was won, such as al-Qaida in Iraq did in 2006. It was also against the idea of establishing a state before ousting the local rulers, such as the Islamic State did when they declared a caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014.

The three points illustrated in the Bin Laden quote – that al-Qaida is fighting towards a goal; that al-Qaida's goal has geographic limits (or at least priorities); and that al-Qaida sees its fight as a multi-phased

¹³ Osama bin Laden, *bushrayat lil-shaykh usama*, al-Sahab, undated [ca. June 19, 2001], accessed via *FFI's Jihadi Video Database*, video no. 855.

process, are fundamental assumptions that guide the analysis conducted in this book.

OUTLINE

The book is divided into nine chapters. Chapter 1 covers the circumstances of al-Qaida's foundation in 1988 and activities during the first years of its existence from 1988–1992. Al-Qaida was initially founded to be an elite Muslim combat unit that would serve as an example and inspiration to Afghan guerrillas. Contrary to common belief, al-Qaida did not withdraw from Afghanistan in 1989, but continued being deeply engaged on the frontlines until the fall of the Afghan communist regime to the mujahidin in 1992. Al-Qaida in this period formulated their training philosophy, which was improved and expanded under the Taliban regime.

Chapter 2 examines relations between al-Qaida, other Arabs, and Afghan factions during the Afghan civil war from 1992–1996. In this period, al-Qaida gradually disengaged from Afghanistan. It planned initially to continue using Afghanistan for training. Over time, political developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan made it difficult for al-Qaida to run systematic training courses. Only a handful of al-Qaida cadre stayed in Afghanistan throughout the civil war, overseeing al-Qaida's possessions and supporting other militant groups. Al-Qaida was a marginal actor in Afghanistan in this period, dwarfed by the networks of other, enterprising individuals hailing from the larger Afghan-Arab community.

Chapter 3 sheds light on bin Laden's return to Afghanistan in 1996 and the start of the al-Qaida-Taliban relationship. When bin Laden returned to Afghanistan in May 1996, he was initially looking for a refuge from where he could continue his proselytizing campaign against the Saudi regime. He found refuge in Eastern Afghanistan with old allies from the Afghan-Soviet war. When Taliban came to power a few months later and invited bin Laden to stay under their protection, bin Laden saw an opportunity to continue the state-building project he had failed to finish in Sudan. An internal al-Qaida document from 1997 outlines the first contours of al-Qaida's Afghanistan strategy: Taliban-run Afghanistan would be an exemplary Islamic state and a base from where to spread the Islamic revolution. Like Sudan, Afghanistan was situated on the fringes of the Muslim world, far from the US influence that prevented al-Qaida from establishing a base in the Middle East.

Chapter 4 explores the political relationship between al-Qaida and the Taliban. Bin Laden managed to secure a sanctuary in Afghanistan,