# Al-Qaida in Afghanistan

Since 9/11, al-Qaida has become one of the most infamous and widely discussed terrorist organizations in the world, with affiliates spread across the globe. However, little known are the group's activities within Afghanistan itself, something that Anne Stenersen examines in this book. Using an array of unique primary sources, she presents an alternative narrative of al-Qaida's goals and strategies prior to 9/11. She argues that al-Qaida's actions were not just an ideological expression of religious fanaticism and violent anti-Americanism, but that they were actually far more practical and organized, with a more revolutionary and Middle Eastern–focused agenda than previously thought. Through Stenersen's analysis, we see how al-Qaida employed a dual strategy: with a small section focused on staging international terrorist attacks, but at the same time with a larger part dedicated to building a resilient and cohesive organization that would ultimately serve as a vanguard for future Islamist revolutions.

Anne Stenersen (M.Phil., PhD) is a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) in Norway. With an academic background rooted in history, Arabic and Middle Eastern studies, she has conducted research on militant Islamism, with a focus on CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) terrorism, al-Qaida and the Taliban.

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Any errors of analysis or fact are, of course, my responsibility.

# Note on Transliteration

The transliteration of Arabic words into English has been simplified by making no distinction between emphatic and nonemphatic consonants, and between long and short vowels. When *ayn* and *hamza* appear at the beginning of a word, they have been omitted. In other positions they are represented by the signs ‘ and ’. Arabic names follow the same transliteration rules, except for names that already have a widely used spelling in English (e.g., Osama bin Laden). English names and words occurring in Arabic texts have been transliterated back to their original form (e.g., land cruiser not land kruzar).

# Note on Sources

The main sources used for this study are internal documents from the al-Qaida network. These documents were found in Arab camps and safe houses in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime in November 2001. Most of the documents were captured by the US military and transferred to the US Department of Defense, where they were stored in a classified database known as Harmony. Since 2005, a selection of the documents have been de-classified and made available to academic researchers through the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, New York, and the Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC) at the National Defense University in Washington, DC. Another collection of internal al-Qaida documents were retrieved by journalists who were present in Afghanistan to cover the US-led invasion in late 2001. A small number of these documents were later paraphrased or published in full in Western newspapers.[1] A third collection of al-Qaida documents have been made available to the public after being presented as evidence in court cases against suspected terrorists in the United States.[2] In sum, these collections amount to several thousand pages of internal al-Qaida correspondence and other written material affiliated with al-Qaida including diaries, battlefield reports, camp schedules, lists of al-Qaida members, meeting notes, and personal letters.

A second, important source used in this study are memoirs by Arab, Afghan, and Pakistani individuals close to the events. They include

[1] Alan Cullison, "Inside al-Qaeda's hard drive: Budget squabbles, baby pictures, office rivalries – and the path to 9/11," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 2004.

[2] In particular, the trials against Khalid al-Fawwaz in Southern District of New York (2015); *United States v. Babar Ahmad* (2014), and *United States v. Arnaout* (2002).

jihadists, former Taliban officials, journalists, and Pakistani officials.[3] Some of these memoirs have only been used by researchers to a limited degree before – including Fadil Harun's *War on Islam: The Story of Fadil Harun* and Abu al-Shukara al-Hindukushi's *My Memoirs from Kabul to Baghdad*.[4] The former is written by an al-Qaida veteran who served as al-Qaida's secretary from 1998. The latter is written by an Egyptian jihadist who served on various frontlines with Arabs in Afghanistan, and who eventually joined al-Qaida in 1999 or 2000. Other memoirs have also been consulted including Vahid Mojdeh's *Five Years Under Taliban Sovreignty,* Mustafa Hamid's book series *Chatter on the World's Rooftop*, and Ayman al-Zawahiri's memoir, *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*.[5]

A third, and arguably controversial source used in this study is a collection of classified memoranda from the US prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba known as *The Guantánamo Files*. They were leaked to the public in 2011 by *Wikileaks*.[6] The memoranda summarize US intelligence about each of the prisoners detained at Guantánamo in order to recommend continued detention or release. Part of the intelligence is based on information extracted from Guantánamo prisoners under duress, and in some

[3] Including, but not limited to, Abu Zubaydah, *The Abu Zubaydah Diaries, vol. 1–6*, translated to English by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, published by *Al-Jazeera*, December 3, 2013; Malika El Aroud, *Les soldats de lumière [Soldiers of light]*, Dépôt légal: D/2003/9625/2, Imprimé en Belgique; Mustafa Hamid, *tharthara fi saqaf al-alam* vol. 1–12 (Place and publisher unknown, year unknown); Jamal Isma'il, *bin ladin wa al-jazira wa … ana* (Place unknown: Dar al-Huriya, 2001); Vahid Mojdeh, *Afghanistan wa panj sal sultah taliban [Afghanistan and five years under Taliban sovereignty],* 2nd ed. (Tehran: Nashreney, 1382 H. [2003]); Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, *Afghanistan aw Taliban [Afghanistan and the Taliban]* (place and publisher unknown, 1384 h. [2005]); S. Iftikhar Murshed, *Afghanistan: The Taliban years* (London: Bennett and Bloom, 2006); Jean Sasson, N. bin Laden and O. bin Laden, *Growing up Bin Laden: Osama's wife and son take us inside their secret world* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009); Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, "*muqabala ma'a sahifat al-ra'i al-amm al-kuwaytiyya*," [transcript of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's interview with journalist Majid al-Ali in Kabul, Afghanistan, 18 March 1999], unpublished, courtesy Brynjar Lia; Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My life with the Taliban* (London: Hurst, 2010).

[4] With the notable exception of Nelly Lahoud's excellent study of Fadil Harun's memoir. Nelly Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators: al-Qa`ida through the lens of its confidential secretary* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012); Fadil Harun [Fadil Abdallah Muhammad], *al-harb ala al-islam: qissat fadil harun*, vol. 1 (Place and publisher unknown, 2009); Abu al-Shukara al-Hindukushi, *mudhakkarati min kabul ila baghdad*, part 1–9 (Place and publisher unknown, 2007), accessed February 5, 2016. https://archive.org/details/@alhindkoshi.

[5] Ayman al-Zawahiri, *fursan taht rayat al-nabi* (Place unknown: Minbar al-tawhid wal-jihad, 2001).

[6] "WikiLeaks reveals secret files on all Guantánamo prisoners," *Wikileaks*, accessed July 31, 2012,. http://wikileaks.ch/gitmo/

cases, by use of what former US President George W. Bush Jr. termed "enhanced interrogation techniques."[7] However, *The Guantánamo Files* are not raw interrogation reports, but intelligence products based on multiple sources of information including, but not limited to, prisoner interrogations. In spite of the moral and legal predicaments, *The Guantánamo Files* can hardly be ignored when studying the history of al-Qaida in Afghanistan. I have used them here to cross-check other information, to pinpoint locations of Arab training camps and guesthouses, and to fill in certain gaps in the history of al-Qaida in Afghanistan that were not covered in other sources, but that were extensively covered in *The Guantánamo Files* – for example, details about al-Qaida's recruitment procedures in the Gulf in 1999–2001.

A fourth source are declassified US documents maintained by the *National Security Archive* at George Washington University. The archive includes a large collection of diplomatic cables, primarily between the US Embassy in Islamabad and the US Department of State in the period 1994–2001, as well as other documents concerning the relationship between the United States and the Taliban.[8]

A fifth type of source used for this study is interviews with Afghan, Pakistani, and Arab individuals close to the events. Most of the interviews were conducted during the author's fieldwork in Kabul in 2009. Many of the interviewees were former Taliban officials, but representatives of other parties were also included. I have decided to anonymize all interviewees, because some of them still reside in volatile areas of the world and may or may not wish to be associated with the topics discussed in this book.

The sixth, major type of source used for this book is journalistic sources from the Middle East and Pakistan. Two archives in particular were consulted – the electronic archives of the Arabic daily *al-Hayat*, and the English-language archives of *Dawn Newspaper Group* in Karachi, Pakistan. *Al-Hayat* is a Saudi-owned international daily newspaper based in London and Beirut, and it is one of the largest circulated newspapers in the Middle East. *Al-Hayat* was selected because it covered the Taliban

[7] Several Human Rights organizations have condemned the use of "Enhanced interrogation techniques," arguing that the techniques are equal to torture. United States President Obama in 2009 supported the notion that techniques such as waterboarding amount to torture. "Obama: 'I believe waterboarding was torture, and it was a mistake'," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2009.

[8] "The September 11th Sourcebooks," *The National Security Archive*, accessed February 24, 2011, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/sept11/

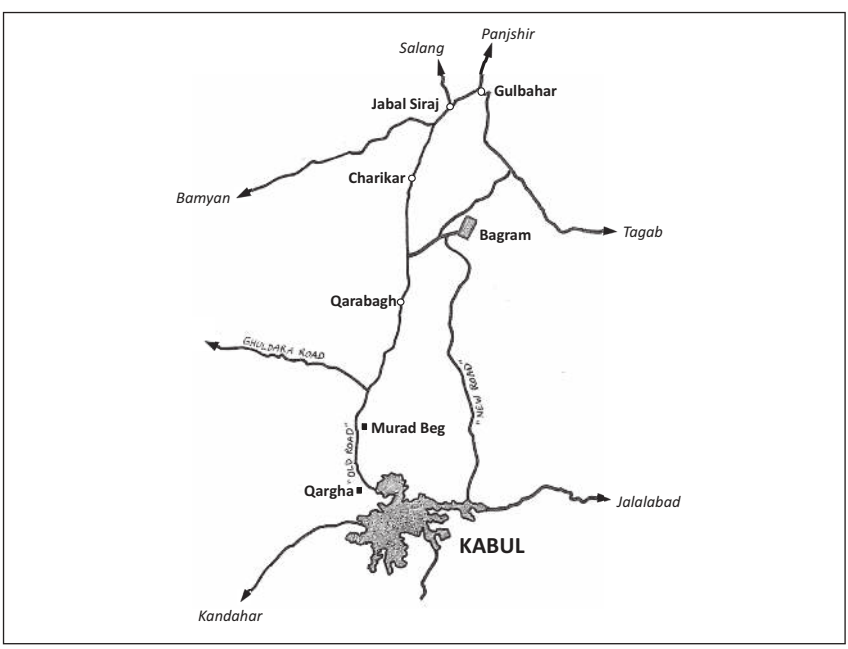
regime period in Afghanistan and the role of Arab fighters in some detail, and because its journalists had relatively good access to insider sources, including sources close to or familiar with al-Qaida and Taliban's leadership. At the time, *al-Hayat* conducted several phone interviews with Mullah Omar and other Taliban representatives, as opposed to Western media that tended to rely more heavily on information from US government officials and other secondary sources. The *Dawn* archive contained articles written by Pakistani journalists with direct access to Taliban officials and other Afghan sources, in addition to invaluable information about the regional context in which al-Qaida and the Taliban were operating.

In sum, these primary sources represent a wide variety of perspectives. They represent al-Qaida's official and unofficial communications. They represent the personal accounts of militants from inside and outside al-Qaida. They also represent the perspectives of the US intelligence and diplomatic communities, and of Middle Eastern and Pakistani politicians, security officials, and observers. Each source tells the story through the lens of his or her own worldview, and since I sometimes rely on one or a few sources only, my empirical chapters are bound to contain mistakes and inaccuracies. However, I believe that the story of al-Qaida in Afghanistan is still a story worth telling, and that my overall analysis – which is the synthesis of information from a wide range of sources – is a valuable contribution to the existing literature on al-Qaida.

# Maps


MAP 1. Afghanistan.


MAP 2. Jaji base and surroundings.




MAP 3. The Kabul front, 1996–2001.