Although Al Qaeda has been significantly weakened as an organisation, its ideological footprint has grown in recent years. This has been partly because of the 2011 Arab revolts, which removed established regimes that opposed jihadism in the Middle East and North Africa. A secondary reason has been the death of Osama Bin Laden, which permitted the re-emergence of an indirect approach to fighting the West. There is no longer an overarching body in the international ‘jihadosphere’, but rather, there are regional groups that are becoming more deadly.
For some years, there has been muted concern among Western counterterrorism experts regarding the threat of ‘glocal’ terrorism, a new phenomenon unlike previous waves of terrorist violence. This threat was highlighted by the January 2013 attack in Algeria, in which jihadists linked to Al Qaeda seized a gas pumping facility, killing 38 foreign workers. Rather than being an isolated incident, the attack appears to have been a logical progression in Al Qaeda’s longstanding efforts to transpose its millennial ideology and targeting philosophy into new regions outside of South Asia. Although these efforts did not meet with much success during the 1990s and early 2000s, they now seem to be gaining traction, ironically in part due to two developments that were thought to have signalled the demise of the jihadist group.

The first and more important development was the wave of revolts which rocked the Arab world in 2011. Some of these, in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, ended with autocratic rulers being swept from power. Initially welcomed by Western governments as a progressive trend – democratisation without radicalisation – the revolts are now viewed as potential sources of instability. The abrupt removal of established regimes appears to have created operational space for radical Islamist groups to compete in. Being relatively unconcerned about Western opprobrium, some elements within these radical groups are becoming responsive to strategic outreach from Al Qaeda. The Arab jihadist network, from its base in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, is keen to exploit regime changes in the Middle East.

This leads to the second development which has boosted Al Qaeda’s ideology locally: the death of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011. Documents captured by US forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan during 2001–11 reveal that Al Qaeda was not monolithic; it was a tightly-knit coalition of different regional jihadist factions. Bin Laden spent much of his time managing conflicting priorities between these factions: Some wanted to overthrow apostate Arab governments (the ‘near enemy’) while others wanted to attack the United States (the ‘far enemy’). Bin Laden himself was opposed to internecine warfare between Muslims and thus advocated long-distance attacks on Western homelands. His deputy and eventual successor, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, was on the other hand more interested in regional jihad. With Bin Laden gone, Zawahiri’s emphasis on attacking the ‘near enemy’ has gained impetus.
The shift in targeting priorities
Between them, the Arab revolts and Bin Laden’s death have cleared the way for Al Qaeda to develop a more localised approach to fighting the West, one that focuses on hitting Western assets overseas. Having taken heart from what they see as Washington’s inability to support authoritarian governments in the Middle East and North Africa, Al Qaeda strategists feel that a cash-strapped and risk-averse United States would not be willing to maintain a prolonged presence in Muslim lands, if attacked there. Although their ultimate goal of establishing a pan-Islamic caliphate seems beyond reach at present, they view the 2011 Arab revolts as a loss of Western influence in the Muslim world, and thus as the removal of a key obstacle in their path. Building on the forward momentum thus created, they are tapping into pre-existing connections with radical Islamists worldwide to acquire more striking power.

This chapter will trace the ideological and organisational evolution of Al Qaeda, two distinct processes, and examine how they came together in a strategy of cooptation. Al Qaeda has had to be both a de-territorialised political movement and a territorially-bound jihadist bureaucracy. It has reconciled the contradiction through a combination of skill-sharing and alliance-building, but these methods have granted the group an ideological reach greater than its organisational grasp. Despite suffering massive personnel losses in the last decade, Al Qaeda has still managed to increase its presence in at least 19 countries through networking with other well-established jihadist groups. With local proxies willing to act in conformity with its worldview, Al Qaeda now presents a different threat from that to which governments have grown accustomed. Although attacks on Western homelands might still be launched by subsidiary networks, the main theatre of contestation will be overseas.

‘Glocalisation’, an amalgam of globalisation and localisation, is a term originally developed in the 1980s to describe how global brands adapt to local market conditions. Lately, however, the term has been employed in the study of international terrorism, to describe the process by which local jihadist groups develop a global perspective which thereafter guides their choice of targets and tactics. The glocalisation of Al Qaeda’s brand name has not been a one-way process. Even as Al Qaeda has been seeking to build alliances, resistance to its overtures has melted due to counterterrorism successes and associated political processes.
Glocalisation makes terrorist groups more resilient

Jihadist groups that had limited contact with the Al Qaeda leadership have suffered heavy losses from police action in developing countries. Their own brutality towards local populations, often derived from crude attempts at imposing Sharia law, has lost them popular support. To keep themselves sustained with funds, weapons and personnel, they need to develop a broader narrative that allows them to seek financial and military aid from other jihadists worldwide.

There is also the legitimacy factor: The rank and file of many combat-effective jihadist groups consists largely of semi-literate youth and career criminals. Although they are able to fabricate or forcibly obtain jurisprudential sanction for their violent activities, their cadres’ ignorance of theological matters poses a credibility problem at the street level. To get around this, they seek to develop a Saudi affiliation, however tenuous, since the internal politics of jihadistism tend to place Saudi radicals in a leadership role. Since Al Qaeda is the only transnational jihadist group to have a strong Saudi pedigree, even if it is now led by an Egyptian, it is an attractive partner for local jihadists looking to bolster their own credentials.

This trend towards the fusing of global and local jihadism complicates counterterrorist efforts at both operational and political levels. Differentiated targeting by terrorist networks results in governments failing to perceive a common security threat and to act jointly against it. Overlapping connections between jihadists and criminals in ungoverned spaces make counterintelligence exceedingly difficult. In effect, the lack of a single clear-cut adversary is a throwback to the early 1990s, with the significant difference that jihadists today are better connected among themselves. They draw inspiration from each other’s tactical ‘successes’, thus closing themselves off to external criticism of the human cost inflicted. Body counts are an approximation of collective achievement in the international ‘jihadosphere’ in which Al Qaeda emerged, and which it has since managed to dominate.

By first exploring the network’s origins, this chapter will demonstrate that glocalisation has been an integral part of Al Qaeda’s strategy since the 1980s, albeit with varying degrees of emphasis. The chapter will then trace the connections that Bin Laden’s network forged during the 1990s and into the post 9/11 era. It will list the methods used and how they were adapted under counterterrorist pres-
sure. Finally, the chapter will examine current developments in theatres of jihadist activity, and their implications for European and global security.

The Islamist International

Al Qaeda emerged out of a web of transnational jihadism that had been spun by the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–89). A radical Palestinian cleric, Abdullah Azzam, issued a call for Muslims worldwide to unite in repelling the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a Muslim country. The result was a massive movement of funds and private citizens from several Arab states to Pakistan, which soon became the sanctuary of an international Islamist conglomerate. Both the donations and the citizens were focused on a military purpose: That of fighting the Soviet occupation forces and ‘rescuing’ the Afghans from their brutality.

One of the Arab volunteers to move to Pakistan was Osama Bin Laden, who, together with Azzam, established the Arab Services Bureau to receive other foreign jihadists arriving in the country. Being from a wealthy family, Bin Laden donated $25,000 per month to keep the office running. Initially an organizer and financier, in around 1987 he began to see himself as more of a frontline fighter and took part in a skirmish against Soviet troops that convinced him of his own military prowess. Having observed the lackadaisical attitude of the Afghans towards orthodox Islam and disillusioned by rampant corruption within his mentor Azzam’s inner circle, the Saudi millionaire decided to strike out for himself as a jihadist leader.

He was nudged in this direction by a coterie of Egyptian jihadists led by Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who played upon Bin Laden’s ambition. Zawahiri was mindful that Bin Laden’s cash and Saudi connections could be useful to him in his own fight against the Egyptian government. He accordingly set out to redirect Bin Laden towards supporting the overthrow of apostate regimes in the Arab world, starting with his own homeland, Egypt. Bin Laden, however, was opposed to the idea of fighting fellow Muslims and was more interested in continuing jihad against unbelievers who were occupying Islamic territories. His personal preference was to wage jihad in southern Yemen, which at that time had a communist government.

*Al Qaeda searches for an enemy*

When Al Qaeda was formed in August 1988, it had no clear agenda other than to create a lasting fellowship among Arab veterans who had fought the Soviets. There was no agreement on the enemy of this group. Only a very broad framework for future op-
network within the Lebanese militia, Hezbollah. Mughniyeh was the originator of a tactic that Al Qaeda later adopted widely: the vehicle-borne suicide bomb.

Some estimates suggest that Al Qaeda trained around 11,000 jihadists between 1996 and 2001, of whom 3000 were drilled in attack methods and 8000 instructed in support activities. As a direct participant it was, however, a relative latecomer to the international terrorist scene. Another network of jihadists, also blooded from the Soviet-Afghan War, had attempted to blow up the World Trade Center in New York in 1993 and two years later, planned to blow up US transcontinental airliners over the Pacific. Most of its members were caught, but the main leader, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, escaped arrest and drifted into Al Qaeda in 1996.

A key challenge facing Bin Laden and his followers was how to attract new recruits and build a brand name for themselves in the international Islamist movement. The core group of Al Qaeda was remarkably small: In as late as 1996, it only had 93 fulltime members. Gradually however, it established a reputation for providing quality training to freelance jihadists. Using former Egyptian military and police personnel, Al Qaeda evolved a counterintelligence and operations concept that earned the admiration of other radical Islamists. It is thought to have received advice in this regard from Imad Mughniyeh, the chief of an ultra-secretive special operations network within the Lebanese militia.

Near enemy, far enemy
Defectors and captured members of Al Qaeda all suggest that Bin Laden only gave serious thought to attacking
American interests in 1992, when the US intervened in Somalia. Although Washington was acting out of humanitarian motives, the Saudi jihadist saw a re-enactment of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan playing itself out on a grander scale. Already incensed by the US military presence in Saudi Arabia, and the Saudi government’s willingness to permit this, he now believed that the US was attempting to occupy more Muslim lands. Within two weeks of the intervention, jihadists affiliated with Al Qaeda bombed hotels in Yemen, where American soldiers en route to Somalia were staying. The subsequent halt to US transits through Yemen convinced Bin Laden that the United States had little capacity to absorb losses, and would withdraw from the Arab world if pressured.

During the 1990s, personalities played a key role in shaping Al Qaeda’s organisational philosophy. Bin Laden admired Mughniyeh, who had blasted US forces out of Lebanon in 1983. He fantasised about going even further and engineering the disintegration of the United States through jihad, just as he believed had happened to the Soviet Union. Other members of Al Qaeda were more interested in waging their own private jihads against repressive Arab governments. Despite sharing their leader’s antipathy for the ‘far enemy’, their priority was to hit the

### Timeline of Al Qaeda-related events and emergence of new branches

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'near enemy’. For a long time, these differences of opinion were submerged under a policy of seeking to hit US interests in Arab territories.

The reasoning went thus: Although the US presence in the Islamic world was abhorrent, what Al Qaeda found even more objectionable was Arab elites’ complicity in the occupation. Since it was impossible to attack the elites directly without drawing condemnation from the religious establishment, the Americans became a proxy target. Al Qaeda hoped that, by attacking the US presence on Muslim soil, it would force local governments to demonstrate their support for the United States, thereby discrediting themselves. A constant cycle of terrorist provocation, government retaliation and jihadist indoctrination would follow, eventually leading to popular demands for regime change.

A shared logic, but no shared strategy

Roughly around the same time, in 1994–95, an identical line of thought was motivating the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria to begin planning attacks on France. The former colonial power was seen as a patron of the Algerian military and its counterterrorist efforts. It had, however, succeeded in keeping this collusion hidden from the Algerian masses. If security cooperation between Algiers and Paris could be exposed through a terrorist offensive on French soil, the Algerian government would be locally discredited. Another important driver was the personal ambition of the GIA’s leader, who, like Bin Laden, had ideas of pitting himself against a major foreign adversary in order to raise his own stature among his peers.

It is important to note that Al Qaeda and the GIA had only tenuous contact with each other, and did not share a hierarchical relationship. The GIA had limited patience for Bin Laden’s US-focused strategy and, in any case, was not receptive to advice from an outsider on how it ought to conduct its activities. The commonality in their thinking did not extend to skill-sharing or mutual endorsement. On the contrary, Al Qaeda recoiled from the GIA’s indiscriminate attacks on fellow Muslims in Algeria. It was not until the GIA splintered in 1998 that one of its factions, the Group for Salafist Preaching and Combat (GSPC), emerged as a possible partner. Although the GSPC was also not interested in targeting the US, it tried to refrain from the wholesale slaughter of Muslim civilians for which its parent body had become infamous.

The Algerian case illustrated a broader dilemma that Al Qaeda has faced ever since its creation: how to balance
local and global agendas. If the network focuses too heavily on targeting the US and fails to tap into local grievances in Arab countries, it risks losing contact with the disaffected populations who supply it with new recruits. If it focuses too heavily on Arab politics, it risks marginalisation by entrenched local jihadists with the street credibility and firepower to resist its encroachment. It was partly with a view to navigating around this dilemma that in 1998 Al Qaeda made the internal shift from being a deterritorialised network and training provider to being a consolidated terrorist bureaucracy in its own right.

**Alliance-building**

Al Qaeda took on a definitive shape in February 1998, when it announced the formation of an ‘International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders’. This was the point at which Bin Laden’s outfit became a jihadist organisation with which even its potential rivals could identify and ally. It had created a firm base in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and articulated an agenda that resonated with established jihadist groups across the world. Although these groups had their own local agendas, at a rhetorical level they were happy to sign up to an internationalist project that enhanced their own prestige vis-à-vis local competitors.

**Al Qaedaism as a unifying ideology**

By positioning itself at the head of a multinational jihadist coalition dedicated to fighting Israel and the West, Al Qaeda accomplished two objectives. First, it created a distinct ideological brand. ‘Al Qaedaism’ today refers to a school of jihadist thought, whether propounded by hierarchically structured insurgent groups or loosely coordinated networks, that emphasises striking Western interests through indiscriminate and usually ‘spectacular’ attacks. These attacks can be on Western homelands, or on Western nationals wherever they are found to be vulnerable in the developing world. Largely devoid of a consistent strategic logic, it has become the gold standard among aspiring jihadists seeking to prove their capabilities.

Second, the International Islamic Front also gave Al Qaeda a plausible excuse to claim responsibility for actions carried out by persons only loosely affiliated with it. The group could essentially plagiarise terrorist attacks launched by other, semi-autonomous jihadists, as long as they targeted the entities that Al Qaeda claimed to be fighting against. This doctrinal flexibility has played a significant role in keeping Al Qaedaism alive, even as the organisation itself suffered massive losses from Western counterterrorist efforts after 2001.
Its setbacks have, paradoxically, become Al Qaeda’s strength. There are three principal sources of credibility in the ‘jihadosphere’: jurisprudential sanction, combat success, and personal suffering. Jihadist groups have to build their organisational reputation around one or more of these factors. Despite Al Qaeda having lost its topmost leader, its prestige among radical Islamists remains intact, owing to the group’s continued survival as evidenced by its ability to issue defiant statements against the US and incite terrorist attacks by affiliated groups. The fact that some of these attacks are proving successful, such as the killing of the US ambassador to Libya in September 2012, is a morale-booster for other jihadist organizations. What is now emerging is a radicalised landscape in the Middle East and South Asia, where no single power centre controls the activities of others. Instead, each provides moral and technical support to the other, while working independently in its own area.

**Partnership with Lashkar-e-Tayyeba**

This landscape did not come about by accident; Al Qaeda was, and is, strategic in its alliance-building. In 1989 it provided seed money for the consolidation of a new jihadist group, the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT), in northern Pakistan. One of its top operatives married into the family of a future LeT leader – a tactic that has since been often used to build linkages with regional Islamists and ‘capture’ their leadership. The idea is that once an Al Qaeda member became family, his new circle of relatives would slowly be brought around to the Al Qaeda ideology.

This is what happened in the case of LeT. The group already adhered to Abdullah Azzam’s vision of a unified caliphate in former and current Muslim territories, thus sharing an ideological link with Al Qaeda. Bin Laden exploited this link to coopt LeT into his jihad against the West and Israel in 1998. Three years later, the benefits of the alliance became apparent when LeT took over Al Qaeda’s international training responsibilities following the US invasion of Afghanistan.

LeT focused on recruiting within the Muslim diaspora in the West, eventually developing support networks in 21 countries and training volunteers from several more. A number of its graduates went on to commit terrorist attacks in Europe, as freelance jihadists. Among them were organizers of the 2005 London bombings and a French-Algerian gunman who killed seven people in southern France in 2012. However, its more ambitious attacks, which required considerable planning and preparation, were detected and disrupted by Western counterintelligence agencies. These
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included plans in 2003 to seize an Australian nuclear facility and a signal intelligence station, in 2006 to use liquid bombs on transcontinental airliners flying from Britain to the US, and in 2009 to storm newspaper offices in Denmark. In each case there was no specific provocation or rationale for the attack, other than to carry out a ‘spectacular’ and thereby boost LeT’s image as a sophisticated peer of Al Qaeda.

**Shifting focus to cross-border operations**

Owing to the repeated failure of major terrorist plots in the West and the logistical difficulties of conducting long-distance attacks, around 2006 Al Qaeda seems to have partly redrawn its priorities. The war in Iraq had given it a new affiliate in the shape of the network led by Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. Iraq became a meeting ground for a new generation of international jihadist volunteers, as Afghanistan had been in the 1980s. Skill-sharing and personnel exchanges built a sense of solidarity among radical Islamists unable to communicate electronically, for fear of detection by security agencies. Zarqawi’s group became an important link between Al Qaeda’s surviving leadership in Pakistan and regional jihadist groups elsewhere. As a practitioner of mass casualty suicide attacks, the Zarqawi network played a key role in popularising the use of this tactic, resulting in a rise in death rates from terrorism.

**Al Qaeda’s ideational influence upon local jihadists…**

The GSPC, for instance, changed its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) partly as a result of the friendship between its leader and
Zarqawi. The Algerian jihadist group had in any case suffered heavy losses as a result of determined counterterrorist action, and had gradually lost its bases in Algeria proper, moving to neighbouring countries. Its alliance with Al Qaeda gave it fresh respectability, and grounds to request technical assistance from other jihadists. In substantive terms, the alliance was mostly symbolic, since AQIM retained the same command structure as the old GSPC. However, there was a notable change in its targeting policy. Following the name change, the group finally began to attack US and European nationals in Algeria, through a combination of abductions and bombings.

The introduction of vehicle-borne suicide bombs by AQIM and a Nigerian group allied with it, Boko Haram, made West Africa vulnerable to the polarising effect of Al Qaedaism. Approximately 3000 people were killed in 2009–2012 in violence connected with Boko Haram. Personality clashes within the leadership of both jihadist groups compounded the challenge faced by security authorities in the region. New factions competed with each other for street credibility by carrying out increasingly bloody attacks against civilians and foreign nationals. United Nations offices in Algiers and Abuja were bombed in 2007 and 2011 respectively, with parallels being drawn to the 2003 bombing of the UN mission in Iraq by Zarqawi’s network. Reacting to pressure from counterterrorist agencies, the new jihadist philosophy seems to have been one of merely creating political shock, with little strategic purpose being served.

A similar pattern appeared elsewhere. In southern Russia, an amorphous network called the Caucasus Emirate launched an assassination campaign against government officials, killing over 1550, plus 400 civilians, in five years. In Uganda, a network operated by the Somali jihadist group Al Shabaab bombed Ethiopian businesses, allegedly due to the decision by both countries to support counterterrorist operations in Somalia. In India, a network of Pakistani and Saudi-affiliated jihadists bombed urban transport systems and marketplaces, with a view towards undermining the foreign tourism industry and disrupting local commerce.

It is out of this trend that jihadist groups seem to have developed their newest tactic: attacks against Western citizens in the developing world, using cross-border affiliations. In this, they are exploiting a crucial weakness in the international counterterrorist regime. Unlike long-distance at-
The localisation of Al Qaedaism

In 1997, members of al-Gama al-Islamiyya massacred foreign tourists in Egypt. The public outrage that followed took the group by surprise and compelled its spokesmen to hurriedly distance themselves from the incident. It also provided the Egyptian government with political grounds to impose a massive security crackdown. Keeping this in mind, LeT initially attempted to deny its involvement when it conducted a similar attack in 2008, killing Western tourists and Israeli nationals in India. This time, the attack involved a transnational network that led investigators to suspected terrorist sympathisers within the Pakistani security apparatus, as well as diaspora communities in the US, Europe and Saudi Arabia. For reasons of political sensitivity, it could not be fully probed by the concerned law enforcement agencies, and as a result LeT suffered no consequences for the massacre.

Impact of the Arab revolts

The January 2013 crisis in Algeria was a recent example of the new drift towards cross-border terrorism. The perpetrators are believed to have comprised of at least six different nationalities, with possible connections to Europe and North America. Several appear to have been from countries bordering Algeria, and the attack itself likely originated from a poorly policed area in nearby Libya. This raises serious questions regarding the 

attacks, which can often be traced back electronically to the originator, cross-border attacks rely heavily on human networks which are difficult to penetrate. Often, these networks make use of criminal contacts that have already compromised the effectiveness of regional border control systems and police surveillance. Attributing responsibility for a specific terrorist attack becomes exceedingly difficult in such an operational milieu.

Furthermore, unlike domestic terrorist incidents which can be thoroughly investigated, cross-border attacks collaterally create diplomatic tensions between governments. Intelligence agencies usually are less willing to share information about an attack if it appears to have originated from within their jurisdiction. This is especially true when elements of an intelligence agency might themselves be implicated in the attack, either at the level of planning and preparation, or merely by possessing foreknowledge of it. The bureaucratic firewalls which come up around cross-border investigations allow terrorist planners to plausibly deny their involvement and escape government retribution as well as public anger.

For jihadist strategists, the need for deniability regarding wholesale slaughter of civilians has been evident since 1997, when members of al-Gama al-
effect that political disturbances in the Middle East and North Africa have had on counterterrorist surveillance.

There is a general consensus that intelligence awareness of jihadist activity in the Arab world has diminished since the Arab revolts began in 2011. The extent of this deterioration has varied between areas. In Egypt, for instance, much of the security apparatus was able to continue functioning normally. However, in the Sinai desert bordering Israel there has been a drop in local patrolling and intelligence coverage. The result is that Bedouin tribesmen who have traditionally been involved in arms smuggling, have grown bolder in moving their shipments. They are currently believed to be the main source of weapons for Islamist groups in Egypt and Gaza. These groups feel that the overthrow of the Hosni Mubarak regime has left Israel open to guerrilla attacks on its southern flank. They are confident that with more regime changes in other Arab states, the Israeli nation would stand isolated. Any secret arrangements for peaceful coexistence between the Israeli government and Arab elites would be voided with the overthrow of these elites and their replacement by street Islamists.

The situation is worse in Libya, where the violent downfall of Muammar Gaddafi led to a systemic collapse, in intelligence terms. Jihadists inspired by Al Qaeda are believed to have rushed to exploit the consequent turmoil, setting up sleeper cells in urban areas and logistics networks in the countryside. They have been a major factor in the ongoing instability in Mali. AQIM has acted as a receptor and conduit for these militants, due to its area of operations having widened across much of the Sahel region since 2006. There are other players too, however, such as various factions of a group called ‘Ansar Dine’ (Defenders of the Faith), and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, an AQIM splinter faction.

Competition between rival leaders is a prime reason for jihadist attacks on Western targets located in Africa. The 2013 Algeria crisis is believed to have been orchestrated by a career criminal who was simultaneously a longtime jihadist. Passed over for promotions within AQIM and dissatisfied over the payouts he received from its kidnapping operations, he founded a breakaway faction. It appears that he was seeking to assert his credibility as an independent warlord by attacking Western energy concerns in Algeria, knowing that this would earn him international attention. An identical process had led to a spike in Boko Haram operations in Nigeria during 2011–12, when a ‘dissident’ fac-
tion turned to spectacular attacks as a means of overshadowing its parent organization. Importantly, in both cases the dissidents continued to proclaim loyalty to the Al Qaedaist dogma that drove their former colleagues.

Twisting jihadist narratives to match reality

At the level of political narrative, the Arab revolts have provided scope for Al Qaeda to project itself in self-flattering terms. According to Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the United States had already been reeling from defeat suffered at the hands of Al Qaeda footsoldiers around the world, in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq. It had retreated behind a wall of Arab puppet dictators, with whom it had hoped to crush the Islamist resistance. With those dictators now being swept from power, Washington has suffered yet another grievous defeat. Zawahiri claims that the only reason the US did not oppose the fall of Mubarak was because he had evidently become a strategic liability, not because it supported a more just system of governance in Egypt.

Similar liberties with facts are being taken in Al Qaeda’s interpretation of Gaddafi’s fall. According to jihadist folklore, the Libyan dictator was overthrown by a populace outraged at his willingness to cooperate with the West and dismantle his weapons of mass:

Fatalities from jihadist terrorism in selected countries, 2002 – 2011

Jihadist violence in Iraq has declined since 2007, but increased in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

A decrease in attacks within Algeria has been offset by substantial increases in Yemen, Somalia and Nigeria.

Source: Global Terrorism Index
destruction (WMD). No mention is made of the support that Western powers gave the Libyan insurgents. This is hardly surprising: Jihadist folklore also states that the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989 due to a handful of ‘Arab Afghan’ fighters, rather than because of domestic compulsions and a massive covert operation by Western intelligence agencies in support of Afghan rebels. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan now only a matter of time, Al Qaeda is preparing to lay claim to yet another jihadist ‘victory’ that it actually had little to do with.

Back to the future
Analysts are increasingly of the view that the international terrorism landscape is returning to the form it had in the early 1990s. The global movement first identified in 1992 by Egyptian intelligence and subsequently labelled as an ‘Islamist International’ by US scholars has merely been re-branded as ‘Al Qaedaism’ since 2006. In essence however, it reflects the same situation: Several clusters of terrorist networks linking regional Islamist movements, some of which are more militant than others, and all of which seek to violently overthrow governments in the developing world. However, unlike the ‘Islamist International’, Al Qaedaism has imparted a coherent narrative and strategic concept to regional jihads. This narrative and concept emphasizes the need to hit Western targets at a local level, even as operations continue to be launched against the ‘near enemy’ and its security apparatus.

One alarming development has been the adaptation of jihadist groups to ground conditions, with a view to winning popular support. The Al Qaeda leadership is known to have lately issued directives to regional affiliates that they should study the grievances of people within their immediate vicinity, and exploit these in a positive sense. Thus, governance failure in many parts of the Muslim world has been a recruitment booster for local jihadists aligned with Al Qaeda’s ideology. From North Africa to South Asia, they have engaged in the provision of social services and have highlighted the human costs of counterinsurgency policies. This extends to the US drone campaigns in western Pakistan and in Yemen, which have been used by jihadist sympathisers in local media organisations to arouse public anger against the governments of Pakistan and Yemen, besides stoking rage against the West.

It would be erroneous to believe that no major terrorist attacks can be launched against Western homelands, but the possibility of their succeeding is low. This is partly because of
sustained investments in the US and Europe in foreign and domestic intelligence systems, which have made complex plots difficult to execute. However, the main reason is because the casualties suffered by Al Qaeda’s operational leadership have crippled the core group that was personally assembled by Bin Laden. Between 2001 and 2011, it lost four military chiefs and four chiefs of its special operations unit, which handled long-distance attacks. The Saudi millionaire’s insistence on avoiding bloodshed between Muslims had led him to sponsor operations towards Western targets in non-Muslim countries. If past trends are any indication, his successors will now seek to personalise Al Qaeda’s targeting policy in their own ways.

Without a strong central leadership, this could lead to a fragmentation of Al Qaeda. Zawahiri is believed to be a divisive leader, and it is not clear how prepared other Arab jihadists would be to obey his dictates, particularly since he does not have the same high-society origins as Bin Laden. However, this does not mean that a divided Al Qaeda would be less dangerous than a united one, merely that it would present a different type of threat.

_Diverse, with shared purpose_

The jurisprudential legacy of Abdullah Azzam lives on, albeit tinged with the tactical innovations of operational planners like Imad Mughniyeh and Khalid Sheikh Mohammad. This legacy prophesies an eventual reconquest of Muslim lands currently ruled by ‘apostates’ and ‘unbelievers’, and their incorporation into a unified caliphate. Importantly Europe and the US do not share similar destinies in this vision. Since parts of southern and eastern Europe were once under Islamic rule, or so goes the jihadist narrative, they must be reclaimed. The United States, on the other hand, became an enemy primarily because it opposed this reconquest from an early stage and encroached into Muslim lands after 1990. If it were only to withdraw its forces to its own territory and stop supporting apostate governments, the jihadist movement would have far fewer reasons to quarrel with it.

Besides becoming a prop in Al Qaeda’s internal narrative, the Arab revolts have also helped radical Islamists in practical ways. They have disrupted police surveillance of jihadist activities, and in countries where massive unrest has occurred, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria, scores of top-ranking jihadists have been able to escape from prison, or were simply set free by governments no longer interested in cooperating with the West against terrorism. Strategic thinkers such as the Syrian radical Abu Mus-
ab Al-Suri, who is best known for his sharp assessments of the international jihad’s strengths and weaknesses, have ensured that Al Qaedaism will outlive the organisation that is most strongly associated with it.

Already, counterterrorism analysts have observed that the few plots against Western homelands that have been detected in recent years have originated from Yemen. An Al Qaeda affiliate, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), is believed to be responsible. Although primarily focused on conducting cross-border attacks in Saudi Arabia, in order to destabilise the regime there, its members are also scouting opportunities to strike the ‘far enemy’. AQAP might even be a slightly exceptional case: The broader trend seems to point towards attacking Western interests in areas where jihadists have long operated.

Al Qaeda is relying on a combination of intermarriages, organisational mergers and personnel transfers to boost its local presence worldwide without attracting intelligence attention. This is a shrewd approach, since a review of US counterterrorist targeting patterns indicates that Washington only prioritises going after those jihadists who attack American interests a long way from their ‘normal’ area of operations. If regional jihadists can be coopted to strike at US nationals and American-owned businesses in developing countries, there is little likelihood of an immediate punitive response on the lines of that which followed the 9/11 attacks. Fears have even been voiced of a ‘competition’ breaking out among these jihadists, to surpass each other’s achievements by conducting spectacular attacks against local Western targets.

With the Arab revolts having partially eased pressure on radical Islamists, and Bin Laden’s death having weakened the logic of focusing only on the ‘far enemy’, Al Qaedaism has gained currency at local levels. The narrative that underpins this ideology has shown remarkable adaptability, balancing tensions within the near enemy/far enemy strategic debate without losing coherence among its followers. While the threat that Al Qaeda and its affiliates pose to Europe and the United States has certainly declined, the different positions that each occupies within the jihadist worldview do not suggest that they each face identical risks. The United States remains a prime target, but is less vulnerable in ideological terms to jihadist attack since it was never historically part of the Muslim realm and thus is not part of the caliphate vision. Europe, on the other hand, is still considered to be a battleground due to its medieval his-
ceed in carrying out a major strike on European soil, owing to recent developments in North Africa.