



THE RETURN OF AL-QAEDA?

Henry Wilkinson reports on Afghanistan and the future state of global jihad

The Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan ahead of the 20th anniversary of 9/11 prompted intense debate about the global jihadist threat. And it has raised many questions about the impact of the US withdrawal from a region that remains heavily affected by terrorism at a highly symbolic moment. Many jihadist terrorist groups were quick to praise the Taliban's victory as an auspicious endorsement of violent jihad.

Much has changed since the US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan in 2001 with the goal of eliminating the al-Qaeda threat. America's strategy has changed, as President Biden made clear when defending his decision to leave Afghanistan. And US counter-terrorism means have also changed. Mr Biden cited 'over the horizon' capabilities

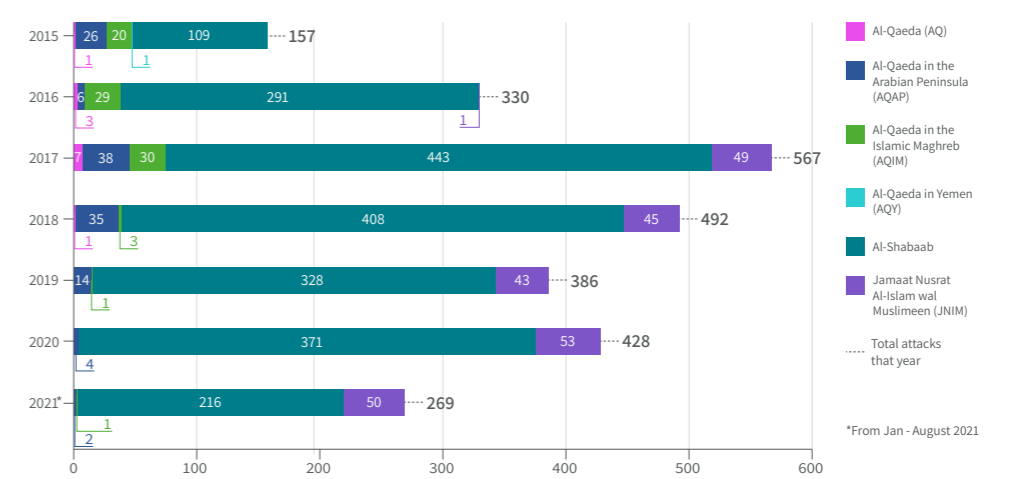
to target terrorist networks that threaten US national security as a key factor in his decision.

The threat has also changed as has the very nature of the global jihadist movement. With the Taliban in power once again, it would be inaccurate to say that we have simply gone full circle since 9/11. The facts as they were in 2001 are markedly different to what they are now. The state of global jihadism now is far more complex and diffuse, as is the threat.

It is still too soon to tell what the full ramifications of the US withdrawal of Afghanistan will be on the global terrorism threat, but a global review of terrorist violence worldwide as it stands today suggests the outlook is not positive, particularly for vulnerable countries in South Asia, the Middle East and Africa, where we are seeing persisting and often increasing levels of jihadist violence.

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Attacks by Al-Qaeda and its affiliates since 2015



Source: Terrorism Tracker

Credit: Dragonfly

The close and historical ties between the Taliban and al-Qaeda and a raft of like-minded groups in Afghanistan, makes the question of some kind of al-Qaeda revival pertinent. And some 20 years on from when the US first declared its 'war on terrorism', the need for an objective and empirical sense of what the current state of global jihad actually is and where it is heading, has rarely been more required.

The Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan inevitably raises questions about the potential for al-Qaeda to revive itself in the country. Should it be able to do so under Taliban rule, which seems more likely than not, there are then questions as to the extent to which it will seek to once again plot attacks against the West. Or whether it will maintain its focus on supporting, exploiting and grafting itself on to more localised militant groups in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Al-Qaeda's overall aim remains to establish Islamic rule. To that end, and particularly under the leadership of Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the group has in recent years prioritised its engagement in insurgencies across Muslim-majority countries over and above seeking spectacular long-range attacks. It is strongest in the Middle East and Africa. This is largely through strategic, material and ideological backing for local insurgencies. Al-Shabaab in Somalia and JNIM in the Sahel have been the most prolific al-Qaeda affiliates in terms of the frequency of their attacks over the past five years.

Conflict-related developments have the potential to create the conditions in which the group can revitalise its activities beyond those regions. It is reasonable to assume that al-Qaeda views the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan as an opportunity to regroup. Its previous strategies and public statements indicate that it would probably seek to support Islamist militants in other conflicts, including Kashmir and Myanmar as well as Syria and Iraq. And that it will explore opportunities in other conflicts as they emerge, including in the Sahel and West Africa.

Al-Qaeda's engagement with these local insurgencies aligns with its strategies in several ways. By backing like-minded groups – like the Taliban – it increases the chances of establishing Islamic rule, and can force out what it perceives to be foreign or non-Muslim occupiers. A presence in conflict areas also enables the group to project itself beyond those regions, not just in terms of propaganda but also recruitment and training, and ultimately mounting long-range attacks against the West, its 'far enemy'.

The map over the page is based on Dragonfly's TerrorismTracker data. It shows where al-Qaeda and its affiliates have been present and where they have attempted to mount attacks beyond those core locations. Our data begins from 2007. As that data suggests, it is well placed to take advantage of areas of insecurity and weak governance to mount attacks on Western sites in the Middle East and Africa. Its capabilities, particularly to mount spectacular long-range attacks, have been seriously diminished over the last two decades.

IT IS TOO SOON TO TELL WHAT THE RAMIFICATIONS OF THE US WITHDRAWAL OF AFGHANISTAN WILL BE

Nothing we have seen suggests that al-Qaeda's desire to incite attacks against Western interests globally has diminished. For example, the group has recirculated training guides on attacking public transport; in 2017 al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) released an instructional video on how to mount 'train derail operations' in the West, and similar to IS it has adopted an approach of encouraging radicalised supporters to mount attacks in the West, including in the US. The question is however, the extent to which it will commit resources to doing so.

The publicly available details of attacks and plots in recent years indicate that the group has not significantly invested in the kind of long-range complex attacks that came to define it under Bin Laden's leadership. For example, AQAP claimed that it had been in touch with a Saudi Arabian airline pilot who killed three people at a US naval base in 2019. But incitement and encouragement seems to have been the extent of its involvement.

In contrast, the assailants in the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris had trained with AQAP. And in 2014 the US reported that al-Qaeda members in northern Syria were planning to mount attacks against civilian aviation using hard-to-detect explosive devices. From what we can determine from reported plots and government statements, the group has not been prioritising long-range or spectacular attacks in the last five years. The shift in priorities probably reflects the extent

to which it has struggled to stay relevant in the face of competition from Islamic State and unrelenting counter-terrorism efforts by the US and its allies. Data gathered by a monitoring organisation shows that since 2004 the US has mounted over 14,000 drone strikes, primarily on al-Qaeda and IS members in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. We therefore forecast that localised insurgencies will very likely remain the group's priority in the coming years. But that in parallel al-Qaeda will use favourable conditions in Afghanistan and the Sahel and beyond to revitalise its propaganda and strategy to incite violence globally.

The long-term trajectory of the group also suggests that compared with the last five years, al-Qaeda will put greater emphasis on pursuing spectacular long-range attacks, despite its chances of success on any remotely comparable scale to 9/11 being negligible. This is because of the prestige and standing among its target support base that it would bring.

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan on 15 August, just prior to the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, was met with a stream of praise by jihadists worldwide. Many groups affiliated with the Taliban and al-Qaeda network lauded the victory and released communiques citing the achievement as inspiration for their own militants and the righteousness of jihad. Conversely, Islamic State and its supporters continued to show hostility against the Taliban and sought to discredit it.

Al-Qaeda's regional affiliates released statements congratulating the Taliban on the takeover of Afghanistan, reflecting al-Qaeda's deep ties to the Taliban. Al-Shabaab published a statement saying that: "the 20-year jihad has become reality". Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), two AQ affiliates in the Sahel, released a joint statement saying that what happened in Afghanistan proved that: "jihad... is the only way". However, al-Qaeda central has not – at least yet – released a statement by its leader, Ayman Al-Zawahiri. Several other terrorist organisations that are not

formal affiliates of al-Qaeda, albeit with noted historical ties to it, also praised the Taliban such as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, which issued a statement saying that the Taliban's takeover was: "an inspiration for its own steadfastness" and wished its victory in: "liberating Syria". In South Asia, both the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), two jihadist organisations based in Pakistan and with a significant presence in Afghanistan, also praised the victory of the Taliban.

Islamic State did not officially react to the Taliban takeover. Indeed reflecting its open hostility against the Afghan group, in its weekly newsletter on 17 June, IS called the Taliban the: "security guards" of the US, and took credit for the US' exit of Afghanistan. On 2 September, an IS-linked media foundation called the Taliban: "fools and apostates", a common IS narrative. And on encrypted platforms, IS supporters said there will never be an alliance with the Taliban and called for attacks against them.

While it seems fairly clear that the Taliban victory is being seized upon as a powerful motivation by jihadist groups, there has not been much evidence of this translating into an immediate surge of attacks on the ground since. Indeed, the most active groups' operational patterns remain largely the same, suggesting that renewed zeal does not necessarily have any material and immediate impact on operational realities or prevailing strategies.

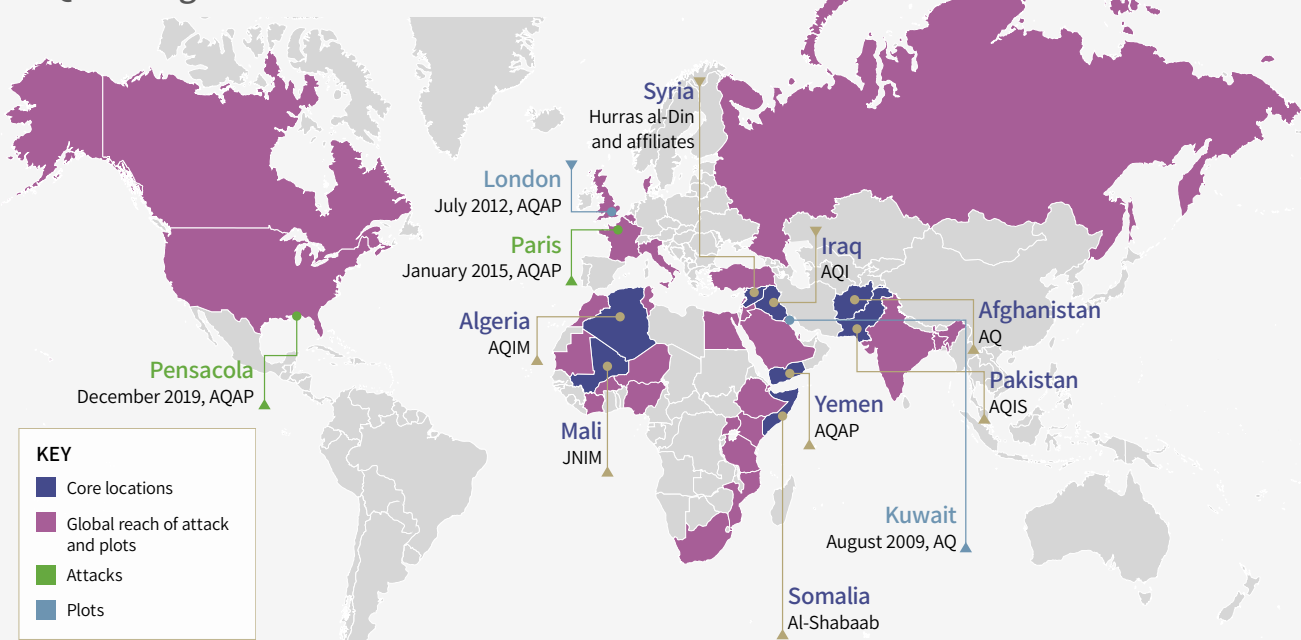
More time needs to pass before a proper assessment can be made of what the impact of the Taliban's success has on global terrorist attacks, at least as far as established groups and networks are concerned. And of course none of this discounts the possibility that al-Qaeda affiliated or linked groups seek to mount spectacular attacks.

The more urgent question concerning rhetoric by jihadist groups is the impact it has on jihadist terrorism in the West. The prevailing threat in Western countries is low-capability spontaneous attacks by individuals that require little lead time or coordination to prepare. Past perpetrators have often shown a high degree of impressionability to incitements by groups and external influencing events ●

Henry Wilkinson is Chief Intelligence Officer at Dragonfly and has overall responsibility for the company's intelligence and analysis operations, products, services and methodologies and leads Dragonfly's team of analysts.

Al-Qaeda is best-placed to take advantage of areas of insecurity and weak governance to mount attacks on Western sites in the Middle East and Africa

Al-Qaeda's global reach since 2007



Source: Terrorism Tracker

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