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# Al-Qaeda Focus & Capabilities

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INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT

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## **Al-Qaeda Re-Emerging as a Global Threat**

Al-Qaeda (AQ) is transforming into a coherent, capable entity contesting for power in Muslim countries by continuing to plan and target the United States, which they consider their main strategic enemy. In the past three years, Al-Qaeda has slowly evolved into a political powerhouse by forming major alliances with Iran and the Taliban and expanding their military wings in Africa. Al-Qaeda is more powerful today than ever in its history, transforming into an adaptable, capable, and enduring organization under the younger generation of its leaders. "Al-Qaeda remains strategically patient, cooperating with other terrorist groups in Afghanistan and prioritizing its ongoing relationship with the Taliban. The group continues to operate covertly to project the image of Taliban adherence to the provisions of the Doha Agreement to prevent the use of Afghan soil for terrorist purposes," says the UN Security Council Monitoring and Sanctions Committee.

In 1997, a handful of Al-Qaeda commanders lived in Afghanistan. Later, these men went on to significant roles in international terrorist organizations. They included the founder of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; the butcher of Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; the leader of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri; the 9/11 mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed; and the current leader of Al-Qaeda, Saiful Adle. Initially led by Osama bin Laden, this group of men orchestrated 9/11, butchered Iraqis and international soldiers, captured Yemen with the Houthis, and took control of Afghanistan with the Taliban. As well as its strength in its Middle East and Afghan heartlands, as of July 2024, Al-Qaeda is a major player in Libya, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Niger, Kenya, Burkina Faso, and Mali, with a hidden hand in the affairs of these countries. This global increase has come despite the efforts of the global war on terror.

Today, there are 800 Al-Qaeda commanders in Afghanistan with some 50,000 fighters. The majority of the commanders are seasoned battle leaders, more sophisticated than their predecessors in the 1990s. They come from Africa, the Arab world, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia, with various backgrounds that add to Al-Qaeda's capabilities and sophistication for future operations. The majority of these commanders came from the Iraq theater, Yemen, and Syria, directly fighting Western militaries. There are thousands of AQ trainees rotating to and from Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda now has space and time on its side, bolstered by the much-needed ambition provided by the Taliban victory. This rise has often been ignored by Western media, who instead framed the narrative as one where Al-Qaeda was on the run, with its "back against the wall," etc. This misunderstanding increased because the only reporting of the organization tends to focus on the death or capture of a named leader. The campaign against figureheads, leaders, and facilitators may slow down the progress of Al-Qaeda as a network, but there has been no effort to dismantle any branches or limit the Al-Qaeda threat to the rest of the world. Furthermore, Al-Qaeda's capabilities tend to be shown as weak compared to that of the United States or Western

powers. This gives U.S. policymakers and intelligence leaders a false sense of achievement, reducing their capacity to recognize terrorism as the greatest threat to civilization as we know it.

The global war on terror was launched by President George W. Bush after the tragic loss of lives in New York on September 11, 2001. The initial stages went well. U.S.-led forces supported irregular Afghan militias on the ground, ousting the Taliban regime and destroying the capabilities of Al-Qaeda, whose leaders scattered to Pakistan and beyond. Laws and regulations changed, extending U.S. reach over global financial and banking systems, flight controls, communication, and internet controls across most of the Western world and the Middle East. The global war on terror was comprehensive, well-resourced, and backed by strong leadership from President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom.

But they overreached by invading Iraq. The Iraq war derailed the global war on terror and decreased public support for the war in other theaters, including Afghanistan. Consistency in the campaign was lost as succeeding presidents each undid the work of their predecessor, creating confusion, mistrust, and chaos.

During the administration of President Barack Obama, the war on terror became a political tool in the hands of the political elite to score points rather than decrease the threat. Today, under President Joe Biden, the White House tells the CIA what the president wants to hear, regardless of its importance on the global stage or level of threat to the U.S. and the rest of the world. Policy has become a show rather than a program to save lives and make the world a safer place. This lack of focus has allowed Al-Qaeda to spread discreetly into strategic points in the African and Asian continents. Put simply, Al-Qaeda is winning the global war in every corner of the world. Here are some comparative facts that will shed light on Al-Qaeda.

When 9/11 hit the U.S., Al-Qaeda as an organization had fewer than 4,000 men spread across the Arab world in small groups of less than 100, most without lethal capabilities. Today, they have over 100,000 fighters directly under their command in two continents. Pre-9/11, Al-Qaeda's only refuge was Afghanistan; today, they have over 60 bases in 19 countries in Africa and Asia.

Pre-9/11, Al-Qaeda was seen as a small network of avengers unhappy with dictatorship in their own countries, like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iraq, and some other smaller nations. Today, Al-Qaeda is the largest and most powerful non-state actor in the world.

Pre-9/11, Al-Qaeda was led mostly by intellectuals and a group of ideologues; today, they have some of the most experienced fighters with battle experience against the most powerful countries in the world.

Pre-9/11, Al-Qaeda had members only from roughly 10 Arab countries; today, Al-Qaeda is composed of members from over 60 nations across five continents.

In 2014, a U.S.-led operation in the Shorabak district of Kandahar killed 145 Al-Qaeda fighters. At the time, the belief was that Al-Qaeda had no fighting capacity; these men were deployed alongside the Taliban to fight in Afghanistan. In 2016, a series of U.S. and Afghan special forces raids were conducted in the Ghazni and Zabul provinces, where it was discovered that Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent had battalion-sized fighters deployed alongside the Taliban in the Ghazni and Paktika provinces alone.

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) fighters went on to fight alongside Taliban formations against the Afghan government. The senior cadre of Al-Qaeda had been supporting Taliban commanders with advice and assistance in conducting sophisticated operations in Kabul city.

Al-Qaeda made sure that the Afghan Taliban kept Western installations and embassies at the top of their target list to force the West to leave Afghanistan, just as they had left Iraq in 2015. This was a strategic move, as the Afghan government relied on Western support to advance the country and maintain the fight against the Taliban. Al-Qaeda's main objective for Afghanistan was to force the U.S. and NATO troops out and return with their Taliban allies. Long after U.S.-NATO combat operations ended in 2014, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda could not defeat the Afghan forces, who proved to be a formidable force against them.

A strategic political opening came their way when President Trump unilaterally decided to talk to the Taliban and sign a new agreement that removed any U.S. pressure on the Taliban, and by extension, on Al-Qaeda. This relieved them of the continuous U.S. Air Force and CIA pursuit, but they still could not win the battlefield against the Afghan forces. In April 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden announced an immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces, contract support, and ammunition shipments to Afghan forces, and asked the Afghan President to resign in favor of a joint Taliban and Afghan government. This move delivered a profound blow and became the main cause of the collapse of the Afghan Republic in August 2021.

For years, U.S. and Afghan soldiers and intelligence operatives, through hard work and sacrifice, had kept Al-Qaeda in check and hunted. Together, they prevented a number of high-level attacks targeting Europe, the U.S., and other regions in the Middle East, India, and Pakistan. Afghan and U.S. pressure on Al-Qaeda's key leaders and fighters kept the organization in survival mode and significantly reduced their capacity to communicate with the outside world. As a result, Al-Qaeda's branches in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, and other places operated disconnected from their core leadership and from each other. This made the fight against them easier for the respective governments in their countries. But the return of the Taliban has changed

the situation substantially in their favor.

In the past 23 months, Al-Qaeda has been active in regrouping, strategizing, and increasing their lethal capabilities. The Taliban's victory provided them with much-needed inspiration for this new era of their fight, and thousands of new fighters rushed to join. Victory in Afghanistan provided them with a new bumper sticker: "We defeated the United States and forced them to leave a Muslim land; now let's do it in the next one."

The most notable achievement of Al-Qaeda is the increased capabilities and equipment for Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. This organization has grown enormously in the past two years. They now have more than 40,000 fighters inside Afghanistan, more than a thousand in India, and some 3,000 in Pakistan, while continuing to recruit and send explosives to India and fighters to Pakistan in support of the ongoing TTP campaign. AQIS is currently supporting the Tehreek-e-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP) in their battle against the Pakistani military in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces. After the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, TTP's attacks in Pakistan increased dramatically, and they are now the most significant military threat to Pakistan.

The AQIS current emir, Usama Mahmood, aka Abu Zar, is a disenfranchised Pakistani who worked with the TTP for over a decade in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He was then assigned to keep Al-Qaeda leaders alive. In Afghan and U.S. intelligence, he was known as "Zawahiri's gatekeeper," as he used his connections in the TTP to keep al-Zawahiri and his deputies alive. He now sees it as time to repay the favor to the TTP by providing support to their battle against Pakistan. For them, a defeated Pakistan will open the door to the conquest of India, which is the main battleground.

Usama Mahmood lives in Kandahar, where he and Abdullah Bin Laden, the brother of Osama Bin Laden, are frequent visitors of the Taliban leader Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada. They are key voices urging that the Taliban remain isolated from the West. In December 2021, Usama Mahmood and his deputy Atif Ghorri, the head of recruitment and deputy of the TTP, were designated global terror leaders by the U.S. Department of State.

Al-Qaeda commanders from Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and North Africa routinely travel to Afghanistan via Iran to regroup with their fighters, friends, and family; some have even moved their families to Afghanistan. For the past two decades, the Al-Qaeda leadership was separated from their operational echelon, limiting their abilities to operate as a cohesive organization with strategic direction. But today, Al-Qaeda leader Saiful Adle and his commanders meet openly in Iran, train openly in Afghanistan, and travel freely across the Middle East to North and East Africa.

Al-Qaeda not only survived but adapted to the changing policies of the West,

waiting out the West in Iraq and Afghanistan and watching the U.S. attack their rival ISIS in the Middle East. Although the Taliban have said they won't support Al-Qaeda, they never stopped supporting them. Al-Qaeda has been able to regroup and recruit in Afghanistan, making this their most successful international cell. American intelligence analysts are wrong in their assessment that Al-Qaeda is not capable of carrying out another attack on the U.S. mainland. Al-Qaeda always chooses its targets in advance and carries them out at a time of their choosing. Al-Qaeda has already succeeded in supporting the ouster of U.S. forces from Afghanistan – a blow against what their doctrine describes as the “far enemy.” But from their stable bases in Afghanistan, they are now able to attack the governments in the Middle East they see as the “near enemy.” They have the ability and the will to kill or kidnap American soldiers, business leaders, and diplomats in the Middle East and Africa, and disrupt international trade, impacting the global economy and political stability.

The U.S. has shown to use its counter-terrorist capability very inconsistently. When Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed by an American missile in Kabul, Sirajuddin Haqqani was literally in the next house. The leader of the Haqqani network has a \$10 million bounty on his head and has killed more American soldiers than al-Zawahiri.

### **Al-Qaeda, Iran and Taliban**

In October 2021, at a secret location in Tehran, Esmail Qahani, leader of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Al-Qaeda's global operations head and current leader Saif al-Adel, and a senior representative of the Taliban met. This is the first recorded meeting of the three at one time and in the same location. Qahani congratulated the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda for their success in Afghanistan and said, "We all have done a great job; now we need to pursue the Americans out of the Middle East as well."

The first important point they agreed on was that all Al-Qaeda branches, affiliate groups, and the IRGC in the Middle East and Africa would work together, and both sides would try to broker peace between them. The first peace was brokered between the Houthis and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which still holds, and coordination with Hezbollah and groups in Iraq and Syria is now operational. The second point was that the Afghan Taliban should provide space and tools for training the Al-Qaeda fighting force. The last point was that the IRGC is willing to pay for all their expenses in Afghanistan and their overseas operations in the Middle East as well.

Subsequent to these developments, Al-Qaeda's recruitment and training centers have dramatically increased inside Afghanistan, as has their financial capacity to build new housing and camps for incoming families from across the Middle East and Africa. As of early July, Iranians have been working closely with Al-Qaeda's number two, Abdul Rahman al-Maghrebi, to arm and support Al-Qaeda's new leader in the Arabian Peninsula, Ibrahim al-Banna, to increase attacks in the Red Sea and

start targeting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The key Al-Qaeda facilitators within the Taliban include:

- 1) Fathullah Mansoor, the son of the former Taliban leader Akhtar Mansoor, who was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan. Fathullah Mansoor is now the head of the Civil Aviation Authority of the Taliban regime. He is one of the most trusted Taliban leaders by Al-Qaeda's leadership. His role involves choosing the time, location, and routes for senior Al-Qaeda leaders traveling and living in Afghanistan. He also provides security for them, especially in southern Afghanistan's Kandahar province. These leaders include Osama bin Laden's sons, his brother Abdullah bin Laden, Usama Mahmood, the leader of AQIS, and many others.
- 2) Sadr Ebrahim, the deputy minister of Interior, originally from northern Helmand province, is one of the most important figures in Afghanistan. He provides training camps, housing, weapons, vehicles, and paperwork for Al-Qaeda fighters and their families. The majority of Al-Qaeda operational leaders are housed and protected by his men in the southwestern province of Helmand. Sadr Ebrahim is also a key ally of the Iranian IRGC within the Taliban regime.
- 3) Qari Fasihudin, the General Chief of Staff of the Taliban, has the main task of training, equipping, and integrating Al-Qaeda affiliate groups, especially the Ansarullah of Tajikistan, now known as the Tahreke Taliban Tajikistan (TTT), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, which is composed of Chinese Uyghurs. These groups are primarily Al-Qaeda affiliates focused on Central Asia. TTT and IMU are organized into two battalions currently fighting for the Taliban. It's worth noting that approximately 70 suicide bombers from the IMU were sent to Lebanon in 2022 to train and support Hezbollah against Israel, who are currently stationed in southern Lebanon.
- 4) Mula Fazil Mazloom, the Taliban Deputy Minister of Defense and former Guantanamo detainee, is a key delegate in the Doha negotiations and one of the main supporters of Al-Qaeda. He authorized the provision of thousands of weapons, vehicles, and trainers to help Al-Qaeda establish its fighting force, especially the AQIS, which currently serves as the main ground fighting corps of Al-Qaeda deployed in Pakistan. They are also instructed to deploy to Yemen.

### **AQ Strategic Objectives**

- 1) Force the US to retreat from Muslim countries, especially Arab countries.
- 2) Topple Arab monarchies and replace them with Al-Qaeda leaders; topple secular leaders in Muslim countries.

3) Destruction of the State of Israel.

### **AQ Operational Focus**

Al-Qaeda leadership has been keen on expanding in Africa and recruiting in the Middle East while training in Afghanistan. They have planned attacks in the past three years but have yet to carry them out. In January 2022, Al-Qaeda tasked its branch AQIS to plan an attack on the US consulate in Karachi. In June 2022, the leader of the Iranian Quds Forces asked Al-Qaeda's current de facto leader, Saiful Adle, to carry out an attack against the Israeli embassy and intelligence locations in the UAE. Iran would pay and send explosives, but the operatives needed to be from AQ. This was a serious threat that forced Israeli diplomats and intelligence operatives out of the UAE. Iranians believed that assassinations of its scientists and senior members of its military were carried out by the Israeli Mossad based in the UAE, though no Israeli operation had assassinated any senior Iranian government member, and the attack was called off for now.

In January 2024, as pressure mounted on the Houthis by US and UK navies, Iranians asked Al-Qaeda to plan an attack on US and UK embassies to disrupt their coalition building with the Saudis. The task was given to Khalid Batrafi, the leader of AQ in the Arabian Peninsula, but he died a month later from an unknown disease. The attack was delayed but not cancelled.

### **Al-Qaeda Threats**

**Current Plans:** As of early July, AQ's geographical focus was Pakistan, Mali, Yemen, and Lebanon. Thematically, they are working on targeting diplomatic installations in the Middle East and financial institutions in the United States. AQ will soon join the Houthis in Yemen to block the Red Sea and increase sophisticated attacks on US personnel in the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Iraq.

### **AQ Main Financing**

From 2001 to 2021, AQ leadership suffered a major loss of financial streams. After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, they not only found enough finances to survive, but also to grow and thrive systematically. They support 40,000 fighters, their families, and their leadership. From all the intelligence received, they are living very well and do not have problems with money. The current head of AQ's financial commission is Abu Maaz Al-Masoomi. He visited Afghanistan in 2022 and conducted a courtesy call with the head of the Taliban Intelligence Department, Haji Wasiq.

According to intelligence collected over the last 22 months, Al-Qaeda leadership currently has four main sources of income:



- 1) **Traditional Arab Gulf donors:** Oil-rich sheikhs from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE often make large donations to AQ-led charity organizations, as well as secret payments to participate in global jihad. This financial support, termed "Jihad with finances," has been ongoing despite the US government implementing many controls over the global financial systems. AQ has always found ways and loopholes to support its leadership. While not significant for expanding operations, it is enough to keep them alive.
- 2) **Iran:** on October 5th, 2021, Saiful Adle, his deputy Abdul Rahman Al-Maghrebi, a senior Taliban representative, and Esmail Qahani, the head of the Quds Forces of the IRGC, which lead overseas operations, met in Tehran. Besides congratulating the Taliban and Al-Qaeda for their success in Afghanistan, Qahani offered a new partnership among the Taliban, AQ, and Quds Forces for the Middle East and Africa. He stated, "We have successfully freed our Muslim brother country of Afghanistan; it's time we go after the US in the Middle East and free our oppressed Muslim brothers globally." They all agreed that Iran would pay for AQ training camps in Afghanistan, the Taliban would provide space and equipment for training, and AQ would conduct operations in Africa and the Middle East targeting US and Western installations, escalating to force American withdrawal from the Middle East. This arrangement provided significant financial support to AQ from the Quds Forces, making them the primary financial supporter of AQ leadership and fighters in Afghanistan.
- 3) **Afghan Taliban:** The Taliban have been sharing profits from mining in Afghanistan with AQ fighters and their leadership. According to a Foreign Policy article published this year, AQ has received approximately \$200 million from mining operations in northeastern Afghanistan. In February 2022, Abu Basir Al-Misry, head of AQ in Afghanistan at the time, Usama Mahmood, head of AQIS, and Serajudin Haqqani met in Kabul to discuss a benefit scheme for AQ and AQIS members who died in the Afghan war. Subsequently, Serajudin Haqqani convinced Taliban leadership to provide 200,000 Pakistani Rupees (\$1,000 USD) and agricultural land to AQ families. Throughout 2022, as AQ families continued to arrive in Afghanistan, thousands of AQ/AQIS families settled in Logar, Wardak, Ghazni, Zabul, and Paktika provinces, establishing communities and obtaining Afghan citizenship.

### **Al-Qaeda's Core Military Strength**

Al-Qaeda's core leadership has direct control over some 50,000 fighters located in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. The majority of these men are in Afghanistan, with most operating under the command of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. AQ also has affiliate groups inside Afghanistan and Pakistan, totaling another 50,000 fighters. These affiliates include Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic Movement of

Uzbekistan (IMU), East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM, also known as Uyghurs), and Ansarullah of Tajikistan. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi of Pakistan and some leadership members of Jamaat-e-Ulema Islam of Pakistan are closely affiliated with AQ and obey their orders.

In times of need, AQ's core can call on around 100,000 fighters to mobilize for a cause, excluding the Taliban military, which comprises another 200,000 fighters. Furthermore, AQ's core has a cadre of some 800 battle-hardened commanders who traveled from Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Somalia to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover and are now training their men for global operations. An increasing number of new recruits continue to join AQIS from Bangladesh and India. Unlike ISIS recruitment, AQIS recruitment is based on personal affiliation and recommendations of local commanders and AQ operatives worldwide, somewhat limiting their recruitment in the Arab world. However, after Afghanistan fell into Taliban hands, many young Arabs from Egypt, Jordan, Libya, and Yemen have joined AQ.

### **Counter-Terrorism Politics and Practice**

Currently, the United States is running two counter-terrorism programs specifically designed for Afghanistan. The first one is called "Over the Horizon." It's a program of air surveillance launched from Qatar to Afghanistan to collect videos, audios, and track targets. Over the past three years, they have conducted one strike in which they killed the leader of Al-Qaeda in Kabul. Since then, they have largely focused on observation, but practically, they are not gaining any insights that could provide a clear picture of what is truly happening under the Taliban.

The second program is run out of the UAE in collaboration with the Taliban. This program focuses on the repatriation and monitoring of AQ members, with the Taliban's assistance. Out of the 40,000 AQ members, the Taliban reported only about 200 of them to the CIA, none of whom are in leadership ranks of Al-Qaeda. In return, the CIA pays a large, undisclosed sum to the Taliban to keep Al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan and prevent them from attacking the US and its allies globally. As of July 2024, only 18 Al-Qaeda members from Egypt, Libya, and Jordan have agreed to return to their families and countries. In exchange, Al-Qaeda has recruited at least 30,000 new fighters who are undergoing training for overseas operations inside Afghanistan.

Following the fall of Kabul, the United States needs a new comprehensive strategic security and defense review to assess future global threats, both conventional and asymmetric. This review should aim to clarify the distinction between professional military assessments and political assumptions made by short-sighted politicians. Al-Qaeda is leveraging the Taliban to ensure security for their preparations. They are content that the Taliban are receiving concessions from the US to avoid attacks by AQ in return for minimal information.

## **Recommendations**

As the world becomes increasingly divided into political and economic blocks, interconnectivity, business, and the future prosperity of the globe depend on stable economies, trade routes, and common global rules. Terrorism aims to sow anarchy and increase economic, political, and ethno-religious divisions, potentially leading not only to localized conflicts but also major global wars.

There is an urgent need across the Arab world, Muslim communities, and Europe to implement a comprehensive counter-terrorism program. This program must not only focus on immediate kinetic actions to mitigate current threats but also work towards reducing the growing capabilities and impact of Al-Qaeda. It is essential to identify a leading country for this effort, and while no candidate is perfect, Egypt has a successful background in counter-terrorism programs, and Saudi Arabia possesses strong leadership, resources, and religious credibility. This leadership should be complemented by local partners in Afghanistan and Yemen to effectively counter AQ's influence.

Under President Biden, America appears to be stepping back from its leadership role in various global areas, necessitating others to fill this void. In Europe, the United Kingdom's extensive experience, intelligence capabilities, and credibility position it well to lead efforts in preventing large-scale terrorism across the continent.

In Africa, most countries lack effective intelligence-sharing mechanisms and are ill-prepared to confront the terrorism threat collectively. Over the next five years, Al-Qaeda is expected to expand rapidly in Yemen, Syria, Libya, Somalia, Sahel countries, Niger, and Kenya. Al-Qaeda has already established a formidable military presence in Mali and Burkina Faso, leading to coups in these nations.

Over the past 26 years, the Taliban have been the primary force sustaining Al-Qaeda, providing protection to leaders like Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, and nurturing the next generation of terrorist leaders such as Abdullah Bin Laden in Afghanistan. Despite strong opposition to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, particularly from former Afghan Forces, who could be crucial partners in defeating AQ and their hosts, they require political backing and material support to effectively carry out their mission. The former Afghan Forces bring extensive experience in combating AQ and other terrorist organizations, possess intimate knowledge of the terrain, and are highly motivated to confront these threats.