



Al-Qaeda After Bin Laden: Organizational Survival, Affiliate Autonomy, and Strategic Fragmentation

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: May 30, 2026 Revised: June 13, 2026 Accepted: June 28, 2026 Available Online: July 15, 2026 Keywords: Al Qaeda, Terrorist, Network, Affiliates, Decentralization. Corresponding author: khurramsiddiqui.edu@gmail.com	Al Qaeda, founded by Osama bin Laden, is a global terrorist organization that aims to establish an Islamic Caliphate. Initially, the group was resisting the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan; however, later the group turned into a network committed to global jihad against its perceived enemies. The death of the core leader and weakening of the overall leadership have impacted the organization. The centralized structure converted into a decentralized network that has sustained the organization's survival. The paper addresses how Al-Qaeda's use of an affiliate network helped it survive, but at the same time reduced its strategic unity and central control. As the Al-Qaeda jihadist ideology and affiliates' political objectives prevent them from fully following Al Qaeda's religious mission. Moreover, assessing ways in which the group and its affiliates are balancing them in the region while facing global counter-terrorism pressure.

Introduction

Al-Qaeda ("The Base") emerged in 1988 from Makhtab Al Khidamat, founded by Usama Bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam during the anti-Soviet jihad, and subsequently developed an international presence that included Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States.¹ Its attacks on US interests before 9/11 and the global counterterrorism campaign that followed transformed the organization: Bin Laden was killed in 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri succeeded him and was killed in Afghanistan in 2022, while Sayf al-Adl is now assessed as its de facto leader.² Yet leadership losses and declining direct operational capacity did not produce organizational disappearance. Al-Qaeda survived through a networked structure even as its central authority weakened. This tension is especially relevant in Pakistan, which ranked second among countries most affected by terrorism in the Global Terrorism Index 2025, although Al-Qaeda's visible activity in South Asia has declined.³

Existing scholarship increasingly explains Al-Qaeda's persistence through decentralization, leadership adaptation, and indirect influence rather than spectacular violence alone. The debate remains unsettled. Mir portrays Al-Qaeda as a continuing threat that retains meaningful influence over affiliates and may benefit from Taliban rule in Afghanistan and shifting US priorities; Byman instead emphasizes organizational weakness, affiliates' turn towards local conflicts, and the

¹ "Al Qaeda Terrorist Group, Pakistan," Terrorism | South Asia Terrorism Portal, accessed January 18, 2026, <https://www.satp.org/terrorist-profile/pakistan/al-qaeda>.

² Al Qaeda: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy, (Congress Government, 2024).

³ Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism (Sydney: IEP, 2025), 23, accessed January 20, 2026, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>

constraining effects of sustained counterterrorism pressure.⁴ Ideological studies further show that Al-Qaeda frames itself as the protector of Muslims against the West, whereas Islamic State claims the religious authority to define “true” Islam.⁵ Frame analysis identifies how such narratives support mobilization.⁶ Al-Qaeda constructs its adversaries through the idea of a US-Israeli “Zionist-Crusader alliance,”⁷ regimes that do not implement Sharia and oppress Muslims,⁸ actors portrayed as serving that alliance,⁹ and Jews.¹⁰ Islamic State, by contrast, defines all opponents of the caliphate as enemies of Islam,¹¹ rejects jihadist groups that refuse obedience, including Al-Qaeda,¹² treats ideological rivals as infidels or apostates,¹³ attacks scholars who issue fatwas against it,¹⁴ and condemns Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood as deviant.¹⁵ Turner consequently argues that Islamic State’s excesses helped restore Al-Qaeda’s relative relevance.¹⁶ Under post-9/11 pressure, Al-Qaeda adopted a survival-oriented “meta-strategy” that prioritized organizational continuity over rigid rules,¹⁷ while its less immediate eschatology distinguished it from Islamic State’s claim that the end times had already begun.¹⁸

The organizational literature nevertheless reveals the costs of this adaptation. Al-Qaeda’s affiliates extend geographical reach and operational resilience, but their concentration on local disputes limits the core’s ability to determine strategic outcomes, making the organization a fragile network sustained by a compromise between autonomy and control rather than a coherent hierarchy.¹⁹ Leadership succession compounded this problem: Zawahiri faced deficits of legitimacy, command and communication, fragmentation, and counterterrorism pressure, while lacking Bin Laden’s charismatic authority and direct influence over affiliates.²⁰ External policy also matters, since counterterrorism responses that misread local socio-political conditions can reproduce the environments in which Al-Qaeda’s narratives and networks survive without territorial control.²¹

These dynamics are most visible in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Al-Qaeda’s origins there were not merely historical; its capacity to connect global objectives with local struggles enabled it to retain ideological coherence despite a weakened central command.²² Long-standing partnerships and shared jihadist networks have therefore allowed it to continue acting as a connective force among Islamist militants in South Asia.²³ Evidence from the region links foreign-fighter movement and attack plotting primarily to Al-Qaeda or Al-Qaeda-connected groups,²⁴ while Pakistan remains an important logistical and transit space, including through Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar.²⁵ The Taliban’s return to power in 2021 reportedly provided Al-Qaeda members protection, documentation, freedom of movement, safe houses, and opportunities to re-establish training

⁴ Daniel Byman and Asfandiyar Mir, "Assessing al-Qaeda: A Debate," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 47, no. 12 (2022): 1559.

⁵ Konstantinos Kavrakis, "Identity and Ideology through the Frames of Al Qaeda and Islamic State," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 5 (March 2022): 1235, doi:10.1080/09546553.2022.2035366.

⁶ Ibid, 1238.

⁷ Ibid, 1240.

⁸ Ibid, 1240.

⁹ Ibid, 1240.

¹⁰ Ibid, 1240.

¹¹ Ibid, 1240.

¹² Ibid, 1241.

¹³ Ibid, 1241.

¹⁴ Ibid, 1241.

¹⁵ Ibid, 1241.

¹⁶ ohn Turner, "The impact of Islamic State’s ideological correction initiative on al Qaeda’s bid for relevance," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 30, no. 3 (June 2019): 563, doi:10.1080/09592318.2019.1601843. 563

¹⁷ Ibid, 565.

¹⁸ Ibid, 570.

¹⁹ Daniel Byman, "Buddies or Burdens? Understanding the Al Qaeda Relationship with Its Affiliate Organizations," *Security Studies* 23, no. 3 (2014): 431–470, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2014.935228>.

²⁰ Barak Mendelsohn, "Ayman al-Zawahiri and the Challenges of Succession in Terrorist Organizations," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 8 (2022): 1826–1845, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1844673>.

²¹ Nichola E. J. Rew, "A New Counterterrorism Strategy: Why the World Failed to Stop Al Qaeda and ISIS/ISIL, and How to Defeat Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 8 (2021): 1815–1817, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.2000214>.

²² Vasilieva, A. M., & Zherlitsyna, N. A. (2022). The evolution of Al-Qaeda: Between regional conflicts and a globalist perspective. Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences; Peoples Friendship University of Russia

²³ Page S1242

²⁴ Mines, A. (2023). The evolving terrorism threat to the U.S. from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Program on Extremism, George Washington University. <https://www.extremism.gwu.edu>.

²⁵ Page 9

infrastructure.²⁶ Although the Taliban's national orientation may restrain overt transnational activity, informal ideological and cross-border cooperation remains possible,²⁷ as illustrated by the renewed allegiance of the Pakistani Taliban to the Afghan Taliban.²⁸

The research puzzle is therefore why the affiliate network that enabled Al-Qaeda to survive sustained counterterrorism pressure has simultaneously reduced its strategic unity, central control, and ability to secure adherence to its global religious mission. Existing studies tend to privilege the advantages of affiliation and adopt a top-down focus on how central leaders manage affiliates; they pay less attention to bottom-up dynamics through which local commanders, socio-political conditions, grassroots pressures, and regional agendas shape affiliate behaviour and strategic deviation. Region-specific analysis of this tension in Af-Pak also remains limited. This article addresses that gap by examining how affiliate networks have preserved Al-Qaeda while fragmenting authority; how the tension between its global jihadist ideology and affiliates' local political priorities constrains the global mission; and how Al-Qaeda has balanced decentralization and control in the Af-Pak region under sustained counterterrorism pressure.

Theoretical Framework

Social Network Theory Social Network Theory is a study of the structure and dynamics of social relations and interactions. According to social network theory, individuals are not isolated actors but a part of networks connected through social ties, which influence behavior, communication, and the movement of information and power.²⁹

The theory provides a systematic way to describe these connections and discover the underlying patterns that shape social interactions. It is based on the idea that social ties formed through family, friendships, professional relations, or online interactions play an essential role in shaping a person's attitudes, behavior, and access to resources, as well as broader outcomes.³⁰

Defining Nodes and Ties

The ideas of nodes and ties is the foundation of network theory. Nodes represent individuals, organizations, or other entities, while ties refer to the relationships or connections between them. By examining these connections, researchers can understand how information and behaviors spread, identify influential actors, and analyze the overall structure and dynamics of a network.³¹ Network properties like centrality, density, and cohesion help identify key actors, subgroups, and the level of connectedness within a network, using various network analysis tools and measures.³²

Connection and Structure

The theory is based on two key ideas: connections and structure. Connections matter because they serve as pathways for interactions and exchanges between people, groups, or organizations. Structure matters because it shapes opportunities and limitations for actors in the network, as well as for the network as a whole.³³

Three Approaches

In management research, most studies fall into three approaches, first, relatedness and topology, second, embeddedness, and third, egonet composition. These approaches help explain how social networks impact performance, cooperation, and information flow.³⁴ Through the lens of network theory approaches the strengths and limitations of Al Qaeda through its affiliates will be more visible.

²⁶ Page 27

²⁷ Krause, D., & Sheikh, M. K. (2021, August 20). The Taliban back in power: An assessment of al-Qaeda and IS two decades after 9/11. DIIS Comment. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/the-taliban-back-in-power>.

²⁸ Krause, D., & Sheikh, M. K. (2021, August 20). The Taliban back in power: An assessment of al-Qaeda and IS two decades after 9/11. DIIS Comment. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/the-taliban-back-in-power>.

²⁹ Dr.Nalin Chirakkara, "Classification Social Network Theory," *International Journal of Innovative Research in Computer Science & Technology* 10, no. 8 (August 2022): 124, accessed January 18, 2026, https://ijircst.org/DOC/ebch_1462-20.pdf%.

³⁰ Ibid,124.

³¹ Ibid,125.

³² Ibid,125.

³³ Ibid, 126.

³⁴ "Classification Social Network Theory," 126.

Relatedness and Topology

Relatedness refers to the direct connections between actors, while topology focuses on the overall shape of the network. Combine, they explain how the connection creates opportunities and constraints for individuals and organizations. It focused on how the network affects the behavior of individuals. Relationships such as physical proximity, shared memberships, or personnel exchanges influence information sharing, behavior, and decision-making. An actor's position within the network is crucial because individual links collectively form a broader social structure.³⁵ The degree of relatedness in social networks can be measured in several ways. The concept of centrality is the most popular technique for quantifying them at the actor level. Relatedness is commonly measured through centrality, which indicates the importance of an actor within the network. Key forms include degree centrality, which means the number of direct ties, eigenvector centrality, which means connections to influential actors, closeness centrality, which means access to others in the network, and betweenness centrality, which means acting as an intermediary. At the group level, density is used to measure how connected the network is.³⁶ Actors can gain advantages from their position in local networks, especially by bridging structural holes, as explained by Ron Burt. When an actor connects others who are not connected, the actor's ego gets a greater access to information, flexibility and control. These benefits are captured through concepts like effective size, which measures non-redundant connections, and constraint, which determines how much an actor's freedom is limited by their network. The structural holes approach is one of the most influential ways network topology explains power and advantage in social networks.³⁷

Embeddedness

It highlights how interactions, especially economic ones, are shaped by the broader social context in which they occur. Unlike the structural hole approach that emphasized individuals, embeddedness focused on relationships among organizations and groups. It shows that actors often share multiple ties (multiplicity), such as social and business relations at the same time, and tend to build stronger connections within close-knit groups. Embedded in such networks builds trust, improves information sharing, reduces risks and transaction costs, and limits opportunistic behavior.³⁸

Egonet: It is the composition that focuses on how an individual's characteristics are shaped the group they are connected to. The theory recognizes that actors bring their own traits into the network, but these traits are also affected by their relationships. People form connections with others who are similar to them, known as homophily.³⁹ Influence can also work in the opposite direction, as individuals adopt beliefs, behaviors, or resources from their ties. Network ties act as channels through which information, resources, status, and influence flow from others (alters) to the individual (ego).⁴⁰

Application of Social Network Theory on Al Qaeda

Nodes and Ties: Al Qaeda is a global terrorist network. The leaders of the terrorist organization, such as Usama Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and Sayf-al-Adl, and affiliates, including Al Qaeda in Iraq, in the Arabian Peninsula, and Islamic Maghreb and others are the nodes of the network. The ideological linkage, and resource and financial support represent ties in the network. Al Qaeda strength lies in its ideological appeal, it incites and inspires the global movements to attack those who are the enemies of Islam.⁴¹ By framing it as a fight against the enemies of Islam, Al Qaeda gains sympathy and recruit individuals from various part of the world.⁴²

Moreover, Al Qaeda and its affiliates are generating revenue from various sources including the donations from the supporter, criminal activities generate there revenue such as drug trafficking, kidnapping, and through investment in the legal business to perform activities.⁴³ In 2020, Al Qaeda used online-propaganda campaigns to incite individuals and raise funds.⁴⁴ This provides strength to network.

³⁵ Ibid,126.

³⁶ Ibid,127.

³⁷ Ibid,127.

³⁸ Ibid, 127.

³⁹ Ibid,127.

⁴⁰ Ibid,128.

⁴¹ Rohan Gunaratna, Al Qaeda's Ideology, Hudson Institute, accessed January 19, 2019, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/al-qaeda-s-ideology>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Financial Action Task Force (FATF), Public Statement on the Financing of ISIL, Al Qaeda and Affiliates, Paris, 21 October 2021, FATF, accessed January 19, 2025, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Fatfgeneral/Statement-isil-al-qaeda.html>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Structure: The structure of Al Qaeda was initially centralized; however, the weakening of the core leadership and growth of the affiliates, along with the rise of IS in 2014 has changed the structure of the terrorist group.⁴⁵ The structure becomes decentralized. As of now, the operational control is with its affiliates rather than being centralized. The affiliates are providing strength and resources to the core leadership.⁴⁶ Al Qaeda's Yemen and African affiliates are key to sustaining the whole terrorist network.⁴⁷ The regional instability, including the 2003 Iraq invasion, and the Arab Spring 2011, created a space for Al Qaeda in the Middle East, Somalia, North Africa, and Sahel. ⁴⁸ This decentralized structure is keeping the terrorist network alive. The lack of centrality, cohesion and density has declined the group overall. Al Qaeda faced a downfall after 9/11, the group lost its key commanders, and the group was unable to conduct any successful terrorist attack in the west. The ideological friction between the local groups and the global organization, broadly these groups follows two ideologies deobandi Islam and Ahl-e-Hadith (often known as Salafi) and the Ahl-e-Hadith do not recognize Deobandi religious authority.⁴⁹ Moreover, with leadership decline, there caused a decline in the command over the affiliates. Overall, the lack of centrality, cohesion and density has declined the group.

Affiliates	AQI, AQAP, Shahaab, AQIM	Ensured Al-Qaeda's Survival
Lack of Centrality	Top down to decentralized	Ensured Al-Qaeda's Survival
Lack of Cohesion	Fragmentation caused by local and global priorities	Declined Al-Qaeda
Lack of Density	Weak interconnection	Declined Al-Qaeda

Network Theory Approaches: Through the lens of network theory approaches of relatedness, embeddedness, and egonet, the strength and limitations of Al Qaeda through its affiliates will be more visible.

AQI: Al-Qaeda in Iraq AQI was formed by Al-Zarqawi. Which was later renamed as Islamic State of Iraq, (ISI). It expanded in Syria as the Nusra Front when the situation in Syria deteriorated in 2011. ISI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi attempted to merge the Nusra Front into his group Islamic State of Syria and Iraq, but Al Qaeda and Al-Nusra denied his move. In 2017, Hayat Tahrir al Sham, which controls part of Idlib and has distanced itself from Al Qaeda, however, its breakup off group Hurras-al-Din is still closer to AQ.⁵⁰ The ISI ignored the guidance of Al-Qaeda, consequently, the Al Qaeda in Iraq collapsed. The AQI has a relatedness formed by the leading figure of Al Qaeda and has a context and ideology that influence its formation. However, as the theory says the actor trait and ideology has also influence on the network and caused fragmentation. Relatedness to Al-Qaeda in terms of shared goals, embeddedness in the form of legitimacy, and changes in the egonet lead to separation of the affiliate from the network.

Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula: US counter terrorism efforts have eliminated Al-Qaeda branch in Saudi Arabia by 2005, therefore, in 2009, the remaining cells merged with the Yemeni AQ operatives and formed AQAP. This affiliation was expanded during the 2011 Yemeni instability. The group has conducted more than any other affiliate of this group in the US and Europe. AQAP remained an active Al Qaeda affiliate in the region.⁵¹ . Related in form of shared ideology and goals, embeddedness provides legitimacy and propaganda support, egonet, strong local ties enable territorial.

Al Shabaab: The likeminded founders of this group had ties with AQ and formally joined the group in 2012. It controls territory in Somalia and conducts attacks on domestic as well as international targets in Somalia. Al Shabab is the wealthy affiliate of AQ. Its annual revenue is \$100 million.⁵² In 2006, Al shabaab emerged in a battle over over Somali capital. The terrorism by this group caused 387 deaths.⁵³ The like-mindedness created a direct relation with Al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda is the Islamic Maghreb: The group emerged in the Algeria civil war in 1990s and declared loyalty to Al Qaeda in 2006-7. After 2011, the group focus was shifted to east and south leading to form its local affiliates, the famous offshoot affiliate is Group for Supporting Islam and Muslim (JNIM) created in 2017, with merger of AQIM Sahel branch. The group has expanded in west African states.⁵⁴ This symbolizes the existence of Al-Qaeda on earth. NIM) declared France and its allies as

⁴⁵ "Al Qaeda: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy"

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Failed Transnationalization? The Challenges Faced by al-Qaeda and IS in South Asia pg 237

⁵⁰ "Al Qaeda: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy"

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Global Terrorism Index 2025", 18.

⁵⁴ "Al Qaeda: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy"

their enemies.⁵⁵ IS affiliates are present in the region however, they have limited influence as compared to JNIM.⁵⁶ and it is the second deadliest group in 2024, 146 attacks and 1454 deaths are attributed to this group. JNIM each attack has an average of 10 deaths make it a lethal group in 2024. In year 2024, 327 deaths in 12 attacks conducted by this group, while 8 attacks and 161 deaths in the previous year.⁵⁷ The group has ideological alignment with global al-Qaeda, embeddedness in regional networks, and autonomy in the local operation.

Al Qaeda has alliances with the like-minded groups such as Al Jihad of Egypt, Hezbollah of Iran, National Islamic Front of Sudan and terrorist groups in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Somalia. It has connections with the Islamic groups, who were once led by Sheikh Omer Abdel Rehman, serving a life sentence for World Trade Center Bombing 1993. His sons joined Al Qaeda in 1990's. Since 1992, Al Qaeda conducted attacks on the US military forces in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Africa.⁵⁸ The common factor is to overthrow what they perceive as a heretic regime and establish an Islamic regime.

Social network theory importance of informal networks in organizations and provides a clear way to study how they shape outcomes. The formal structures alone do not explain how organizations really function. The theory acknowledges the significance of network links and how they affect the propagation of ideas, behaviours, information and social support.⁵⁹ The decentralized network of Al Qaeda is ensuring the survival of Al-Qaeda.

Al Qaeda faced a downfall after 9/11, the group lost its key commanders, and the group was unable to conduct any successful terrorist attack in the west. With leadership decline, there caused a decline in the command over the affiliates. Moreover, the ideological friction between the local groups and the global organization, broadly these groups follow two ideologies Deobandi Islam and Ahl-e-Hadith (often known as Salafi) and the Ahl-e-Hadith do not recognize Deobandi religious authority.⁶⁰

Al-Qaeda's transformation Post 2001: Transitioning from Core to Network

Al-Qaeda witnessed one of the most significant organizational changes in the history of contemporary militant groups after the events of September 11, 2001. Before 2001, Al-Qaeda was a geographically centered organization that relied on direct command-and-control systems, physical infrastructure, and hierarchical leadership for its operations. This model was completely rewritten by the U.S.-led War on Terror, which forced Al-Qaeda to give up centralization in favor of a distributed, network-based organization. The transformation made the group difficult to remain with the same ideas and plans as it continued to grow members despite the fact that it held the organization alive.

This section explores how counterterrorism disintegrated the core of Al-Qaeda, the reasons this organization began disintegrating intentionally to survive, and why the emergence of regional affiliates transformed the local politics into an obvious struggle against the global regulations of jihadists.

Organizational Disruption and the U.S.-led War on Terror

The geographical and organizational underpinnings of Al-Qaeda's pre-9/11 operating model were dismantled by the U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan in October 2001. According to the United Nations Security Council Monitoring Team, Al-Qaeda was no longer able to operate as a territorially anchored organization with centralized operational planning due to the destruction of training camps, communications centers, and logistical safe havens.⁶¹

According to Bruce Hoffman's important study, Al-Qaeda had direct control over recruiting, funding, training, and target selection prior to 2001. This was made possible by the operatives' close closeness to the leadership in Afghanistan. According to Hoffman (2006), the loss of this sanctuary caused command structures to become fractured and made it more difficult to maintain centralized coordination over time.⁶²

⁵⁵ "Global Terrorism Index 2025", 16.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 17.

⁵⁷ <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf> 17

⁵⁸ "Al Qaeda Terrorist Group, Pakistan,"

⁵⁹ "Classification Social Network Theory,"

⁶⁰ Failed Transnationalization? The Challenges Faced by al-Qaeda and IS in South Asia pg 237

⁶¹ United Nations Security Council, Fourteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Pursuant to Resolution 1526 (2004) (New York: United Nations, 2011): paras. 7-15, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil/files/monitoringteamreport2011.pdf>.

⁶² Bruce Hoffman, Inside Terrorism, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006): 285-302, <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/inside-terrorism/9780231126984>.

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) empirical conflict data also shows a dramatic drop in assaults that can be directly linked to Al-Qaeda's core leadership after 2001, which coincided with the organization's infrastructure deterioration and the dispersal of its senior cadre.

The decline of organized funding networks exacerbated the disruption. International counterterrorism tactics forced operators and new affiliates to get finance locally by freezing assets, dismantling charitable fronts, and targeting informal transfer mechanisms.⁶³

The U.S. Congressional Research Service claims that by reducing financial reliance on the core leadership, this change significantly changed Al-Qaeda's internal power dynamics.⁶⁴

Crucially, ideological enforcement was compromised by Al-Qaeda's leadership's incapacity to maintain constant supervision. Communications became more symbolic than directive, irregular, and delayed. Due to the structural circumstances brought about by this loss of power, local players were able to exercise discretion over jihadist doctrinal interpretation and tactics.

Decentralization as a Strategy for Survival

Al-Qaeda implemented decentralization as a deliberate organizational plan in response to persistent military pressure and leadership attrition. The organization reframed itself as a global intellectual movement that operated through semi-autonomous nodes instead of trying to reconstruct a centralized structure.

Marc Sageman describes this process as a shift from "organization" to "social movement," with ideological alignment replacing direct command as the primary mechanism of cohesiveness.⁶⁵

From a network theory standpoint, this paradigm improved robustness. RAND Corporation study shows that decentralized terrorist networks are less resilient to leadership decapitation and intelligence surveillance, allowing them to absorb casualties without causing systemic collapse.⁶⁶

However, decentralization entailed significant strategic costs. When the affiliates became independent, they became more selective regarding their ideas. Instead of issuing definite instructions, the central leaders, mostly Ayman al-Zawahiri, discussed more abstract religious concepts thus they were unable to rectify affiliates who failed to align themselves to the long-term global objectives of Al-Qaeda.

Repeatedly, the UN Monitoring Team claimed that the leaders of the Al-Qaeda organization are not able to direct affiliates to concentrate on international assaults rather than domestic problems, this causes them to behave differently in every region.⁶⁷ Decentralization made them survive but it also disseminated their ideas allowing the followers to view global jihad in the way that matches the local politics.

Emergence of Regional Affiliates

Since the year 2001, Al-Qaeda established an affiliate-based organization, and local militant organizations pledged allegiance to the central leadership without relinquishing much of their own authority. This tactic enlarged Al-Qaeda's geographical reach while fundamentally altering the character of its power. According to data provided by the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) and the UCDP, most affiliates prioritize incidents within local political, ethnic, or sectarian settings above Al-Qaeda's initial concept of a unified global struggle against the "far enemy."^{68,69}

⁶³ Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), Actor Profile: Al-Qaeda (Uppsala University, accessed 2025), activity timeline and associated conflicts sections, <https://ucdp.uu.se/actor/224>.

⁶⁴ United States Congressional Research Service, *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates: Global Presence, Operations, and Strategy* (Washington, DC: CRS, 2019): 6–9, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10613>.

⁶⁵ Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008): 69–92, <https://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/14447.html>.

⁶⁶ Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering Al Qaeda* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008): 42–45, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG741.html>.

⁶⁷ United Nations Security Council, *Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017)* (New York: United Nations, 2020): paras. 23–29, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil/files/mt_report_2020.pdf.

⁶⁸ South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), "Al-Qaeda" Terrorist Group Profile (New Delhi: Institute for Conflict Management, accessed 2025), operational strategy and regional presence sections, https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/terroristoutfits/al_qaeda.htm.

According to Assaf Moghadam's comparative examination of jihadist organizations, identification with Al-Qaeda is frequently used as a branding tool rather than a strategy of subordination. Affiliates selectively use global jihadist language to increase credibility, recruitment, and finance, while pursuing goals influenced by local political circumstances. This environment exacerbated a fundamental contradiction: although Al-Qaeda's leadership attempted to preserve intellectual dominance, affiliates needed local legitimacy to thrive. As a result, global religious missions and objectives were pushed aside in favor of nationalist, sectarian, or insurgent interests, hurting Al-Qaeda's transnational objective.⁷⁰

Evaluation of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)

The emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in 2014 is one of the most obvious empirical situations for investigating the conflict between Al-Qaeda's global jihadist ideology and affiliates' local political interests. Al-Qaeda's central leadership designed AQIS as a method of expanding its ideological reach into South Asia, countering the Islamic State's rising influence, and reestablishing relevance within the global jihadi movement. Nevertheless, empirical evidence from SATP, UCDP, and United Nations monitoring reports shows that AQIS has remained predominantly integrated in local militant ecosystems, putting region-specific political and insurgency goals ahead of Al-Qaeda's Universalist religious purpose.

AQIS's Origins and Strategic Goals

Ayman al-Zawahiri publicly established AQIS in September 2014 via audio message, declaring the formation of a new regional branch charged with "raising the flag of jihad" in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Zawahiri viewed AQIS as part of Al-Qaeda's long-term global war against Western dominance and regional governments that support it, clearly placing the organization inside Al-Qaeda's transnational ideological agenda.⁷¹

Dimension	Al-Qaeda Core (Global Level)	AQIS (Regional Affiliate)
Strategic Focus	Global jihad against the "far enemy," particularly Western states	Region-specific insurgency focused on South Asian political and security targets
Target Selection	High-profile international targets designed to produce symbolic global impact	Local state actors, police, secular activists, and rival militant groups
Ideological Enforcement	Centralized ideological guidance articulated by senior leadership	Selective adoption of global jihadist rhetoric aligned with local grievances
Operational Autonomy	Intended centralized direction pre-2001	High operational autonomy with minimal central oversight
Relationship to Local Politics	Rejection of national political frameworks	Deep entanglement with local political conflicts and militant ecosystems

Compiled by author

Despite this global framework, the United Nations Security Council Monitoring Team's current evaluations show that AQIS arose largely via the rebranding and unification of pre-existing South Asian militant organizations, many of whom were previously involved in localized insurgencies.⁷²

Rather than forming a new organizational structure from start, Al-Qaeda incorporated these people into its network, giving them ideological validity while retaining operational autonomy.

⁶⁹ Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), Armed Actor Dataset (Uppsala University, accessed 2025), <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/>.

⁷⁰ Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation among Terrorist Actors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017): 155–182, <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/nexus-of-global-jihad/9780231161282>.

⁷¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Announcement of Qaedat al-Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent" (2014), transcript cited in United Nations Security Council Monitoring Team reports, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/monitoring-team/reports>.

⁷² United Nations Security Council, Twenty-First Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (New York: United Nations, 2015): paras. 18–22, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil/files/monitoringteamreport2015.pdf>.

This trend corresponds to Al-Qaeda's post-2001 goal of expansion through affiliation rather than direct control. However, it also involved AQIS in local political situations from the start, restricting the central leadership's ability to enforce strategic aims that were incompatible with regional realities.

Ideological Framing and Target Selection

AQIS' ideological conduct is closely related to Al-Qaeda's global jihadist discourse, emphasizing resistance to Western powers, rejection of democratic administration, and the creation of Islamic authority. AQIS propaganda regularly draws on themes of Muslim victimization in Kashmir, Rohingya persecution in Myanmar, and claimed Western intervention in South Asia, linking local complaints with Al-Qaeda's larger narrative.⁷³

Nonetheless, actual statistics on AQIS' operational conduct show a substantial gap between discourse and practice. According to data on events published by the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) and confirmed by UCDP, AQIS assaults have mostly targeted local state actors, secular bloggers, police officers, and rival militant organizations, rather than Western or transnational targets.⁷⁴

The trend demonstrates that at the present moment AQIS is more likely to be guided by local political goals than Al-Qaeda used to be preoccupied with the far enemy. This limited application of global jihadist doctrine indicates a pragmatic adaptation to regional settings in which assaults on Western targets are logistically impossible and politically expensive. As a result, AQIS' ideological affinity with Al-Qaeda is mostly symbolic rather than programmatic.

Organizational Leadership and Structure

The AQIS leadership structure demonstrates the limitations of central authority. AQIS has legally committed allegiance (bay'ah) to Ayman al-Zawahiri, although its leadership is controlled by people from Pakistani and South Asian extremist networks. The selection of Asim Umar as AQIS's first emir epitomized this trend; Umar was a long-time member of Pakistani jihadist circles with strong local ties rather than a direct representative of Al-Qaeda's Arab core.⁷⁵

According to United Nations assessments, AQIS has great autonomy in recruiting, fundraising, and making tactical decisions. Communication between the AQIS leadership and Al-Qaeda headquarters has been described as sporadic and primarily ideological, with no indication of direct operational control.⁷⁶ This organizational autonomy has enabled AQIS to sustain strong counterterrorism efforts while simultaneously strengthening its focus on particular insurgency demands.

Operating Patterns and Limitations

From an operational standpoint, AQIS has struggled to reach the scope and effect envisioned by Al-Qaeda's senior leadership. According to UCDP conflict statistics, AQIS-attributed violence is less frequent and lethal than other jihadist organizations in the region, notably the Pakistani Taliban (TTP).⁷⁷

SATP data also shows that AQIS operations are frequently opportunistic and small-scale, restricted by resources and rivalry with more established terrorist players.⁷⁸ Because of these constraints, AQIS has been forced to integrate itself within existing militant infrastructures rather than operating as a vanguard of international jihad. The contrast between Al-Qaeda's global objectives and AQIS's limited operational reach highlights the structural restrictions imposed by local political realities. AQIS's existence is dependent on avoiding actions that might result in massive state reaction, confirming its preference for limited targets and gradual engagement over spectacular global operations.

⁷³ United Nations Security Council, Twenty-Third Monitoring Team Report (New York: United Nations, 2017): paras. 29–33, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil/files/mt_report_2017.pdf.

⁷⁴ South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), AQIS Incident and Profile Data (Institute for Conflict Management, accessed 2025), <https://www.satp.org>; and Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), Actor Profile: AQIS, <https://ucdp.uu.se>.

⁷⁵ Bruce Hoffman and Colin P. Clarke, *Al-Qaeda's Resurrection* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2015): 12–14, <https://www.cfr.org/report/al-qaedas-resurrection>.

⁷⁶ United Nations Security Council, Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (New York: United Nations, 2020): paras. 23–29, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil/files/mt_report_2020.pdf.

⁷⁷ Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), Armed Actor Dataset (Uppsala University, accessed 2025), <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/>.

⁷⁸ South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), Terrorist Group Profile: AQIS (Institute for Conflict Management, accessed 2025), <https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/terroristoutfits/aqls.htm>.

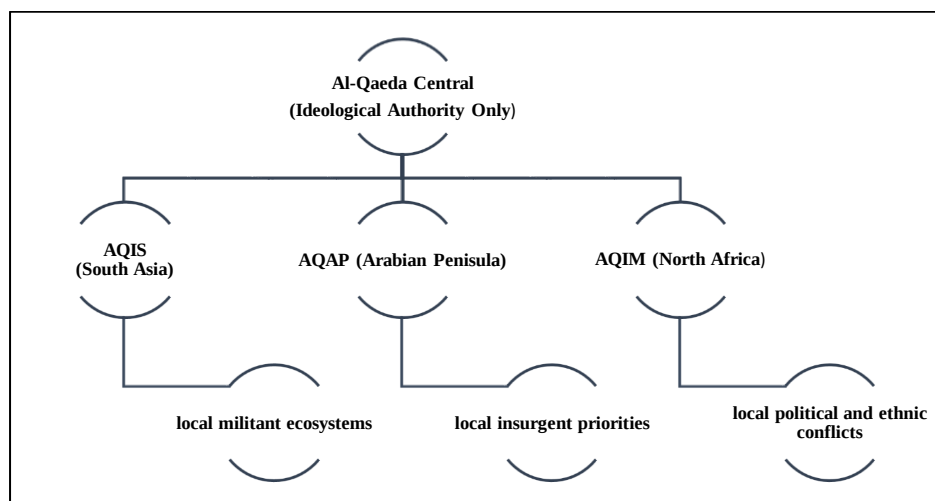


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Al-Qaeda's Post-2001 Network Structure Source: Compiled by Author

Relationship with the Taliban and local militant groups

AQIS's engagement with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban shows the conflict between global ideology and local political pragmatism. While AQIS has ideological similar goals with the Taliban, it mostly works as a subordinate or complementing key player in Taliban-controlled areas. According to UN evaluations, AQIS is largely dependent on Taliban security and logistical support, limiting its strategic autonomy.⁷⁹

This dependence has significant ideological ramifications. The Taliban's principal goal is the consolidation of political power in Afghanistan and the autonomy of regional security dynamics, which do not always coincide with Al-Qaeda's global jihadist objectives. As a result, AQIS has changed its conduct to avoid hurting Taliban missions, even if it means ignoring Al-Qaeda's larger global objectives.

The AQIS situation refers to the fact that the mismatch between the global jihadist ideology of the Al-Qaeda and the local political interests of its affiliates is not by chance but rather a systematic issue. The reliance of AQIS on local militant ecosystems, the focus on region-specific issues, and the inability to operate effectively all block the adequate performance of Al-Qaeda global religious mission. Instead of being an extension of the centrally based intellectual authority, AQIS is a locally based force that exclusively uses global jihadist discourses to justify fundamentally localized agendas.

Affiliate Autonomy and Behavior Dynamics

Al-Qaeda became a networked organization after 2001, and this altered the behavior of its affiliates operated. The top leadership at Al-Qaeda believed that the affiliates were to be used in the globalization of jihad. In the real world, however, the affiliates are operating mostly independently, in accordance with the local politics, scarcity of resources and survival. Due to this freedom, they do not act as the Al-Qaeda global religious objectives.

The intended role of affiliates in Al-Qaeda's strategy

The leaders of al-Qaeda had envisioned that their affiliates would be numerous groups that might assist in executing a global jihad program but escaping the weakness of a single command. Ayman al-Zawahiri frequently indicated that affiliates were to adhere to the ideas of the Al-Qaeda, but changing the tactics according to the local circumstances. According to the UN monitoring reports, the senior leadership of the Al-Qaeda wished to maintain their ideas in command and leave the operational risks to the local groups.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ United Nations Security Council, Thirty-First Monitoring Team Report (New York: United Nations, 2023): paras. 41-46, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/monitoring-team/reports>.

⁸⁰ United Nations Security Council, Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) (New York: United Nations, 2020): paras. 18-22, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil/files/mt_report_2020.pdf.

Dimension	Core-Led Al-Qaeda Structure (1998–2001)	Networked Affiliate-Driven Structure (2004 onward)
Organizational Control	Centralized command under Bin Laden and senior shura; direct operational oversight	Decentralized authority; affiliates plan and execute operations independently
Decision-Making	Strategic and tactical decisions made by core leadership	Strategic guidance from core; tactical autonomy at regional level
Operational Planning	Centrally planned, transnational attacks	Locally planned operations aligned with regional priorities
Resource Allocation	Central funding, training camps, and logistics	Self-financing through local networks; limited core support
Ideological Enforcement	Strong ideological discipline and uniform messaging	Ideological alignment with variations in tactics and targets
Branding and Identity	Single organizational identity (Al-Qaeda Core)	Al-Qaeda brand used as legitimacy marker by affiliates
Target Selection	High-profile “far enemy” targets	Mixed focus on “near enemy” and regional conflicts
Command Accountability	Clear hierarchy and internal discipline	Loose accountability; occasional defiance of core guidance
Strategic Benefits	Operational coherence and global shock impact	Geographic expansion and resilience
Strategic Challenges	Vulnerable to leadership decapitation	Loss of control, reputational damage from affiliate actions

Compiled by author

However there were no regulations of enforcement, and the plan remained rather an idea. Organizations swore loyalty (bayah) and yet remained free to decide the manner in which they recruited, its intended victims and allies. It is due to this that loyalty was more based on being supportive rather than being obedient, thereby diminishing the capability of Al-Qaeda to ensure people subjugated to its international ambitions.

Ideological flexibility vs central control

Affiliate autonomy has provided them with a great deal of ideological freedom, usually to the loss of central control. Though affiliates tend to make reference to global jihadist messages of Al-Qaeda, they select segments of the ideology that can support their domestic political objectives. The UN evaluations indicate that affiliates concentrate on activities enhancing their legitimacy in the area, and the activities may not align with the general strategy of Al-Qaeda.⁸¹

The concepts that are being advanced in the case of AQIS centre on regional issues, such as the perception that the Muslims in South Asia are being discriminated upon, and not on the initial mission of the Al-Qaeda to strike the west armies. Such a shift in emphasis is a natural reaction to certain political circumstances, but it shatters the cohesiveness of the overall religious ambition of Al-Qaeda.

Financial constraints and operational adaptations

The affiliates are more independent when there is financial independence. Since 2001 the counterterrorism operations have significantly reduced the capability of Al-Qaeda central to provide money directly. The U.S. Congressional Research Service and the United Nations Monitoring Team report that affiliates are now more reliant on local sources of income like donations, crime, and assistance of other terrorist organizations.⁸²

⁸¹ United Nations Security Council, Twenty-Third Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (New York: United Nations, 2017): paras. 29–33, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil/files/mt_report_2017.pdf

⁸² United States Congressional Research Service, Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates: Global Presence, Operations, and Strategy (Washington, DC: CRS, 2019): 6–9, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10613>.

This financial decentralization limits affiliates' operating choices. Affiliates emphasize low-cost, low-risk attacks that maintain local relevance above resource-intensive operations aimed at symbolic global reach. As a result, financial need encourages localized bloodshed while discouraging involvement in Al-Qaeda's worldwide effort.

Nationalist agendas vs global jihad objectives

Perhaps the most major cause of variance is affiliates' involvement with nationalist and regional political goals. SATP and UCDP statistics show that affiliates typically support local insurgent movements, tribal relationships, and sectarian conflicts.⁸³ These activities integrate affiliates into national political fights, making allegiance to Al-Qaeda's global jihadist goals strategically expensive.

In South Asia, AQIS's reliance on Taliban-controlled territory and local terrorist networks has forced it to prioritize regional stability above global objectives. According to United Nations studies, affiliates avoid moves that may undermine their connections with prominent local players, even when such caution goes against Al-Qaeda's doctrinal imperatives.⁸⁴

Thus conflict between Al-Qaeda's global jihadist ideology and affiliates' local political aims is systemic, not incidental. Affiliates' autonomy, ideological flexibility, financial autonomy, and nationalism allegiances all restrict their ability and desire to promote Al-Qaeda's international religious goal. As a result, Al-Qaeda's affiliate-based approach preserves organizational longevity while reinforcing strategic fragmentation.

Security Implications in Afghanistan and Pakistan:

Militant Violence persisted even after Leadership Decapitation

Although this has led to targeted assassination of top al-Qaeda leaders such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, militant violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan has continued⁸⁵. This persistence indicates organizational change of al-Qaeda into a decentralized network, which do not depend on strict command chain but on semi-autonomous affiliates. The symbolic authority was undermined, but the operational capacity was not eroded because the local cells and other associated groups could plan and carry out attacks without coordination with their headquarters⁸⁶. As a result, the counterterrorism measures that focus on killing leadership have not been effective enough to stabilize security in the AfPak region in the long run.

The Role of Porous Borders and Inter-Group Networks in Sustaining Militancy: Al-Qaeda, Taliban, TTP, and AQIS.

Porous borders coupled with the trans-border presence of various militant groups, such as the al-Qaeda, the Afghanistan Taliban, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) compound the regional security issue in the Af-Pak region⁸⁷. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border, especially the Durand Line, does not work as a fixed geographical boundary of territory but as a liquid zone of militant movement where groups can move and reorganize, and escape the pressure of counterterrorism⁸⁸. This geographic permeability enables coordination of militant participants who, though their strategic goals might be entirely different, face ideological similarities, logistical chains and operational platforms. These groups coordinate informally by training facilities, safe havens and tolerating each other instead of command structures. Consequently, the Af Pak region has become a networked militant ecosystem where the destruction of a

⁸³ South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), Terrorist Group Profiles and Incident Data (Institute for Conflict Management, accessed 2025), <https://www.satp.org>; and Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), Armed Actor Dataset, <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/>.

⁸⁴ United Nations Security Council, Thirty-First Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (New York: United Nations, 2023): paras. 41–46, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/monitoring-team/reports>.

⁸⁵ Jordan, J. (2014). Attacking the leader, missing the mark: Why terrorist organizations survive decapitation strikes. *International Security*, 38(4), 7–38. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00157

⁸⁶ Byman, D. (2022). Al-Qaida after al-Zawahiri. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/al-qaida-after-al-zawahiri/>.

⁸⁷ JMHorizons. (2023). Cross-border militancy and regional security in the Afghanistan–Pakistan region. *Journal of Military Horizons*. <https://jmhorizons.com/index.php/journal/article/download/704/623>.

⁸⁸ Eurasia Review. (2024, July 19). Cross-border alliances: Afghan safe havens empowering Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). <https://www.eurasiareview.com/19072024-cross-border-alliances-afghan-safe-havens-empowering-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-ttp-oped/>.

single organization has no major impact on the larger system⁸⁹. This has complicated intelligence work and undermined the performance of group-specific counterterrorism actions since al-Qaeda is still within a larger umbrella of regional militancy.

Lasting Insecurity, Changing Violence Patterns and Strategic Communication

The persistence of the al-Qaeda networks in the Af-Pak region has caused a chronic insecurity not only to the internal security forces but also to the people. Al-Qaeda and its allies have instead adopted a low-intensity but prolonged militancy strategy such as targeted murders, intermittent attacks on security forces, and terrorism of intimidation, rather than mass-casualty attacks as their primary method of attack⁹⁰. This will subject the Afghan and Pakistani security organizations to a continuous operational pressure, which causes resource pressure and complicates the effort to counter a highly decentralized and adaptive threat. In the case of civilian, such violence has a longer term impact that creates a long term feeling of fear and instability that breaks down people trust on the state authority even when such attacks are not there in large numbers⁹¹.

In addition to this change of tactics in violence, al-Qaeda has perfected its strategic communication and propaganda practice as a measure of long term survival. Compared to other groups like ISIS which depend on graphic and sensationalist communications⁹², al-Qaeda media output is held back, ideological, and planned. According to studies of the jihad rhetoric, al-Qaeda makes humour scarce and inconspicuous; it is usually used in the form of sarcasm or intellectual mockery, to strengthen in-group unity and damage opponents without jeopardizing its leadership authority. This regulated humour helps popularize violence among fan groups without bringing the same type of criticism that excessive violence does.

Online propaganda comparative analyses also indicate that al-Qaeda is more focused on coherence and ideological plausibility than size or spectacle. Its surface-web media generation is based on endurance, global relevancy and moral legitimacy as opposed to instant mobilization. This communication policy is in the Af-Pak context an extension of low-intensity militancy, in that ideological influence tends to be maintained even when activity is low. The two aspects of ongoing low-level violence and disciplined strategic communication allow al-Qaeda to be relevant, cause psychological pressure, and lead to long-term instability in the region without creating such a significant counterterrorism reaction.

Influence on Local Militancy and Radicalization

Al-Qaeda and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): Ideological Coherence and Regional Cooperation

The most apparent impact of the al-Qaeda on local militancy in the Af-Pak region is the connection of the group with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), where it is not a matter of organizational domination, but ideological one⁹³. The Salafi-jihadists worldview, an anti-Pakistanist view and an anti-Western influence make both groups cooperate despite their operational autonomy. Al-Qaeda has traditionally offered ideological leadership, training, and narrative strategy to legitimize TTP violent campaign in a wider global jihadist perspective⁹⁴. Such a connection enables TTP to localize the global jihad of al-Qaeda by placing it within the domestic range of political and sectarian aversions in Pakistan. Instead of controlling daily activities, al-Qaeda acts as an ideological guide, strengthening the legitimacy of using violence in the name of religion and making TTP look more legitimate among the militant communities. This type of cooperation is one of the factors that lead to the long-term radicalization of the population through the warming of violence as a religious obligation and permitting TTP to pursue local

⁸⁹ Tribune, The. (2025, January 12). After Doha: Will Afghanistan honour its commitments? <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2573710/after-doha-will-afghanistan-honour-its-commitments>.

⁹⁰ Vasileva, A. M., & Zherlitsyna, N. A. (2023). The evolution of Al-Qaeda: Between regional conflicts and a globalist perspective. [Journal Name]. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10036157/>

⁹¹ Hankiss, Á. (2019). Behind the scenes of Al-Qaida's media strategy. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 12(2), 60–76. <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.12.2.1714>.

⁹² Kursuncu, U., Gaur, M., Castillo, C., Alambo, A., Thirunarayan, K., Shalin, V., ... & Arpinar, I. B. (2019). Modeling Islamist extremist communications on social media using contextual dimensions: Religion, ideology, and hate. *arXiv*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/1908.06520>.

⁹³ Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Pakistan. (2024, July 14). TTP using Afghan soil for terrorist operations against Pakistan: UN report. Government of Pakistan. <https://moib.gov.pk/News/62918>.

⁹⁴ Staff Report. (2025, February 15). Anti-Pakistan TTP terrorists continue to receive Afghan funds, logistical support: UN report. Pakistan Today. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/02/15/anti-pakistan-ttp-terrorists-continue-to-receive-afghan-funds-logistical-support-un-report/>

goals. The al-Qaeda-TTP relationship exemplifies how transnational jihadist thinking can be tailored to local insurgencies that do not have any command-and-control framework.

Network-Based Collaboration and Decentralized Influence on TTP and IS-KP

The modern role of al-Qaeda in the Af-Pak region can be explained by its de-centralized organizational structure that is quite unlike its completely centralized one in the early 2000s. Despite a reduced operational manpower, al-Qaeda has maintained a comparative edge in terms of alliance management, networking and facilitation of ideology. Instead of having direct control over the affiliates including Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) al-Qaeda operates as an enabler by offering strategic direction, training experience, logistic experience, and good propaganda skills enhanced during decades of transnational jihadist operations. These capabilities enable al-Qaeda to use affiliates to achieve its aims with reduced exposure to pressure of counterterrorism. Its further and still continued presence in Afghanistan also adds symbolic authority and moral support to other regional militant groups that are involved in terrorism and insurgency. This manner in which al-Qaeda makes up the relative weakness of its fighters by maintaining power through decentralized networks provides strength to local militancy, but not operational authority.

Counterterrorism challenges for Pakistan from al-Qaeda's local affiliates (TTP and IS-KP)

Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts face major structural and strategic challenges due to the changing militant landscape in the Af-Pak region. A primary concern is the ongoing operation of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from Afghan territory. This situation restricts Pakistan's ability to carry out effective counterterrorism operations⁹⁵. The presence of cross-border sanctuaries limits enforcement options, complicates intelligence coordination, and strains Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. These factors highlight the weaknesses of state-focused counterterrorism strategies when militant groups take advantage of gaps in sovereignty and weak border control.

Another challenge comes from the growing use of new technologies by militant groups. Organizations operating in and around Afghanistan now rely more on encrypted AI communication platforms⁹⁶, advanced online propaganda, and new technological tools that improve recruitment, coordination, and operational security. These changes, while not uniformly advanced, make surveillance and intelligence-gathering harder, increasing the workload for security forces.

The merging of multiple militant groups in Afghanistan—including al-Qaeda, TTP, and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)—creates a wider regional threat that goes beyond Pakistan. The coexistence of these organizations allows for the sharing of knowledge, strengthening of ideologies, and learning of tactics, which raises instability in neighboring regions like Iran and Central Asia⁹⁷. This concentration of militant activity could turn Afghanistan into a center for international militancy.

Lastly, the limited international pressure on the Taliban-led Afghan government to stop militant safe⁹⁸ havens has weakened joint counterterrorism efforts. The lack of a unified international response diminishes accountability and allows cross-border militancy to continue, which threatens Pakistan's security and overall regional stability.

Counterterrorism Response against Al-Qaeda and its affiliates at the global and regional levels

The strategies of counterterrorism used worldwide tend to recognize that al-Qaeda is more of a regional affiliate than a centrally established organization. As a result, the current international reactions are aimed at destabilising the facilitating structures of the al-Qaeda and its affiliates, such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic

⁹⁵ Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies & Reuters. (2025, July 21). Pakistani Islamist militants use drones to target security forces, officials say. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistani-islamist-militants-use-drones-target-security-forces-officials-say-2025-07-21/>.

⁹⁶ Shahzad, A. (2025, July 21). Pakistani Islamist militants use drones to target security forces, officials say. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistani-islamist-militants-use-drones-target-security-forces-officials-say-2025-07-21/>.

⁹⁷ SS Europe. (2024, November). Security risks emanating from Afghanistan. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/security-risks-emanating-afghanistan>.

⁹⁸ Kabul Now. (2025, December 5). Afghanistan becomes safe haven for terror groups, Pakistan warns UN. <https://kabulnow.com/2025/12/afghanistan-becomes-safe-haven-for-terror-groups-pakistan-warns-un/>.

Maghreb (AQIM), and the remnants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). In the international scale, these bodies as the United Nations⁹⁹ and the Financial Action Task Force are focusing on network-based disruption policies against terrorist money laundering, communications, training pipelines, and ideology propagation¹⁰⁰.

Breaking down and tracing the monetary trail is the key to eliminating affiliates based on local fundraising, extortion, kidnapping-to-ransom, and informal money transfer networks¹⁰¹. This strategy has been especially applicable in undermining AQAP and AQIM that rely so much on local revenue sources. On the same note, in the quest to monitor and disrupt communication channels, the global community is focusing on curbing coordination, recruiting and propaganda activities in different regions, which includes digitally active affiliates like the ISKP, AQIS, and TTP. Breaking pipelines¹⁰² of training—either through physical camps or through distance training—is one of the priorities so as to avoid transfer of operation skills among affiliate that are operating in South Asia, Middle East, and Africa.

Counterterrorism planning of the region should be adjusted to the particular operating conditions of affiliates¹⁰³. To overcome the challenge of TTP, ISKP, and AQIS in South Asia, the countries should increase border control, intelligence sharing, and joint action on militant havens. Strategies against the AQAP and AQIM in the Middle East and North Africa focus on local security partnerships and capacity building against insurgent entrenchment. In different regions, it is crucial to counter ideological centers with real accounts and community involvement to diminish the process of recruitment and long-term radicalization¹⁰⁴.

In short, successful counterterrorism against al-Qaeda must be an integrated global-regional tactic that incorporates both international network destruction and localized tactics to deal with affiliate autonomy, regional grievance, and lax conditions. This holistic approach indicates that al-Qaeda is a changing and dynamic organization which is not a top-down hierarchy but a networked terror group.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the transformation of al-Qaeda as a centralized terrorist group into a decentralized transnational group and evaluated how the evolution has influenced its relevance moving forward, especially in the Af-Pak region. Instead of considering al-Qaeda as a weak organization characterized only by spectacular violence, the paper shows that its survival has been facilitated by its organizational adaptability, affiliate group, and strategic decentralization. Al-Qaeda has been able to endure through its affiliates like AQIS, AQAP, AQIM, and locally integrated affiliates like TTP and ISKP to ensure that it remains influential even with the ongoing pressure of counterterrorism and limitation of its core activities.

In the analysis it is revealed that even though decentralization has made al-Qaeda more resilient it has also created strategic fragmentation, loss of central control, and reputational risks. The local political and insurgent interests of affiliates tend to interfere with the global jihadist outlook of al-Qaeda and cause friction between the ideological integrity and operational independence. This dynamic has been more clearly seen in the Af-Pak region where boundaries have been porous, militant havens, and overlapping networks which have enabled the continuation of al-Qaeda-linked groups and their adaptation in spite of their leadership setbacks and spatial limitations.

In the security perspective, the ecosystem of al-Qaeda affiliates remains a destabilizing force on Pakistan and the entire region due to the low-intensity, consistent violence, strains on domestic security agencies, and dissemination of methods, training and propaganda. Combination of several militant actors in Afghanistan along with the lack of international leverage on the Taliban further complicates the stabilization and counterterrorism activities in the region.

⁹⁹ United Nations Security Council. (2023). Thirty-first report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/monitoring-team-reports>.

¹⁰⁰ United Nations General Assembly. (2021). United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy review. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/global-counter-terrorism-strategy>.

¹⁰¹ Financial Action Task Force. (2021). Risk assessment of terrorist financing. FATF. <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Fatfrecommendations/Risk-assessment-terrorist-financing.html>.

¹⁰² United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate. (2022). The use of the Internet for terrorist purposes. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/cted>.

¹⁰³ Global Counterterrorism Forum. (2018). Good practices on addressing terrorist safe havens. <https://www.thegctf.org>.

¹⁰⁴ ones, S. G., Dobbins, J., & Chandler, N. (2018). Counterterrorism and insurgency: Understanding the threat. RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org>.

The paper also highlights the shortcomings of leadership-based and state-centered counterterrorism strategies in dealing with decentralized terrorist cells. The responses should be effective; they need network strategies that address financial flows, communication lines, training pipelines, and ideological hubs both at the global and regional levels. In the end, it is important to interpret al-Qaeda as a loose network, but not a structured hierarchy so that it is possible to develop sustainable counterterrorism policies. This study by considering the nature of top-down leadership processes and bottom-up processes of affiliates provides a more sophisticated view of the modern jihadist threats and outlines the findings on more adaptable and region-oriented approaches to counterterrorism.

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