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THESIS

**THE U.S. WAR IN AFGHANISTAN:
AN ASSESSMENT OF OBJECTIVES ACHIEVED
AT ITS CONCLUSION**

by

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March 2022

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ABSTRACT

The dawn of the new millennium witnessed worldwide terrorism. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the United States entered Afghanistan in 2001 primarily to defeat Al-Qaeda. The war turned out to be the longest overseas military campaign conducted by the United States by the time U.S. troops completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. Since the nature of an asymmetric war such as this one is inherently complex, it is challenging to assess how successfully the war in Afghanistan achieved U.S. objectives. This research aims to facilitate that assessment by first laying out tangible benchmarks, and thereafter gauging the war efforts according to those criteria.

The research evaluates relevant terrorism statistics by examining the change in the number of terrorist incidents perpetrated by Al-Qaeda and the decimation of that group during the war. Additionally, the research analyzes the pattern of the Taliban insurgency that restored them to national power. The thesis also considers the frequency of terrorism incidents following the establishment of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The research empirically examines the U.S. war in Afghanistan and provides an objective assessment of the goals achieved. The research can help policymakers, think tanks, scholars, defense analysts, and military students in their respective domains by providing a strong foundation on which to draw lessons from the U.S. war in Afghanistan for future reference.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
CEP	Counter Extremism Project
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DVE	Domestic Violent Extremists
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FDD	Foundation for Defense of Democracies
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
GWOT	Global War on Terror
HVE	Homegrown Violent Extremists
IC	Intelligence Community
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
IS-KP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
KSM	Khalid Sheikh Mohammed
MVE	Militia Violent Extremists
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ODNI	Office of the Director of National Intelligence
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
RMVE	Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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I want to dedicate this thesis to the brave men of the Pakistan Army who fought courageously against the terrorists, defeated their ideology, and are still relentlessly offering the ultimate sacrifice of their lives, for a bright and safer tomorrow.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND

Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (9/11) on the U.S. mainland, the United States invaded Afghanistan after the Taliban refused to surrender Osama bin Laden. Little did the United States realize at the time, but the war eventually would become the longest in the history of the country, spanning a 20-year period. The event marked for the first time in history the United States, along with its allies, occupying another country to wage a war against terrorists. The counterinsurgency campaign persisted for two decades even after the search for Osama bin Laden was over.

The war effort encompassed deployment of more than 100,000 U.S. troops at its peak in 2011 in Afghanistan with war expenditures totaling approximately \$100 billion annually.¹ While the drawdown of U.S. troops kept occurring gradually after 2011 during Obama's administration, in April 2021 the Biden administration announced a decisive and complete withdrawal of U.S. troops by September 2021.² The announcement marked a milestone event whose impact cannot be overlooked in key global events in general and in U.S. foreign policy in particular.

The 9/11 attacks triggered a major shift of U.S. foreign policy and the national focus towards eliminating the threat of terrorism. Under President George W. Bush, the United States declared the global war on terror (GWOT) and invaded Afghanistan in 2001. The objective of the military action, known as Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), centered on elimination of Al-Qaeda and the ousting of the then sitting Taliban government in Afghanistan that had hosted Al-Qaeda. The U.S. forces subsequently conducted military action against Al-Qaeda, killed its several leaders, and were finally able to hunt down Osama bin Laden in 2011 in Pakistan. The United States removed the Taliban from

¹ Reality Check Team, "Afghanistan War: What Has the Conflict Cost the US?," BBC News, July 6, 2021, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-47391821>.

² Kevin Liptak, "Biden Announces Troops Will Leave Afghanistan by September 11: 'It's Time to End America's Longest War,'" CNN, April 14, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/14/politics/joe-biden-afghanistan-announcement/index.html>.

government and put in place a non-Taliban Afghan government led by President Hamid Karzai.

B. RESEARCH QUESTION

In retrospect, an important question arises: was the United States successful in achieving its goals set in the GWOT that prompted the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan? This thesis addresses the question of whether the war in Afghanistan achieved America's principal war objectives of first eliminating the threat of Al-Qaeda, and second, making the United States safe from additional terrorist attacks.

C. SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of this research is twofold: (1) to generate insights on how the United States applied force against an asymmetric threat; and (2) to assess to what degree the United States has been able to avert the terrorist threat altogether by preventing a recurrence of an event like 9/11 in America or elsewhere in the world. Stated differently, did the war make the United States safer from subsequent Al-Qaeda inspired attacks? The thesis also establishes avenues for the future research in the field of counterterrorism, reinforcing or undermining the U.S. decision to go to war in Afghanistan against Al-Qaeda. This research also acts as a steppingstone towards formulating future U.S. foreign policy related to a military engagement away from the U.S. mainland against an unconventional enemy in a context of asymmetric warfare. It is pertinent to mention that the United States undertook various other overseas deployments as well in the post-2001 period until 2021, in addition to those at Afghanistan. Notably those have included the U.S. action in Iraq in 2003 (Operation Iraqi Freedom), in Northern Africa (such as Libya), and deployments in the Middle East (such as Syria). Though those U.S. kinetic operations were also correlated to counterterrorism indirectly, it is the U.S. military action in Afghanistan which became the flagship campaign of GWOT as declared by U.S. President George W. Bush at the core of his speech after the 9/11 catastrophe.

Hence, this research focuses exclusively on the gains from overseas action from where the GWOT commenced (i.e., Afghanistan). In April 2021, President Joseph R. Biden announced the pulling out of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the withdrawal process

commenced, thus formally ending the GWOT. Following suit, many other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops also completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan. Therefore, this research has been structured through available quantifiable variables, limited to the U.S. gains in Afghanistan exclusively, and their ensuing effects.

D. LITERATURE REVIEW

The U.S. war on terror and military action in Afghanistan has been a subject of consideration after the commencement of GWOT. Various scholars, researchers, and think tanks have been studying and analyzing the U.S. military action in its GWOT. But that scholarly work has largely been undertaken while the U.S. operations in Afghanistan were ongoing (i.e., before the withdrawal phase of U.S. forces). Likewise, many works present an overall assessment of the GWOT, not only in Afghanistan but also in other overseas and Middle Eastern deployments related to counterterrorism efforts. By contrast, this research is specifically aimed at the U.S. gains in the aftermath of withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, thereby analyzing the achievement of goals set when the war in Afghanistan commenced.

An assessment of gains in GWOT has been studied by Erik Goepner in his article “Measuring the Effectiveness of America’s War on Terror” for U.S. Army War College Quarterly.³ His study empirically evaluates the extent to which the United States was able to achieve its goals. To do so, he examines the terrorist incidents in countries which the U.S. military invaded or chose not to invade, the number of casualties that occurred prior to and after the 9/11 incident, and the capacity and efficacy of Islamist-inspired foreign terrorist organizations.

Goepner argued that GWOT resulted not only in an increase in the number of Islamist-inspired terror groups but also in the personnel strength within those organizations.⁴ In his analysis, 13 Islamist-inspired foreign terrorist organizations existed in 2001, and that number grew to 37 by 2013. In terms of personnel strength, terrorist

³ Erik Goepner, “Measuring the Effectiveness of America’s War on Terror,” *Parameters* 46, no. 1 Spring 2016 (March 1, 2016): 15, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol46/iss1/12>.

⁴ Goepner, 113.

organizations comprised 32,200 fighters in the year 2000; however, their number tripled to 110,000 in 2013. Further, the study revealed that more terrorist attacks occurred annually in countries which the U.S. military invaded in comparison to those which it did not invade. In terms of human losses, on average, more U.S. casualties occurred per year in a 12-year period post-9/11 in comparison to the annual number of deaths that occurred pre-9/11 (i.e., 65 versus 57 deaths annually). Likewise, in terms of global fatalities, the study revealed 72 percent rise on average in deaths occurred in the 13-year period after 9/11 as compared to the 13 years prior to September 2001. In a nutshell, the U.S. endeavors to achieve the objectives of GWOT have been “largely ineffective.”⁵ As per Goepner, his research represents “one of only a few attempts to assess quantitatively the effectiveness of U.S. efforts” in GWOT. Hence, more studies are required with additional research on the “effectiveness” of U.S. efforts associated with the GWOT.

Among the researchers, another approach has been to assess the results of GWOT altogether by questioning the military action itself against the terrorists’ threat. Such researchers argue that military action may not have been the best approach; rather an indirect strategy might have been a better option. In a policy analysis report by the CATO Institute titled “Step Back Lessons for U.S. Foreign Policy from the Failed War on Terror,” Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner argued that the GWOT “failed.”⁶ The authors based their arguments firstly on United States’ “inflated assessment” of the terrorism threat, which led to an “expansive counterterrorism effort” and, secondly, the application of an “aggressive strategy of military intervention.” The study revealed that both reasons just mentioned led to a failure in the GWOT.

On the other hand, the work of Thrall and Goepner considered not only the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan, but also the overall U.S. counterterrorism efforts undertaken in Middle Eastern and African countries including Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Somalia;

⁵ Goepner, 119.

⁶ Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner, “Step Back: Lessons for U.S. Foreign Policy from the Failed War on Terror,” Policy Analysis (CATO Institute, June 26, 2017), 9–10, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/step-back-lessons-us-foreign-policy-failed-war-terror>.

and Pakistani tribal areas, where drone strikes were conducted.⁷ Their report highlighted that although the U.S. military action in Afghanistan—Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)—did curtail Al-Qaeda central, it did little to hinder affiliates such as AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), which pose a significant threat. The report called for a “step back” strategy from GWOT against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Islamist-inspired terrorism.

Undeniably, the answer as to whether gains were made in the GWOT is directly embedded in the objectives set forth. In a few cases more than a decade from 2001, especially after the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, the clarity on objectives becomes blurred and, obviously, so does the resulting answer about the success in meeting those objectives. Since the commencement of the GWOT in Afghanistan, the scope of war’s goals kept expanding in relation to the initial goals set, with the emergence of many other significant objectives in U.S. foreign policy. Accordingly, the gauging of objectives got confused due to mission creep as the war dragged on, even to the eventual troop withdrawal. Whether those expanded goals were covertly set by the U.S. government or explicitly spelled out is not the question. But it is important to view the war in Afghanistan through the right lens of objectives to arrive at the correct and relevant answer as to whether those goals were met. And to get to that right answer, the current U.S. President Joe Biden had to explicitly elaborate on the goals set even two months after the withdrawal announcement:⁸

The United States did what we went to do in Afghanistan: to get the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11 and to deliver justice to Osama bin Laden, and to degrade the terrorist threat to keep Afghanistan from becoming a base from which attacks could be continued against the United States. We achieved those objectives. That’s why we went.

The president also took care to express what the United States did not aim to achieve: “We did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build. And it’s the right and the

⁷ Thrall and Goepner, 11.

⁸ *Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.

responsibility of the Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country.”⁹ The statement sets the correct vector for those who might drift to gauge the Afghan war on some reformed parameters. For instance, in the study on “US Policy and Strategy Toward Afghanistan After 2014,” Larry Goodson and Thomas Johnson have examined the U.S. policy in Afghanistan post-2014 and identified the following key security interests of the United States present in and around the Afghanistan region:¹⁰

1. Contain or prevent the threat of terrorist attacks on the homeland or American interests abroad;
2. Prevent the proliferation of WMD from the region;
3. Ensure regional stability; and,
4. Forestall rising peer competitors in the region.

Goodson and Johnson have argued that similar to cases in all limited wars, gauging victory in the Afghan war is complex, without analyzing the last three objectives. It is evident that half of the first objective remains the primary goal, even though it was set at the onset of the GWOT. The remaining objectives are also interlinked with the U.S. war in Iraq and the region. The authors associated the withdrawal from Afghanistan as “reminiscent of the ‘Vietnamization’ strategy of an earlier era and dangerously flawed” since the U.S. military had no supporting base left to help the South Vietnamese troops.¹¹ The authors posited that the existing U.S. strategy could not fulfill remaining objectives; yet the first objective has been met to an extent, though at a higher cost than anticipated. Towards that end and given the long geographical distance of the region from the U.S. homeland, the paper called for a “three-part strategy for post-2014 Afghanistan,” including (1) finish destroying Al-Qaeda; (2) continue rebuilding Afghanistan; and (3) regionalize strategy.¹²

⁹ Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan.

¹⁰ Larry Goodson and Thomas Johnson, *U.S. Policy and Strategy Toward Afghanistan after 2014* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2014), 18, <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/45567>.

¹¹ Goodson and Johnson, 34.

¹² Goodson and Johnson, 23.

Now, after seven years under a three-part strategy, the last two recommendations of the study do not fit well into the initial objectives set forth in 2001. Despite whether the U.S. government invested towards the rebuilding of war-torn Afghanistan and directed its energies towards regionalization, the fact remains that the midterm goals have to be kept distinct, as explicitly highlighted by President Biden.

Yet another way to view the U.S. war in Afghanistan is through a future perspective in Afghanistan, after the departure of U.S. forces. In a report by the American Security Project (ASP) published after the U.S. announcement of its withdrawal from Afghanistan, “Preparing for the Consequences of Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” Claire Brenner and Matthew Wallin posited that the U.S. withdrawal will have “profound implications on governance, Afghan security forces, terrorism, regional dynamics, great power competition, human rights, humanitarian issues, and development.”¹³ The authors argued that a hasty and unconditional U.S. withdrawal would bear ramifications on the overall security environment in Afghanistan and hard-earned gains against the terrorists. The authors held that if the Taliban regime assumed power, Afghanistan would face the prospect of becoming an epicenter of “international terrorists” once again.¹⁴

The era between 2001 and 2021 has witnessed four different U.S. regimes under the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joseph Biden. It is quite relevant that the scope of the GWOT expanded initially from Afghanistan to the countering of WMD in Iraq and from promoting democracy in Afghanistan to combating ISIS terrorists in the Middle East. This shift and expansion in the scope of the GWOT, both in terms of geography and aims, whether driven by U.S. foreign policy or not, falls beyond the purview of this research.

With regard to the analysis of terrorist incidents, the past research works just described have also taken into account the acts by terrorist groups, in addition to Al-Qaeda,

¹³ Claire Brenner and Matthew Wallin, *Perspective – Preparing for the Consequences of Withdrawal from Afghanistan, Asymmetric Operations* (Washington, D.C.: American Security Project, 2021), 4, <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/perspective-preparing-for-the-consequences-of-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>.

¹⁴ Brenner and Wallin, 4.

which have been operating outside Afghanistan. Likewise, the studies incorporate and analyze those statistics of casualties from terrorism, which the U.S. military suffered while fighting GWOT overseas. Hence, these analyses lead to a picture which becomes vague and inconclusive for a particular case, i.e., Afghanistan, since several different variables are also at play. By contrast, this research is structured in a manner to incorporate the statistics relevant to the U.S. war in Afghanistan only in considering the gains against Al-Qaeda in particular. The paper is not directed towards analyzing all U.S. foreign policy related to counterterrorism during the 20-year period as that policy applied to South Asia to North Africa. Rather, it focuses on the objectives consolidated in the wake of the final departure of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan after fighting its longest overseas deployment.

The occurrence of terrorist incidents before and after the U.S. intervention in 2001 in Afghanistan can lead to insight about the gains in tangible terms. The increase, decrease, or absence of change in the number of terrorist incidents by Al-Qaeda would manifest the gains or success of the GWOT.

An assessment of Al-Qaeda's current capacity cannot be quantified precisely; however, its key leadership can provide a reasonable degree of visibility of potential capabilities. A comparison of Al-Qaeda's core leadership at its peak when it conducted the attacks on the United States vis-à-vis its current capacity would illuminate the viability of U.S. efforts. The change in motives and mindset for terrorist actions in terms of radicalism is difficult to correctly assess immediately after withdrawal stage; however, it does offer an avenue for further research.

In the equation of United States and Al-Qaeda, an analysis of the Taliban factor seems imperative. When the U.S. government demanded the then ruling Afghan government hand over Al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, the Taliban refused, which ultimately drew the United States into war in Afghanistan. After two decades of war, the Taliban returned to power in 2021. The Taliban resurgence can be empirically assessed with an analysis of strikes by the Taliban against the U.S. and allied forces, and the Afghan government. The true implementation of commitment and surety by the Taliban that the Afghan soil will not be used for perpetrating terrorist acts would manifest how far the

United States has remained successful in Afghanistan. In this context, upholding the pledges and commitment made by the Taliban in the Doha Peace Agreement are vital.¹⁵ The actual manifestation by the Taliban that Afghan soil is not used for perpetrating terrorist acts would reflect how far the U.S. effort has remained successful in Afghanistan.

This thesis attempts to answer the research questions exclusively from the perspective of Afghanistan: the flashpoint of the GWOT and its symbolic endpoint. By analyzing the following variables, this thesis endeavors to provide an overall assessment of the U.S. war in Afghanistan fought during the first two decades of the new millennium:

- Al-Qaeda's capacity as a terrorist organization after the U.S. war in Afghanistan as indicated by the current state of Al-Qaeda's key leadership, i.e., alive or killed.
- Al-Qaeda's attacks before and after the U.S. intervention in 2001; the increase, decrease, or lack of change in the number of terrorist incidents stands as empirical evidence.
- The Taliban's sustained actions in terms of terrorist incidents since the United States overthrew the Taliban government in 2001, until their return to power in August 2021, which would illustrate the gains made from the U.S. efforts. Also, a review of current and projected status and pledges by the Taliban about the use of Afghan soil as a base from which to threaten the U.S. security would elucidate the U.S. gains in the Afghan war.
- U.S. homeland security in relation to terrorist incidents perpetrated by Al-Qaeda after the creation of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

¹⁵ Taliban and United States, signatories, Comprehensive Peace Agreement: Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America, Treaties and Other International Acts Series (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State, 2020), <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

(DHS), which would depict the U.S. gains, if any, from the war in Afghanistan.

E. METHODOLOGY

To answer the question of whether the U.S. effort in Afghanistan during the first two decades of this century achieved any of Washington's stated objectives, the research design employs a statistical analysis of causal factors to determine the U.S. gains. In order to examine the U.S. success in the GWOT in Afghanistan, the thesis assesses the efficacy of Al-Qaeda through a comparative analysis of Al-Qaeda's key leadership prior to U.S. action, i.e., pre-9/11, and after the U.S. action in Afghanistan. Second, a statistical analysis of terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda in the decade before 9/11 and after the conduct of U.S. operations in Afghanistan is presented to reveal the U.S. gains from the Afghan war. Third, an analysis of Taliban pledges and their fulfillment with regards to occurrence and recurrence of terrorist incidents in the wake of Doha Peace Agreement establishes the U.S. gains in the wake of 20 years' fighting in Afghanistan. Moreover, an analysis of the Taliban's actions from 2001 to 2021 is included as these actions invariably reflect the outcome of U.S. efforts. Lastly, an analysis of terrorist acts in the U.S. mainland after the establishment of DHS contributes to the assessment of whether the objectives of the U.S. war in Afghanistan were met.

The Global Terrorism Database has been chiefly utilized for the comparative analysis of terrorist acts by Al-Qaeda. In addition, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) has also been utilized for the years 2020 and 2021. For the analysis of Al-Qaeda's key leadership, different resources have been consulted, including but not limited to:

- Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University
- Wilson Center, Washington, D.C.
- Congressional Research Service (CRS) Reports

- Counter Extremism Project (CEP)
- Foundation for Defense of Democracies' (FDD) *Long War Journal*, Washington, D.C.
- U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

The thesis is principally structured to analyze the key variables of the U.S. war in Afghanistan with a view to assess the U.S. gains in some tangible terms. Chapter II focuses on the U.S. achievements by assessing U.S. efforts in degrading Al-Qaeda's key leadership. Chapter III presents an analysis of terrorist incidents by Al-Qaeda in the aftermath of U.S. actions. Chapter IV examines the Taliban's acts of terrorism and their pledges in the light of the Doha Peace Agreement following the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021. Chapter V evaluates the security of the U.S. mainland in relation to Al-Qaeda after the creation of DHS and the concluding chapter offers an overall assessment of U.S. gains from the war in Afghanistan.

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II. DEFEATING AL-QAEDA: A PRIMARY CRITERION FOR SUCCESS

The attack took place on American soil, but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilized world. And the world has come together to fight a new and different war, the first, and we hope the only one, of the 21st century. A war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them.¹⁶

— President George W. Bush

Al-Qaeda is an extremely resilient terrorist organization. Al-Qaeda's leadership and members are not from a single nationality.¹⁷ Rather, it comprises a mix of individuals from the Arab states of the Middle East and Africa, Asia, the Caucasus region, and the Balkan region.

During its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the United States employed kinetic force to eliminate Al-Qaeda. On October 7 of that year, the United States started engaging with aerial strikes in Afghanistan.¹⁸ The drone technology and aerial strikes proved to be quite effective, especially in decimating Al-Qaeda's key personnel. The sustained and relentless pressure against Al-Qaeda's important leaders and field commanders dealt a critical blow to the organization. The greatest blow was the killing of the organization's charismatic leader Osama bin Laden in 2011, about a decade after the 9/11 attacks. The death of Al-Qaeda's top leader is a remarkable success for the United States. Despite its resilience and diverse national makeup, Al-Qaeda has faced an organizational challenge in finding Osama bin Laden's replacement as several potential contenders have been targeted and eliminated by U.S. efforts.

¹⁶ Bureau of Public Affairs Department of State. The Office of Electronic Information, *The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism), accessed October 3, 2021, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/wh/6947.htm>.

¹⁷ Mapping Militant Organizations, "Al Qaeda," Center for International Security and Cooperation, January 2019, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/al-qaeda>.

¹⁸ History com Editors, "The Story of the Global War on Terror: Timeline," *History*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/21st-century/war-on-terror-timeline>.

This chapter explores Al-Qaeda's key leaders and the other personnel targeted by the United States during its war in Afghanistan. Some authors refer to Al-Qaeda as "Al-Qaeda central" and others refer to it as "Al-Qaeda core" in order to distinguish the erstwhile Al-Qaeda "as a whole" from its regional affiliates. Since U.S. operations restricted the operations of Al-Qaeda to Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan, affiliates of Al-Qaeda emerged in other parts of the world to include Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS); Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI); Al-Qaeda in Yemen; and Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia.

Al-Qaeda's leaders and key planners were instrumental in waging deliberate terrorist attacks across many parts of the world, rendering the organization as one of the most resilient and deadliest terrorist organizations in the history. Nevertheless, Al-Qaeda was vulnerable to leadership attacks. According to Edwin Bakker, "Religious terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda, the Aum Shinrikyo movement, Hezbollah, and the Taliban proved five times more likely to experience organizational decline resulting from decapitation than terrorist organizations in general."¹⁹

U.S. strikes proved to be effective because they not only killed key planners and leaders but also incoming leaders. In addition to the killings that disabled the groups direction, Al-Qaeda leaders were also arrested following the successful collaboration of various intelligence agencies. These individuals were thereafter detained by the United States at Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba. As a result, Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan was tightly squeezed and became dissipated. The organization's remaining leaders either relocated to Iran or joined affiliates of Al-Qaeda outside Afghanistan, especially AQAP and AQIM.

A. ELIMINATION OF AL-QAEDA'S KEY LEADERS AND PLANNERS

The U.S. effort to eliminate Al-Qaeda's key leaders and planners lasted two decades. This section examines the removal and arrest of key personnel of Al-Qaeda and

¹⁹ Edwin Bakker, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies: Comparing Theory and Practice*, 1st ed. (The Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2015).

their replacements. The analysis first covers from 2001 until the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011 and then examines the period following his death until fall 2021.

1. The First Decade (2001–2011)

Osama bin Laden headed Al-Qaeda as a single uncontested leader. He hailed from Saudi Arabia. He was killed by U.S. forces on May 2, 2011, during a compound raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Until Osama bin Laden's death, Ayman al-Zawahiri remained at the number two leadership slot in Al-Qaeda. Upon Osama bin Laden's assassination in 2011, Zawahiri assumed the leadership of the organization and currently heads Al-Qaeda.²⁰ While Osama bin Laden largely remained a figurehead as he hid from counterterrorism efforts, Zawahiri acted to execute terrorist plans with the organization's other key planners.

Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, also known by the name Sheikh Saeed al-Masri, stands among the founding members of Al-Qaeda.²¹ He held the number three position in Al-Qaeda's leadership. He was pivotal in perpetrating terrorist attacks against the allied forces in Afghanistan. Abu al-Yazid was killed by a drone strike in May 2010.

Decapitation of Al-Qaeda's organizational leadership has been a major success. As per the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, Osama bin Laden and Mohammed Atef held "undisputed leadership positions atop al Qaeda's organizational structure."²² Al-Qaeda was organized in a manner where its commanders held a significant degree of initiative and decision power. Its three key commanders included Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), Hambali, and Abd al Rahim al Nashiri. KSM is believed to have been the mastermind of 9/11 attacks. Among these five key leaders, Osama bin Laden and Mohammed Atef have been killed while KSM, Hambali, and Abd al Rahim al Nashiri were arrested and are currently in custody at Guantánamo Bay.

²⁰ Mapping Militant Organizations, "Al Qaeda."

²¹ Mapping Militant Organizations.

²² National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: Norton, 2004), 145, <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, believed to have been the mastermind behind the attacks of September 11, 2001, was brought up in Kuwait.²³ He was arrested from Pakistan in 2003 by joint U.S.-Pakistan intelligence efforts and is presently detained at Guantánamo Bay awaiting trial.²⁴ Riduan Isamuddin, well known as Hambali, was born in Indonesia but later moved to Malaysia for work in the 1980s.²⁵ He fought against the Soviets in the 1980s and later moved back to Malaysia in 1990s. He assumed major role in Jemaah Islamiah (JI) for facilitating Al-Qaeda operatives in the Far East region, including Malaysia and Singapore, who were involved in attacks on the United States. He was arrested in Thailand in 2003 and is presently detained at Guantánamo Bay.²⁶ Similarly, Abd al Rahim al Nashiri is known to have been the key planner behind the USS Cole bombing in Yemen in 2000.²⁷ He led operations in the Arabian Peninsula where he was arrested from UAE in November 2002. He has also been detained at Guantánamo Bay.²⁸

Al-Qaeda's core leadership is composed of a shura council and committees to undertake terrorist operations.²⁹ Aerial bombing and drone strikes have been instrumental in eliminating this leadership as well as key members of its committees, and have greatly reduced the organization's capacity. Al-Qaeda's Islamic Studies Committee is composed of religious scholars and guides religious ideology by the issuing of fatwas and recruitment. The committee is responsible for planning various attacks such as the first World Trade center bombings, Khobar Towers bombing, the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen, and the attacks of September 11, 2001. Mohammed

²³ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 145.

²⁴ Sam Raphael, Crofton Black, and Ruth Blakeley, *CIA Torture Unredacted* (UK: The Rendition Project, 2019), 192, <https://www.therenditionproject.org.uk/documents/RDI/190710-TRP-TBIJ-CIA-Torture-Unredacted-Full.pdf>.

²⁵ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, 151, 152.

²⁶ Raphael, Black, and Blakeley, *CIA Torture Unredacted*, 220.

²⁷ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, 152.

²⁸ Raphael, Black, and Blakeley, 176.

²⁹ Cameron Glenn, *Al Qaeda v ISIS: Leaders & Structure*, *The Islamists* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2015), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/al-qaeda-v-isis-leaders-structure>.

Atef, also known as Abu Hafs al Masri, was the chief of operations and a key leader of Al-Qaeda.³⁰ After the U.S. airstrikes in Afghanistan, Atef was the only leader known to have stayed behind at Kandahar (primarily due to illness). Later, he was killed during a U.S. air strike in 2001. After the killing of Atef, Abu Zubaydah filled his position.³¹ Abu Zubaydah was arrested due to the joint efforts of the Pakistan and U.S. governments in 2002.

A landmark U.S. achievement was the elimination of Al-Qaeda's key planners after Osama bin Laden's killing in 2011. Atiyah abd al-Rahman was an important member of Al-Qaeda who was killed. He acted as the organization's operational planner after Osama bin Laden's death.³² He was eliminated in a drone attack in August 2011. Abu Yahya al-Libi, a Libyan who had an Islamic scholarly background, secured a key position in Al-Qaeda in late 2011 after its top leadership was eliminated.³³ Libi filled the organization's vacant position and continued directing terrorist attacks. After the assassination of Osama bin Laden, Libi acted as number two to Zawahiri. He was killed during a drone attack in tribal areas of Pakistan.

2. The Second Decade (2011–2021)

The second decade spans the period from Osama bin Laden's death in 2011 until the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021. Even after the troop reductions in Afghanistan under the Obama administration, the killings of Al-Qaeda leaders continued to remain effective. One of Al-Qaeda's key commanders, Abu Ghaith after fleeing to Iran, later was arrested in Jordan and subsequently extradited to the United States in 2013.³⁴ Nasser al-Wuhayshi, the leader of AQAP, assumed the role of second-in-command of Al-

³⁰ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, 145.

³¹ Jerrold M Post, *Killing in the Name of God: Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda*, Future Warfare Series No. 18 (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: USAF Counterproliferation Center, Air University, 2002), 16, <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/LPS105230>.

³² Mapping Militant Organizations, "Al Qaeda."

³³ Mapping Militant Organizations.

³⁴ "Al-Qaeda's Remaining Leaders," BBC News, June 16, 2015, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11489337>.

Qaeda in 2015.³⁵ Al-Wuhayshi was eliminated through a U.S. drone attack in June 2015. He served as the overall deputy to Zawahiri and was believed to be a charismatic and revered leader who enjoyed the loyalty of the rank and file.³⁶ Upon the death of Wuhayshi, Qasim al Raymi assumed leadership of AQIM and was known to be part of Al-Qaeda's core leadership.³⁷ He served as deputy to Zawahiri, implying that he formed part of Al-Qaeda's core organization. He was killed in Yemen by a U.S. air strike in 2020.³⁸ Khalid Batarfi replaced Qasim al Raymi upon his death as the new leader of AQAP. He has conducted terrorist attacks in Yemen and remains part of the shura council of AQAP.³⁹ Abu Khalil al-Madani, also commonly known as Abu Khalil al-Sudani, was a key senior Al-Qaeda leader who was "directly linked to external attack planning against the United States"; he was killed by U.S. air strikes in July 2015.⁴⁰

The documents recovered from the Abbottabad compound revealed that Osama bin Laden preferred Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, and Saif al-Adel in the same order for the succession of organization's leadership.⁴¹ Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, who was also known as Abdullah Muhammad Rajab, however, was killed in Syria.⁴² He also had served as the chairman of Al-Qaeda's management council. Signed documents by the members of the governing shura council were intended to formalize Osama bin Laden's

³⁵ Mapping Militant Organizations, "Al Qaeda."

³⁶ "The Death of AQAP Leader Nasir Al-Wuhayshi," CSIS, accessed September 28, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/death-aqap-leader-nasir-al-wuhayshi>.

³⁷ Glenn, Al Qaeda v. ISIS.

³⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, "White House Confirms Death of AQAP Leader," *FDD's Long War Journal* (Washington, DC: Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), 2020), <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/02/white-house-confirms-death-of-aqap-leader.php>.

³⁹ "Khalid Batarfi," Counter Extremism Project (CEP), Extremist Group and Leaders, accessed September 27, 2021, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/khalid-batarfi>.

⁴⁰ Denise Ajiri, "Senior Al Qaeda Operational Commander Killed in U.S. Airstrike," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 24, 2015, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/USA-Update/2015/0724/Senior-Al-Qaeda-operational-commander-killed-in-US-airstrike>.

⁴¹ Ali Soufan, "Next in Line to Lead Al-Qa'ida: A Profile of Abu Muhammad al-Masri," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 10 (November 2019), <https://ctc.usma.edu/next-line-lead-al-qaida-profile-abu-muhammad-al-masri/>.

⁴² CBS News, "Al Qaeda Deputy Abu Al-Khayr al-Masri Killed in CIA Drone Strike," February 28, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/al-qaeda-abu-al-khayr-al-masri-reportedly-killed-airstrike-idlib-syria/>.

plans for succession and “agreed that in the event of al-Zawahiri’s death or incapacitation, leadership would pass first to Abu al-Khair, then to Abu Muhammad, then to Saif al-`Adl.”⁴³ Abu Muhammad al-Masri, whose original name was Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, was among the founding members of Al-Qaeda.⁴⁴ It was widely believed that he would be the leader of Al-Qaeda in the event of Zawahiri’s death. According to a Combating Terrorism Center article by Ali Soufan, “Next in Line to Lead Al-Qa`ida: A Profile of Abu Muhammad al-Masri,” “Abu Muhammad al-Masri had the strongest claim to succeed Ayman al-Zawahiri as emir of al-Qa`ida.”⁴⁵ He was known to be the second in command of Al-Qaeda central but was killed by Israeli agents in Iran in August 2020 (a claim denied by Iran).⁴⁶

Al-Qaeda’s key planners were relentlessly pursued and eliminated by the United States. Mansoor al Harbi was an important member of Al-Qaeda and acted as a logistician, senior leader, facilitator, and trainer based in Afghanistan.⁴⁷ He was killed during an air strike by the United States.⁴⁸ Nayef Salam Muhammad Ujaym al-Hababi, well known as Farouq al Qahtani al Qatari, was a key Al-Qaeda commander stationed at Kunar, Afghanistan.⁴⁹ According to Pentagon reports, he was a “senior planner” of terrorist acts against the U.S. and allied troops and was finally killed in a drone strike by the United States in 2016.⁵⁰

⁴³ Soufan, “Next in Line to Lead Al-Qa`ida.”

⁴⁴ Adam Goldman et al., “Al Qaeda’s Abu Muhammad al-Masri Secretly Killed in Iran,” *New York Times*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/13/world/middleeast/al-masri-abdullah-qaeda-dead.html>.

⁴⁵ Soufan, “Next in Line to Lead Al-Qa`ida.”

⁴⁶ Aaron Zelin, *Jihadis 2021: ISIS & al Qaeda*, Jihadi Extremists and Islamist Parties in 2021 (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2021), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/jihadis-2021-isis-al-qaeda>.

⁴⁷ Bill Roggio, “Wanted Saudi al Qaeda Leader Reported Killed in Afghanistan,” *FDD’s Long War Journal* (Washington, D.C.: Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), 2015), <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/wanted-saudi-al-qaeda-leader-reported-killed-in-afghanistan.php>.

⁴⁸ Glenn, Al Qaeda v. ISIS.

⁴⁹ Glenn.

⁵⁰ “Farouq Al-Katani,” Counter Extremism Project (CEP), Extremist Group and Leaders, accessed September 27, 2021, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/farouq-al-katani>.

Although a few remain in Afghanistan, most of the remaining members of Al-Qaeda have relocated from Afghanistan to the Middle East and North Africa. Among them, is Mustafa Hamid who is a relative of Saif al-Adel.⁵¹ He used to train Al-Qaeda personnel in the northeastern part of Afghanistan and was a key connection between Al-Qaeda and the Iranian establishment. Hamid was arrested by Iranian forces and upon his release, reached Egypt post-2011 revolution.⁵² Similarly, Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, a former member of AQI, is known to lead the Nusra Front in Syria.⁵³ Khalid al-Habib of North African origin, also commonly known as Khalid al-Harbi, is considered to be a field commander in Southeast Afghanistan.⁵⁴ According to some reports, he was killed in a drone strike near the Pakistan and Afghanistan border in 2006. Nonetheless, a few reports assert that he heads the Iraqi Wing while others suggest that he has been supervising activities in Afghanistan since 2008. Another commander, Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi, heads Al-Qaeda's activities in the Southwest of Afghanistan.⁵⁵

As per a Wilson Center report, the influence of Al-Qaeda has weakened chiefly due to the erosion of the organization's leadership.⁵⁶ Although Zawahiri still leads the organization, several of its key leaders were killed, including Husam 'Abd al-Rauf, Qassim al Raimi, Abdelmalek Droukdel, and Khaled al Aruri, among others. Abdelwadoud, whose real name is Abdelmalek Droukdel, was a university student of science and possessed bomb-making skills. He was the leader of AQIM.⁵⁷ Initially, he joined the Algerian Islamist militant organization, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), with an aim to establish an Islamic state in Algeria. In 2006, GSPC declared its allegiance to Al-Qaeda, and a year later, in 2007 changed the organization's name to AQIM. Abdelwadoud remained active in Mali and northern Africa. He was killed by the French forces on June

⁵¹ "Al-Qaeda's Remaining Leaders."

⁵² "Al-Qaeda's Remaining Leaders."

⁵³ Glenn, Al Qaeda v. ISIS.

⁵⁴ "Al-Qaeda's Remaining Leaders."

⁵⁵ "Al-Qaeda's Remaining Leaders."

⁵⁶ Zelin, Jihadis 2021.

⁵⁷ "Al-Qaeda's Remaining Leaders."

3, 2020, in Mali.⁵⁸ Abu al Qassam, commonly known as Khaled al Aruri, was a key leader of Al-Qaeda and a veteran who was active in waging jihad since the 1990s and close to Abu Musab Al Zarqawi.⁵⁹ He was killed in a U.S. drone attack in Syria on June 14, 2020. Husam Abd al-Rauf, commonly known as Abu Muhsin al-Masri, was also a key Al-Qaeda leader and known to be a lead propagandist of that group. He was killed by the Afghan security forces on October 24, 2020, in Afghanistan.⁶⁰

Saif al-Adel, an Egyptian formerly known as Muhamad Ibrahim Makkawi, remained as key security aide of Osama bin Laden.⁶¹ He succeeded Mohammed Atef after the latter was targeted in an aerial strike in 2001. Adel reportedly escaped to Iran and remained under the secure custody of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). According to the U.S. think tank Counter Extremism Project (CEP), Al Adel is one of Zawahiri's key aides and likely in Iran. According to Barak Mendelsohn, an expert on Al-Qaeda and jihadism, as quoted in the *Hindustan Times*, "Adel played a crucial role in building Al-Qaeda's operational capabilities and quickly ascended the hierarchy," and he is considered a "big name" in Al-Qaeda and "should be the next in line."⁶²

3. Death of Osama bin Laden's Sons

Another blow to the organization has been the killing of Osama bin Laden's two sons; one of them was likely to become the future leader of Al-Qaeda. Saad bin Laden, one of Osama bin Laden's sons, was killed in an American drone strike in 2009 in Pakistan.⁶³ Hamza bin Laden, Osama bin Laden's other son, was trained by the organization to assume

⁵⁸ Zelin, Jihadis 2021.

⁵⁹ Thomas Joscelyn, "U.S. Reportedly Targets 2 Senior al Qaeda Figures in Airstrike in Syria," *FDD's Long War Journal* (Washington, DC: Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), 2020), <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/06/u-s-reportedly-targets-2-senior-al-qaeda-figures-in-airstrike-in-syria.php>.

⁶⁰ Zelin, Jihadis 2021.

⁶¹ "Al-Qaeda's Remaining Leaders."

⁶² Kunal Gaurav, "Questions over Al-Qaeda Future after Leaders' Reported Deaths," *Hindustan Times*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/questions-over-al-qaeda-future-after-leaders-reported-deaths/story-DZBWbfOWvufzLHVSJvae6L.html>.

⁶³ Mary Louise Kelly, "Bin Laden Son Reported Killed in Pakistan," NPR, July 22, 2009, sec. World, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106903109>.

leadership from Zawahiri, providing an ancestral line of succession from Osama bin Laden.⁶⁴ By 2016, he started to appear in Al-Qaeda's video messages and two years later assumed the title of "shaykh"—a title revered for respect and leadership in the Arab culture. He was killed in a drone strike in 2019.⁶⁵

B. AL-QAEDA'S DESTRUCTION

The inherent time lag between the old and new leadership created a disruption in Al-Qaeda's operations. Adel, while hiding in Iran, has been away from the new generation of Al-Qaeda. Hence even the relevance of Adel in Al-Qaeda's hierarchy remains questionable.⁶⁶ Another challenge facing the organization is the divergent interests and ideologies of Al-Qaeda's leadership, some of whom may defect and show allegiance to ISIS. In fact, one of the reasons for nominating Saif al-Adel as the last among three future leadership candidates was the likelihood of his support for the "creation of an Islamic State in Iraq," which diverges from the objectives of Al-Qaeda.⁶⁷

According to a U.S. Congressional Research Service report dated June 14, 2021, the threat emanating from Al-Qaeda central has been reduced, but it remains more significant than the threat emanating from its affiliates who generally remain "focused on local issues in their respective areas of operation."⁶⁸ Moreover, this report maintains that "attacks against U.S. and Western targets worldwide continued in the years after 9/11, but the group has not successfully carried out a major attack inside the United States since then."⁶⁹ Another dimension is that with the rise of Al-Qaeda affiliates, Al-Qaeda central has become rather less significant and its status has dropped. As a result, the affiliates'

⁶⁴ Mapping Militant Organizations, "Al Qaeda."

⁶⁵ Colin Clarke, *Implications of the Death of Hamza Bin Laden*, Middle East Program (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2019), <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/08/implications-of-the-death-of-hamza-bin-laden/>.

⁶⁶ Gaurav, "Questions over Al-Qaeda Future after Leaders' Reported Deaths."

⁶⁷ Soufan, "Next in Line to Lead Al-Qa'ida."

⁶⁸ Clayton Thomas, *Al Qaeda: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy*, CRS Report No. IF11854 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11854>.

⁶⁹ Thomas, *Al Qaeda: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy*.

actions are driven by their own preferences instead of being driven by a “centrally directed ideology or program.”⁷⁰ As per the Department of Defense report of December 2020, “AQ’s remaining core leaders pose a limited threat to U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan because they are focused primarily on survival.”⁷¹

According to Daniel Byman, the use of efficient intelligence and targeted drone strikes against Al-Qaeda has kept the organization’s leaders like “Zawahiri in hiding and disrupted its recruitment and communications.”⁷² Most importantly, Al-Qaeda central could not launch another terrorist attack in the U.S. homeland or the West. The death of Hamza bin Laden has been a serious setback to the endeavors of Al-Qaeda central in the restoration of its lost impetus.

Table 1 reviews the findings just presented by summarizing the present status of key Al-Qaeda leaders and planners, as well as its key commanders, after the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Among the list, about 76% of the organization’s key members have either been killed or arrested and detained. Out of 24% of those surviving, 7% have relocated themselves to the Middle East or North Africa while the remaining 17% are reported as being either in Afghanistan or Iran and currently in hiding. The list is not exhaustive, yet the important names forming the erstwhile Al-Qaeda, and later Al-Qaeda central (the core chiefly restricted to Afghanistan) provide a keen and substantial insight on the U.S. achievements in its war against Al-Qaeda.

⁷⁰ Thomas.

⁷¹ Thomas.

⁷² Daniel L. Byman, “The Death of Hamza Bin Laden and the Weakness of Al-Qaida,” *Brookings* (blog), August 1, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/08/01/the-death-of-hamza-bin-laden-and-the-weakness-of-al-qaida/>.

Table 1. Al-Qaeda Central–Key Leaders, Planners, and Field Commanders

Popular Name / Alias	Less Common Name	Role in Organization	Present Status (Killed/ Detained/ Relocated/ Alive)	Place where Killed	Year of Killing	Mode of Killing
Osama bin Laden	-	Top Leader/ Chief	K	Pakistan	2011	Raid by U.S. Navy SEALs ⁷³
Ayman al-Zawahiri	-	Current Chief after Osama bin Laden ⁷⁴	A	-	-	-
Mustafa Abu al-Yazid	Sheikh Saeed al-Masri	Founding member (Held No. 3 position in AQ until death)	K	Pakistan	2010	Drone strike ⁷⁵
Khalid Sheikh Mohammed	-	Key Planner 9/11 attacks ⁷⁶	D	-	-	-
Hambali	Riduan Isamuddin	Key Facilitator 9/11 attacks ⁷⁷	D	-	-	-
Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri	-	Key Planner USS Cole bombing ⁷⁸	D ⁷⁹	-	-	-
Mohammed Atef	Abu Hafs al-Masri	Chief of Operations / Key Leader	K	Afghanistan	2001	Airstrike ⁸⁰

⁷³ CNN Editorial Research, “Osama Bin Laden Fast Facts,” CNN, August 30, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/08/30/world/osama-bin-laden-fast-facts/index.html>.

⁷⁴ Mapping Militant Organizations, “Al Qaeda.”

⁷⁵ Mapping Militant Organizations.

⁷⁶ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 145.

⁷⁷ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 151, 152.

⁷⁸ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 152.

⁷⁹ CIA Torture Unredacted, 176.

⁸⁰ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 145.

Popular Name / Alias	Less Common Name	Role in Organization	Present Status (Killed/ Detained/ Relocated/ Alive)	Place where Killed	Year of Killing	Mode of Killing
Abu Zubaydah	Zein al Abideen	Replacement (Atef)	D ⁸¹	-	-	-
Atiyah abd al-Rahman	-	Replacement (Abu Zubaydah) Operational Planner	K	Pakistan	2011	Drone strike ⁸²
Abu Yahya al-Libi	-	Initially Field Commander	K	Pakistan	2012	Drone strike ⁸³
Saad bin Laden	-	Son of Osama bin Laden	K	Pakistan	2009	Drone strike ⁸⁴
Hamza bin Laden	-	Son of Osama bin Laden (Potential Chief of AQ)	K	Afghanistan-Pakistan Region	2019	Drone strike ⁸⁵
Khalid al-Habib	Khalid al-Harbi	Field Commander in Southeastern Afghanistan	A ⁸⁶	-	-	-
Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi	-	Field Commander in Southwestern Afghanistan	A ⁸⁷	-	-	-
Sulaiman Abu Ghaith	-	Spokesman of AQ/ Son-in-law of	D ⁸⁸	-	-	-

⁸¹ Killing in the Name of God: Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, 16.

⁸² Mapping Militant Organizations, “Al Qaeda.”

⁸³ Mapping Militant Organizations.

⁸⁴ Kelly, “Bin Laden Son Reported Killed in Pakistan.”

⁸⁵ Implications of the Death of Hamza Bin Laden - Foreign Policy Research Institute.

⁸⁶ “Al-Qaeda’s Remaining Leaders.”

⁸⁷ “Al-Qaeda’s Remaining Leaders.”

⁸⁸ “Al-Qaeda’s Remaining Leaders.”

Popular Name / Alias	Less Common Name	Role in Organization	Present Status (Killed/ Detained/ Relocated/ Alive)	Place where Killed	Year of Killing	Mode of Killing
		Osama bin Laden				
Mustafa Hamid	-	Trainer / Instructor in tactics	R to Egypt ⁸⁹	-	-	-
Abu al-Khayr al-Masri	Abdullah Muhammad Rajab Abdulrahman	Chairman AQ's Shura Council	K	Syria	2017	Drone strike ⁹⁰
Abu Muhammad al-Masri	Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah	Replacement (Al- Khayr al-Masri)	K	Iran	2020	Gunshot by Israeli Agents ⁹¹
Saif al-Adel	Muhamad Ibrahim Makkawi,	Replacement (Abu Muhammad al-Masri) / Initially, Osama bin Laden's Security Chief	A ⁹²	-	-	-
Mansoor al Harbi (Abu Muslim al Makki)	Azzam Abdullah Zureik Al Maulid Al Subhi	Senior Leader, Logistician, and Trainer	K	Afghanistan	2015	Drone strike ⁹³
Nasser al-Wuhayshi	-	Replacement (Al-Libi) Founder AQAP	K	Yemen	2015	Drone strike ⁹⁴

⁸⁹ "Al-Qaeda's Remaining Leaders."

⁹⁰ "Al Qaeda Deputy Abu Al-Khayr al-Masri Killed in CIA Drone Strike."

⁹¹ "Wanted Saudi al Qaeda Leader Reported Killed in Afghanistan."

⁹² "Questions over Al-Qaeda Future after Leaders' Reported Deaths."

⁹³ Glenn, Al Qaeda v. ISIS.

⁹⁴ Mapping Militant Organizations, "Al Qaeda."

Popular Name / Alias	Less Common Name	Role in Organization	Present Status (Killed/ Detained/ Relocated/ Alive)	Place where Killed	Year of Killing	Mode of Killing
Qasim al Raymi	-	Replacement (Al-Wuhayshi)	K	Yemen	2020	Drone strike ⁹⁵
Abu Khalil al-Sudani	Abu Khalil al-Madani	Senior Leader	K	Afghanistan	2015	Air strike ⁹⁶
Khalid Batarfi	-	Replacement (Al-Raymi)/ Member Shura Council AQAP	A ⁹⁷	-	-	-
Farouq al Qahtani al Qatari	Nayef Salam Muhammad Ujaym al-Hababi	Senior Leader/ Fundraiser	K	Afghanistan	2016	Drone strike ⁹⁸
Abu Mohammed al-Joulani	Abu Muhammad al-Golani and Ahmed Hussein al-Shar'a	Senior Leader	R to Nusra Front ⁹⁹	-	-	-
Abu Mossab Abdul Wadood	Abdelmalek Droukdel	Founder AQIM/ (Bombmaker, explosives expert)	K	Mali	2020	Operation by French Forces ¹⁰⁰
Khaled al-Aruri	Abu al Qassam	Key Leader / Veteran against USSR	K	Syria	2020	Drone strike ¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ “White House Confirms Death of AQAP Leader.”

⁹⁶ “Senior Al Qaeda Operational Commander Killed in U.S. Airstrike.”

⁹⁷ “Khalid Batarfi.”

⁹⁸ “Farouq Al-Katani.”

⁹⁹ Glenn, Al Qaeda v. ISIS.

¹⁰⁰ Zelin, Jihadis 2021.

¹⁰¹ “U.S. Reportedly Targets 2 Senior al Qaeda Figures in Airstrike in Syria.”

Popular Name / Alias	Less Common Name	Role in Organization	Present Status (Killed/ Detained/ Relocated/ Alive)	Place where Killed	Year of Killing	Mode of Killing
		Invasion of 1979				
Abu Muhsin al-Masri	Husam Abd al-Rauf	Lead Propagandist of AQ	K	Afghanistan	2020	Operation by Afghan Forces ¹⁰²

Key:

AQ - Al-Qaeda

K - Killed

D - Detained / Arrested

R - Relocated

A - Alive

A statistical analysis of the status of Al-Qaeda's key leaders and planners reflects that with 76% leadership either killed or arrested and the remaining 7% relocated from Afghanistan, the combined 83% result has been a striking success for the United States in defeating Al-Qaeda. Moreover, the 17% of leadership in existence has also not been active since the years when it was at its peak right after 9/11. The gruesome wave of transnational terrorist attacks, especially in the first five years following September 2001, in Madrid, London, and Saudi Arabia, saw the peak of Al-Qaeda's efficacy and reach. Nevertheless, due to the repeated successes achieved by the killing of Al-Qaeda leaders and key members, Al-Qaeda central has been sufficiently degraded. As per Bruce Riedel, the organization's core has been amply beaten: "Zawahiri remains alive and he continues to issue statements from his hideout in Pakistan, but the core is defeated."¹⁰³

Further, Colin Clarke, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, argues that Hamza bin Laden's death would have strategic level implications for Al-Qaeda.¹⁰⁴ It would impinge upon the organization's ability to "recruit new and especially

¹⁰² Zelin, Jihadis 2021.

¹⁰³ Bruce Riedel, "Al-Qaida Today, 18 Years after 9/11," *Brookings* (blog), September 10, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/09/10/al-qaida-today-18-years-after-9-11/>.

¹⁰⁴ Clarke, Implications of the Death of Hamza Bin Laden.

younger militants,” as the new generation comes at a time when ISIS has been the dominant factor instead of Al-Qaeda in a jihadist context. The leadership issue has become a more and more challenging dilemma for Al-Qaeda. The repeated successful targeting and killings of emerging potential contenders has put the organization strongly on the back foot. As per Clarke: ¹⁰⁵

Without Hamza waiting in the wings, it is unclear who will replace Zawahiri once he is killed, captured, or dies of natural causes. He is thought to be close to 70 years old and has been on the run and in hiding for the past 20 years. Without a charismatic figure to take the helm, what remains of al-Qaeda central could be eclipsed by one of al-Qaeda’s franchise or affiliate groups in North Africa or the Arabian Peninsula.

The U.S. war in Afghanistan was driven by the goal of destroying Al-Qaeda. An analysis of the current status of Al-Qaeda’s leaders, planners, commanders, and militants after a two-decade war reflects the U.S. success in defeating Al-Qaeda. As per the assessment of National Counterterrorism Center, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the killing of “two of al-Qa’ida’s most experienced top leaders”—Nasser al-Wuhayshi and Abu Khalil al-Sudani—has “hindered the organization’s core functions”:

While al-Zawahiri leads a small but influential cadre of senior leaders widely called al-Qa’ida Core, the group’s cohesiveness the past three years has diminished because of leadership losses from counterterrorism pressure in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the rise of other organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) that serve as an alternative for some disaffected extremists.¹⁰⁶

C. CONCLUSION

The capacity of Al-Qaeda as a terrorist organization after the U.S. war in Afghanistan has been effectively degraded. The phenomenon gets even more pronounced as the replacements of killed and arrested personnel were also eliminated, thereby yielding a tremendous blow to Al-Qaeda. The organization is dwindling as the future of Al-Qaeda’s leadership faces several challenges such as the advanced age of Al-Zawahiri, the killing of

¹⁰⁵ Clarke.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), “Groups,” Counter Terrorism Guide, accessed October 9, 2021, https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/al_qaida.html.

Osama bin Laden's sons who were being groomed as the potential leaders of Al-Qaeda, the growing ideological differences due to the generation gap between the new and old jihadists, the continued hiding of remaining leadership that operates in survival mode, and the growing influence of ISIS. The success of effectively defeating and degrading Al-Qaeda is directly attributable and stands testament to the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

III. REDUCING TERRORIST ACTS POST 9/11: A SECOND CRITERION OF SUCCESS

The 9/11 terrorist attacks drew the U.S. into war in Afghanistan. How successful the U.S. was in this war can at minimum be judged by the absence of a “second 9/11” like incident. So far, that has remained a testament of success, based upon the absence of any large-scale terrorist event on the continental U.S. mainland in 20 years. Most importantly, however, the number of terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda before and after the U.S. intervention in 2001 would provide an insight on the viability of U.S. military operations. An increase, decrease, or no change in the number of terrorist incidents would stand as empirical evidence to meet the success criterion.

In this context, three time periods consisting of one decade each have been framed and analyzed. The first period comprises the decade leading up to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, by Al-Qaeda. The second period encompasses the post-9/11 attacks until the death of Al-Qaeda’s leader Osama bin Laden in 2011. The third period spans the decade after Osama bin Laden’s death, 2011 until 2021. The Global Terrorism Database has been utilized to perform a comparative analysis of the frequency of terrorist acts perpetrated by Al-Qaeda. Additionally, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) was consulted to acquire incident data for the years 2020 and 2021.¹⁰⁷

A. CRITERIA

The data on terrorist attacks has been acquired by applying filters for the following three criteria set by the Global Terrorism Database:

- Criterion Number I: “The act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Due to the last available data in the Global Terrorism Database until December 31, 2019, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) was consulted to acquire the data from January 1, 2020, until August 31, 2021.

¹⁰⁸ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Codebook: Methodology, Inclusion Criteria, and Variables* (College Park: University of Maryland, 2019), 11, <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf>.

- Criterion Number II: “There must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims.”¹⁰⁹
- Criterion Number III: “The action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities, that is, the act must be outside the parameters permitted by international humanitarian law, insofar as it targets non-combatants.”¹¹⁰

B. GLOBAL ATTACKS BY AL-QAEDA

This research evaluates the worldwide terrorist attacks conducted by Al-Qaeda over three decades. The number of terrorist strikes from 1991 until 2021 have been examined decade-wise to gain an insight on Al-Qaeda’s capability and sustainability as a terrorist organization. The first time period analyzes the terrorist incidents in the decade prior to 9/11. Thereafter, the acts after the 9/11 event until the death of Osama bin Laden are studied. The third time bracket highlights the terrorist acts by Al-Qaeda after the death of Osama bin Laden until the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. An evaluation of the pattern of the three time brackets renders an understanding of Al-Qaeda’s viability and efficacy as a terrorist organization amid the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

1. The First Period (1991–2001)

The first period records Al-Qaeda activity from January 1, 1991, until September 11, 2001. This timeframe includes terrorist acts by Al-Qaeda a decade preceding 2001 and culminates in the catastrophic 9/11 event. The period, as shown in Table 2, reflects a total of eight terrorist incidents directed chiefly at the United States, including the 9/11 attacks on the homeland, bomb blasts at the U.S. embassies in Eastern Africa, and the strike on the USS Cole.

¹⁰⁹ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 11.

¹¹⁰ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START).

Table 2. First Period: Pre-9/11 Decade (January 1, 1991–September 11, 2001)¹¹¹

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
20010 91100 07	2001-09-11	United States	Shanksville	Al-Qaida	44	9	Private Citizens & Property, Government (General), Airports and Aircraft
20010 91100 06	2001-09-11	United States	Arlington	Al-Qaida	190	106	Government (General), Military, Airports and Aircraft
20010 91100 05	2001-09-11	United States	New York City	Al-Qaida	1385	10878	Private Citizens & Property, Business, Airports and Aircraft
20010 91100 04	2001-09-11	United States	New York City	Al-Qaida	1385	10878	Private Citizens & Property, Business, Airports and Aircraft
19980 80700 03	1998-08-07	Tanzania	Dar es Salaam	Al-Qaida	11	85	Government (Diplomatic)
19980 80700 02	1998-08-07	Kenya	Nairobi	Al-Qaida	224	4000	Government (Diplomatic)
19921 22900 03	1992-12-29	Yemen	Aden	Al-Qaida	1	1	Business
19921 22900 02	1992-12-29	Yemen	Aden	Al-Qaida	2	5	Business

¹¹¹ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed October 7, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=&end_yearonly=&start_year=1991&start_month=1&start_day=1&end_year=2001&end_month=9&end_day=11&asmSelect0=&asmSelect1=&perpetrator=20029&criterion1=yes&criterion2=yes&criterion3=yes&ctp2=some&success=yes&casualties_type=b&casualties_max.

The number of terrorist incidents attributed to Al-Qaeda during this timeframe is limited to eight occurrences. However, the selection of a wide range of target types—aircraft carrier, diplomatic missions, and defense and economical infrastructure—spread across three continents and their successful execution, exhibits Al-Qaeda’s capacity, initiative, and boldness. Though a mere eight incidents, those attacks resulted in significant casualties and were horrific in the psychological and political domains. Moreover, the choice of targets at will reflected the proactive mode of Al-Qaeda’s leadership.

2. The Second Period (2001–2011)

The second period covers September 12, 2001, until May 2, 2011. This timeframe marks the U.S. entrance into war with Al-Qaeda following the 9/11 attacks until the killing of Al-Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden in 2011. The second decade includes the pinnacle in terms of U.S. troops’ size in Afghanistan, aerial strikes from drones, and the successful killings of Al-Qaeda’s key personnel. However, during this decade, the horrendous terrorist incidents by Al-Qaeda in parallel shook major cities across the globe, from Bali to London. The period includes a total of 70 dreadful terrorist incidents in Indonesia, Tunisia, Kenya, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, France, Spain, and the UK as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Second Period: Post-9/11 Decade (September 12, 2001–May 2, 2011)¹¹²

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
200807090016	2008-07-09	Turkey	Istanbul	Al-Qaida (suspected)	6	2	Police
200803150001	2008-03-15	Pakistan	Islamabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	1	10	Business, Tourists
200803110011	2008-03-11	Pakistan	Lahore	Al-Qaida (suspected)	27	200	Business, Police

¹¹² Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed October 7, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=&end_yearonly=&start_year=2001&start_month=9&start_day=12&end_year=2011&end_month=5&end_day=2&asmSelect0=&asmSelect1=&perpetrator=20029&criteria1=yes&criteria2=yes&criteria3=yes&dt2=some&success=yes&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=.

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
200712270001	2007-12-27	Pakistan	Rawalpindi	Al-Qaida (suspected), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (suspected)	20	100	Violent Political Party
200709040001	2007-09-04	Pakistan	Rawalpindi	Al-Qaida (suspected)	18	35	Military, Military
200701230001	2007-01-23	West Bank and Gaza Strip	Gaza	Al-Qaida (suspected), Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement) (suspected)	0	0	Business, Government (Diplomatic)
200611100004	2006-11-10	Pakistan	Malik Shahi	Al-Qaida (suspected)	9	4	Private Citizens & Property
200609180004	2006-09-18	Somalia	Baidoa	Al-Qaida (suspected)	11	18	Government (General)
200604110001	2006-04-11	Afghanistan	Asadabad	Al-Qaida, Taliban	7	34	Educational Institution
200602060003	2006-02-06	Afghanistan	Mazari Sharif	Al-Qaida (suspected)	0	0	Government (General)
200507210008	2005-07-21	United Kingdom	London	Al-Qaida	0	0	Transportation
200507210007	2005-07-21	United Kingdom	London	Al-Qaida	0	0	Transportation
200507210006	2005-07-21	United Kingdom	London	Al-Qaida	0	0	Transportation
200507210002	2005-07-21	United Kingdom	London	Al-Qaida	0	0	Transportation
200507070004	2005-07-07	United Kingdom	London	Al-Qaida	14	110	Transportation
200507070003	2005-07-07	United Kingdom	London	Al-Qaida	7	163	Transportation
200507070002	2005-07-07	United Kingdom	London	Al-Qaida	27	340	Transportation
200507070001	2005-07-07	United Kingdom	London	Al-Qaida	8	171	Transportation
200506280006	2005-06-28	Afghanistan	Unknown	Al-Qaida, Taliban	0	0	Business
200506010001	2005-06-01	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected)	21	52	Police, Private Citizens & Property, Religious

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
							Figures/ Institutions
200501030007	2005-01-03	Iraq	Baghdad	Al-Qaida, Ansar al-Sunna	5	24	Police
200408280004	2004-08-28	Pakistan	Wana	Al-Qaida (suspected)	2	5	Police
200408260006	2004-08-26	Pakistan	Tiarza	Al-Qaida (suspected)	1	6	Military
200408090003	2004-08-09	Turkey	Istanbul	Al-Qaida (suspected), Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK) (suspected)	0	0	Utilities
200408090002	2004-08-09	Turkey	Istanbul	Al-Qaida (suspected), Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK) (suspected)	1	3	Business
200408090001	2004-08-09	Turkey	Istanbul	Al-Qaida (suspected), Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK) (suspected)	0	4	Business
200406040004	2004-06-04	Pakistan	Razmak	Al-Qaida	0	3	Military
200404090004	2004-04-09	Iraq	Abu Ghraib	Al-Qaida, Mujahedeen Group	8	Unknown	Business, Private Citizens & Property
200403240001	2004-03-24	Pakistan	Peshawar	Al-Qaida (suspected)	0	2	Private Citizens & Property
200403110007	2004-03-11	Spain	Madrid	Al-Qaida (suspected)	62	450	Transportation, Transportation
200403110006	2004-03-11	Spain	Madrid	Al-Qaida (suspected)	0	0	Transportation, Transportation
200403110005	2004-03-11	Spain	Madrid	Al-Qaida (suspected)	0	0	Transportation, Transportation
200403110004	2004-03-11	Spain	Madrid	Al-Qaida (suspected)	19	450	Transportation, Transportation

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
200403110003	2004-03-11	Spain	Madrid	Al-Qaida (suspected)	73	450	Transportation, Transportation
200403110001	2004-03-11	Spain	Madrid	Al-Qaida (suspected)	37	450	Transportation, Transportation
200312250002	2003-12-25	Pakistan	Rawalpindi	Al-Qaida (suspected)	15	46	Government (General)
200311200006	2003-11-20	Turkey	Istanbul	Al-Qaida, Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front (IBDA-C) (suspected)	16	224	Business, Private Citizens & Property
200311200005	2003-11-20	Turkey	Istanbul	Al-Qaida, Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front (IBDA-C) (suspected)	16	224	Government (Diplomatic)
200311010003	2003-11-01	Afghanistan	Unknown	Al-Qaida (suspected)	0	0	Private Citizens & Property
200309250003	2003-09-25	Afghanistan	Oz Khushk	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	1	1	NGO
200308130001	2003-08-13	Afghanistan	Lashkar Gah	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	17	3	Transportation
200306300001	2003-06-30	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Government (Diplomatic), Private Citizens & Property
200303200003	2003-03-20	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Food or Water Supply, Private Citizens & Property
200303180007	2003-03-18	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Government (General)

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
200303150002	2003-03-15	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Government (General)
200303130001	2003-03-13	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected), Hizb-I-Islami (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Transportation
200303100003	2003-03-10	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected), Hizb-I-Islami (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	3	5	Private Citizens & Property
200303070006	2003-03-07	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Government (General)
200303050004	2003-03-05	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	1	Government (Diplomatic)
200303040003	2003-03-04	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Educational Institution
200303030002	2003-03-03	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	2	Private Citizens & Property
200211280004	2002-11-28	Kenya	Mombasa	Al-Qaida (suspected)	0	0	Airports and Aircraft
200211280003	2002-11-28	Kenya	Mombasa	Al-Qaida (suspected)	16	0	Business, Private Citizens & Property, Private Citizens & Property
200211260002	2002-11-26	Afghanistan	Kabul	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Business

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
200211210006	2002-11-21	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	8	Private Citizens & Property
200211140003	2002-11-14	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Airports and Aircraft, Educational Institution
200210120005	2002-10-12	Indonesia	Kuta	Al-Qaida (suspected), Jemaah Islamiya (JI)	101	150	Business
200210120004	2002-10-12	Indonesia	Kuta	Al-Qaida (suspected), Jemaah Islamiya (JI)	101	150	Business
200210060001	2002-10-06	International	Gulf of Aden	Adan Abyan Islamic Army (AAIA), Al-Qaida	1	12	Maritime
200209150002	2002-09-15	Pakistan	Hyderabad	Al-Qaida (suspected)	1	5	Private Citizens & Property, Transportation
200209050005	2002-09-05	Afghanistan	Kabul	Al-Qaida (suspected)	10	65	Business, Private Citizens & Property
200209050001	2002-09-05	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected)	3	1	Government (General)
200206270006	2002-06-27	Afghanistan	Spin Boldak	Al-Qaida	19	24	Military
200205080002	2002-05-08	Pakistan	Karachi	Al-Qaida (suspected)	14	20	Military, Military
200205020001	2002-05-02	Afghanistan	Khost	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	4	Military, Private Citizens & Property
200204110003	2002-04-11	Tunisia	Er Riadh	Al-Qaida	21	30	Religious Figures/ Institutions, Tourists, Tourists
200204080001	2002-04-08	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida	10	80	Government (General),

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
							Private Citizens & Property
200203170001	2002-03-17	Pakistan	Islamabad	Al-Qaida (suspected)	5	46	Government (Diplomatic), Religious Figures/ Institutions, Religious Figures/ Institutions
200201230002	2002-01-23	Pakistan	Karachi	Al-Qaida (suspected), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) (suspected)	1	0	Journalists & Media
200112220002	2001-12-22	France	Paris	Al-Qaida	0	1	Airports and Aircraft

The incidents in the second period reflect that 39 out of 70 incidents took place regionally in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This is the area where Al-Qaeda's leadership was stationed. This is also the period when Pakistan joined the U.S. war in Afghanistan after 9/11. During this period, Al-Qaeda selected targets within Pakistan, including bombing its major urban cities of Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Karachi. Even though Al-Qaeda continued terrorist attacks worldwide, 55% of these incidents (39 out of 70) were in Pakistan and Afghanistan, reflecting that Al-Qaeda was restricted in its access to global targets while unable to strike the U.S. homeland.

3. The Third Period (2011–2021)

The third period extends from May 3, 2011, until August 31, 2021. This timeframe commences after the death of Osama bin Laden and ends with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. Only a single terrorist incident occurred during this period and it was inside Pakistan early on: within three months of the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Third Period: Decade Post Osama bin Laden's Death (May 3, 2011–August 31, 2021)¹¹³

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
201108130011	2011-08-13	Pakistan	Lahore	Al-Qaida	1	0	Business

4. Analysis of Terrorist Incidents by Al-Qaeda

An analysis of the three timeframes reveals a steep rise in terrorist incidents by Al-Qaeda occurred in the second period. Approximately nine times more incidents were witnessed after the U.S. entered war in Afghanistan post-9/11 in comparison to the number of attacks perpetrated during the first decade studied. Al-Qaeda central was at its prime in carrying out transnational attacks while based in Afghanistan as reflected in the statistics of the second decade. Nonetheless, the U.S. military action sufficiently degraded the organization's capability, leaving it unable to lodge a major incident in the third period after the U.S. killing of Osama bin Laden. Moreover, in the second period alone, the last incident was recorded after mid-2008 in Istanbul, Turkey. The number of incidents logged for each period vary considerably prior to and after U.S. military action as follows:

- First Period (1991–2001) - 8
- Second Period (2001–2011) - 70
- Third Period (2011–2021) - 1

¹¹³ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed October 7, 2021); see the exact parameters at <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>.

C. ATTACKS BY AL-QAEDA AND ITS AFFILIATES WITHIN AFGHANISTAN

In order to further fine tune and gain clarity on Al-Qaeda’s viability, this research analyzes the possibility of Al-Qaeda’s affiliates waging attacks inside Afghanistan for the latter two decades studied since affiliates did not exist in the first decade (1991–2001). The key Al-Qaeda affiliates include the following organizations:

- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)¹¹⁴
- Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)¹¹⁵
- Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)¹¹⁶
- Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)¹¹⁷
- Al-Qaeda in Yemen¹¹⁸

1. The Second Period (2001–2011): Al-Qaeda and Affiliates

The terrorist attacks within Afghanistan carried out by Al-Qaeda central and its affiliates have been studied during the second decade (post 9/11 until Osama bin Laden’s death). Such incidents comprise a total of 25 acts as shown in Table 5. Moreover, the Global Terrorism Database reveals that these acts did not include the involvement of affiliates. This implies that the affiliates have primarily remained focused on their own region with regards to their planning and conduct of operations and have not been concerned in Afghanistan, where there is the sole involvement of Al-Qaeda central along with the Taliban support.

¹¹⁴ Mapping Militant Organizations, “Al Qaeda.”

¹¹⁵ Mapping Militant Organizations.

¹¹⁶ Mapping Militant Organizations, “Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS),” Center for International Security and Cooperation, accessed January 30, 2022, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/al-qaeda-indian-subcontinent-aqis>.

¹¹⁷ Mapping Militant Organizations.

¹¹⁸ Mapping Militant Organizations.

Table 5. Post 9/11 Decade: Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates (September 12, 2001–May 2, 2011)¹¹⁹

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
200604110001	2006-04-11	Afghanistan	Asadabad	Al-Qaida, Taliban	7	34	Educational Institution
200602060003	2006-02-06	Afghanistan	Mazari Sharif	Al-Qaida (suspected)	0	0	Government (General)
200506280006	2005-06-28	Afghanistan	Unknown	Al-Qaida, Taliban	0	0	Business
200506010001	2005-06-01	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected)	21	52	Religious Figures/ Institutions, Police, Private Citizens & Property
200311010003	2003-11-01	Afghanistan	Unknown	Al-Qaida (suspected)	0	0	Private Citizens & Property
200309250003	2003-09-25	Afghanistan	Oz Khushk	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	1	1	NGO
200308130001	2003-08-13	Afghanistan	Lashkar Gah	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	17	3	Transportation
200306300001	2003-06-30	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Government (Diplomatic), Private Citizens & Property
200303200003	2003-03-20	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Private Citizens & Property, Food or Water Supply
200303180007	2003-03-18	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected),	0	0	Government (General)

¹¹⁹ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed October 7, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?expanded=no&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=&start_year=2001&start_month=9&start_day=12&end_year=2011&end_month=5&end_day=2&criterion1=yes&criterion2=yes&criterion3=yes&dt_p2=some&success=yes&country=4&perpetrator=20029%2C20030%2C20522%2C20032%2C40325%2C20033%2C20496&ob=GTDID&od=desc&page=1&count=30#results-table.

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
				Taliban (suspected)			
200303150002	2003-03-15	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Government (General)
200303130001	2003-03-13	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected), Hizb-I-Islami (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Transportation
200303100003	2003-03-10	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected), Hizb-I-Islami (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	3	5	Private Citizens & Property
200303070006	2003-03-07	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Government (General)
200303050004	2003-03-05	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	1	Government (Diplomatic)
200303040003	2003-03-04	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Educational Institution
200303030002	2003-03-03	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	2	Private Citizens & Property
200211260002	2002-11-26	Afghanistan	Kabul	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	0	Business
200211210006	2002-11-21	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	8	Private Citizens & Property
200211140003	2002-11-14	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida (suspected),	0	0	Airports and Aircraft,

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
				Taliban (suspected)			Educational Institution
200209050005	2002-09-05	Afghanistan	Kabul	Al-Qaida (suspected)	10	65	Business, Private Citizens & Property
200209050001	2002-09-05	Afghanistan	Kandahar	Al-Qaida (suspected)	3	1	Government (General)
200206270006	2002-06-27	Afghanistan	Spin Boldak	Al-Qaida	19	24	Military
200205020001	2002-05-02	Afghanistan	Khost	Al-Qaida (suspected), Taliban (suspected)	0	4	Military, Private Citizens & Property
200204080001	2002-04-08	Afghanistan	Jalalabad	Al-Qaida	10	80	Government (General), Private Citizens & Property

2. The Third Period (2011–2021): Al-Qaeda and Its Affiliates

The evaluation of the third time bracket involving Al-Qaeda central and its affiliates from May 3, 2011, until August 31, 2021, reveals zero terrorist incidents.¹²⁰ The analysis of Al-Qaeda central and its affiliates validates and reinforces the conclusions from Table 4 that a single versus no incident in the third bracket implies that Al-Qaeda central has been greatly degraded, defeated, and diminished in terms of recurrence of terrorist incidents.

D. CONCLUSION

The number of attacks Al-Qaeda carried out during the three decades studied reveals that Al-Qaeda central could not continue conducting its operations even within

¹²⁰ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed October 2, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=&end_yearonly=&start_year=2011&start_month=5&start_day=3&end_year=2019&end_month=12&end_day=31&asmSelect0=&country=4&asmSelect1=&perpetrator=20029&perpetrator=20030&perpetrator=20522&perpetrator=20032&perpetrator=40325&perpetrator=20033&perpetrator=20496&criteria1=yes&criteria2=yes&criteria3=yes&dt2=all&success=yes&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=; The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), “Data Export Tool.”

Afghanistan. Hence, there exists a remote possibility that its key planners and leaders, already in hiding and survival mode, can execute operations globally or exercise control over planning of its affiliates' operations in their respective regions. Another striking conclusion from the analysis is that none of Al-Qaeda's affiliates conducted its operations within the two decades after 2001 in Afghanistan. Thus, the downturn in the number of terrorist acts by Al-Qaeda over the two decades in Afghanistan is reflective of the organization's decline. Hence, if the number or frequency of terrorist incidents perpetrated by Al-Qaeda is a criterion for measuring the successful completion of its objectives, the U.S. war in Afghanistan has been successful—as amply reflected by negligible number of terrorist incidents from 2011 to 2021 in comparison to 1991–2011.

IV. DEPOSING THE TALIBAN-CONTROLLED GOVERNMENT: A THIRD CRITERION OF SUCCESS

“A war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them.”¹²¹

— President George W. Bush

One of the primary goals of the U.S. war in Afghanistan was to depose the then sitting Taliban government in Afghanistan, since it had harbored Al-Qaeda’s top leader, Osama bin Laden, and refused to hand him over to the United States. Then U.S. President George Bush’s rhetoric drew the differentiating line by telling the world, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”¹²² As the Taliban declined to meet the U.S. demand, military action was undertaken in Afghanistan by the United States and overthrew the Taliban government within three months of the commencement. On November 13, 2001, Kabul fell in the wake of U.S. attacks, and in the next three weeks, the Taliban regime was formally ousted on December 7, 2001, with the fall of Kandahar.¹²³

In response, the Taliban commenced a sustained war against the allied “occupation” forces, which the U.S. leaders seemingly neither comprehended nor contemplated. As per Michael Kugelman, Asia Program deputy director and senior associate for South Asia at the Wilson Center, “Washington achieved the most early in the war. It degraded al-Qaeda sanctuaries and removed their Taliban hosts from power. After that point, the U.S. struggled to articulate a strategy for remaining in Afghanistan.”¹²⁴ The U.S. military was successful in decimating Al-Qaeda and reducing terrorist acts as amply described in Chapters II and III. Ultimately, however, the United States was unable to keep the Taliban from securing a foothold in Kabul. The Taliban not only returned to power in 2021 but a Peace Agreement was also made between the U.S. leaders and the Taliban in Doha.

¹²¹ Department of State, The Office of Electronic Information, *The Global War on Terrorism*.

¹²² Editors, “The Story of the Global War on Terror.”

¹²³ Editors.

¹²⁴ Hammad Sarfraz, “Looking Back on the Forever War,” *The Express Tribune: T-Magazine*, September 12, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2319835/looking-back-on-the-forever-war>.

In an assessment of U.S. gains in the Afghan war, the Taliban variable carries two causal mechanisms. Firstly, it is necessary to consider the perspective of denying the Taliban's return to power and forming a new government in Kabul. An examination of the Taliban's sustained actions in terms of terrorist incidents, from the United States' overthrowing of the Taliban government in 2001 until their return to power in August 2021, would illustrate the gains made from the U.S. efforts. Also, a review of the current and prospective status of and pledges by the Taliban about the use of Afghan soil as a base from which to threaten U.S. security would show U.S. gains from the war in Afghanistan. The manifestation of this aspect was witnessed with the toppling of the Taliban government in 2001 as they refused to hand over Osama bin Laden to the United States. Yet, during the two decades of war from 2001 until 2021, the Taliban reversed the U.S. action of overthrowing their government in December 2001, as they assumed control of Kabul on August 15, 2021, two weeks prior to the U.S. withdrawal on August 31, 2021. Most importantly, the last sitting government in Kabul, along with the U.S. trained and equipped Afghan National Army (ANA), could not resist and prevent the Taliban from gaining control of the entire country. A week after the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban formally announced their government on September 7, 2021. The Taliban's ascension to power was not the U.S. choice, rather it was due to the Taliban's actions and dominance. In this regard, an analysis of attacks perpetrated by the Taliban during the war period could give insight on the U.S. war efforts in Afghanistan. An increase, decrease, or absence of change in the number of Taliban attacks would empirically show the viability of U.S. military action in Afghanistan.

The second causal mechanism related to U.S. gains from the Afghan war emanates from the Doha agreement, which focuses on U.S. security.¹²⁵ The agreement assigns the Taliban government with the responsibility of ensuring that Afghanistan is not utilized as a base for projecting and perpetrating terrorist plots to threaten global security.¹²⁶ If the Taliban leaders are able to ensure that no terrorist attacks are perpetrated from Afghanistan

¹²⁵ Taliban and the United States, *Comprehensive Peace Agreement*.

¹²⁶ Taliban and the United States.

against the United States and its allies, then the U.S. war in Afghanistan can be termed a success from that perspective. This chapter focuses on both contributing factors to the U.S.-Taliban equation.

A. TALIBAN RESURGENCE

The Taliban resisted and undermined the U.S. actions by waging a protracted war for two decades in the form of launching terrorist strikes against a wide array of military, governmental, and civilian targets within Afghanistan. The Taliban strategy seems plausible and quite successful, as it ultimately brought them back into the power by formally overthrowing the government of President Ashraf Ghani on August 15, 2021, with the fall of Kabul. More importantly, the U.S. military could not ultimately degrade and defeat the same Taliban whom they had toppled and swiftly removed from power in 2001 at the start of the war in Afghanistan. An analysis of terrorist acts perpetrated by the Taliban from 2001 until 2021 was performed to evaluate how successful the U.S. war in Afghanistan was in meeting America's declared objectives. In this regard, three timeframes have been formulated to study the trend in the number of strikes by the Taliban; post-9/11 until the death of Osama bin Laden; post-Osama bin Laden's death until the Doha peace agreement; and post Doha peace agreement until the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. An analysis of these timeframes affords insight on the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

1. The First Timeframe (T-1) (Post-9/11 until Osama Bin Laden's Death in May 2011)

In order to assess the pattern and history of Taliban actions against the U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan, a statistical analysis of attacks by the Taliban is offered. The United States and the Taliban were at war for 20 years, inflicting casualties upon one another. The Taliban launched attacks against the U.S. and allied forces, the Afghan government (initially led by President Hamid Karzai and later by President Ashraf Ghani), the Afghan National Defense Forces (ANDSF), militias, and the Afghan citizens.

The first timeframe (T-1) comprises a period of terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Taliban from September 12, 2001, until May 2, 2011, inside Afghanistan. By utilizing the Global Terrorism Database, this study filters for only the incidents where no doubt exists

that they represent acts of terrorism and were successful attacks. A total of 1,286 terrorist incidents across various parts of Afghanistan occurred during T-1.¹²⁷ The statistics include the entire range of targets against whom the terrorist acts were directed:¹²⁸

Abortion related, Airports and Aircraft, Business, Educational Institution, Food or Water Supply, Government (Diplomatic), Government (General), Journalists, Media, Maritime, Military, NGO, Other, Police, Private Citizens, Property, Religious Figures/Institutions, Telecommunication, Terrorists/Non-state Militia, Tourists, Transportation, Unknown, Utilities, Violent Political Party.

2. The Second Timeframe (T-2) (Post-2011 Osama bin Laden's Death until the Doha Agreement)

The second timeframe (T-2) covers the period from May 3, 2011, until February 29, 2020. This timeframe commences right after the death of Osama bin Laden until the conclusion of the Doha Peace Agreement on February 29, 2020. These incidents comprise unambiguous terrorism acts proven successful. The Taliban perpetrated a total of 6,284 acts across various parts of Afghanistan during T-2.¹²⁹

A comparative analysis of these two timeframes is noteworthy. T-2 witnesses an approximately five-times increase in the number of incidents from T-1 (i.e., 6,284 vis-à-vis 1,286). It implies that the number of terrorist actions by the Taliban significantly intensified during T-2, with as many as six terrorist strikes on December 31, 2019,

¹²⁷ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed October 3, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?expanded=no&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=&start_year=2001&start_month=9&start_day=12&end_year=2011&end_month=5&end_day=2&criterion1=yes&criterion2=yes&criterion3=yes&dt p2=some&success=no&country=4&perpetrator=652&ob=GTDid&od=desc&page=1&count=100#results-table.

¹²⁸ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed January 30, 2022); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?chart=target&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=&start_year=2001&start_month=9&start_day=12&end_year=2011&end_month=5&end_day=2&criterion1=yes&criterion2=yes&criterion3=yes&dt p2=some&success=no&country=4&perpetrator=652&count=100.

¹²⁹ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed October 3, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=&end_yearonly=&start_year=2011&start_month=5&start_day=3&end_year=2019&end_month=12&end_day=31&asmSelect0=&country=4&asmSelect1=&perpetrator=652&criterion1=yes&criterion2=yes&criterion3=yes&dt p2=some&success=no&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=.

alone.¹³⁰ The statistics include all types of targets against whom the terrorist acts were directed.

As discussed, and evaluated in Chapter III, the terrorist acts by Al-Qaeda central declined from 70 to only one incident in the second and third timeframes, respectively. By contrast, in the case of the Taliban, the pattern is grossly inverted. The marked rise in terrorism incidents by approximately five times from 1,286 to 6,284 in the two timeframes (T-1 and T-2), respectively, suggests that the U.S. war efforts in Afghanistan were not bearing worthwhile results with regards to countering Taliban action.

To further develop a clearer and more detailed picture of the gains achieved from the U.S. war in Afghanistan, the filter for target type has been applied with a view to include only those incidents where the Taliban exclusively targeted the military, police, and government (general and diplomatic). The results reveal a total of 651 terrorist acts against such targets during T-1.¹³¹ For T-2, a total of 4,156 terrorist incidents have been recorded.¹³²

An analysis of the terrorist incidents during these two decades reveals a rise in terrorism incidents by more than six times (6.38 times to be precise). It can be inferred that when data for the full range of targets was included, the statistics were five times more intense in T-1 and T-2, but when the selected targets included government and law enforcement organizations, the rise in successful strikes was revealed to be more than six

¹³⁰ Due to the last data available in the Global Terrorism Database, which was updated through December 31, 2019, the statistics of 6,284 attacks do not include attacks conducted from January 1, 2020, to February 29, 2020. However, as per the statistics of Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 705 incidents occurred from January 1, 2020, until February 29, 2020, and they have been taken into account in the final analysis.

¹³¹ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed October 3, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?expanded=no&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=&start_year=2001&start_month=9&start_day=12&end_year=2011&end_month=5&end_day=2&criterion1=yes&criterion2=yes&criterion3=yes&dt_p2=some&success=no&country=4&perpetrator=652&target=7%2C2%2C4%2C3&ob=GTDID&od=desc&page=1&count=100#results-table.

¹³² Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed October 3, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=&end_yearonly=&start_year=2011&start_month=5&start_day=3&end_year=2019&end_month=12&end_day=31&asmSelect0=&country=4&asmSelect1=&perpetrator=652&target=7&target=2&target=4&target=3&criterion1=yes&criterion2=yes&criterion3=yes&dt_p2=some&success=no&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=.

times as frequent. It can be concluded that the Taliban focused more on attacking the military, police, and government targets during T-2. By contrast, the U.S. effort was not only unable to reduce or even curtail the Taliban's initiative and capacity by letting the incidents happen at the same constant rate, but it also deeply failed as the acts of terrorism not only continued but showed a rise of more than six times.

3. Doha Peace Agreement

The Doha Peace Agreement was inked between the Taliban and the U.S. government on February 29, 2020.¹³³ The agreement underscored the importance of banning the use of Afghan soil as a base for attacking the United States and its allies by insisting on "enforcement mechanisms that will prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies."¹³⁴ Moreover, the agreement explicitly laid out the responsibility of the Taliban to ensure that no terrorist group, including Al-Qaeda, be permitted to threaten the United States and its allies in the following terms:

- The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qa'ida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.
- The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will send a clear message that those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies have no place in Afghanistan and will instruct members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban, not to cooperate with groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States and its allies.
- The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will prevent any group or individual in Afghanistan from threatening the security of the United States and its allies, and will prevent them from recruiting, training, and fundraising and will not host them in accordance with the commitments in this agreement.

¹³³ Taliban and the United States, *Comprehensive Peace Agreement*.

¹³⁴ Taliban and the United States.

- The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban is committed to deal with those seeking asylum or residence in Afghanistan according to international migration law and the commitments of this agreement, so that such persons do not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.
- The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will not provide visas, passports, travel permits, or other legal documents to those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies to enter Afghanistan.¹³⁵

4. The Third Timeframe (T-3) (Post-Doha Peace Agreement until U.S. Withdrawal)

The third timeframe (T-3) covers the period after the Doha Peace Agreement (post-February 29, 2020) until the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan on August 31, 2021. The agreement formed the basis of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the formal conclusion of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) reveals that 705 terrorist attacks were conducted by the Taliban during this one-and-a-half-year period.¹³⁶

5. Analysis

Over two decades, the Taliban continued to wage heinous attacks against a wide range of targets across various parts of Afghanistan while in the U.S. presence. The statistics of terrorist incidents conducted by the Taliban in the first decade (2001–2011) after getting ousted from the power, the second decade (2011–2020) after death of Osama bin Laden until the Doha agreement, and the last period from post-Doha agreement until the U.S. withdrawal can be summarized in Table 6.

¹³⁵ Taliban and the United States.

¹³⁶ The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), “Data Export Tool.”

Table 6. Statistical Summary of Terrorist Incidents by Taliban

Timeframe	Terrorist Incidents by Taliban
T-1	1286
T-2	6352 ¹³⁷
T-3	705 ¹³⁸

After undertaking a comparative analysis of attacks by the Taliban, this research draws six major conclusions:

- The Taliban have a strong grip and legal authority over the entire Afghan territory, and the Taliban leaders have supremacy over warring factions, militias, and other groups including Al-Qaeda.
- There was a remarkable rise of 5.48 times in the number of incidents from the first decade (T-1) until the second and third timeframes (T-2 and T-3),¹³⁹ which culminated in the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.
- The Taliban leaders have fully recovered since their unseating from power by the U.S. troops in 2001.
- The Taliban's unabated and rising attacks against multifarious targets in Afghanistan undermined the U.S. military efforts impinging upon freedom of action, will, or capacity.
- The Taliban have grown in freedom of action, initiative, confidence, and strength since 2001.

¹³⁷ There were 6,284 acts from May 3, 2011, to December 31, 2019; and 68 acts from January 1, 2020, to February 29, 2020.

¹³⁸ There were 705 acts from March 1, 2020, to August 31, 2021

¹³⁹ This includes 6,284 acts from May 3, 2011, to December 31, 2019; 68 acts from January 1, 2020, to February 29, 2020; and 705 acts from March 1, 2020, to August 31, 2021.

- The U.S. military had certain victory against Al-Qaeda but certain failure against the Taliban, who were initially blocked from assuming power and forming a government in Kabul but ultimately succeeded in doing so.

B. POST DOHA PEACE AGREEMENT PLEDGES

A Comprehensive Peace Agreement was concluded at Doha between the Taliban and the United States with pledges that the Afghan territory not be utilized for any terrorist activity.¹⁴⁰ How far that becomes practicable and enforceable is yet to be seen. As of now, with just over two months in power, the Taliban have made repeated pledges through public statements that the Afghan territory would not be used as a base for any group seeking to do harm against anyone.

The Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, commented in a news conference that Afghanistan would not be used for perpetrating terrorist attacks against other states. Mujahid mentioned the “Taliban would not allow Afghanistan to be used as a base for attacking other countries, as it was in the years before 9/11.”¹⁴¹ In his remarks he also stated, “I would like to assure the international community, including the U.S., that nobody will be harmed in Afghanistan,” and as per an Al-Jazeera translation, “You will not be harmed from our soil.”¹⁴² In another interview with NBC News, Mujahid reiterated the Taliban’s commitment as per the Doha Peace Agreement: “Now, we have given promises that Afghan soil won’t be used against anyone.”¹⁴³ With these statements, the Taliban seem poised and determined in not allowing terrorists to operate from Afghanistan.

¹⁴⁰ Taliban and the United States, *Comprehensive Peace Agreement*.

¹⁴¹ Ahmad Seir et al., “Taliban Vow to Respect Women, despite History of Oppression,” AP News, August 17, 2021, sec. Joe Biden, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-kabul-1d4b052cceff113adc8dc94f965ff23c7>.

¹⁴² Zeerak Khurram et al., “Taliban Spokesman Says U.S. Will Not Be Harmed from Afghan Soil,” NBC News, August 17, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/taliban-announces-amnesty-urges-women-join-government-n1276945>.

¹⁴³ Rachel Pannett, “Taliban Spokesman Says ‘No Proof’ Bin Laden Was Responsible for 9/11 Attacks,” *Washington Post*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/26/taliban-bin-laden/>.

In this context, the largest threat emanates from the presence of IS-KP (Islamic State – Khorasan Province), also called Daesh–Khorasan. On August 26, 2021, just five days before the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, IS-KP conducted an attack on Kabul International Airport, claiming the lives of 13 U.S. Marines.¹⁴⁴ The Taliban spokesperson Mujahid denounced these acts, asserting, “You will witness for yourself that these will be the last attacks they have carried out and they will not be able to conduct them in the future.” He maintained, “Daesh [Islamic State] has no physical presence here, but it is possible some people who may be our own Afghans have adopted Daesh ideology, which is a phenomenon that is neither popular nor is it supported by Afghans.”¹⁴⁵ The Taliban claim that ISIS cannot pursue its agenda from the Afghan soil.

In an interview with Steve Inskeep of National Public Radio (NPR), another Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen upheld the Taliban’s resolve to deny the use of Afghan territory for such purposes:

Steve Inskeep

I do have a question from a colleague who wants to follow up, regarding groups such as ISIS and al-Qaida. If groups such as ISIS or al-Qaida are identified again on Afghan soil, will your government move to eradicate them?

Suhail Shaheen

Of course, when we say that we do not allow anyone to use the soil of Afghanistan, that means we will not allow them, that if they are intending to use this soil for their activities outside the country, so that we will not allow them to, we will not tolerate that.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Visual Journalism Team, “Kabul Airport Attack: What Do We Know?,” BBC News, August 27, 2021, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58349010>.

¹⁴⁵ Ayaz Gul, “Taliban Claim No Al-Qaida or Islamic State in Afghanistan,” VOA, September 21, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-claim-al-qaida-islamic-state-are-not-in-afghanistan/6237589.html>.

¹⁴⁶ Steve Inskeep, “Read What the Taliban Told NPR about Their Plans for Afghanistan,” NPR, August 18, 2021, sec. Asia, <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/18/1028780816/transcript-taliban-spokesman-suhail-shaheen-interview>.

C. CONCLUSION

If the Taliban leaders stand by their word and commitment and manifest to the world that no terrorist attacks are perpetrated from Afghanistan against the United States and its allies, then the U.S. war in Afghanistan can be termed a success story from the Taliban perspective. It would also imply that the larger objective of the U.S. war in Afghanistan has been met. Nevertheless, successful implementation to ensure no terrorist act by any group is conducted across the world remains far from realized. In a nutshell, the U.S. war in Afghanistan in terms of the Taliban variable can be assessed as unsuccessful as far as defeating the Taliban, but from the perspective of the Taliban upholding the pledges of the Doha Agreement, it is still early and remains to be ascertained.

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V. THE EFFICACY OF U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY: FOURTH CRITERION OF SUCCESS

Before 9/11, no executive department had, as its first priority, the job of defending America from domestic attack. That changed with the 2002 creation of the Department of Homeland Security. This department now has the lead responsibility for problems that feature so prominently in the 9/11 story, such as protecting borders, securing transportation and other parts of our critical infrastructure, organizing emergency assistance, and working with the private sector to assess vulnerabilities.¹⁴⁷

—The 9/11 Commission Report

A. CREATION OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

The 9/11 catastrophe shocked the American nation, and the incident was reminiscent of the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Instantaneously, the U.S. and global focus turned towards international and transnational terrorism. At one end, this mega incident drew the United States along with its allies into the Afghan war to stamp out the terrorists. Concomitantly, the idea of creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was conceived, in order to protect U.S. citizens from any manifestation of terrorist threats on U.S. soil.

As per the findings of the 9/11 commission report, the lack of intelligence sharing among U.S. government agencies was chiefly attributed to departmental compartmentalization and intrinsic organizational secrecy.¹⁴⁸ The report also noted that with a protracted history of shielding information against the Soviet KGB during the Cold War period, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) practiced compartmentation of sensitive information to prevent its exposure or leakage. Neither the lead domestic intelligence arm, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), nor the overseas or foreign intelligence agency, the CIA, was able to craft any actionable intelligence to deter the havoc

¹⁴⁷ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, 395.

¹⁴⁸ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 91.

that followed September 11, 2001. The 9/11 report discovered that the lack of “unity of effort in sharing information” resulted in a gross failure towards “connecting the dots” to generate a successful intelligence picture.¹⁴⁹ Consequently, the terrorists hijacked the jetliners and smashed them successfully into the twin towers and the Pentagon at will.

One of the key policy steps undertaken by the United States at the federal level was to strengthen the security of the U.S. mainland to deter the onslaught of incoming terrorist strikes. The 9/11 event gave birth to a department which would ultimately take the lead responsibility of defending the U.S. soil from terrorist threats. Consequently, in November 2002, the U.S. Congress passed the Homeland Security Act, paving the way for the creation of an altogether new organizational body, coined as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).¹⁵⁰ The cabinet-level department integrated 22 “federal departments and agencies” under its umbrella, with an aim to protect and safeguard the lives of the U.S. citizens in its homeland.¹⁵¹ One of the key cardinal missions of DHS in determining its “strategic plan” is “Counter Terrorism and Homeland Security Threats”:

One of the Department’s top priorities is to resolutely protect Americans from terrorism and other homeland security threats by preventing nation-states and their proxies, transnational criminal organizations, and groups or individuals from engaging in terrorist or criminal acts that threaten the Homeland.¹⁵²

This chapter empirically examines the security of the U.S. mainland against Al-Qaeda after the creation of DHS to have an overall assessment of the U.S. gains from the war in Afghanistan. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) has been utilized for the comparative analysis of terrorist acts perpetrated by Al-Qaeda against the United States. A review of U.S. homeland security by evaluating terrorist incidents perpetrated by Al-Qaeda after the creation of the DHS depicts the U.S. gains from the war in Afghanistan.

¹⁴⁹ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 416.

¹⁵⁰ “Creation of the Department of Homeland Security,” Department of Homeland Security, February 17, 2011, <https://www.dhs.gov/creation-department-homeland-security>.

¹⁵¹ “Creation of the Department of Homeland Security.”

¹⁵² “Counter Terrorism and Homeland Security Threats,” Department of Homeland Security, July 11, 2012, <https://www.dhs.gov/counter-terrorism-and-homeland-security-threats>.

B. TERRORISM INCIDENTS AFTER THE RAISING OF DHS

An evaluation of terrorism incidents since the establishment of DHS in November 18, 2002, until December 31, 2019, reveals a total of 520 terrorist incidents occurred within the United States, as per the computations of Global Terrorism Database (GTD).¹⁵³ However, these seemingly high statistics include a wide array of incidents perpetrated by numerous violent ethnic, racial, and extremist groups; those who were politically motivated; and animal rights movements among others, and most importantly, domestically engineered acts unlike the 9/11-event.¹⁵⁴ With regard to Al-Qaeda, no incident has been attributed to Al-Qaeda central for any terrorism incident inside the United States after the creation of DHS.¹⁵⁵

To further refine the results to capture only acts of terrorism perpetrated by Al-Qaeda, Table 7 illustrates a total of two terrorism incidents in the United States after the creation of DHS and these incidents were attributed to the AQAP—an Al-Qaeda affiliate.

¹⁵³ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed November 5, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=&end_yearonly=&start_year=2002&start_month=11&start_day=18&end_year=2019&end_month=12&end_day=31&asmSelect0=&country=217&asmSelect1=&dt2=all&success=yes&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=.

¹⁵⁴ Anti-Semitic extremists, Animal Rights extremists, White supremacists/nationalists, Jihadi-inspired extremists, Anti-Muslim extremists, Left-wing extremists, Anti-White extremists, Pro-Trump extremists, Anti-Republican extremists, Neo-Nazi extremists (suspected), Male supremacists, Anti-LGBT extremists, Anti-Police extremists, Anti-Arab extremists, Anti-Government extremists, Ku Klux Klan (suspected), Black Hebrew Israelites (suspected), Conspiracy theory extremists, Anti-Sikh extremists, Anti-Abortion extremists, Muslim extremists, Animal Liberation Front (ALF), and Earth Liberation Front (ELF) etc.

¹⁵⁵ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed November 5, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=&end_yearonly=&start_year=2002&start_month=11&start_day=18&end_year=2019&end_month=12&end_day=31&asmSelect0=&country=217&asmSelect1=&perpetrator=20029&dt2=all&success=yes&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=.

Table 7. AQAP Attacks in the United States after the Creation of DHS¹⁵⁶

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator Group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
200912250024	2009-12-25	United States	Detroit	Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	0	2	Airports and Aircraft
201912060007	2019-12-06	United States	Pensacola	Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	4	8	Military

The two incidents reflected in Table 7 are not only separated from one another by a decade but also share no resemblance in their execution patterns. On December 25, 2009, a Nigerian national, Umar Farouk, boarded Northwest Flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit, Michigan.¹⁵⁷ While the plane approached the airport, the terrorist unsuccessfully tried to detonate a bomb which was sewn into his underwear. No deaths occurred. The second incident took place in Florida on December 6, 2019, when a Saudi officer, Saeed Alshamrani, shot three U.S. Navy sailors at the Naval Air Station, Pensacola.¹⁵⁸ The U.S. Department of Justice and the FBI claimed that information within the shooter's cell phone, upon unlocking, revealed "significant ties" with Al-Qaeda. Later, AQAP accepted responsibility for this act in February 2010. Whether the shooter was self-motivated or had established links with AQAP is debatable. As per Colin Clarke, "It is not yet clear whether the group had a direct role in the attack, but if it did, it would make the shooting the first deadly terrorist attack on U.S. soil since 9/11 directed by a foreign terrorist

¹⁵⁶ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed November 5, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=&end_yearonly=&start_year=2002&start_month=11&start_day=18&end_year=2019&end_month=12&end_day=31&asmSelect0=&country=217&asmSelect1=&perpetrator=20029&perpetrator=20030&perpetrator=20522&perpetrator=20032&perpetrator=40325&perpetrator=20033&perpetrator=20496&perpetrator=20494&dt2=all&success=yes&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=.

¹⁵⁷ Global Terrorism Database (object name GTDID 200912250024, accessed November 5, 2021), <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/IncidentSummary.aspx?gtid=200912250024>.

¹⁵⁸ Stefan Becket and Clare Hymes, "Saudi Shooter in Florida Air Base Attack Had 'Significant Ties' to al Qaeda, Barr Says," May 18, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pensacola-florida-base-shooting-al-qaeda-fbi-justice-department/>.

organization.”¹⁵⁹ Although both the acts are attributed to AQAP, the former was committed by a foreign national carrying out an act on U.S. soil while the latter was committed by a state official, seemingly self-motivated, and bearing allegiance to the AQAP, which remains beyond full certainty.

As discussed in Chapter III, just as the Al-Qaeda threat expanded from Afghanistan into Pakistan and the attacks surged inside Pakistan, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) also waged heinous acts against Pakistan as a U.S. ally.¹⁶⁰ Table 8 shows that after the establishment of DHS, one terrorist attack attributable to the TTP took place in the United States, though it was unsuccessful.¹⁶¹

Table 8. Attacks by the TTP inside the United States¹⁶²

GTD ID	Date	Country	City	Perpetrator Group	Fatalities	Injured	Target Type
201005010001	2010-05-01	United States	New York City	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	0	0	Private Citizens & Property

On May 1, 2010, a car bombing was planned for Times Square in New York City. Later, the suspect, Faisal Shahzad, was arrested and confessed to the planning of this event. As per the GTD, it remains unclear whether Shahzad had links with the TTP or not: “The

¹⁵⁹ Colin Clarke, “The Pensacola Terrorist Attack: The Enduring Influence of al-Qa`ida and Its Affiliates,” *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 3 (March 24, 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/pensacola-terrorist-attack-enduring-influence-al-qaida-affiliates/>.

¹⁶⁰ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)* (College Park: University of Maryland, 2015), <https://www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan-ttp>.

¹⁶¹ Adapted from parameters entered into the Global Terrorism Database search tool (accessed November 5, 2021); see the exact parameters at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=&end_yearonly=&start_year=2002&start_month=11&start_day=18&end_year=2019&end_month=12&end_day=31&asmSelect0=&country=217&perpetrator=20442&dt2=all&success=yes&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=.

¹⁶² Source: Global Terrorism Database.

group did not make specific mention of the car bomb or New York City, so authorities doubt the authenticity of the Pakistani Taliban's involvement.”¹⁶³

C. ANALYSIS

Out of the three incidents described in Tables 7 and 8, two have been attributed to the AQAP while the third act is ascribed to the TTP. Nonetheless, it is evident that Al-Qaeda central could neither plan nor execute a single terrorist act on U.S. soil since 9/11. The conclusion is twofold. First, the actions of the U.S. war in Afghanistan were productive and effective as verified in Chapters II and III—the decapitation of Al-Qaeda's key leadership and the resulting decline in terrorist incidents perpetrated by that group. Second, the raising of DHS post-9/11 was viable and substantially efficient in deterring terrorist plots.

Out of the three terrorism incidents that surfaced during the period after the creation of DHS, the shooting incident by the Saudi officer directed at his fellow service members in Pensacola resembles a pattern more of a domestic mass shooting than a formal terrorist strike by a terrorist group. Similarly, the foiled plot involving a car explosion in Times Square, New York, also replicates domestically driven extremism, since Faisal Shahzad studied in the United States and possessed U.S. citizenship. By contrast, the incident at Detroit Airport onboard Flight 253 by the Nigerian national seems more closely aligned to the pattern of the 9/11-jetliners.

Over a period of about two decades since 2002, DHS has proven apt in foiling traditional transnational terrorist attacks mirroring those of 9/11, as explicitly reflected in the statistics of Tables 7 and 8—none for Al-Qaeda central, two acts for AQAP, and a single unsuccessful incident by the TTP. Accordingly, as of 2020, the terrorism incidents meriting response by the DHS have shifted from conventional transnational terrorism to domestic extremism. The first Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, Thomas J. Ridge, has opined that the new challenge for the DHS is domestic terrorism, “In the post-9/11 world, the threat was foreign terrorism,” and that “the CIA and the military were the

¹⁶³ Global Terrorism Database (object name GTDID 201005010001, accessed November 5, 2021), <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/IncidentSummary.aspx?gtdid=201005010001>.

tip of the spear, and we filled the defensive gap. But now there's another adjective in front of terrorism: domestic terrorism.”¹⁶⁴ Similarly, as per the Homeland Threat Assessment released in October 2020, “the primary terrorist threat inside the United States will stem from lone offenders and small cells of individuals, including Domestic Violent Extremists (DVE) and foreign terrorist-inspired Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVE).”¹⁶⁵ The Homeland Threat Assessment endorses and supports the evidence as out of 520 incidents, only two acts are attributable to a transnational terrorist organization—AQAP. Furthermore, as per the report of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) of March 2021, the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) contemplates that the racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVE) and militia violent extremists (MVE) present the most lethal DVE threats.¹⁶⁶ In this regard, RMVE are poised towards perpetrating mass-casualty attacks against the civilians while the MVE are likely to target personnel and infrastructure of the law enforcement agencies.

The figure of 520 terrorist incidents in the United States after the creation of DHS chiefly amounts to acts by lone offenders and foreign terrorist-inspired HVE. Hence, the unsuccessful terrorist acts perpetrated by Faisal Shahzad at Times Square and by Saeed Alshamrani at the Naval Air Station, Pensacola, are a joint reflection of the lone wolf pattern and foreign terrorist-inspired HVE. Thus, in the context of traditionally styled terrorist acts by transnational terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda on the U.S. territory, there seems to be a difficult proposition and distant possibility for terrorism to materialize considering the statistics of the post-DHS timeframe. Nonetheless, the efficacy of DHS against acts by DVE and HVE is not a subject of debate in this research. The creation of DHS streamlined and improved the screening procedures at the ports of entry inside the

¹⁶⁴ Nick Miroff, “The Agency Founded Because of 9/11 Is Shifting to Face the Threat of Domestic Terrorism,” *Washington Post*, February 14, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/dhs-domestic-extremism-threat/2021/02/14/41693dd0-672f-11eb-bf81-c618c88ed605_story.html.

¹⁶⁵ Department of Homeland Security, *Homeland Threat Assessment October 2020* (Washington, D.C., DHS, 2020), 17, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/2020_10_06_homeland-threat-assessment.pdf.

¹⁶⁶ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021,” Publications Library DHS, March 1, 2021, 2, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/21_0301_odni_unclass-summary-of-dve-assessment-17_march-final_508.pdf.

United States, raised awareness among the citizens, and overall contributed towards averting terrorist plots:

Even though the ODNI and DHS and the proliferation of counter terrorism centers sounded like a lot of bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo—the front lines of American security were transformed. More intelligence was shared, and training was altered. The border patrol agent, the state department visa specialist, the flight attendant, and the general public (“See something, say something”) were all on the lookout for trouble.¹⁶⁷

The terrorist incidents by Al-Qaeda in Europe, especially the bombings in Madrid on March 11, 2004, and in London on July 7, 2005, happened well after the 9/11 attacks. Al-Qaeda’s sophisticatedly planned and well executed acts in Spain and the UK starkly resemble the pattern of 9/11 passenger planes in the United States, where the coordinated explosions of more than one mass commuter system resulted in mass casualties, attraction of a global audience, and projection of organizational invincibility. Thus far, an incident with the gravity of 9/11 has not recurred on the U.S. mainland.

D. CONCLUSION

The defining moment of 9/11 in the annals of U.S. history sparked the creation of DHS. As per the DHS, the department envisages “creating a strengthened homeland security enterprise and a more secure America that is better equipped to confront the range of threats.”¹⁶⁸ It seems that today, the United States is more prepared in terms of early warning and foiling any terrorist attack than it was prior to September 11, 2001. Nevertheless, repetition of a mega terrorist act such as that on 9/11 cannot be altogether ruled out, yet its possibility has been greatly minimalized with the creation of DHS. The statistics related to terrorist incidents by Al-Qaeda central and the non-recurrence of a 9/11 like episode *after the creation of DHS* imply that the U.S. war in Afghanistan was a success.

¹⁶⁷ Elaine Kamarck, “9/11 and the Reinvention of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” *Brookings* (blog), August 27, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/08/27/9-11-and-the-reinvention-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community/>.

¹⁶⁸ “Creation of the Department of Homeland Security.”

VI. CONCLUSION

The U.S. war in Afghanistan was the longest campaign overseas against an unprecedented asymmetric threat. As the nature of the war was complex, so was the setting of success benchmarks against which the war undertaken by the United States could be squarely assessed. The debates about the U.S. successes and rationale for staying in Afghanistan kept occurring during the two decades post-2001, though with vague objectives and criteria muddled by mission creep. Nonetheless, the issue assumed even greater attention when the war was formally concluded with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Against this backdrop, the research presented aimed not only to establish the criteria by which to measure the success the United States achieved in waging this protracted war in Afghanistan, but also to gauge the results of the war as per those success indices.

The success criteria framed in this research formed the four most pertinent and obvious cardinals which have been empirically assessed. The first was the capacity of Al-Qaeda as a terrorist organization after the U.S. war in Afghanistan. The research has revealed that the United States has been successful in this domain as Al-Qaeda has been effectively defeated. Al-Qaeda's key leaders and planners were relentlessly pursued, and severely eliminated or arrested and detained. Al-Qaeda central today faces grave challenges for its projected leadership and from the emergence of regional Al-Qaeda affiliates and the overwhelming clout of ISIS.

The second criterion was framed to evaluate the quantum of terrorism wreaked by Al-Qaeda over the years with its signature terrorist attacks of 9/11. The success was analyzed by dissecting the era from 1991 until 2021 into three decades and examining the number of terrorist incidents perpetrated in each decade. The research has revealed a continuous downturn in and eventual end to terrorist acts by Al-Qaeda—both worldwide and within Afghanistan. Thus, from the perspective of the success metric of a reduction in terrorist incidents perpetrated by Al-Qaeda, the U.S. war in Afghanistan has been a comprehensive success. The second criterion self-validates the first one, since with the decapitation of Al-Qaeda's leadership, the number of terrorist incidents plummeted.

The third criterion was framed to evaluate the U.S. success against the Taliban. Apparently, although the United States toppled the Taliban government within three months of initiating the campaign, the Taliban ultimately returned to power after 20 years. This resurgence is analytically validated by the number of attacks by the Taliban, separately evaluated for the two decades from 2001 until 2021. The continual rise in the number of Taliban attacks against the full spectrum of civilian and military targets verifies that the Taliban remained undeterred in Afghanistan while the U.S. forces were present. Therefore, based on the objective of permanently removing the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, the U.S. war in that country was unsuccessful. Yet another dimension related to the Taliban as a security threat remains. Now that they have once again resumed control of the government and have signed the Doha Peace agreement with the United States, will the Taliban stand by their pledges to uphold that agreement—by maintaining world peace and security by not letting the Afghan soil be used as a base for terrorism. It is still too early to determine whether success has been achieved according to this metric.

The final criterion set for assessing the U.S. gains in the war in Afghanistan was rather an indirect but extremely pertinent one—the efficacy of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The 9/11 event stood as a precursor to the creation of the DHS, which was tasked with leading and coordinating the counterterrorism efforts within the United States and ensuring the security of the homeland from man-made and natural disasters. First, the research shows that in the period after the creation of DHS there was no recurrence of a 9/11-like event, and second, only a few insignificant and mainly unsuccessful terrorist incidents surfaced. Hence, the statistics related to terrorist incidents by Al-Qaeda central and the non-recurrence of a 9/11-like episode after the creation of DHS imply that the U.S. war in Afghanistan was a success.

From the four success criteria framed, the U.S. gains in the war in Afghanistan could be empirically gauged. The defeat of Al-Qaeda central, the elimination of terrorist incidents globally and within Afghanistan, and the viability of DHS stand as U.S. successes. However, the Taliban, which the U.S. removed from power 20 years ago, has resurged and now heads the government in Kabul after the U.S. withdrawal. Hence, in terms of the objective of permanently removing the Taliban from power in Afghanistan,

this outcome is a failure. The failure, however, may be mitigated if over time the Taliban upholds its pledges of Doha Peace Agreement to prevent the use of Afghanistan as a base from which terrorists can launch attacks against the United States or its allies. Hence, if all the success criteria of the research are viewed together and rated as either negligible, partial, reasonable, or phenomenal, the U.S war in Afghanistan can be termed as a “reasonable success.”

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