

The 9/11 Wars Are Over

Charting the best way forward

by Maj Michael Anderson

The 9/11 wars are over. It is time to stop using 9/11 as a call to arms. The United States has entered a new era of a persistent engagement with various violent extremist groups across the globe and a resurgence in growing state competitors, such as Russia and China. This is an era inherited from the 9/11 wars, otherwise referred to as the Global War on Terrorism. The al-Qaeda of 9/11 has ceased to exist in its previous form and the war with Saddam's Iraq ended with a sovereign Iraq and withdrawal of U.S. troops, leaving the authorizations for use of military force for the 9/11 wars overused. The "forever war" against the Taliban, the first expansion to a non-specified enemy from the post-9/11 congressionally approved Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF), is ending. A new, different threat environment has emerged, requiring new or adjusted authorizations. It is important for the Nation and its military to fully understand the environment they are in to determine the best way forward in this new era and to recognize that the 9/11 wars are concluded and that the Nation is engaged in a new set of wars.

Al-Qaeda Transition and Bin Laden's Death

With Osama Bin Laden's death on 2 May 2011, many concluded this was the end of the al-Qaeda of 9/11, the specified enemy in the original post-9/11 AUMF. In actuality, the al-Qaeda that perpetrated the 9/11 attacks and instigated the 9/11 wars (Global War on Terrorism) already felt its death knell circa 2009 after a steady decline starting in 2004. Bin Laden's death in 2011 simply put a new face to the replacement,

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a changing al-Qaeda after the decline and end of the core, original al-Qaeda.

Between 2004 and 2009, the al-Qaeda base in Pakistan contributed to only 6 of the 21 most serious plots against the West. A report by British terrorism expert Paul Cruickshank found the other fifteen were from affiliated groups without training or direction from the core group, or from independent terrorist groups and homegrown radicalized terrorism.¹ Another study found three of twenty plots, specifically two of six planned against the United States, came from affiliate offshoots—not from the core who planned and orchestrated 9/11. In comparison to the plans prior to 2009, these plots lacked the vision, depth, and audacity in scope the traditional al-Qaeda had provided to the 9/11 and previous international terror plots.² Prior to the decline and transition to more affiliate or inspired copy-cats, the core al-Qaeda group from 2001 to 2005 planned and conducted successful attacks in the United States, Bali, Madrid, and London—demonstrating a different approach, focus, and capability.³ In fact, the failed 2009 New York subway plot seemed to be one of the last core al-Qaeda internationally planned events. Two other plots were also planned and foiled for attacks in Britain and Norway.

Starting in 2009, al-Qaeda accelerated its shift to the new strategy of the

local fight, focusing on de-centralized, affiliate-style perpetrators; in 2011 with Bin Laden's death, legitimately shifted to a new "face" with the loss of its iconic figurehead.⁴ Whatever the cause was for this shift, whether it was natural evolution of the organization or if it was because of the external pressure on al-Qaeda post-9/11, the organization fundamentally altered its methods and structure.

Bin Laden's death affected three critical features of al-Qaeda as a global organization:

Its legitimacy as a core organization capable of choreographing catastrophic global terrorist events ... Its ability to claim that it was the base for certain victory ... [and] a credible unfettered training area for global jihad—on the area most critical to its own mystical lore: Afghanistan and western Pakistan.⁵

Aside from the damage his death caused the global organization, more than anything it damaged the core—the "brand name."⁶

Further emphasizing the disconnect between direct core al-Qaeda control and independence of associated affiliates was that after Bin Laden's death, there were increased occurrences of the organization ignoring the ideological background of those they were aligning with—namely the increased involvement in the transatlantic drug trade.⁷

The new al-Qaeda shifted funding from donations largely garnered by Bin Laden's notoriety and message of jihad to illicit drug trade, kidnapping, and international financial system loopholes. These efforts are largely overseen and managed by affiliates for self-sustainability and less for a global group support managed by the core as had been done previously and for 9/11.⁸ In contrast, Bin Laden's 9/11 al-Qaeda core had less affiliates and centrally managed majority of funding, forcing the few affiliates to fall in line with the direction of the core. Even so, some groups such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's affiliated al-Qaeda in Iraq (later to become the Islamic State) started giving Bin Laden pushback as early as 2006, revealing the decline of the centralized 9/11 al-Qaeda.⁹

The affiliates, of course, shared views and inspiration from the traditional al-Qaeda of 9/11, but there is no clear evidence of Bin Laden's al-Qaeda leadership directly influencing and planning the affiliates operational actions or support.¹⁰ This undercuts the idea of the elusive mastermind or puppeteer, and more like a role model and later a martyr. A study by the Institute for Peace and Conflict stated,

Al Qaeda of bin Laden, once an organized structure with set endgames and long term plans has been replaced with al-Zawahiri's al Qaeda: one that is fractured, has short-term goals, and riddled with communication issues.

It goes on to argue the difference between the two leaderships and their inherently effected organizations is a result of "the nature and political climate they had to operate in."¹¹ Al-Qaeda post-Bin Laden has become steadily more decentralized, more of an inspirational, advisory model for the increasingly more independently funded affiliates and independent, like-minded terrorist organizations.¹²

End of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and withdrawal of Operation NEW DAWN in 2011

Though tenuously connected even at the time of its instigation, the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, later christened Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, was included

under the umbrella of the Global War on Terrorism as a result of 9/11. Although it did have a separate authorization for use of military force provided by Congress, it was initially presented as a continuation, or broadening, of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM—the 9/11 war that was ongoing in Afghanistan.

As the Iraq war dragged on, feeding off of the 2006–2007 "surge" in Iraq coupled with the aligning of the Sunni Awakening, negotiations paved the way for the U.S. military withdrawal. These negotiations ended with the Strategic Framework Agreement and the partner security agreement, outlining the future conduct of American military in Iraq and a timeline for the gradual withdrawal.¹³ The security agreement, meant to be a broad baseline for the U.S. military withdrawal, remained the final agreement between the United States and Iraq when subsequent negotiations failed to achieve consensus.¹⁴ This lengthy process eventually led to the final transition from Operation IRAQI FREEDOM to Operation NEW DAWN in January 2010, which oversaw the final withdrawal of U.S. troops the following year.

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On 31 December 2011, Operation NEW DAWN ended, leaving the only U.S. military residual presence supporting the embassy-based Office of Security Cooperation and normal, albeit robust, defense attaché team for the routine interaction of the Department of State and DOD with the Iraqi government.¹⁶ All eyes were on Iraq after the U.S. military departed with so much blood and treasure poured into the nation. After the American forces departed, violence remained at levels similar to those of the preceding, last three years of the American presence,

hovering around 4,000 civilian deaths a year.¹⁷

The violence in Iraq had largely stabilized and with multiple successful elections, the government had established its sovereignty. According to an NPR report in April 2011, the residual murder-violence rate in Iraq was on par with that of Brazil or Mexico and less than Colombia or Venezuela—by multiples. The American occupation and Iraqi government had established and supported a full government of services, regular elections, and a ratified constitution.¹⁸

By the last troop departure in 2011, the Iraq War had ended. Iraq was now a sovereign nation, standing on its own, making its own decisions, for good or bad. Continued U.S. presence arguably would be nothing more than a crutch for a nation that needed to learn how to manage its own affairs.

Operation ENDURING FREEDOM-PHILIPPINES Conclusion in 2014

The impetus for America's expansion of the 9/11 response to the Philippines was by invitation to help them deal with their extremist threats and terrorist groups in the Philippines hiding Ramzi Yousef and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the 1993 World Trade Center bomber and the main planner of the 9/11 attacks in 1994 and 1995, respectfully.¹⁹

The initial involvement of the United States in the Philippines revolved around the hunt for Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) affiliated with al-Qaeda terrorists who had kidnapped two U.S. citizens, a missionary couple. Additionally, beyond ASG an Indonesian jihadist group, Jemaah Islamiyah, was on the hit list as well. Starting in February 2002 and lasting fourteen years until 2016, what became known as Operation ENDURING FREEDOM-PHILIPPINES (OEF-P) remains little known successful theater of the 9/11 wars. Originally named Operation FREEDOM EAGLE before being consolidated under ENDURING FREEDOM banner, the initial deployment was under the guise of a regular occurring U.S.-Philippines joint training exercise called Operation BALIKATAN 02-1. This joint exercise was the peak



The Marine Corps has a long-standing partnership with the Philippine Marines. (Photo by Cpl Tyler Giguere.)

of U.S. involvement, totaling 1,300 personnel who provided assistance, advice, and supported both training and air support. Of the total personnel involved, 160 came from special operations forces—largely U.S. Army Special Forces—along with Civil Affairs, Psychological Operations and limited number of U.S. Navy SEALs and Marine special operations.

Because of socio-political sensitivities, the Philippines authorized only six hundred Americans in the operational area at any given time. After the first six months and the completion of that mission, resulting in the liberation of one hostage (the husband died during the rescue attempt) and successful targeting of ASG leadership, OEF-P's mission evolved to building Philippine forces' self-sufficiency. The new mission was based on building competency within the Philippine forces for internal defense with the mission balancing out around 500–600 troops. This transition being the residual 500–600 coming from special operations forces remaining under a new Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P). During the entire period, the Philippine government and local forces took the lead, with the American troops providing advice and assistance but not partaking in any combat missions or direct action. However slow, this process successfully

built the Philippine forces up to conduct independent missions and kept the United States from taking the reins and relegating the Philippine forces to the background as was largely done in Iraq and Afghanistan. This overriding effort in the long run served as a forcing function to make the Philippine troops improve as they could not use the United States military as a crutch.²⁰ U.S. special operations leadership along with the Philippine leadership agreed that the Zamboanga siege response by the Philippine forces validated the final phases of the gradual withdrawal of the JSOTF-P, showing the Philippine forces capable of planning and executing a complex joint mission in a challenging, urban environment on short notice.²¹

The Philippines response and handling of the Zamboanga crisis served as the culmination of OEF-P. In October 2013, rogue members of the Moro National Liberation Front broke away from their base during ongoing negotiations with the Philippine government and seized the city of Zamboanga, starting with twenty hostages and soon growing to taking two hundred. Within the day, the Philippine government sealed off the city, both land and sea, and over the course of a week fought through the city, killing over 180 rebels. In totality, the siege lasted 28 days, with more rebels surrendering as they took casualties.

Philippine military and police suffered casualties as well, with over a 100,000 left homeless from the fighting.²² During the crisis, Americans supported the Philippines with planning and advice, but no involvement beyond that as a result of the involvement of the Moro National Liberation Front and not the ASG or Jemaah Islamiyah, which were the only two international extremist groups the operation authorized U.S. direct support to Philippine response.²³

When JSOTF-P's withdrawal effectively ended OEF-P, the international terrorist presence in the Philippines had declined, shown by three factors reported in the RAND study on effectiveness of OEF-P. Enemy initiated attacks declined up to 56 percent between 2000 and 2012 in the ASG's primary operating areas. Estimated membership declined for ASG, the primary targeted group, from high of 2,200 members to 400. Independent polling data indicated decreased public support for the ASG declining from 8 percent to less than 3 percent coupled with an increase in positive views from 51 percent to 63 percent of the Philippine government's forces.²⁴ After 9/11 wars, new threats evolved.

Islamic State Emergence from al-Qaeda in Iraq

Although the Islamic State (IS) came from al-Qaeda in Iraq, itself an al-Qaeda offshoot, IS remained a distinct entity. In scope (financing, ideology, and tactics), IS stood apart from al-Qaeda. IS is not al-Qaeda and is not the protégé or standard-bearer for the organization that conducted the 9/11 attacks. It is distinct and fundamentally different, even though it acted as an affiliate to al-Qaeda during the height of the Iraq war (2004–2007).

What was once al-Qaeda in Iraq, then renamed the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in October 2006, broke with al-Qaeda officially in February 2014 over disputes about its spread into Syria. Al-Qaeda, now under al-Zawahiri after Bin Laden's death, attempted to divide the affiliates between al-Nusrah in Syria and ISI focused in Iraq. Al-Baghdadi, leader of ISI, ignored him and continued operations in Syria, resulting in

Zawahiri disowning the organization. Al-Qaeda's al Nursah forces now joined other anti-ISI groups combating the newly renamed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), later to become ISIL and then settle on just Islamic State.²⁵

The Islamic State's financial plan focused on raising money through local means, pillaging, black markets sales, taxation, and robbery, in contrast to how al-Qaeda focuses on its funding through international donations.²⁶ The tactics used by the Islamic State to establish itself in a new area were consistent: small cells would infiltrate an area, conduct an assassination campaign to foster deep social antagonism and delegitimize the government, and finally establish intimidation over the population before attempting complete control of the area. The manufacturing of chaos is how the Islamic State made itself a legitimate player in the region, a technique its affiliate offshoots adopted in places such as North Africa and Asia.²⁷

The Islamic State ideology, inspired by the teachings of Abu Bakr Naji and his "management of savagery," is that out of chaos comes the just rule of the caliphate. The Islamic State's own hyper-obsession with territory contrasted sharply with al-Qaeda's global, transnational organization. While al-Qaeda attempted to co-opt other groups into working with al-Qaeda, the Islamic State either absorbed them into their own or fought them. In the Islamic State world view, you were either with them or against them. This was in direct contradiction to Bin Laden's al-Qaeda, who preferred to be "guests" in other lands, such as guests of the Taliban and earlier guests of Sudan and Saudi Arabia. The Islamic State preferred to conquer, control, and hold territory directly under their banner.²⁸ While the Islamic State and the various other violent extremist groups scattered around the disaffected areas of the globe are threats, they are not the threats of 9/11 but something new and different.

The War with the Taliban

The original post-9/11 authorization for military action was directed at al-Qaeda as the perpetrators of the terrorist

attacks; however, the Taliban's intransigence in handing over Bin Laden and his group resulted in the Taliban being the first expansion of opponents from within the specified named enemies in the congressionally approved authorization for force. Although the war in Afghanistan did not start with the Taliban, had the Taliban turned over Bin Laden there would have been no war with the Taliban; over time it evolved to be largely a contest between the United States and NATO against the Taliban.

Regardless of how the al-Qaeda targeted authorization was used to justify the prolonged conflict against the Taliban in Afghanistan, even that war has come to an end. Signed on 29 February 2020, the "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan" between the United States and the Taliban agreed to Afghanistan not harboring terrorists, a ceasefire between the United States and Taliban, and beginning of negotiations between internal Afghan groups for continued peace, and most importantly to this analysis, the complete withdrawal of foreign forces, namely the United States and its coalition.²⁹ Originally set for withdrawal by 1 May 2021 according to the agreement, the current administration of President Joe Biden shifted the date to 11 September, and then to 31 August. With the closure of the last major U.S. base at Bagram in early July, the war against the Taliban effectively ended for the United States.³⁰

The Overuse of the 9/11 War's Authorization for Use of Military Force

On 18 September 2001, Congress passed a joint resolution *Public Law 107-40 Authorization for the Use of Military Force*. The text reads in part,

the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or harbored such organizations or persons,

providing the legal context for the emerging 9/11 war against al-Qaeda worldwide and the Taliban in Afghanistan. This Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) has been broadly applied since the war against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Africa, and Philippines

and the Taliban in Afghanistan began in the first years after 9/11 and later Yemen. It now is used to legitimize support against most notably the Islamic State but additionally against a myriad of other terrorist organizations across North, Northwest, and East Africa; through the islands of the Pacific; and Syria and the broader Middle East—all somehow tied to "nations, organizations, or persons ... planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001." This broad application possibly falls under the second half of the AUMF stating the use of force against those nations, organizations, or persons associated with the 9/11 attacks is "in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States," except it finishes with, "by such nations, organizations or persons." Many of these currently targeted groups were not affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Taliban on 9/11, some existing before with no connections, others not even in existence until afterward. As demonstrated, even the Islamic State, which is arguably the most violent extremist group, is a stretch to connect directly to 9/11. To hold the Islamic State accountable as an organization or persons responsible for the 9/11 attacks, although arguably a morphed descendant of an al-Qaeda offshoot, would be like holding Turkey or Bulgaria responsible for specific actions of the Ottoman Empire—from which they came. Although a nuanced argument, when a democracy goes to war it should be under very specific direction.

In comparison, the congressional joint resolution, *Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002* made into *Public Law 107-243* on 16 October 2002, provided a very specific and lengthy Iraq AUMF. The key authorization stated,

The President is authorized to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate in order to- (1) defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq; and (2) enforce all relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding Iraq.

This resolution for what would be the second campaign of the Global War on Terrorism clearly identified the target and the scope of the use of military force. The 2003 invasion and the resultant 2011 withdrawal definitively marked the beginning and end of this AUMF, to such an extent that the campaign against Islamic State in Iraq years later fell under the original September 2001 AUMF since it was such broadly written.

A new or adjusted AUMF, or multiple AUMFs, pertaining to the broader conflicts of the post-9/11 wars provide a distinct benefit to the United States, in that it focuses the national efforts, clarifies the message both domestic and foreign audiences, and provides a better governmental and professional military framework for action. Without a congressional challenge, there is nothing inherently incorrect in a broad application of a specifically congressionally approved AUMF within a democratic system. However, appropriately adjusting the AUMF provides improved ability for practitioners to narrow their efforts and for continual public discourse on this new era of persistent conflict with various, evolving, and morphing violent extremist groups and threats. The Biden administration supports a congressional replacement of the post-9/11 AUMFs as well with more appropriate frameworks. This effort supports increased congressional involvement in deciding and regulating America's current and future military actions.³¹

With the end of the 9/11 wars there is a shifting paradigm in our global engagement. The proliferation of violent extremist organizations and emergent state competitors still require a U.S. response—however, one more appropriately guided by a new or adjusted authorization for use of military force. As the measure for congressional approval for the President to take military action, a more directed AUMF better guides the military and national leaders while providing public debate on the use of force on behalf of the people.

Notes

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