Arabinda Acharya. **Ten Years After 9/11: Rethinking the Jihadist Threat**.New York: Routledge, 2013 & Abdel Bari Atwan. **After bin Laden: Al-Qaeda, the Next Generation**.New York: The New Press, 2012

Reviewed by David Hensel

In February 2011, then-Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi attempted to blame the growing rebellion against his regime on Al-Qaeda, charging that its operatives had incited Libyan youths by putting hallucinogens in their milk and Nescafe. While Al- Qaeda leaders may have preferred to have a more dashing tactic ascribed to them than drugging teenagers' coffee, they no doubt wished that their influence had been such a central cause of the uprisings against authoritarian governments throughout the Middle East and North Africa – what came to be known as the Arab Spring. Most observers and analysts agree that jihadist organisations had little to do with fomenting the initial populist revolts of the Arab Spring or Awakening (which initially were led by liberal-secular youth and/or economically-deprived sectors of society). Yet this dramatic shift in the Muslim world's sociopolitical landscape created a pivotal moment with existential implications for Al-Qaeda and its associated movements (AQAM). In two recently published books, Arabinda Acharya and Abdel Bari Atwan assess the current state and future prospects of AQAM in light of these eventful times (which have included the killing of Osama bin Laden by the US military), as well as conducting reviews of AQAM's organisational evolution and international counterterrorism efforts. While the two authors' analyses overlap in many areas, their conclusions differ in important ways.

Arabinda Acharya, a research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, has written a wide-ranging assessment of the global jihadist movement and international attempts to combat it since the attacks on New York and Washington, DC, on 11 September 2001. He begins by outlining how the interplay between terrorism and counterterrorism during this period resulted in a "globalization of violence" that has grown to define much of the international security environment. After describing the organisational, strategic, and tactical characteristics of the modern jihadist movement, Acharya provides a conceptual and practical critique of the "global war on terror" before exploring a number of ideas about how conflict between the international community and AQAM might end. In short, Acharya argues that, although attempts to counter the jihadist threat have suffered many setbacks since 2001, AQAM is under significant stress. Successful counterterrorist operations have taken a toll on the movement's leadership and organisation, and too many instances of indiscriminate violence by its operatives have led to internal dissention and loss of public support. Acharya suggests that the Arab Spring has strong potential to undermine jihadist credibility by demonstrating that political change is possible through non-violent means, and he asserts that international efforts at combating terrorism are back on track and beginning to yield positive outcomes.

Abdel Bari Atwan is editor-in-chief of the London-based, pan-Arab newspaper *Al Quds al-Arabi*. He personally interviewed Osama bin Laden in the late 1990s, and has maintained access to sources within the jihadist community over the last fifteen years. Atwan's latest book is a very accessible (though sometimes personally colored) overview of AQAM, including an account of the movement's development over time, an assessment of the impact of Osama bin Laden's death and ongoing counterterrorist activities against it, and an appraisal of the challenges and opportunities that the Arab Spring presents for jihadists. Atwan argues that post-bin Laden AQAM is "stronger and more widespread than ever," having evolved into a decentralized movement that is highly capable of resisting government attempts to quash it (Atwan, p. 13). It is sustained by a new generation of members who are even more radical and ruthless than their forbears, and who are motivated by grievances that they perceive to be undiminished. According to Atwan, rather than discrediting the jihadist movement, the unfolding Arab Spring has provided AQAM with opportunities for expansion by taking advantage of a strong Islamist preference among the people of the Arab world and by creating security vacuums that have enabled AQAM elements to acquire armament and safe haven territory. While a pragmatic AQAM may moderate somewhat and even enter the political process in areas where Islamists are likely to ascend to power, Western interference or political disappointment in transitioning Arab Spring countries could validate the jihadist worldview and stoke greater radicalism and public support for AQAM.

Evolution and Survivability of AQAM

The evolution of Al-Qaeda over the years from a relatively small, centralized cadre of operatives working under the direct supervision of Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants to today's far-flung family of affiliates, associates, allies, and inspired followers is, by now, a familiar subject, and Acharya and Atwan give considerable treatment to this topic. Both authors note this transformation into a decentralized network, unified as much by ideology as by coordination, as a major achievement that has enabled the Al-Qaeda movement's survival, despite significant attrition at the hands of international counterterrorism forces. This diffusion of AQAM's organisational structure meant that, by the time of his death, Osama bin Laden's role in the organisation was more as a figurehead than as an operational commander; therefore, rather than being a crippling blow, "bin Laden's 'martyrdom' enhances his legend and has immortalized him as an icon, a role model and a rallying point for *jihad*" (Atwan, p. 13).

In his description of the "construction of the adversary," Acharya outlines the characteristics that have contributed to AQAM's growth and resilience over the last decade, emphasizing a organisational flexibility and a unifying ideology of religious absolutism in the face of perceived onslaught by the West and its allies. He highlights the debate among terrorism scholars over whether the jihadist movement has turned almost entirely to the "leaderless jihad" model described by Al-Qaeda ideologue Mustafa al-Suri, or whether Al-Qaeda's more traditional organisational structures have persisted, and still play an important role in facilitating successful

operations (Acharya, pp. 41-47). Acharya also discusses how AQAM has refined its tactics over time, such as expanding into the cyber domain, prioritizing economic targets, and increasing focus on maritime operations (pp. 66-79).

Atwan places even greater emphasis on AQAM's organisational history and development, dedicating much of his book to an explication of the process by which AQAM developed into a complex, dispersed-yet-interwoven organisation. He describes how Al-Qaeda leaders—Ayman al-Zawahiri, in particular—orchestrated the formation of a broad-based network of Al-Qaeda franchises, allies, and associated organisations ,based on tribal connections, intermarriage, operational and logistical collaboration, and shared ideology. He likens the movement that resulted from this process to a mature tree, explaining that "[t]he problem for those prosecuting the 'war on terror' is that cutting off a branch (even big branches like bin Laden…) does little to weaken the roots which are nurtured by a fertile mix of grievances and aspirations" (Atwan, pp. 14-15). Atwan dedicates chapters to detailing the development of several major Al-Qaeda affiliate and ally relationships—Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Somalia's al-Shabaab, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and both the Afghan and Pakistani Talibans —and he provides shorter overviews of several of what he claims are as many as forty Al-Qaeda-connected jihadist groups (p. 212).

Despite the expenditure of more than a trillion dollars on counterterrorism efforts by the United States and its allies, Atwan argues that "the 'war on terror' has failed" (p. 32). He credits AQAM's survival in the face of such determined efforts to destroy it to several causes. First, the size, complexity, and dispersion of the network make it very difficult to target in a strategically debilitating way. Most elements of AQAM have adopted horizontal leadership structures with established succession plans that enable them to weather the loss of key leaders, thus rendering ineffective the popular counterterrorism approach of "decapitation." Second, the jihadists apply the ancient Islamic concept of *hijra* (flight or migration), switching battlefields or going into hiding when they believe they cannot prevail and biding their time to re-engage their enemy when they have an advantage. Third, AQAM effectively have incorporated surprise into their operations, whether in their pioneering use of simultaneous suicide bombings or their increasing success at recruitment from unexpected populations (such as affluent segments of society or native-born citizens of Western countries). Fourth, AQAM have greatly improved their intelligence collection capabilities over the years, colluding with or infiltrating law enforcement agencies in many Muslim countries (pp. 32-35). Finally, AQAM have become highly proficient at navigating the "digital battleground," using the Internet to conduct clandestine communications, to recruit new adherents, and even to conduct cyber-attacks (pp. 238-239).

Another key element of Atwan's assessment of today's AQAM is the rise of what he terms the "next generation" of jihadists. These younger militants are less interested in Islamic scholarship, are technologically savvy, are more likely to include natives of Western countries, and have

benefited from the lessons learned over more than a decade of direct confrontation with the West. Perhaps most significantly, Atwan claims that the "new generation" tends to be more uncompromising and ruthless than their predecessors (a trait that has been recognized and commented upon by some senior members of AQAM as well) (pp. 263-264).

Criticising the War on Terror

Acharya and Atwan agree that, while the so-called global war on terror has achieved some success at causing attrition within the ranks of AQAM, in many ways the conduct of the war has been counterproductive, playing into the hands of jihadists by perpetuating the grievances that constitute much of their *raison d'etre* and basis for recruitment. Civilian casualties resulting from drone strikes, perceived human rights abuses, crimes committed by "rogue soldiers," and ongoing military incursions into Muslim countries have fueled discontent within the Muslim community, generating sympathy for the jihadist cause and eroding the standing of the US and its allies.

Acharya takes a deeper look at the consequences of the ways in which the US and its allies conducted the war on terror, reviewing a number of practical and conceptual debates surrounding the topic. Acknowledging that a military response to jihadist attacks is a necessary component of counterterrorism strategy, he argues that these responses have been out of balance, and that over-militarization of attempts to combat terrorism (especially in the years immediately after 9/11) prevented the US and its allies from correctly identifying the need to address the grievances of the Muslim world in order to undermine support for the jihadist agenda and achieve a long-term solution to the conflict (Acharya, pp. 83-85). Acharya goes on to examine the societal impacts of declaring a "war on terror" and analyzes US strategy in light of just war theory. He concludes that escalating the fight against jihadists to the level of a "war" and adopting policies such as "preemption" unnecessarily raised the stakes of the struggle and had negative domestic consequences for Western societies, hurt relations between Muslims and the West, and weakened the overall international legal system (Acharya, pp. 85-94).

The Future of AQAM

Acharya and Atwan part ways in their predictions regarding the future of AQAM. Acharya takes the position that "there is no reason to believe that the jihadist movement will be a long or generational conflict...our fight against the jihadist threat appears to be on track as it begins to yield results, and we are increasingly getting back in control" (Acharya, p. xi). Atwan, on the other hand, commenting on the state of post-bin Laden AQAM, notes that "optimistic voices have fallen silent as the terror group and its allies return to the headlines, seemingly able to fight on several fronts at once and launch serial 'spectaculars' whilst posing a continual threat to the West" (Atwan, p. 257). The two authors differ in their assessments of the effectiveness of

counterterrorist efforts to dismantle the AQAM network, the significance of internal dissention within the jihadist movement, and the likely impact that the Arab Spring will have on AQAM's status within the Muslim community. It is in these central elements that weaknesses in their arguments, and signs of possible arbitrariness, begin to appear.

Effectiveness of Counterterrorism Efforts

In support of his positively toned central thesis, Acharya asserts that "the jihadist movement itself is now under severe strain due to loss of organisation [and] decapitation of its leadership..." (Acharya, p. xi). As summarised above, however, he dedicates much space in his book to describing the ways in which the jihadist movement has evolved in ways that make it resilient and adaptive. In his chapter entitled "Ten Years After: Bringing the Conflict to an End," Acharya fails to demonstrate that, despite the contrary evidence he himself presented in his earlier description of AQAM, international counterterrorism efforts have put AQAM up against the ropes. He points out, probably correctly, that many senior AQAM leaders have been killed or captured, that Al-Qaeda elements have greater difficulty performing operational and logistical functions, that they have failed to execute attacks on the scale of 9/11, and that a large number of planned attacks have been thwarted or resulted in failed attempts. In linking these factors to an argument that the Al-Qaeda network is fundamentally weak, however, Acharya relies largely on public statements made by American officials, including President Obama, but not on facts on the ground. (pp. 105-106).

To his credit, Acharya also offers a strong counter-argument to his own thesis, noting that "despite military attrition, the jihadist enterprise...has proved resilient" (p. 106). He goes on to cite an overall increase in the quantity of terrorist attacks around the world, continued recruitment gains, and worsening public perceptions of the war on terror within both Muslim and non-Muslim populations (pp. 106-107). In the end, it seems as though Acharya's commitment to intellectual balance ends up undermining his ability to defend his own position. Based on the strength of his argumentation, at least, wishful thinking appears to have played a role in his selection of an overall conclusion.

As discussed above, Atwan flatly rejects the notion that the West's counterterrorism efforts have been able to cripple the Al-Qaeda movement. He perceives that "AQAM seemingly has the resources to maintain a relentless onslaught..." (Atwan, p. 18). Rather than being marginalized and on the run, "Al-Qaeda remains deeply entrenched around the globe...[and] AQAM is an unprecedented phenomenon: a terror organisation with the clout—and many of the resources—of a state actor" (p. 267). His statements may be too strongly worded, however, considering the limited success that AQAM has had since 2001 in conducting attacks against its number one "far" enemy, the United States. At the same time, Atwan's position is in keeping with his arguments that AQAM have contributed to disappointing political and military outcomes for the

US in Iraq and Afghanistan, that they continue to expand through productive recruitment, and are stepping up their activities against the "near" enemies of Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes in the wake of the Arab Spring's instability.

Dissention within the Jihadist Movement

Acharya devotes his concluding chapter to highlighting what he believes is AQAM's greatest vulnerability: internal disagreement within the jihadist movement, and the related problem of dwindling support among the Muslim public. Referencing the widely publicized documents captured by the US military during the raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan, that resulted in Osama bin Laden's death in May 2011, Acharya describes the growing friction between core Al-Qaeda leaders and the leadership of key affiliates and allies. The captured documents reveal that bin Laden and some of his senior lieutenants were frustrated by the actions of groups such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), AQAP, AQIM, al-Shabaab, and the Pakistani Taliban. Due to lack of operational discipline and, most importantly, a growing number of attacks that killed Muslim civilians, Al-Qaeda leaders worried that these satellite organisations were becoming liabilities to the overall movement, sullying the Al-Qaeda name and turning the Muslim community against it. A number of prominent Muslim clerics, including ones typically known to be sympathetic to the jihadist agenda, also have publicly denounced AQAM's excessively violent activities. Acharya reinforces this argument by citing a number of polls conducted by respected research organisations that demonstrate waning support for radical Islam and widespread opposition to jihadist tactics within majority-Muslim populations (Acharya, pp. 121-125).

Interestingly, Atwan seems to shrug off the well-documented dissention within AQAM's ranks. He briefly acknowledges it in his book, but does not identify it as a significant risk to the stability or longevity of the jihadist movement. Atwan mentions concerns within AQAM that the name "Al-Qaeda" may have gained some negative connotations over the years, but he portrays this as a mere branding challenge, rather than as a major threat to the movement (Atwan, pp. 261-262). Rather than discussing polls - such as the ones cited by Acharya - that reveal weaknesses in Muslim popular support for jihadists, he sticks to referencing polls that show growing antagonism towards the West, insisting that, across the Muslim world, there is a resurgent Islamist movement and a growing emphasis on the notion of a unified Muslim *umma* (community) (Atwan, p. 261). In light of Atwan's puzzling decision not even to offer a counter-argument to well-known information suggesting a weakening of AQAM's influence and popular support, it is hard not to suspect him of selective use of evidence.

Impact of the Arab Spring on AQAM

The Arab Spring's uprisings against authoritarian rulers throughout the Middle East and North Africa apparently caught jihadists by surprise. The popular revolts threaten to undermine the

appeal and validity of AQAM's ideology by demonstrating to the Muslim community that there is an effective path to social and political change by means other than violent *jihad*. It already is clear, however, that the democratic transitions envisioned by early protestors did not go as they originally had hoped. Unrest in Libya and Syria quickly degenerated into protracted civil war; the rebellions in Bahrain and Yemen were suppressed with the tacit or active support of the United States and Saudi Arabia; and even Egypt's and Tunisia's relatively peaceful political transitions have been characterized by conflict and frustration. The final outcomes of these tumultuous events have yet to be seen, but Acharya and Atwan present distinctly different views of the Arab Spring's implications for AQAM.

Though elements of AQAM had little, if any, involvement in instigating the initial Arab Spring revolts, it did not take long for many Al-Qaeda leaders to begin expressing solidarity with the protestors and attempting to take some form of credit for the overthrow of authoritarian regimes which they had for years designated as the "near" enemy, yet had been unable to unseat. Acharya sees this as the desperate action of a movement that realizes that it has been dealt a serious strategic setback. He believes that, even if Islamist governments wind up rising to power, they will not represent the same sort of uncompromising religious absolutism that drives jihadist ideology. While it is true that AQAM elements may benefit initially from the chaos and power vacuums created by the fall of strong state security apparatuses, and disappointment may breed further radicalization among the populace if democratic transitions fail, Acharya argues that, on balance, the Arab Spring will prove to be disadvantageous for the jihadist movement. When combined with growing disapproval of jihadist methods within the Muslim community, the Arab Spring's demonstration of possible alternatives to harsh jihadist prescriptions gives the people of the region more incentive to withhold their support from AQAM (Acharya, pp. 113 - 119).

Atwan considers the same range of possibilities for the Arab Spring's impact on AQAM with the addition of one: active jihadist participation in the political process. He predicts that Al-Qaeda eventually will form a political wing (probably under a different name), and, given the right circumstances, sees this as the most feasible way in which elements of AQAM might give up terrorist violence as their primary *modus operandi*. As mentioned earlier, Atwan is convinced that the majority of the Arab body politic has Islamist leanings, and therefore is inclined to elect parties with which a pragmatic AQAM might be willing to interact peacefully. This turn of events would only be possible, Atwan argues, if Arab countries are able to develop their own unique government system - free from outside interference. Therefore, he believes that integration of the jihadist movement into a peaceful political process is extremely unlikely, due to the fact that "the West seems unable to refrain from involvement with the region's efforts to reinvent itself" (Atwan, p. 260).

In the meantime, AQAM will continue to reap the benefits of the instability caused by the Arab Spring, capitalising on power vacuums in places like North Africa and Yemen to expand its

territorial control, establish operational bases and training camps, and procure weapons. Jihadists will insinuate themselves into ongoing resistance movements in places like Syria—if the conflict there is not resolved soon, which Atwan foresees as a novel replay of the Afghan-Soviet War of the 1980s in which the jihadist *mujahideen* end up fighting as proxies of the West (p. 258). AQAM also will stand by, ready to take advantage of opportunities for radicalization and recruitment of disillusioned Arabs who are angered by broken promises for democratic reform or by Western interference in Arab Spring political transitions.

Conclusion

Arabinda Acharya and Abdel Bari Atwan have written timely books that address a question that preoccupies policy-makers and analysts equally: what is the current state of the jihadist threat, and what are its prospects for the future? While the two authors agree in much of their analysis, they arrive at significantly different conclusions on some important points. Taken together, the two books provide a good overview of the range of current thinking on Al-Qaeda and its associated movements. Their points of disagreement, however, highlight the difficulty of assessing a complex, shadowy movement operating in a constantly changing global environment.

About the Reviewer: **David Hensel** *is an officer in the United States Army, currently studying international affairs at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.*