

Al-Qaida Networks

Al-Qaida's infamous 9/11 attacks drew the world's attention to – even its obsession with – its origins, development, and future plans.



“Al-Qa’ida and **associated networks** remained the greatest terrorist threat to the United States and its partners in 2007. It has reconstituted some of its pre-9/11 operational capabilities through the exploitation of Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), replacement of captured or killed operational lieutenants, and the restoration of some central control by its top leadership.”

U.S. State Dept (2008) *Country Reports on Terrorism 2007*.

What is Al-Qaida? Did the U.S. (e.g., CIA) enable in its creation?

Who were & now are its top leaders? What are their goals? What initial terror actions did they instigate?

How did Al-Qaida successfully carry out its 9/11 attacks on the U.S.?

What were Al-Qaida's initial organizational, functional, and social network structures? How have they evolved since 9/11?

Are the Islamic Maghreb and Yemen upcoming Al-Qaida franchises?

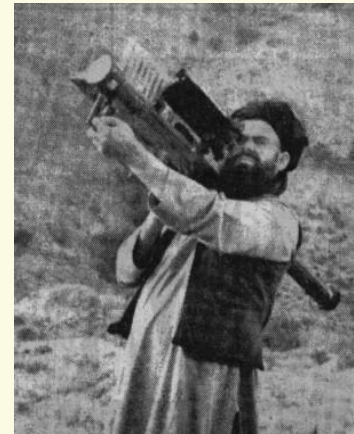
Soviet-Afghan War & the Taliban

Mujahideen resistance to Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1978-88) attracted Arab fighters. U.S. gave covert aid via Pakistan (see “Charlie Wilson’s War”).

Al-Qaida (“Base”) founded 1988 by Azzam, then led by Osama bin Laden. Ayman al-Zawahiri has now emerged as top strategic & operational planner.

After Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan plunged into civil war, until the Taliban (“Students”) took control in 1996. Led by Mullah Omar, most Taliban were ethnic Pashtun from southern Afghanistan and Pakistan’s Tribal Areas.

Omar instituted a severe form of *Sharia*, leading to 1997 revolt by Northern Alliance. OBL & A-Q were welcomed to Afghanistan after their eviction from Sudan in 1996.



Watch “Islamic Terrorism” about the ties between the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaida.

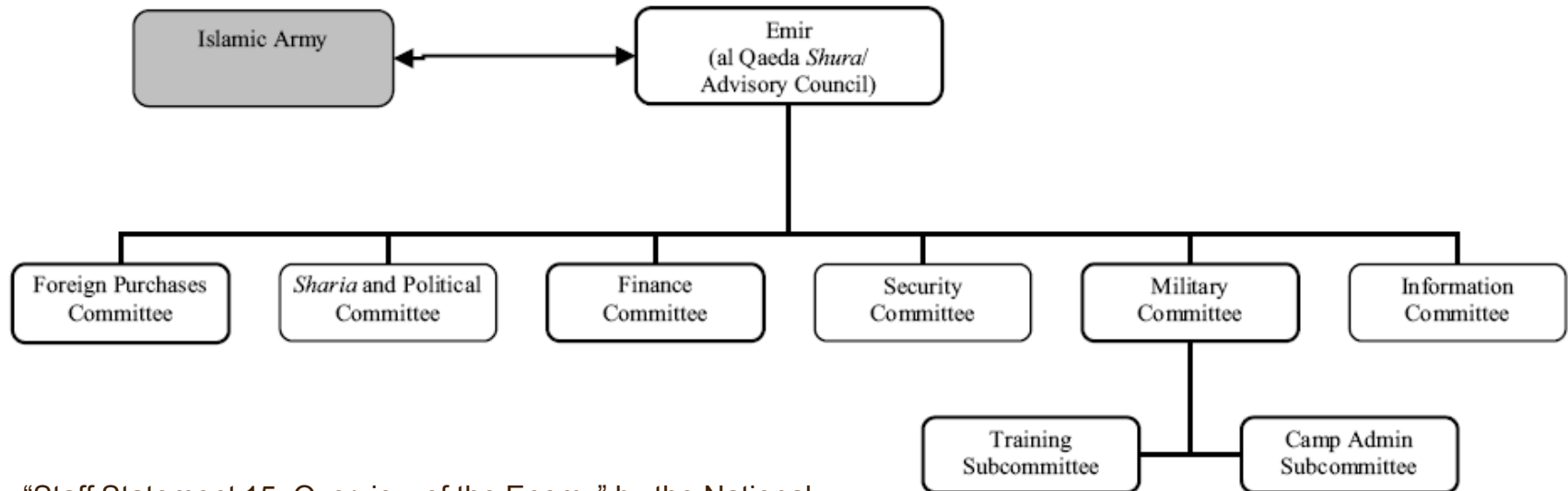
How did a safe haven in Afghanistan enable Al-Qaida to prepare its global jihad?

What was bin Laden’s main grievance, leading to a *fatwa* of jihad against the U.S.?

Which American targets did Al-Qaida hit in the years before 9/11?

Initial Organizational Structure

The National Commission depicted Al-Qaida's organizational structure as **functional committees**. An operation (e.g., *U.S. Cole* or 9/11) would be assigned to a “carefully selected clandestine cell, headed by a senior al Qaeda operative who reported personally to Bin Laden.”

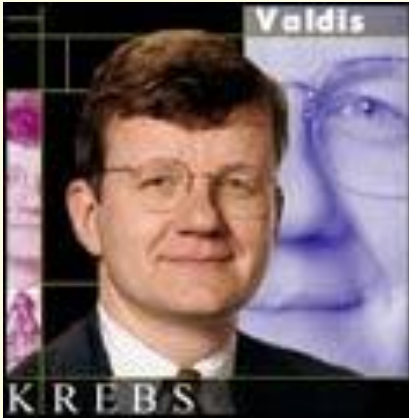


“Staff Statement 15: Overview of the Enemy” by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States.

“This organizational structure should **not** be read as defining a **hierarchical chain of command** for specific terrorist operations. It served as a means for coordinating functions and providing material support to operations.”

Connecting the 9/11 Dots

Shortly after 9/11, network consultant Valdis Krebs began to map the hijacker cells' network connections, using public newspaper reports.



“The 19 hijackers appeared to have come from a network that had formed while they were completing terrorist training in Afghanistan. Many were school chums from many years ago, some had lived together for years, & others were related by kinship ties. **Deep trusted ties**, that were not easily visible to outsiders, wove this terror network together.”

In hindsight, Krebs reported the CIA knew that two suspects with links to al-Qaida (Alhazmi and Almihdhar), living in Los Angeles since 1999, had been photographed at a meeting of known terrorists in Malaysia in January, 2000, before returning to L.A. Also attending the Malaysia meeting was one of the chief suspects (Khallad) in the subsequent *USS Cole* attack (October, 2000).

- **All 19 hijackers on 9/11 were within 2 steps of the two original suspects uncovered by the CIA in early 2000! (see next slide)**
- **Social network analysis reveals that Mohammed Atta *emerged* as the central node linking together the four hijacker cells**

Could network analysts have uncovered A-Q's plot before 9/11?

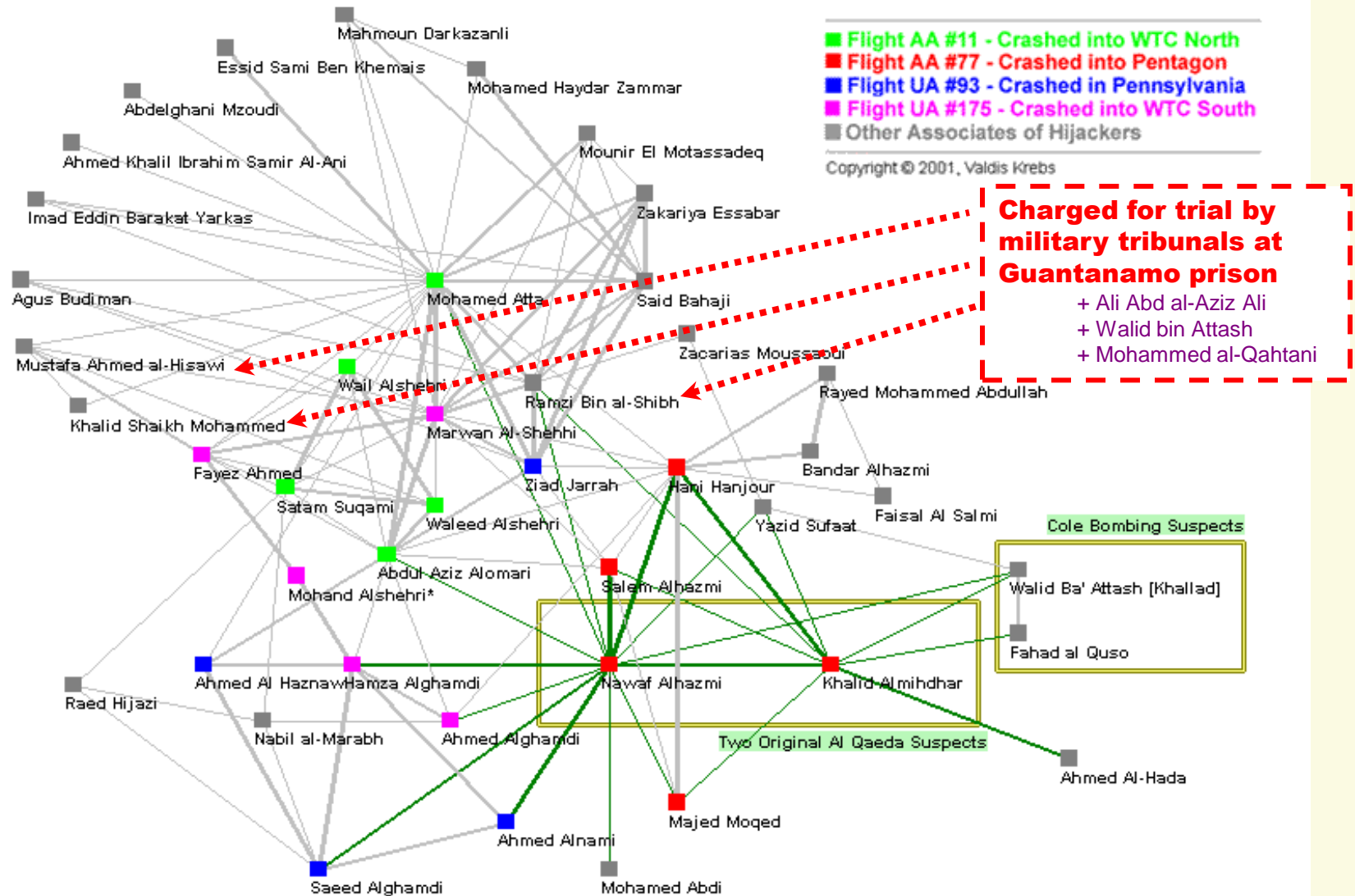


Figure 3 - All Nodes within 2 steps / degrees of original suspects

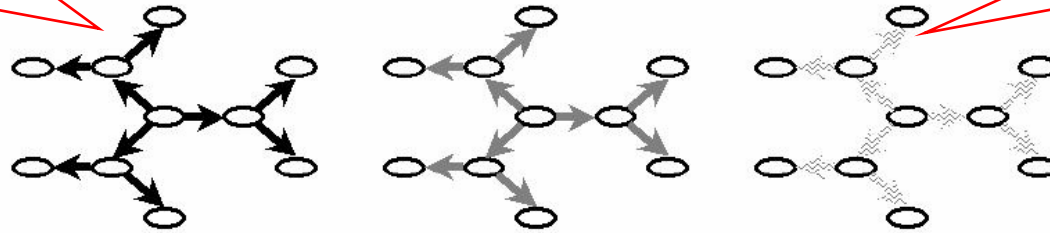
Tight & Loose Coupling

Brian Jackson analyzed command-and-control patterns of terrorist orgs. How did Al-Qaida evolve to meet new environmental challenges?

Authority (control or influence) occurs at strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Variation in authority relations yields 3 “canonical classes”:

Classical hierarchy:
Original Al-Qaida

Social movement:
Al-Qaida “franchise”



Tightly-Coupled Group

Coupled Network

Loosely-Coupled Movement

Extent of:

| | | | |
|---------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Strategic Control | ██████████ | ██████████ | ██████████ |
| Operational Control | ██████████ | ██████████ | ██████████ |
| Tactical Control | ██████████ | ██████████ | ██████████ |

Figure 3. Canonical classes of organizational command and control.

Where to Draw Al-Qaida's Boundary?

“You cannot clearly characterize Al Qaeda without clearly identifying ‘which Al Qaeda’ you are talking about. ... The right terminology will depend on what is considered inside and what considered outside the boundary of Al Qaeda.”

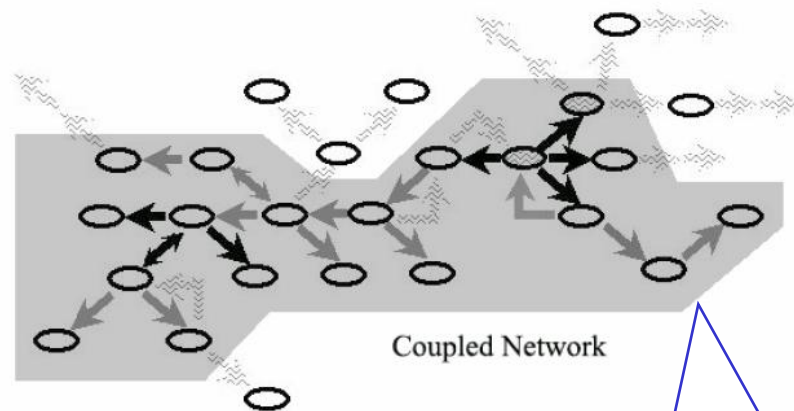


Figure 6. The boundary of a coupled network within a complex terminology organization. (Notes: As Figure 5, shaded area indicates boundary of coupled network—units connected by linkages allowing at least operational command or influence.)

Bounding the **coupled network** focuses on Al-Qaida's strategic and operational authority, ignoring its tactical units. CT payoff can come from info collected on “actual discussions of operations among pieces of an organization actually planning to carry them out.”

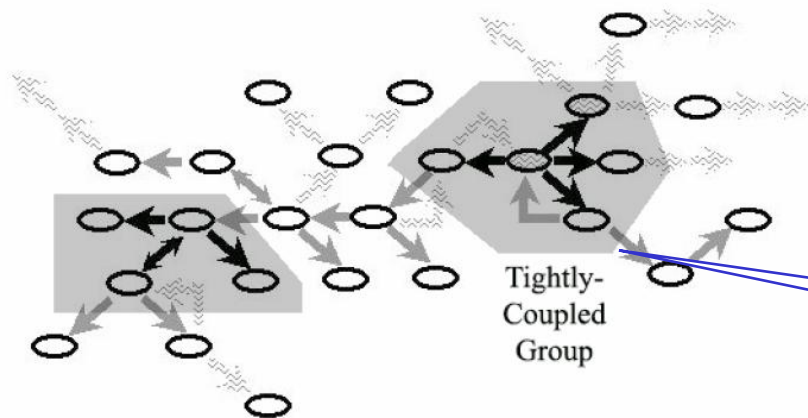


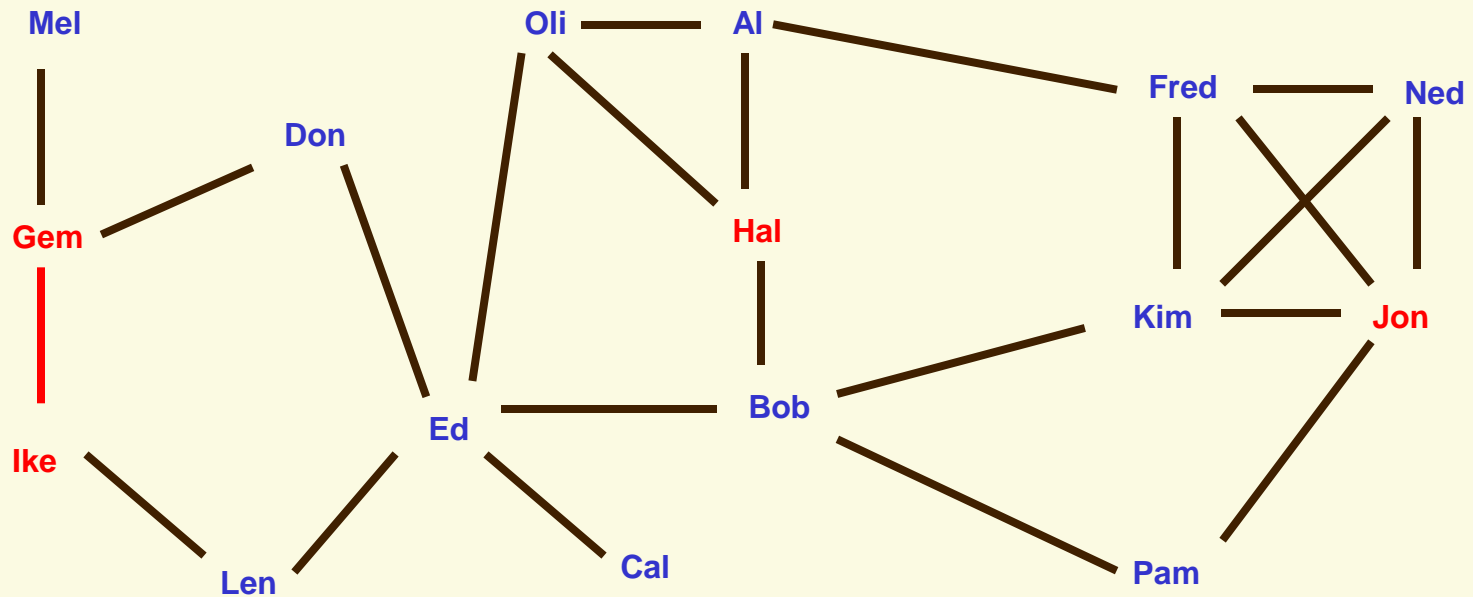
Figure 7. Two tightly coupled groups within a larger organization. (Notes: As Figure 5, shaded areas indicates boundary of tightly-coupled groups—units connected by linkages allowing command or influence at all levels.)

Penetration into A-Q's **tightly coupled groups** is most valuable, but is also the most difficult, “given the role of cultural, kinship, and other connections ...”

Breaking Al-Qaida Networks

Detecting terrorists before they strike is a difficult challenge – inferring larger network structures from incomplete information. Could social network analysis methods be applied to reveal possible hidden connections among actors?

This is a partial map showing known links (friends, kin, etc.) among **suspected terrorists** and **others** who are not believed to be involved in terror activities:



Students discuss in which two actors to invest surveillance resources that could have highest chance of finding **2-step links among terrorists**. Why?

HINTS: How many direct connections & friend-of-friend ties of each actor?

“Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb”

Gray & Stockham described how Algeria’s 50 years of terrorism culminated in Al-Qaida becoming deeply rooted in the Islamic Maghreb (5 North African nations).



1991-2002: Algeria’s secular government won a vicious civil war against Islamist rebel groups

2003: Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat swore allegiance to A-Q

2006: merged into A-Q in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), refocused on transnational jihadist goals; sent suicide bombers & fighters to Iraq War

Moroccans, Tunisians, Libyans likely to rally to AQIM

Is Yemen in southern Arabia becoming Al-Qaida’s next stronghold? A poor tribal nation facing a water crisis, Yemen’s failing state is dealing with two civil wars.

Al-Qaida in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) formed in 2009. After two suicide attacks in Yemen, it tried to kill the prince who heads Saudi Arabia’s internal security.

AQAP claimed that it trained the “underwear bomber,” a Nigerian who tried to blow up Northwestern #235 from Amsterdam to Detroit on Christmas Day 2009.

Should US aid to Yemen be followed by more active military presence inside that country?

