The Future of Al-Qaeda (5/22/18)

00:00:23	Danielle Hodes: Good evening and welcome. My name is Danielle Hodes, and I'm the manager of public programs here at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. It's my pleasure to welcome all of you to tonight's program. As always, I'd like to extend a special welcome to our museum members and those tuning in via our live web broadcast at 911memorial.org/live.
	Tonight's program has generously been supported by the Royal Norwegian Consulate, and it is my privilege to invite Ms. Harriet E. Berg, the Norwegian consul general, to say a few words and introduce tonight's speaker. We are thankful to both Ms. Berg and the consulate for their continued partnership and support.
00:01:01	We're also deeply grateful to the David Berg Foundation for their support of the museum's 2017-2018 public program season. Without further ado, please help me in welcoming Ms. Harriet E. Berg.
	(applause)
00:01:21	Harriet E. Berg: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much. We are very pleased to be here tonight, and for all of you coming to this very exciting conversation that we'll have between the executive vice president and deputy director for museum programs at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum here, Cliff Chanin, and Norwegian scholar Anne Stenersen about the future of al-Qaeda. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has, for many years, supported the institutions in Norway carrying out research on terrorism and international crimes.

00:01:57 I'm very pleased to have Anne Stenersen here, one of Norway's most prominent researchers on terrorism. Anne Stenersen is a senior research fellow and a director of terrorism research at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment. Educated in history, Middle Eastern studies, Arabic, and Russian, she has conducted research on militant Islamism since 2006. Her research is currently focused on al-Qaeda's history, leadership, and strategy, and jihadism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

00:02:31 She has also conducted research on terrorists' modus operandi, terrorists' use of the Internet, and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear terrorism. The Norwegian Consulate is proud to be in collaboration with the 9/11 Museum & Memorial, and we're delighted to be supporting this event.

The museum, and Cliff Chanin in particular, has been very much engaged in the creation of memorial sites in Norway in the aftermath of the July 22 terror attacks. So I would like to extend my gratitude to Cliff for all his support and advice.

00:03:10 Since the Norwegian-American architectural firm Snohetta, I was part of the construction of the beautiful and moving memorial and museum-- the part that we enter into when we go into this museum-- it always feels a bit like home here, and we are very appreciative of the cooperation we have with the museum.

00:03:31 Again, thank you all for coming, and please enjoy the conversation. I hope that we can continue the conversation afterwards outside, for a small drink, after the whole conversation is finished. So enjoy and thank you.

(applause)

00:03:52 Clifford Chanin: Thank you very much, Harriet. Welcome, everybody. I do want to say just, before we get started, that Alice Greenwald, our

president and C.E.O., and I-- Alice, of course, was a high school exchange student in Norway, so she has a long history in Norway-- but both of us were privileged to be involved as part of the conversations in Norway leading up to the establishment of the 22 July Centre in Oslo.

00:04:15 And it reinforced for, for both of us, I think, that-- of course, there are greatly different circumstances that apply to that attack and to the attack here-- but at a fundamentally human level, dealing with families who have lost loved ones and the social trauma that that creates, not to mention the personal grief, is something that creates a certain kind of affinity and resemblance, you know, across cultures, across histories, and, you know, our experience turns out to be one that unfortunately, different people around the world are sharing, and this is sort of a community now that through these efforts, whether in Norway, here in New York, in France, in Orlando...

00:04:59 I mean, unfortunately, the litany of places keeps growing. But, you know, there is a common element of solidarity and human sympathy that brings us together. So it was really a privilege to be part of that. And I will say, for anybody who is lucky enough to go to Norway to see the center, they did an extraordinary job there. Really very moving, very powerful, very simple.

And I think Alice and I will remember with shock how quickly the whole thing came together. It was a matter of months, and, of course, our project was counted in years. So we were quite envious of all of that. So that's by way of thanks and welcome to our Norwegian friends and gratitude for your support.

00:05:42 I mean, turning to Anne... I will say, it's, uh, uh... In this place here, it, it's strange to say it, but I think it's very important that we delve into the history of al-Qaeda because it is an organization, as awful as its intentions and actions have been, it actually has purposes, it has structure, it has a history. And let me ask you first, you know, how you became an historian of al-Qaeda. What brought you into this and what was the trigger for you of thinking that this 30-year history of the organization was something that really needed your attention?

00:06:27 Anne Stenersen: Well, thanks for the... Thanks for the introduction and thanks for your question. My way into this... My way into this field is... It's kind of, it's kind of complicated, I have to say. It started, actually, with a, with an interest in the Middle East. This interest in the Middle East came around 2002, 2003. I guess it was partly triggered by the 9/11 attacks, and the need to... I felt this need to understand, you know, this part of the world that this group came from.

00:07:04 Also, I had a love of languages, so... My education into this, into this field started with actually studying Arabic, in Cairo back in 2003. And then I went on doing my master degree in Arabic, and then I got a job as a research assistant at a Norwegian institution, that's called Norwegian Defence Research Establishment. It's the place I still work today, actually.

00:07:33 And my first job was to be a research assistant and to actually study the texts of al-Qaeda, the primary sources written by the members of al-Qaeda. And through this work, I became intrigued and I got very much inspiration from my colleagues who were already, like, who were already experts in this field. And I wanted... I decided I wanted to do my research career, career within this, this field.

00:08:02 So that's how I came to... I was offered a PhD scholarship. I wrote my thesis about the relationship between al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan. And this is a topic I, I still work on, actually, still working to understand, because there's still so much that we don't know about the history of al-Qaeda.

Clifford Chanin: Unfortunately, it is still very relevant.

Anne Stenersen: Yeah.

00:08:27 Clifford Chanin: So let's talk about the history of al-Qaeda, and use the dividing line of 9/11. What is al-Qaeda pre-9/11 and how does it change post-9/11?

Anne Stenersen: Well, I would say al-Qaeda pre-9/11 and post-9/11 is two completely different organizations, really. I mean, it has the same leadership, the same members, but the opportunities drastically changed after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban regime.

00:08:59 At that point, al-Qaeda loses a sanctuary that they had had in Afghanistan since 1996. They had spent years building up a structure, infrastructure of training camps. They had what may be termed a state-sponsored sanctuary. Although the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was not internationally recognized as a state, it still functioned as a state.

00:09:26 You know, the Taliban controlled who could pass the border into Afghanistan. And this was a tremendous advantage for al-Qaeda because it meant they could receive recruits from all over the world who, who could travel more or less, more or less undetected, let's say, into Afghanistan to receive training in al-Qaeda's camps.

Clifford Chanin: Let me, let me just ask right there.

Anne Stenersen: Yeah, yeah.

00:09:50 Clifford Chanin: What was the purpose of this foreign recruitment and training that al-Qaeda was undertaking in these pre-9/11 days? What was the goal? What was the strategy that was guiding this?

Anne Stenersen: Well, al-Qaeda wanted to be a global organization. Al-Qaeda had very high ambitions at that time. Especially, Osama bin Laden

himself looked upon himself as, like, a world leader, a leader of a worldwide movement.

00:10:19 That's, that was his ambition. He wanted to create a movement of dedicated Islamists, dedicated Muslims, who would bring about a worldwide revolution to create what, what they called a, a worldwide caliphate, an Islamic state where the... where, you know, the, the Islamic laws were enforced, that is, from al-Qaeda's interpretation of these Islamic laws, of course.

00:10:51 Clifford Chanin: Right, and so, they were creating this vanguard movement that would have military capacities to act in furtherance of that goal, of creating, wherever it was possible, this rise of at least part of a caliphate.

Anne Stenersen: Exactly, yeah.

Clifford Chanin: So how does that change? How does that change after 9/11, if it does? What does the U.S. coming to Afghanistan and depriving al-Qaeda of its shelter and haven, what does that do after 9/11?

00:11:18 Anne Stenersen: Well, al-Qaeda's ambitions didn't change. I mean, al-Qaeda's ambitions of creating this vanguard of dedicated Muslims, a well-trained army of Muslims, that ambition didn't change, but the capabilities drastically changed because they actually lost, they lost access to these training camps that they had and they became a network or an organization on the run.

00:11:43 They were still operating training camps, for example, in Pakistan, in the tribal areas after 2001, but it was on a much smaller scale and it was much harder to receive recruits because the borders were much more protected. Of course, the world community was, after 9/11, much more aware that this was actually a threat. So, so after 9/11, al-Qaeda's

capabilities drastically changed. And it also forced them to change their strategy, uh...

Clifford Chanin: In what way?

00:12:18 Anne Stenersen: And this is when we get this phenomenon of al-Qaeda of, like... what's been called al-Qaeda franchises or al-Qaeda regional or local groups popping up in different countries, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. Al-Qaeda in 2003 established a, a branch, let's say, in Saudi Arabia, which was al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which was the first regional branch of al-Qaeda.

00:12:46 And this group, this group's goal was to try and create a, a revolution in Saudi Arabia, which, of course, failed, because the regime drastically clamped down on these... what was essentially terrorists. You know, they were...

Clifford Chanin: There were a number of terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia in this period up through 2005.

00:13:09 Anne Stenersen: Yes, exactly. From 2003 to 2005, there was a terrorist campaign inside Saudi Arabia which was unprecedented in Saudi Arabian history, because, as you know, the Saudi Arabian regime had historically supported the Islamists. They supported even Osama bin Laden in the 1980s, when bin Laden first came to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets.

00:13:31 Clifford Chanin: So you write a very interesting article in the journal "Perspectives on Terrorism": "30 Years After Its Foundation, Where Is al-Qaeda Going?" And you describe al-Qaeda as "a revolutionary vanguard engaged in a perpetual struggle to further its Salafi Jihadi ideology."

Anne Stenersen: Mm-hmm.

Clifford Chanin: Now, you are really focusing on the belief system that motivates its members, and not so much on the tactics or the kinds of attacks that al-Qaeda may be capable of at any given point in time. Why do you think the ideas behind them are the best way to understand what al-Qaeda is about?

00:14:12 Anne Stenersen: Well, I think that's the best way to understand al-Qaeda, when we look at al-Qaeda's whole history, you know, from when it was founded in the late 1980s and until today. As I write in the headline of this article, al-Qaeda is now a 30-year-oldorganization. But it didn't carry out, for example, international terrorist attacks in the United States, against... Sorry, against the United States and its interests... Only started in 1998.

00:14:44 You know, that was when al-Qaeda had already existed for about ten years. So looking at the whole history of al-Qaeda, and looking at their own writings, and the, the texts that they have themselves published about their aims and stating their goals and so on, they're very consistent in stating that they are to be a vanguard and that they are to... Their main task is to inspire Muslims and to support Muslims to carry out revolutions against oppressive regimes.

00:15:16 Clifford Chanin: So if we look at it from the ideological point of view, is there, then, a consistency in what al-Qaeda is, in spite of the circumstances it finds itself in, and the ability it has at any moment in time to carry out terror attacks? Is it, is it, from this perspective, more useful to look at its motivation rather than its actions at any given point in time?

00:15:39 Anne Stenersen: Yes, I definitely think so, because if we look at al-Qaeda's actions, let's say... Let's take one, a very well-known action of al-Qaeda, that is, the attacks on American interests, right? If we only look at those actions, we might conclude today that al-Qaeda is almost gone, that it's, that it's drastically weakened because it hasn't been able to carry out an attack on United States interests, or Western interests in general.

00:16:08 But I think that's a misperception because al-Qaeda is not... It, it's not about its tactics, you know? It's about, like, right now, al-Qaeda is doing other things than, than staging international terrorist attacks that are very influential, for example, in the Middle East, especially.

So I think that by only focusing on one aspect of al-Qaeda's behavior, we're actually misunderstanding... misunderstanding what al-Qaeda is all about, and we might mistakenly think that they're gone, that they're not relevant anymore. I think that would be a mistake.

00:16:46 Clifford Chanin: So one of the questions you raise, and I'd like to ask you to sort of weigh the balance here... Currently, you asked the question: "Is al-Qaeda strong or is it weak at this point?" And I think getting you to talk about that will, I think, illustrate further this idea that being strong or weak may change at any given moment in time, but if the motivation is the same, then the threat can come back, even if you think of them as weak at any given moment.

00:17:12 Anne Stenersen: Well, yeah. I mean, the question of whether al-Qaeda is strong or weak is, of course, we're very... has been very relevant in the past few years, especially with the... with the downfall of ISIS. We're asking, you know, what, what come... What will come next? Because, obviously, the ideology behind al-Qaeda and behind ISIS that we call jihadism, is not, is not gone, you know.

00:17:35 There are many groups all over the Muslim world that carry out attacks in the name of jihadism, or are inspired by this, this ideas and this ideology. So the debate about whether al-Qaeda is weak or strong is, is really a debate about... I mean, it boils down to, you know, different conceptions, different definitions of "what does it mean to be strong." How do we, how do we define whether al-Qaeda is strong or weak? Those...

Clifford Chanin: Give us an example.

00:18:08 Anne Stenersen: Yeah, those who say al-Qaeda is strong today, they refer to the fact that al-Qaeda today has 30,000 members. I mean, it's the number I count. I can't confirm that number, but it's based on estimates of the number of members in, in the different regions where al-Qaeda have affiliated groups. Especially in Syria, even. In Syria alone, it's, like, you know... Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria have 20,000 members, right?

00:18:36 So that means al-Qaeda is strong, but if you choose another definition, like how many international terrorist attacks have al-Qaeda carried out in the past ten years? There's only one, right? There's the "Charlie Hebdo" attack in Paris in 20...

Clifford Chanin: 15.

Anne Stenersen: In 2015, yes. So based on that definition, al-Qaeda is very weak, right? So it all depends on, how do you measure it? And you can come to whatever conclusion that suits your political views, basically.

00:19:09 Clifford Chanin: Now, you mentioned earlier the development of an al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq. You do write that the Iraq War, the U.S. war in Iraq, was "a stroke of luck for al-Qaeda," that it opened a window, essentially, for al-Qaeda to establish itself among the Sunni population there.

Anne Stenersen: Yes.

00:19:34 Clifford Chanin: Talk about that a little bit, because, if we understand correctly, prior to the war in Iraq, in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda had lost its base, had gone into the Pakistani tribal areas, and was on the run, as you said earlier. What changes with the war in Iraq?

00:19:51 Anne Stenersen: Yes, al-Qaeda was very much weakened after 2001. Members were in shock because of the huge response from the United States. I think the response of the U.S. to 9/11 was not expected-- not by Taliban, not by al-Qaeda. So after 2001, there was sort of a crisis inside the movement. There was also a lot of criticism-- criticism against bin Laden and his decision to carry out the 9/11 attacks, because, also, members within al-Qaeda were against the idea of 9/11 because they were afraid of the consequences, and they were afraid that this would destroy whatever al-Qaeda had built up in Afghanistan.

00:20:38 And it turned out that they were correct, because al-Qaeda lost everything they had in Afghanistan, basically, and they had to start from scratch. So in 2002, 2003, al-Qaeda was starting to get involved in a sort of insurgency in Afghanistan, supported by some elements of the Taliban. But this was on a very small scale. Parts of al-Qaeda were in Iran at the time, seeking refuge in Iran, and others had gone back to their home countries, leaving, leaving the struggle altogether, being disillusioned with the whole idea of al-Qaeda.

00:21:20 Then the Iraq War came, and it was a tremendous boost of confidence for, for al-Qaeda, and for radical Muslims in general, because it confirmed the worldview that al-Qaeda was promoting, namely that the Muslim world is under attack by the West. And that was precisely what the Iraq invasion confirmed, you know, that the U.S. is attacking a Muslim country with U.S. troops on the ground.

00:21:51 So that was, gave a tremendous boost to al-Qaeda recruitment in the whole Muslim world, and also among Muslims in Europe. And that's why we had, in 2004, 2005, we had this large start of a... al-Qaeda terrorist campaign in Europe. That was because these radicalized Muslims were mobilized by the invasion of Iraq. You can find specific examples of members of terrorist cells who said that, you know, it was the Iraq War that motivated them.

00:22:32 For example, the, the attack on Madrid in 2004. So the Iraq War was a stroke of luck because it gave... It had the opposite effect of what the U.S. intended, I suppose. The U.S. wanted to attack Saddam Hussein because

of weapons of mass destruction, but also because of suspected links between him and al-Qaeda, and to, through that, weaken al-Qaeda, but instead, the opposite happened.

00:23:01

Clifford Chanin: Now, al-Qaeda, because of its, the emergence of this franchise that it has, actually begins to operate on the ground in Iraq. And there's a long history here, which we don't have to go into in detail, but it's out of that franchise that, ultimately, Islamic State emerges and breaks with al-Qaeda.

Anne Stenersen: That's true, yeah, yeah.

00:23:26

Clifford Chanin: So, tell us, if you will, what the difference is between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. They're within the same jihadi universe, as you described before...

Anne Stenersen: Yes.

Clifford Chanin: And there is this sense in the original al-Qaeda motivation of creating a global movement.

Anne Stenersen: Mm-hmm.

Clifford Chanin: But somewhere along the way, there is this division, and al-Qaeda turns out, in this comparison, to be the more moderate, if that's the right word...

Anne Stenersen: Exactly, yeah.

Clifford Chanin: ...of the two. What's the... What is... Define the differences between the two organizations.

00:23:57 Anne Stenersen: Well, to put it simply, I believe al-Qaeda and ISIS more or less have the same goals, the same theological interpretations as a foundation for their ideology, and so on, with some, with some, some minor differences, of course. But overall, they have the same goal, and it is to create an Islamic state or Islamic society, a caliphate based on their interpretation of, of the Islamic laws, right?

00:24:24 The difference is that they... I mean, they fundamentally differ in their view on how to do it-- what is the correct strategy to achieve the Islamic state as a goal. Al-Qaeda has a long-term strategy. Al-Qaeda wants... Al-Qaeda-- and especially bin Laden wrote about this in his letters-- that it's very important, before establishing a state anywhere, al-Qaeda needs to have the support of the people.

00:24:56 So they need to educate the people. They need to carry out operations in order to gather people, popular support, basically. And when they have this, when they have sufficient popular support, then is the time to establish a state. Because without that popular support, it will be impossible for them to defend that state from attacks from abroad. That's al-Qaeda's view of the strategy.

00:25:27 And for the Islamic State, it's, it's sort of the opposite. They want to establish the state first, and then, they believe, they will get popular support because they have established a state. So this, I think, is the main difference. It's a difference of strategy, if you want to call it that.

Clifford Chanin: Now, if you track, sort of, the relative strength of these two groups over the last four or five years, it does seem like the moment when the Islamic State is established, and then spreads very widely in Iraq and Syria, that the Islamic State's ideology is somehow confirmed by this, and al-Qaeda seems to have fallen into a distant second place by comparison.

Anne Stenersen: Yes, definitely.

00:26:11 Clifford Chanin: More recently, with the successful military campaign, and the loss of most of the territory that the Islamic State was holding, there seems to be now this sense that, "Wait a minute, Islamic State is now in a very bad position," whereas al-Qaeda has somehow rebounded. Is that a fair reading of these things at this point?

00:26:31 Anne Stenersen: Yes, that's a fair reading, and that's also a worrying, you know, observation, because that means al-Qaeda were actually right, and I think that has boosted their confidence now. You know, it's... They said, they were saying all the time that, you know, the Islamic State, or the ISIS declaration of a caliphate, was premature. It was, it was bound to fail, and so on. That's what al-Qaeda was criticizing the Islamic State for.

00:27:03 And now it turned out they were exactly right, and I think that has... Al-Qaeda will come out as the stronger one in this struggle between al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Clifford Chanin: But what does that mean, for al-Qaeda to be stronger, if they don't have an operating base-- that, again, going back to Afghanistan-- but, you know, what does it mean to be stronger in the current context?

00:27:27 Anne Stenersen: Yeah, that's a good, good thing you point out, because by al-Qaeda being stronger, I don't mean that they're anywhere near the level that they were at in 2001. Al-Qaeda was much stronger and in much better position in 2001 than what they are now, that's for sure. But I would say al-Qaeda is probably stronger now than what they were, let's say, like, in 2010, '11. You know, right before the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS.

00:28:00 Clifford Chanin: Now, one of the points you make is that because al-Qaeda has sort of decentralized, and has different groups in different parts of the world, who are themselves smaller, that they have been contained, if that's the right word, by various U.S. and allied military

actions. And you particularly point to the use of drones as an effective weapon against leadership of al-Qaeda, even though it's dispersed in different battlefields.

Anne Stenersen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: Please talk a bit about the impact of drones and why you think it has been effective in limiting al-Qaeda's options.

00:28:37 Anne Stenersen: Yes, I'm not... Well, not going into the debate about the legality-- legal issues surrounding drones... Of course, it's a controversial tactic. But I'm looking at this from al-Qaeda's own perspective, using, reading bin Laden's letters from 2009, 2010, when the drones were really taking its toll on al-Qaeda members in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area.

00:29:01 You know, the drone campaign started in... drastically increased from 2008, and a number, I would say high number, of al-Qaeda mid-level managers, mid-level leaders, were killed from 2008 and until 2015, and it really took its toll on al-Qaeda. And bin Laden writes about this in his correspondence with his subordinate. I mean, he recommends al-Qaeda to shift its base from Afghanistan-Pakistan border area because of the threat from drones.

00:29:39 So this has a direct impact on how al-Qaeda is operating, and it's definitely making them feel even more on the run than they had ever been before, before 2008. And it's also quite clear that al-Qaeda, as the mid-level leaders-- I mean, the number two and number three and number four in al-Qaeda, that they are popularly termed-- when these guys are killed, al-Qaeda can replace them quite quickly, you know, in the beginning.

00:30:15 But then, around 2010, '11, '12, it starts... Specifically, bin Laden writes, you know, it's hard to find someone who can replace bin Laden's number

three at that time. And in the end, al-Qaeda ends up appointing a guy in Yemen to be al-Qaeda's number two, so he's moving, sort of, part of the leadership responsibilities of al-Qaeda away from Pakistan altogether. And that, I think, is a direct result of the drone campaign.

Clifford Chanin: The drone campaign, though, is extended into Yemen.

Anne Stenersen: Oh, yeah.

Clifford Chanin: And has a strong impact on the, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula there.

00:30:55

Anne Stenersen: Yes, it did have a very direct impact on A.Q.A.P., as well, in Yemen. I think it was the direct reason for why, you know, when Awlaki-- Anwar al-Awlaki-- was killed, that directly weakened al-Qaeda's capability to attack the United States at that time, because there was a small group of people in Yemen who were, at that time, staging quite ambitious... or had this ambition to stage ambitious international terrorist attacks on U.S.... U.S. airplanes, aviation, in particular. You have the so-called "underwear bomber" in 2009.

Clifford Chanin: Right.

00:31:44

Anne Stenersen: Who was, uh... Who almost, almost managed to explode this bomb abroad...

Clifford Chanin: Aboard an airplane.

Anne Stenersen: Aboard an airplane, yeah. And so it was, I think... The reason why these efforts stopped was a direct result of the drone strikes that killed Awlaki, who was the main guy behind this initiative, and also his lieutenants.

00:32:12 Clifford Chanin: Let me ask about bin Laden. First, the period that he is in hiding. He has disappeared post-U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. We don't know where he is, he has courier networks. Describe to us, please, what you think his role in al-Qaeda was over that period before the raid in Abbottabad.

00:32:36 Anne Stenersen: He had a, he had a very... He was very involved in al-Qaeda prior to 2011. At least, that's reflected from his communications, that now is released, so that everyone can read it, which is a very interesting collection of documents. So in the first years, he was on... He was very much on the run, and al-Qaeda was very disorganized.

00:33:02 And then, gradually, over time, let's say from the mid-2000s, he issued his first propaganda video in a long time. I think it was in 2004. And then, he starts... Over time, he really starts to micromanage al-Qaeda again. In fact, his instructions to his subordinates in these letters are very detailed, and there is a lot of communication going back and forth, and he's very much involved in the exact phrasing of different propaganda statements and videos, and he's making remarks on the speeches of other al-Qaeda leaders.

00:33:43 So, and he has to approve them before they can be published, and so on, so he's very much involved, but, I mean, not in a... I mean, mostly in the propaganda, I think, in the propaganda and in the public messaging of al-Qaeda, and as a spiritual leader of the al-Qaeda organization. Not so much, perhaps, in operations.

00:34:11 I mean, he had his hang-ups, let's say. He wanted al-Qaeda to carry out attacks on U.S. airplanes. He was very much encouraging his subordinates to attack airplanes. I mean, for some reason, he had chosen that method as his preferred. But he, um... But he didn't control the operatives, you know. Someone else in the organization had to, had to take his orders, and to commission them to someone further down below. So he was giving—issuing his requests, advice, and his opinion on how to do things, and then it was up to his lieutenants to carry out this in practice.

00:34:55 Clifford Chanin: Given the fact that he was isolated, that there was not instant communications as there would be under normal circumstances from a boss to subordinates, did people listen to him? Even when they got his messages, did they have an impact? Was he, you know, sort of spouting off just for the sake of spouting off? Or did that have an influence and shape the decisions of the subordinate?

00:35:20 Anne Stenersen: Well, people certainly listened to him and took his messages seriously. But the further geographically his recipients were removed from him, the less, I think, they listened, to put it like that. It's very clear in the communications between bin Laden and his, and the al-Qaeda affiliates in the Middle East and North Africa, that bin Laden wants al-Qaeda in Yemen to do things a certain way.

And he writes a letter to the leader in Yemen, and the leader in Yemen says, "Yeah, but I think we should rather do it like this based on the..." You know, "my understanding of the situation on the ground." And he writes a letter back to bin Laden with his opinion, and then this exchange goes back and forth.

00:36:04 And in the Yemen case, al-Qaeda Yemen actually ends up doing what they wanted to do, you know? And that was contradicting bin Laden's advice. The example is that al-Qaeda in Yemen wanted to declare an Islamic state in Yemen, and bin Laden said, "No, you shouldn't do that, it's too early, and it's counterproductive at this time."

00:36:25 And discussion went back and forth, and then al-Qaeda in Yemen declared the state. It was completely contradicting bin Laden's views, but, uh... I mean, they did have a discussion, but in the end, the people on the ground-- I suppose that's quite natural, that the people that are on the ground, they think that they are themselves better suited to judge, you know, "What's sensible to do in our situation?"

Clifford Chanin: What difference did the killing of bin Laden make to al-Qaeda?

00:36:58

Anne Stenersen: I think it's still too early to say, you know, the... how the... Our understanding of al-Qaeda is sort of constantly evolving. It's very different today than it was even five years ago. And I think, uh, maybe in 20 years' time, I'll be able to answer that question properly. Definitely, it did have an impact, because bin Laden was the founder. He was the spiritual leader of al-Qaeda.

00:37:28

On the other hand, al-Qaeda has lived on post-bin Laden, and not everyone actually believed that you know, in 2011. Many people think-- experts and observers thought-- that now al-Qaeda is... is gone, is irrelevant, right? Because a leader was gone, and because of the Arab Spring, you know? The popular revolutions in the Arab world that sort of showed that it's possible to... It's possible to create a revolution in the Arab countries without violence.

00:38:06

I mean, and that was the opposite of what al-Qaeda has been preaching all along. Al-Qaeda basically says you have to use violence framed as jihad to create a revolution, right? And the people in Tunisia and Egypt and elsewhere, they proved al-Qaeda wrong, basically. So many people thought that the... 2011 marked the, you know, the end of al-Qaeda.

00:38:34

And then, as you know, the Arab Revolution backfired. The-- some of the previous dictators basically came back to power, creating new oppressive regimes and so on. And also, and some countries fell into complete chaos, like Syria. The Syrian war was very important for al-Qaeda's... For, again, giving al-Qaeda a boost at a time when it was weak.

Clifford Chanin: How did that happen? What was the benefit of that Syrian war for al-Qaeda?

00:39:07 Anne Stenersen: Uh, primarily, Syria became an arena where it was easy for recruits to go to. Syria, I mean, the, the oppressiveness of the, the Assad regime created a cause that people wanted to rally behind, you know, a very... A cause that was very easy for people to support because of the brutality of the regime.

00:39:33 And fighting against this regime sort of became a cause that attracted Muslims from all over the world. And Syria's location was also important. It was close to Europe, and it meant a lot of Europeans in particular were attracted to Syria, to fight, and then came ISIS and declared their caliphate, was-- which was another thing that attracted recruits. And there were also many other groups in Syria, including the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra-- the Nusra Front, as they were called at the time.

00:40:12 All of this created, I mean, what al-Qaeda calls a front. Al-Qaeda is basically... You know, "fronts" in al-Qaeda is important because it attracts recruits that can be recruited into al-Qaeda. Afghanistan in the late 1990s was such a front. Iraq in 2003 was a front, and so on.

00:40:36 So Syria became the new front for al-Qaeda, and it gave a boost to the militant Islamist movement because it again showed, you know, Muslims are under, Muslims are under oppression. It's the duty of everyone to go there and help them, and these recruits get, get then... recruited into militant groups, and many of them had this jihadist ideology that was supportive of al-Qaeda and ISIS and, and the like.

Clifford Chanin: Okay.

Anne Stenersen: Yeah.

00:41:15 Clifford Chanin: Now, we see, in more recent times, bin Laden's son, Hamza, emerging as a potential future leader of the organization. And Zawahiri, the number... the successor to bin Laden, has been criticized for

his various failings as a public speaker and as a mobilizing force, and so on and so forth. Do you expect that Hamza bin Laden will, assuming he survives, but will rise to a leadership position, or the leadership position, of al-Qaeda?

00:41:45 Anne Stenersen: Well, he's clearly being prepared for that. He's being groomed as the, as the... Some observers already-- correctly, I would say-- have stated, for becoming the next leader of al-Qaeda, and it's, uh... He is the kind of person that al-Qaeda very much needs and has been in need of after the death of bin Laden, because, as you mentioned, Zawahiri is not the most charismatic person, you know?

00:42:13 He doesn't have that aura. He's not a Saudi. I mean, being Saudi, from a Saudi Arabian background, is also important in terms of financing, I believe. So Hamza has all of these qualities that Zawahiri is lacking. He's quite charismatic. You know, he looks like bin Laden. He has the name of bin Laden, and family relations are, as you know, very important in this part of the world.

00:42:41 So, yes, I think he can... He will eventually-- if he survives-- he will become a new figurehead of al-Qaeda. However, I do not think that he will necessarily be the organizational brains of al-Qaeda. Zawahiri, in that respect, is a much more capable person, a much more experienced person, who can run the day-to-day affairs, that can manage a network, manage the organization, lay out sensible strategies, and so on.

00:43:13 I do not think Hamza is that kind of person, based on his background. I mean, he's, he's only, now, 29 years old. He spent most of his teenage years and adult years in basically house arrest in Iran, so he doesn't have that experience with jihadi organizations that Zawahiri and also others in al-Qaeda have.

00:43:42 Clifford Chanin: You mentioned Iran, which is sort of an interesting wild card in this conversation, particularly in the current day. What do we know about Iran's relationship to al-Qaeda, whether current or previously?

00:43:58 Anne Stenersen: The current everyone wants to know, of course, and I don't. I can't fill you in anything there. Previously, we were starting to learn more about al-Qaeda's, you know, past relationship to Iran. There was certainly a relationship after 2001, when al-Qaeda leaders fled Afghanistan.

00:44:18 Some of them, as you know, went to Iran, went into hiding there, and they included many members of bin Laden's family, as well. And also other very high-ranking members of al-Qaeda. So they went into Iran, and, I mean, according to the sources, were, were, for some time, able to operate quite freely, and then they were put in a... put under restrictions and put in a sort of house arrest, as I said, many of them for many years.

00:44:55 It's also reflected in, in the Abbottabad documents, where bin Laden is actually corresponding with, uh... with his son Hamza, when Hamza is in Iran. So al-Qaeda members who were based in Iran had a certain degree of freedom, and it, of course, changed over time as their restrictions were lifted and then put back and so on. This is all a long, very fascinating story in itself.

00:45:28 Clifford Chanin: Do you have a sense of why Iran was doing this and how... To what degree they were complicit in al-Qaeda actions?

Anne Stenersen: I think, I mean, Iran wanted to keep al-Qaeda as sort of a... in their back pocket to say, to have... in, in case they needed them, you know? I don't think... I mean, of course, as, as you probably know, Iran, the Irani regime, and al-Qaeda have completely different ideologies, Iran being Shia Muslims, al-Qaeda being Sunnis and quite, uh...

00:46:08 Well, some of them quite, quite, uh... Negative attitudes towards the Shia Muslims and definitely not trusting the Shia Muslims and definitely not trusting the Irani regime. So this was not a relationship that was based on common ideology or common trust or friendship at all. It was a relationship based on necessity and on a common enemy, of course.

00:46:36 Both al-Qaeda and Iran sort of views the United States as a potential enemy, right? So I could only speculate about what Iranian authorities, intelligence services, how they wanted to use al-Qaeda, you know? It's... We don't have any good sources about this as academics, but it seems to me that they wanted to keep them in house arrest. I mean, they chose to give al-Qaeda's members a sort of sanctuary in Iran. They wanted to keep them therein case they needed them.That's, that's what I think.

00:47:17 Clifford Chanin: What's-- let's look ahead, and tell me where you think al-Qaeda is going and the role... Because you say that, and we talked a little bit about this, that their interest in international terrorism, particularly targeting the United States, or their ability to do that, is not really a priority at this point for them. They're trying to re-establish themselves, particularly in the Middle East. Look ahead for us.

Anne Stenersen: Yeah.

00:47:41 Clifford Chanin: Where do you think they're going? What kind of appeal do you think they will have? And will the threat they pose to the United States still be relatively low, or do you expect it to increase?

00:47:54 Anne Stenersen: It's very hard to say because it all depends on what else... what will happen. I mean, al-Qaeda is an organization that seizes opportunities whenever they arise. Al-Qaeda doesn't have a big strategic plan, you know, that, "We're going to do this and then this." Al-Qaeda sees opportunities and then they act on them in a reactive way, so if al-Qaeda got an opportunity to, let's say, establish an external operations branch, as they call it-- the guys in al-Qaeda that specifically work to carry out attacks on the United States.

00:48:36 If they got an opportunity to do that, I think they would definitely do that, but right now, I don't see that they have such an opportunity, because of, because of... They lost a lot of senior members during the whole war on terror, and also because they're so... Right now, there are

other opportunities that are, I think, more interesting to al-Qaeda, and it's the opportunities that came after the Arab Spring, and the, like, the revolution and the counter-revolutions when... and when some Middle Eastern countries fell into chaos.

00:49:16 Both Syria and Yemen, Libya today, are... represent tremendous opportunities for al-Qaeda, I think, sort of like Iraq did in 2003.When that conflict started, al-Qaeda jumped on that opportunity. They failed in the end, as you know. But right now, I think al-Qaeda really wants to jump on the opportunity to do something, in Syria, especially, because that's the arena that they see as most... Has the most potential right now.

00:49:49 Clifford Chanin: President Trump has been talking about withdrawing U.S. troops from various of these operating areas, you know, on the assumption that the battle is won, whether in Syria or Afghanistan, in particular-- Iraq, as well, to some degree. From what you are saying, it doesn't sound like the battle is won, nor, frankly, that there's a way to understand what the end is if the ideology is still a motivating force. So do you think that there is a risk, if the U.S. pulls back in these ways, of creating more vacuums for al-Qaeda to fill?

00:50:25 Anne Stenersen: Well, it's, it's hard to say, you know? There's always a risk, whether or not the U.S. pulls back. I think there are risks, there are opportunities, so thiswhole picture is currently very complicated, so it's... I'm so glad I'm not a policy adviser of Trump, because I wouldn't know. For many reasons, but anyway...

(laughter)

Anne Stenersen: But...

Clifford Chanin: Irresistible to say that, yeah.

(laughter)

00:50:53 Anne Stenersen: No, but honestly, it's very hard, because there's not one cause-and-effect relationship. Like, if the United States does that, then al-Qaeda will... then that will happen, you know? It depends on so many factors that are currently unknown, so, yeah. Yeah, we just have to do the best we can.

00:51:14 Clifford Chanin: Yeah, yeah. And what constitutes "the best we can"? I mean, what... You're not a policymaker, we understand that, but... but, you know, if you're picking out, you know, one or two things that you think would make a difference, and we were talking about the drones... I'm not sure you would list those, but they had an impact in your view. What do you think should guide U.S. policy in relation to minimizing the threat?

00:51:37 Anne Stenersen: Well, obviously, it's to... I mean, I can mention the drones. I believe in that as a, as a tool. I mean, not from a moral perspective. I don't really talk from that perspective. But from a practical perspective, and the way they have affected al-Qaeda, I believe that's still, from many bad options, it's... The least bad option, I guess, to fight al-Qaeda is to target very narrowly the leaders and the individuals in al-Qaeda that are actively planning terrorist attacks against the United States.

00:52:18 So that's, that's one measure. It's, it's quite obvious to me that that's, so far it has worked. Of course, there are downsides, and the, the drone attacks that kill civilians, they do radicalize the larger Muslim population and so on, but there are many things that radicalize the larger Muslim populations that are much worse than drones, I think. So that's why I'm calling it the least bad of several bad options, let's say.

00:52:49 Another thing is to, well, support Sunni Muslim movements in the Middle East that work for sort of peaceful solutions to the conflict. It's also an obvious thing that I think the world community's already very much concerned about doing in places like Syria and Iraq. I always get asked

this question, you know: "Which, which group should we support in Syria?" You know? (chuckles)

00:53:16

And there is already a big awareness that it's important to... that the, the Sunni Muslims are not marginalized in these conflicts, because that obviously would strengthen al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups in those areas.

Clifford Chanin: Thank you. I think we, we'll take a couple of questions from the audience. And we have colleagues here with microphones, so raise your hand-- ooh, the lights just went on. Over there-- uh, just wait for the mic, please, from Harmony.

00:53:50

Audience Member: Hi, I was wondering about the rise of neoconservative nationalist movements and how you're seeing-- certainly in the English-speaking world-- but you've seen them in Germany and even Austria now, too, and, well, there's a number of reasons people give for this. Some say it's economics, some say it's generational. People do say it's partly terrorism. I was wondering if you think there's a connection between al-Qaeda and terrorism and the rise of these movements now.

Anne Stenersen: Well, yeah, I think there is a connection, but it's, again, a complicated, um, complicated... Sorry, a complicated topic, and there's not one explanation for the rise of these movements, but terrorism, inspired by militant Islamism, is definitely a part of it.

00:54:38

And if I speak from a European perspective, which I know much better than the American perspective, the issue also has a lot to do with... Well, things like immigration, things like populism, the failure of moderate populism, and a lot of, a lot of other issues, yeah.

00:55:01

But, so I'm not an expert on right-wing extremism, but, I think, to answer your question... militant Islamism plays a part, but I would say a rather small part in the larger picture.

Clifford Chanin: Who else? Over here, please.

Audience Member: Hi, thanks for your remarks. What do you see as the prospect for reunification between ISIS and al-Qaeda?

00:55:34 Anne Stenersen: I think there wouldn't be any reunification with ISIS as long as Baghdadi is the leader because of the personal antagonism between Baghdadi and Zawahiri. I don't see any sign of sort of, yeah, or any, any reason why they would want to reunite. They would rather die before reuniting, I think.

00:56:03 But when it comes to ISIS rank-and-file, a lot of the members of ISIS, or former members of ISIS, have already joined other groups in places like Syria. On the ground, there is usually more overlap between these groups in any case. In some regions, al-Qaeda-, ISIS-affiliated groups are even cooperating. So this, you know, barrier between al-Qaeda on one side, ISIS on another, it's not so clear-cut, at least not on the ground.

00:56:38 And so I think... Yeah, what I imagine would happen was that for... Like, ISIS now is very much pressured in Syria, and having lost much of their momentum that they had, and I think that will push a lot of the foot soldiers to join other groups, including al-Qaeda.

Clifford Chanin: Someone else. Right here in the front. Just hang on a second.

00:57:08 Audience Member: First of all, thank you for your really insightful presentation. I was just wondering earlier, when you were talking about how to evaluate al-Qaeda's strength or weakness, you mentioned that al-Qaeda now is doing other things, other than, you know, planning terrorist attacks. Can you elaborate on that a little bit? Is that about propaganda and proselytizing, or what, what sort of things?

00:57:33 Anne Stenersen: It's a lot of things, and I don't think we know all of them. Obviously, I don't know all of them. The intelligence communities might know a little bit more, but based on what I know about what al-Qaeda did in the past and how they operated throughout history, I think they're doing... They're still very ambitious and still, I think they're focusing on building networks, building up a strong organization again like they did before, because that's the prereq.

00:58:05 That's how they view, you know, their... Their eventual success is dependent on building a strong organization. And I think they're doing it much more covertly now than they used to. After 2001, al-Qaeda had a very overt strategy of creating franchises, and al-Qaeda this and al-Qaeda that. And that was, at the time, a strategy that they viewed as sensible and that also worked in a sense because it gave al-Qaeda... It projected an image of al-Qaeda being everywhere and al-Qaeda being strong.

00:58:47 But then over time, as al-Qaeda is a learning organization, it learned that creating these franchises and calling themselves al-Qaeda is not necessarily a positive thing anymore, because, locally, in the different regions, al-Qaeda now, the past years, have experienced that local Islamists, they do not want to be associated with al-Qaeda because it scares away donors. It scares away recruits. It attracts drone attacks and all these things.

00:59:20 So now I think al-Qaeda is, I don't know... We've seen examples of it already, that al-Qaeda is operating and making affiliates, but not in an overt way. They're calling themselves with different names. But I think definitely they're trying to create and strengthen a secret network spanning, spanning the Middle East, North Africa, and over to the Indian subcontinent. Uh, yeah.

00:59:47 Clifford Chanin: You mention their funding. I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about... You know, there was, for a long period of time, great tension between the U.S. and the Saudi government and other Gulf governments because whether official money was coming is one

question, but, you know, there are wealthy people there who have means of getting money to al-Qaeda and similar movements. Where do they get their money at this point?

01:00:11 Anne Stenersen: Well, I wish I could answer you. (laugh) I guess al-Qaeda has always had a variety of funding sources. But what we know from the past, let's say the period since 2001, when al-Qaeda lost the sanctuary in Afghanistan and became dispersed, they, over time, they became more dependent on funding from the regions.

01:00:36 Like, al-Qaeda central would ask al-Qaeda in Iraq to send them money, to be blunt. And al-Qaeda in Iraq would get the money from a variety of sources like local taxation in areas they controlled, and extortion, kidnap, money for ransom, and all these kinds of sources. Al-Qaeda organizations on the ground would actually get funding from different sources and al-Qaeda central would request that money.

01:01:06 I don't know if they actually got it or not. I don't have any sources on that. But it sort of tells me that al-Qaeda central was not in a very good financial situation for the past 15 years.

Clifford Chanin: Anyone else? We have one more gentleman there.

01:01:30 Audience Member: You mentioned that it is important in al-Qaeda to have some Saudi background.

Anne Stenersen: Mm-hmm.

Audience Member: I wondered how much of the al-Qaeda ideology is influenced by the Wahhabi, and what are their prospect of recruiting young Saudis for their, their cause.

01:01:50 Anne Stenersen: Yeah, that's, that's a big, big question. Of course, there's a difference between... I mean, when you talk about al-Qaeda ideology, what do we really talk about? Is it the religious foundation, the theology behind, that al-Qaeda leaders subscribe to, or is it more the political thoughts, you know?

01:02:13 On the political level, al-Qaeda is definitely very much different from Saudi Arabia. I mean, they are, in practice, at war. Bin Laden declared war on... or at least... Well, he was, for political reasons, cautious about... about declaring war on the Saudi royal family, but he was definitely not a supporter of them, you know? He believed them to be... You know, have betrayed the religion for inviting the Americans into Saudi Arabia after the Gulf War, as we know the history.

01:02:52 So politically, al-Qaeda and Saudi Arabia are very much against each other. Religiously, I mean, there are many similarities. But then there's the whole discussion of how much of al-Qaeda's ideology comes from religion, you know? From the, the, for example, the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. Of course, you find... You find, you find the religious texts in both... in both Saudi Arabia's society in general and among al-Qaeda members.

01:03:29 But I'm not so sure that that's what makes, that's what makes al-Qaeda violent. I think the violence comes from the political ideology of al-Qaeda, which is, a very modern, a modern interpretation of, you know, world events that's not really related to the... to the religious texts, texts.

01:03:53 Clifford Chanin: Well, I mean, we can see that this is... This is a subject that is to some degree obscure, but I think so important to understand for all the nuances that we're getting here. And I would encourage you, if you have a further interest in this, to find Anne's article in "Perspectives on Terrorism" about the history of al-Qaeda.

And also to thank you for coming and to say again, we've had colleagues of yours from the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment come here and I don't know that any of us would've assumed that Norway would be

such a strong source of, you know, deep study and information about this, but it does turn out to be. So thank you for being here and please join me in thanking Anne Stenersen.

Anne Stenersen: Yeah.

01:04:37 (applause)