

Al-Qaida Expands its Reach

The terrorist group remains relevant by using affiliates

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Chiroma Maina, right, holds a picture of her abducted daughter, Comfort Amos, while sitting next to her husband, Jonah, and her daughter Helen at their home in Maiduguri, Nigeria, in May 2014. Comfort Amos was abducted by Boko Haram militants along with more than 200 of her secondary school classmates.

Assessing al-Qaida's health is not easy. On one hand, the United States' drones regularly kill al-Qaida's leaders, and the group has not pulled off a successful attack in the West since the London bombings of July 2005. On the other hand, al-Qaida controls territory across the Middle East and Africa and still has a significant presence in the world.

It can be equally difficult to define how exactly the group operates.¹ As the American Enterprise Institute's Katherine Zimmerman recently wrote, al-Qaida "relies on secrecy to survive. Even al-Qaida members are confused about each other's status. ... The covert nature of the network intentionally obscures many relationships."² Therefore, analyzing how al-Qaida

operates is not only a challenge for the intelligence community and policy-makers, it is also a challenge for group members themselves.

The conventional thinking in government circles is that the al-Qaida network consists of several different layers. At the top is the group's "core,"³ the senior leadership based in Afghanistan and/or Pakistan and led by Ayman al-Zawahri, al-Qaida's emir and Osama bin Laden's successor.

Beyond this core are al-Qaida's affiliates, formally integrated into the network that now exists: al-Shabab in Somalia, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, al-Nusra Front (ANF) in Syria, and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the

African Sahel. Leaders of these groups have publicly sworn loyalty to al-Qaida's emir and had this oath of loyalty recognized and accepted in turn. Assessing how far al-Qaida's network runs beyond these affiliates, and how active it is in countries such as Tunisia and Libya, requires additional exploration.

This article examines these questions and concludes that three factors have been key in ensuring why al-Qaida's threat endures: its decentralization and the rise of the regional affiliates that has accompanied this, the ongoing crisis in Syria, and the power of the group's ideology.

THE FALL OF THE CORE

A recent change within al-Qaida's

operating structure has brought into question previously held assumptions of the usefulness of using al-Qaida's core to understand how the group operates.

In 2013, AQAP emir Nasir al-Wuhayshi, a former bin Laden aide now based in Yemen, was promoted to the role of al-Qaida's "general manager" by al-Zawahri.⁴ This was the first time that al-Qaida promoted a leader from a regional affiliate to such a senior role, rather than from within the group's core leadership. This led a recent Foreign & Commonwealth Office paper to proclaim that the "AQ Core" is no more.⁵ Al-Wuhayshi's promotion showed that "Af/Pak based AQ figures ... do not necessarily have a higher standing than any of the other AQ groups."⁵ Similarly, analysts such as the Foundation for Defense of Democracies' Thomas Joscelyn have long argued that it "does not make sense to draw a firm line between al Qaeda's 'core,' which is imprecisely defined, and the affiliates. ... And al Qaeda has dispatched 'core' members around the globe."⁶

Al-Qaida diminished the relevance of its "core" when al-Zawahri reduced his role. While he remains the group's emir, the business intelligence group Five Dimensions Consultants learned that, at the beginning of 2014, al-Zawahri "relinquished operational leadership" to al-Wuhayshi "to avoid criticism of not being an effective leader."⁷ Clearly, al-Zawahri finds it difficult to communicate effectively with the rest of his network, leading to an even greater decentralization within al-Qaida. This is an understandable move, yet it reduces al-Zawahri's overall control of the network and his relevance within it.

Therefore, in understanding al-Qaida's overall threat, our analysis should focus on groups outside of the core.

AFFILIATE GROUPS

Al-Qaida affiliate groups have a great deal of operational autonomy and consist primarily of local membership.⁸ Their activities can include bombing operations, assassinations of government officials, kidnappings and basic governance of territory that

they control. They also allow al-Qaida a geographic reach it did not possess before 9/11. A brief overview of these affiliates follows.

Yemen: AQAP's existence was formally announced in January 2009 following a merger between al-Qaida's Yemeni and Saudi branches. AQAP focuses on hollowing out the Yemeni state's strength by regularly assassinating intelligence and military officials. John Brennan, director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, has called AQAP "very, very dangerous" and al-Qaida's "most active operational franchise."⁹

AQAP has attempted to attack Western aviation at least three times. Most notoriously, in December 2009, a Nigerian AQAP recruit, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, attempted to detonate a bomb concealed in his underwear while flying from Amsterdam to Detroit. In October 2010, the group concealed bombs in printer cartridges inside U.S.-bound cargo planes during stopovers in the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom. Finally, in April 2012, AQAP planned to use another underwear bomb on a flight destined for the U.S. and was thwarted by a Saudi spy who had infiltrated the group.

However, AQAP's strength does not lie solely in terrorist attacks. During the revolution in Yemen, in the spring of 2011, AQAP's insurgency arm, Ansar al-Sharia, gained and then controlled territory in the provinces of Abyan and Shabwa, south Yemen. Ansar al-Sharia declared them Islamic "emirates" and provided a form of governance.¹⁰ This territory was held until a state counteroffensive in the summer of 2012. Therefore, AQAP's threat is multi-pronged. While its wishes to govern all of Yemen may be far-fetched, that is very clearly its ambition.

Somalia: Al-Shabab was formerly part of the Islamic Courts Union, a group of Shariah courts operating in Somalia. Following the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in December 2006, al-Shabab emerged as an independent organization. Despite multiple declarations of loyalty from al-Shabab toward al-Qaida, it was not until

February 2012 that these links were formalized.¹¹

Somali forces have had some success in expelling al-Shabab from territory it formerly controlled in Somalia, but the group is still an effective insurgent fighting force that easily recruits new followers.

In terms of its threat to the region and the West more broadly, there is a consistent tension within al-Shabab between those more focused on nationalist, Somali-specific issues and those concerned with global jihad. Al-Shabab's apparent involvement in the Westgate Shopping Mall attack in Kenya suggests that there is certainly an increasingly regional component to its threat. It also recently released a propaganda video calling for Westerners to carry out "lone wolf" suicide attacks in their home countries, although such al-Shabab attempts in the past have been unsuccessful.¹²

Al-Shabab may now be attempting to acquire chemical weapons. Mahdi Hashi, a Briton who recently had his citizenship revoked and is now facing terrorism charges in the U.S., is believed to have "substantial knowledge regarding an al-Shabab research and development department that was developing chemical weapons."¹³

The Sahel: AQIM is the latest manifestation of the Armed Islamic Group and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), two Algerian terrorist groups. The GSPC aligned itself with al-Qaida's global jihadist aims, and al-Zawahri acknowledged their integration into the al-Qaida network in a video released in September 2006.¹⁴

AQIM operates throughout North Africa's Sahel and Sahara regions, particularly in the mountainous regions of northern Mali, Algeria and parts of southern Libya. The group carries out military actions, including suicide bombings, and replenishes its resources via drug smuggling and kidnappings for ransom.

Syria: The ANF, a group created in the summer of 2011 as the country descended into civil war, represents

al-Qaida in Syria. It is one of the most effective rebel groups and boasts significant manpower, with an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 fighters.¹⁵

The ANF has carried out a string of car bombings and suicide attacks and established basic administration and provision of services in areas that it controls. It has seized oil fields in eastern Syria, although the control of these is under threat from fellow rebel groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).¹⁶

The ongoing violence in Syria has provided fresh opportunities for al-Qaida to attack the West and has provided an enormous boost to the overall jihadist movement. The number of foreign fighters there is higher than in any other jihadist conflict zone since the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan.¹⁷ There could be as many as 2,000 Western recruits in Syria, according to a December 2013 analysis from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation.¹⁸ Although operations focus on attacking Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces, the war has provided a large pool of potential volunteers for attacks on Western targets. The British security service has already outlined such concerns, stating that:

“Foreign fighters can gain combat experience, access to training and a network of overseas extremist contacts. The skills, contacts and status acquired overseas can make these individuals a much greater threat when they return to the UK, even if they have not been tasked directly to carry out an attack on their return. Experience of fighting overseas with terrorist groups can also promote radicalisation.”¹⁹

A CHALLENGER TO THE THRONE?

While al-Qaida has been largely successful in taking in new affiliates since 9/11, it has consistently failed to rein in one of them — its representative in Iraq, ISIS (formerly known as al-Qaida in Iraq, the Mujahideen Shura Council and the Islamic State of Iraq).

In April 2013, ISIS emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi claimed that the ANF was just a component of the ISI (as it was



A Syrian rescue worker aids a man following an airstrike in Aleppo in June 2014. Al-Qaida affiliates have been active in a civil war that has killed more than 162,000 people since March 2011. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

then known) and that his group would be changing its name to ISIS to reflect its active role in the Syrian conflict. When ANF emir Abu Mohammad al-Jolani objected, al-Zawahri told al-Baghdadi that his group should focus only on Iraq. Al-Baghdadi refused.²⁰

This was not the first time there had been tension between al-Qaida's senior leadership and their Iraqi representative. Bin Laden and al-Zawahri had previously been critical of the indiscriminate nature of terrorist attacks by ISIS' precursor groups, which were known to have ignored their guidance. Relations deteriorated to the extent that al-Qaida expelled ISIS from the network in early 2014.²¹

ISIS is now attempting to usurp al-Qaida's place as the pre-eminent jihadi group. ISIS has criticised al-Zawahri's leadership,²² and according to Five Dimensions Consultants, al-Baghdadi sent a letter to several jihadi groups asking that they pledge allegiance to him rather than al-Zawahri. Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, Egypt's al-Qaida-inspired militant organization, has already agreed to do so,²³ and a recent ISIS cell arrested in Saudi Arabia were former AQAP fighters who had abandoned the group in favor of al-Baghdadi's.²⁴ AQAP member Maamoun Hatem also expressed public

support for ISIS.²⁵ Yet despite this, the al-Qaida affiliates that have issued official public statements on this issue have so far all backed al-Zawahri's leadership.

The formation of a jihadist group that is more theologically extreme than al-Qaida is not a complete surprise. Bin Laden survived an assassination attempt in Sudan in 1994 carried out by those who did not regard him as adequately Islamic, and documents discovered in his Abbottabad compound showed him to be critical of jihadists he regarded as too extreme.²⁶ Yet time will tell whether ISIS's rise will displace al-Qaida at the head of the violent jihadist movement. Certainly, its success in gaining control over large amounts of territory in Iraq in June 2014 make it a credible challenger.

THE BROADER AL-QAIDA NETWORK

Al-Qaida has ties to several networks across the Middle East and Africa. Some of these may be formal affiliates not publicly acknowledged by al-Zawahri — an attempt to avoid international pressure or prevent these groups from alienating domestic audiences they are attempting to cultivate.

Iran: One of the more surprising



Iraqi security forces arrest suspected militants of the violent extremist group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant during a raid and weapons search operation in Hawija in April 2014. The operation resulted in arrests and the seizure of weapons and ammunition. REUTERS

networks that al-Qaida has operated in a country that is traditionally regarded as an enemy: Iran. A network of low-to-middle level al-Qaida fixers – personnel who serve as travel agents and financial intermediaries for al-Qaida operatives – operates in Zahedan, a city in eastern Iran near the borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁷ The U.S. Treasury regards Iran as a “critical transit point” for al-Qaida’s activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with this network also sending funds and fighters to Syria.²⁸

There is also a connection between al-Qaida in Iran and a possible attack in the West. Chiheb Esseghaier, accused by the Canadian government of plotting to derail a passenger train traveling between Canada and the U.S., is suspected of receiving direction and guidance from al-Qaida “elements” based in Zahedan.²⁹

However, a host of al-Qaida figures departed Iran in early 2014, suggesting that this network could now be dispersing.³⁰

The Sahel: Al-Qaida’s influence in the Sahel extends beyond AQIM. Ansar al-Dine (AAD), for example, was financed by al-Qaida,³¹ while the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) is an AQIM splinter

group.³² Mokhtar Belmokhtar, formerly one of AQIM’s top commanders, also formed his own group, the Signed in Blood Battalion. This group took over a gas plant near In Amenas, Algeria, killing 39 people and holding 800 workers hostage in January 2014. Despite an earlier split from AQIM,³³ Belmokhtar still claimed the In Amenas operation was conducted in al-Qaida’s name.³⁴

In August 2013, MUJAO and the Signed in Blood Battalion merged, taking the name al-Murabitoun. This group is designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. government, which describes it as “the greatest near-term threat to U.S. and Western interests in the Sahel.”³⁵ In April 2014, the SITE Intelligence Group reported that Belmokhtar pledged his group’s allegiance to al-Zawahri, as opposed to ISIS.³⁶

Al-Qaida is also active in increasingly ungoverned Libya and instructs its followers to gather weapons and run training camps.³⁷ This presence mainly comes via AQAP, AQIM and related individuals.³⁸

The Ansar Al-Sharias, Tunisia and Libya: The Tunisian group, Ansar al-Sharia, is closely tied to al-Qaida. Its leader, Seifallah ben

Hassine, is connected to senior al-Qaida figures,³⁹ and helped establish the jihadist Tunisian Combat Group.⁴⁰ Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia was designated a terrorist group by the U.S. State Department in January 2014, which described it as “ideologically aligned with al-Qaida and tied to its affiliates, including AQIM.”⁴¹ Ansar al-Sharia chapters also operate in the Libyan cities of Darnah and Benghazi.

The State Department recently described all Ansar al-Sharia groups operating in Libya and Tunisia as sharing “some aspects of AQ ideology, but are not formal affiliates and generally maintain a local focus.”⁴² However, these ties may be closer than the State Department suspects. For example, the Tunisian government claims that al-Qaida funds the Tunisian branch of Ansar al-Sharia.⁴³

Nigeria: Al-Qaida’s main connections to Nigeria are through Boko Haram, a group that has killed thousands in Nigeria and was designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. in November 2013.⁴⁴ Boko Haram leaders have had contact with the upper echelons of al-Qaida, possibly including Osama bin Laden.⁴⁵ Furthermore, in 2002, bin Laden dispatched one of his aides to Nigeria to distribute \$3 million to sympathetic Salafist groups. Among the recipients was Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram’s founder.⁴⁶

The U.S. government suspects “communications, training, and weapons links” between Boko Haram, AQAP, al-Shabab and AQIM.⁴⁷ The AQIM/Boko Haram collaboration “is a mature relationship that allows Boko Haram an avenue to advance its capability, and gives AQIM influence over a developing al Qaeda affiliate and a rich target list,” a U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee report stated. It also allows AQIM to expand into Nigeria.⁴⁸

Boko Haram is tied to other parts of al-Qaida’s broader network. According to the United Nations, “a number of Boko Haram members fought alongside al Qaeda affiliated groups in Mali in 2012 and 2013 before



A man walks away from Somalia's parliament building in Mogadishu after it was bombed by al-Qaida militant group al-Shabab, killing four people in May 2014. REUTERS

returning to Nigeria with terrorist expertise.”⁴⁹ For example, AAD hosted hundreds of members of Boko Haram in territory it used to control in Mali,⁵⁰ while the Nigerian group is also thought to have trained with — and assisted in operations alongside — MUJAO.⁵¹

Furthermore, more than 30 members of Boko Haram trained in Afghanistan, with at least one receiving this training from al-Qaida.⁵²

Sinai Peninsula: In the summer of 2011, one U.S. official commented that there was “no longer any doubt that al Qaeda had some kind of potent presence” in the Sinai Peninsula.⁵³ While a group calling itself al-Qaida in the Sinai Peninsula claimed to be operating there briefly that year, in reality, al-Qaida’s activities are more likely tied to the Muhammad Jamal Network (MJN), which operates in North Sinai.

Jamal is a jihadist tied to AQIM,⁵⁴ al-Zawahri⁵⁵ and the group he formerly headed, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad.⁵⁶ Jamal also has connections to the upper echelons of AQAP’s leadership, including emir Nasir al-Wuhayshi and military chief Qasim al-Raymi,⁵⁷ and the MJN network has been funded by AQAP.⁵⁸

Despite Jamal’s November 2012 arrest, his network continues to operate.⁵⁹

North Caucasus: Emarat Kavkaz, or the “Caucasus Emirate,” is a terrorist organization affiliated with al-Qaida that emerged in 2004 and operates in the North Caucasus. Al-Qaida’s representative in Chechnya, Abu Hafs al-Urduni, said that the group’s leader, Doku Umarov, would run the jihadist movement there.⁶⁰ Following Umarov’s death in March 2014, Aliaskhab Kebekov, a respected jihadist theologian, assumed leadership.⁶¹

Emarat Kavkaz has carried out bomb attacks in Russia, including the March 2010 Moscow Metro suicide bombings and the January 2011 Moscow Airport bombing. In July 2011, the UN listed Emarat Kavkaz as an al-Qaida associated group.⁶² The group is also tied to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which was funded by bin Laden and led by al-Qaida figures.⁶³

CONCLUSION

Al-Qaida’s network — of which this article provides only a snapshot — is wide ranging and goes beyond that of its formal affiliate groups. U.S. President Barack Obama has downplayed the danger that some of the groups pose to the West. Obama recently stated, “I think there is a distinction between the capacity and reach of a bin Laden and a network

that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the homeland versus jihadists who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian.”⁶⁴ Some al-Qaida-aligned groups may be prioritizing local jihad over global, but lack of capacity should not be confused with lack of intent. It is unlikely that they are passing up available chances to strike against U.S. interests.

The U.S.’s record of eliminating al-Qaida’s key personnel is impressive and has contributed to its inability to carry out attacks in the West. Yet despite the death or capture of so many of its members, al-Qaida’s ability to replenish its ranks is impressive.

Furthermore, the international community’s success in dismantling the ideology that allows al-Qaida to recruit new followers has been limited. For example, al-Qaida-inspired ideology has been disseminated throughout the West in recent years. Small, hard-to-detect cells inspired by the group — yet not receiving direct instruction from it — struck both London and Boston in 2013.

Until al-Qaida’s ideology is comprehensively dismantled theologically, socio-economic conditions improve in the countries where al-Qaida recruits, and images of Muslim suffering in conflicts such as Syria no longer proliferate, the group will remain relevant. Clearly, these huge tasks may take generations to accomplish. For these reasons, policymakers should expect the al-Qaida threat to endure. □

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