

How al Qaeda Works

What the Organization's Subsidiaries Say About Its Strength

Leah Farrall

DESPITE NEARLY a decade of war, al Qaeda is stronger today than when it carried out the 9/11 attacks. Before 2001, its history was checkered with mostly failed attempts to fulfill its most enduring goal: the unification of other militant Islamist groups under its strategic leadership. However, since fleeing Afghanistan to Pakistan's tribal areas in late 2001, al Qaeda has founded a regional branch in the Arabian Peninsula and acquired franchises in Iraq and the Maghreb. Today, it has more members, greater geographic reach, and a level of ideological sophistication and influence it lacked ten years ago.

Still, most accounts of the progress of the war against al Qaeda contend that the organization is on the decline, pointing to its degraded capacity to carry out terrorist operations and depleted senior leadership as evidence that the group is at its weakest since 9/11. But such accounts treat the central al Qaeda organization separately from its subsidiaries and overlook its success in expanding its power and influence through them. These groups should not be ignored. All have attacked Western interests in their regions of operation. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has also long targeted the United

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States, but its efforts have moved beyond the execution stage only in the last two years, most recently with the foiled plot to bomb cargo planes in October 2010. And although al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has not yet attacked outside its region, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was reportedly involved in the June 2007 London and Glasgow bomb plots.

It is time for an updated conception of al Qaeda's organization that takes into account its relationships with its subsidiaries. A broader conceptual framework will allow for a greater understanding of how and to what degree it exercises command and control over its expanded structure, the goals driving its expansion strategy, and its tactics.

AL QAEDA'S LOST DECADE

ALTHOUGH AL QAEDA had tried to use other groups to further its agenda in the 1980s and early 1990s, Osama bin Laden's first serious attempts at unification began in the mid-1990s, when the organization was based in Sudan. Bin Laden sought to build an "Islamic Army" but failed. Al Qaeda had no ideology or *manhaj* (program) around which to build lasting unity, no open front of its own to attract new fighters, and many of its members, dissatisfied with "civilian work," had left to join the jihad elsewhere. Faced with such circumstances, bin Laden instead relied on doling out financial support to encourage militant groups to join his army. But the international community put pressure on Sudan to stop his activities, and so the Sudanese government expelled al Qaeda from the country in 1996. As a result, the group fled to Afghanistan.

By mid-1996, al Qaeda was a shell of an organization, reduced to some 30 members. Facing irrelevance and fearing that a movement of Islamist militants was rising outside of his control, bin Laden decided a "blessed jihad" was necessary. He declared war on the United States, hoping this would attract others to follow al Qaeda. It did not. A second effort followed in 1998, when bin Laden unsuccessfully used his newly created World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders to lobby other groups to join him. Later that year, al Qaeda launched its first large-scale attacks: the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which it hoped would

boost its fortunes. But these, too, failed to attract other groups to join, with some instead criticizing al Qaeda for the attacks and its lack of a legitimate *manhaj*.

With no coherent ideology or *manhaj* to encourage unification under his leadership, bin Laden instead pursued a predatory approach. He endeavored to buy the allegiance of weaker groups or bully them into aligning with al Qaeda, and he attempted to divide and conquer the stronger groups. In the late 1990s, he tried and failed to gain control over the Khalden training camp, led by the militants Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi and Abu Zubaydah, and over the activities of Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Khabab al-Masri, senior militant figures who ran their own training programs. Bin Laden's attempts in 1997–98 to convince Ibn al-Khattab, a Saudi militant who led an international brigade in Chechnya, to come under al Qaeda's banner also failed. His efforts in 2000–2001 to gain control over a brigade of foreign fighters in Afghanistan met a similar fate: the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who had supreme authority over the brigade, instead handed the leadership of it to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, another group bin Laden was attempting to convince to align with al Qaeda. Around the same time, bin Laden also unsuccessfully lobbied the Egyptian Islamic Group and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group to join al Qaeda's efforts. And although al Qaeda supported the militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in his establishment of an independent training camp in Afghanistan, bin Laden was unable to convince him to formally join the organization.

The only real success during this period was al Qaeda's mid-2001 merger with Egyptian Islamic Jihad, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, now al Qaeda's second-in-command. The merger was possible thanks to Egyptian Islamic Jihad's weakened position and its reliance on bin Laden for money. The decision was nevertheless contentious within Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and several of its members left rather than join with al Qaeda. In the end, al Qaeda's only successful merger during its Afghanistan years added just five people to its core membership. Compared to this dismal record, the past decade has been highly successful.

By 2001, al Qaeda still had no formal branches or franchises. Its membership included a core of just under 200 people, a 122-person martyrdom brigade, and several dozen foot soldiers recruited from

the 700 or so graduates of its training camps. These numbers made al Qaeda among the strongest of the 14 foreign militant groups operating in Afghanistan, yet there was little unity among them. Relations were characterized by doctrinal debate on issues such as the legitimacy of fighting alongside the Taliban or recognizing Mullah Omar as "commander of the faithful." The lack of unity further hampered bin Laden's efforts to gain influence and control.

MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS

HIS PREDATORY approach to unification having failed, bin Laden sowed the seeds of a new strategy. He concluded that al Qaeda could force unity among foreign militants and draw in new followers by carrying out "mass impact" attacks against the United States. The 9/11 attacks were designed to incite an armed retaliation that would get U.S. boots on Afghan soil, opening up a new front for jihad and—because the retaliation would confirm al Qaeda's status as the "strong horse" among Islamist militants—causing smaller groups to come under al Qaeda's leadership to fight against the invading Americans.

The strategy worked at first. The U.S. invasion began in October 2001, and in November, the leaders of the foreign militant groups remaining in Kandahar agreed to come under al Qaeda's command in an effort to defend the city. But the organization's control did not last long: in early December 2001, those foreign militants began to withdraw from Kandahar. Al Qaeda still lacked a cogent ideology and *manhaj*, which meant that bin Laden had nothing to convince these groups to fully commit to its cause.

After al Qaeda's flight from Afghanistan in December 2001, the group's Iran-based leadership and its members in the Arabian Peninsula sought to reverse the organization's fortunes by building a solid ideological foundation and a clear *manhaj*. This effort was intended to support those already undertaking jihad in al Qaeda's name and end senior Saudi religious figures' criticisms of its lack of a *manhaj*. Around the same time, bin Laden also ordered that a new branch in the Arabian Peninsula—preparations for which had been undertaken in Khandahar before 9/11—be activated. AQAP is often referred to as an al Qaeda franchise, but it is better described as a branch. It was created by, and continues to operate under, the leadership of core

al Qaeda members. Unlike those of al Qaeda's franchises, the leaders of AQAP did not swear an oath of allegiance to bin Laden in order to bring their organization under al Qaeda's umbrella. They were

The past decade has been highly successful for al Qaeda.

already al Qaeda members and established the branch on bin Laden's direct orders. Although AQAP commanders answer directly to al Qaeda's leadership, they have regional autonomy. But the relationship has not been without issues. Senior figures responsible for

establishing the branch and some members in Iran had lobbied bin Laden to delay its opening and instead focus on developing an ideology and a *manhaj*. Bin Laden refused; nevertheless, between 2002 and 2004, AQAP's and al Qaeda's leaders intensified their efforts to consolidate the organization's ideological and tactical foundations to support the new branch and bolster al Qaeda's legitimacy.

They drew from *takfiri* thought, which justifies attacking corrupt regimes in Muslim lands, and on materials that outline the Muslim requirement to target the global enemy: in this case, the United States and the West. (This was framed in the context of defensive jihad, the need for which was reinforced by the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.) The hybrid ideology and *manhaj* that emerged make little distinction between targeting local enemies and targeting global ones and have a one-size-fits-all solution—jihad. Partnering with al Qaeda does not, therefore, require a local group to abandon its own agenda, just broaden its focus. This helped assuage other groups' fears that merging with al Qaeda would mean a loss of autonomy to pursue their own local goals.

The inclusion of *takfiri* materials gave al Qaeda another advantage, because this literature stresses the need for militant groups to unify. There are two main streams of guidance on how this should be done. One focuses on seniority and holds that newer groups should merge with the oldest group, regardless of the capabilities of each. The other emphasizes capability. Al Qaeda seems to have favored the seniority argument, and after its merger with Egyptian Islamic Jihad, it could—rather dubiously—present itself as the senior militant group.

Newer groups were apparently willing to go along, even if they had greater capacity than al Qaeda. By late 2004, for example, Zarqawi's

group in Iraq, Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, had eclipsed al Qaeda in terms of both resources and brand power. Even so, Zarqawi willingly merged his group with the weaker al Qaeda and swore an oath to bin Laden, creating AQI. Zarqawi's ties to al Qaeda's senior leadership, which had been consolidated during time he had spent in Afghanistan and Iran and had been further strengthened when al Qaeda members arrived in Iraq after the U.S. invasion, also played a role in his decision. Zarqawi was also instrumental in convincing the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) to join, even though it had more members than al Qaeda. Significantly, the GSPC did not merge with Zarqawi's group, which was then the strongest Islamist militant group worldwide. Instead, in late 2006, after a lengthy negotiation process, the GSPC merged with the central al Qaeda organization, the most senior group, becoming its second branch, AQIM.

Although the development of a coherent ideology and *manhaj* helped al Qaeda acquire franchises, negotiations with most groups were nevertheless drawn out because it proved difficult to agree on the parameters of operational autonomy. Al Qaeda's focus was on integration, unity, growth, and gaining strategic leadership in the militant milieu. The group viewed external operations against the West; keeping the jihad going, no matter how incrementally; and strategic messaging as the way to achieve these objectives. So even as they pursued local agendas, the franchises were required to undertake some attacks against Western interests, and leaders of groups joining al Qaeda had to be willing to present a united front, stay on message, and be seen to fall under al Qaeda's authority—all crucial for demonstrating the organization's power and attracting others to its cause.

WHO'S THE BOSS?

AL QAEDA today is not a traditional hierarchical terrorist organization, with a pyramid-style organizational structure, and it does not exercise full command and control over its branch and franchises. But nor is its role limited to broad ideological influence. Due to its dispersed structure, al Qaeda operates as a devolved network hierarchy, in which levels of command authority are not always clear; personal ties between militants carry weight and, at times, transcend the command structure between core, branch, and franchises. For their part,

al Qaeda's core members focus on exercising strategic command and control to ensure the centralization of the organization's actions and message, rather than directly managing its branch and franchises. Such an approach reduces the command-and-control burden, because al Qaeda need only manage centralization on a broad level, which, with a solid *manhaj* already in place, can be achieved through strategic leadership rather than day-to-day oversight.

Al Qaeda exercises command and control mostly in relation to external operations. It requires its subsidiaries to seek approval before conducting attacks outside their assigned regions and specifies that its branch and franchises seek approval before assisting other militant groups with external operations. For the most part, they appear to follow these stipulations. While Zarqawi was at AQI's helm, he reportedly sought permission to expand his area of operation to include Jordan, but it is not known whether permission was granted.

In times of sustained pressure, al Qaeda has delegated significant responsibility for external operations against the United States to its branch, AQAP. The first such action came in late 2002, when al Qaeda had exhausted its existing supply of operatives for external operations and was in the process of rebuilding its capacity from its sanctuary in Pakistan. Al Qaeda asked AQAP to carry out an attack on U.S. interests; AQAP devised a plot against U.S. subways and got permission to use a chemical device. (In 2003, just before putting the plan into action, AQAP asked al Qaeda for final signoff but was denied.) When the pressure on al Qaeda eased between 2003 and 2006, because the United States was focusing less on Afghanistan, the group was able to regenerate its capacity and intensify its planning for global operations. But the U.S. drone campaign against al Qaeda in Pakistan's tribal areas has again put pressure on it, and the group has again tapped AQAP to undertake external operations. It has also made similar requests of its franchises, particularly AQI. In 2008, for example, it asked AQI to carry out attacks against Danish interests in retaliation for a Danish newspaper's publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad.

When subsidiaries do carry out attacks outside their territories, al Qaeda requires that they be conducted within set parameters. For example, al Qaeda heavily encourages suicide attacks and repeated

strikes on preapproved classes of targets, such as public transportation, government buildings, and vital infrastructure. Once a location has been authorized, the branch and the franchises are free to pursue plots against it. But al Qaeda still emphasizes the need to consult the central leadership before undertaking large-scale plots, plots directed against a new location or a new class of targets, and plots utilizing a tactic that has not been previously sanctioned, such as the use of chemical, biological, or radiological devices.

Al Qaeda has put these requirements in place to ensure that attacks complement, not undermine, its strategic objectives. Whereas AQAP appears to honor al Qaeda's authority, at times the franchises have acted on their own; AQI's unapproved bombings of three hotels in Amman, Jordan, in 2005, for example, earned it a strong rebuke from headquarters. And a range of factors influence whether a franchise will attack an

external target when al Qaeda asks it to. Chief among them is the franchise's capacity and whether the franchise is willing to dedicate resources to external operations instead of local activities. Another factor is the closeness of the ties between the subsidiary and the central organization; the tighter the ties, the more likely the request will be honored. AQI has a closer relationship with al Qaeda than AQIM. Still, AQIM has generally cooperated at least with requests to stay on message and present the image of a united and hierarchical organization. This emphasis on a unified appearance was clear when, in November 2010, AQIM's leader, Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, announced that France would have to negotiate directly with bin Laden for the release of hostages held by AQIM. Although in recent times, the capacity of both franchises has been weakened by intensified counterterrorism efforts against them, neither has shown any signs of abandoning al Qaeda's global agenda in favor of purely local goals.

Communication and coordination among al Qaeda's core, branch, and franchises occur mostly through their respective information committees, which have access to senior leaders, distribution networks to assist in passing information, and close ties to the operations section of each group, which is responsible for planning attacks (since attacks must be publicized). Messages from the branch and the franchises to the core then generally go through al Qaeda's second-tier leadership,

Al Qaeda approaches new mergers warily.

which briefs Zawahiri, bin Laden, or both if the issue is urgent—that is, involves gaining permission for external operations or resolving a conflict between or within the subsidiaries.

Because al Qaeda's second-tier leadership manages most of the group's interaction with its subsidiaries, the removal of either Zawahiri or bin Laden would not overly affect the unity among the organization's core, branch, and franchises, nor would it impede communication among them. So long as al Qaeda can continue to demonstrate its ability to lead and provide strategic direction, its organizational dynamics will likely remain unchanged. The emphasis on unity in al Qaeda's ideology and *manhaj* and a desire to maintain the status quo will likely allow the organization to hold together, even as it comes under more pressure from the West.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

ALTHOUGH OPENING a regional branch and acquiring franchises has reinforced the position of al Qaeda and its ability to present itself as both the senior and the most capable Islamist militant group, it approaches new mergers warily. Al Qaeda learned a lesson about overreach in 2006, when it attempted to bring splinter groups from the Egyptian Islamic Group and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group under its umbrella. In an ill-calculated move, it portrayed the joining of the splinter factions as formal mergers with al Qaeda, which elicited heavy criticism from both groups' leaders, who opposed unification with al Qaeda. This criticism has, however, minimally impacted al Qaeda's appeal with its target audience—those already radicalized to its cause but not yet part of the organization—and other groups still seek to join under al Qaeda's banner. Al Qaeda is nonetheless wary of attracting criticism from other militants, so it is reticent to accept groups that have not demonstrated unified leadership within their areas of operation.

Al Shabab, a Somali militant group, has openly declared its allegiance to bin Laden in an effort to join al Qaeda as a franchise. But infighting between al Shabab and another group with historical ties to al Qaeda, Hizbul Islam, has thus far kept al Qaeda from accepting al Shabab. Recent reports that Hizbul Islam and al Shabab have unified may see a change in al Qaeda's position. Due to the significant

ties between AQAP and al Shabab, any future merger would likely be negotiated with AQAP's assistance.

Should al Shabab's popularity with foreign fighters continue to rise, and the group become more active in external operations planning, al Qaeda's hand may be forced. In 2009, a small group of Australian extremists (mostly of Somali descent) sought the permission of al Shabab leaders to carry out an attack in Australia. Although the plot was foiled, al Qaeda views this type of extraregional activity as potential brand competition. If al Shabab carries out a successful attack somewhere in the West, al Qaeda might more quickly move to bring the group under its umbrella, in order to control al Shabab's projection of power.

With the exception of al Shabab, al Qaeda is unlikely to acquire any new subsidiaries in the immediate future. It largely ignores Southeast Asia, despite the ongoing efforts of Islamist militants there to reach out to the organization. Al Qaeda was once linked to a splinter group of the Indonesian organization Jemaah Islamiyah, but Jemaah Islamiyah has since been decimated by Indonesian counterterrorism efforts. Should ties again be strengthened between al Qaeda and Indonesian militants—many of whom are now coalescing around a relatively new group, Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid—the relationship would likely be limited to material support. A training group dubbed “al Qaeda in Aceh,” which was linked to Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid, adopted the al Qaeda name without formal permission and probably as a means of attracting material support. Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid has its own robust and regionally focused *manhaj*, making a formal merger unlikely.

In Lebanon, meanwhile, after several failed attempts to gain influence over groups there and in the broader region, al Qaeda seems to have settled for working with a group active in the area. The Abdullah Azzam Brigades, which are led by Saleh al-Qarawi, a senior figure with links to AQAP, AQI, and al Qaeda's core, are reportedly based in Lebanon but have a wide operational ambit in the broader region. The group has regional autonomy but ultimately answers to the central al Qaeda organization for strategic direction. Given the inability of the group to gain dominance in the region, it is unlikely to become an official franchise.

In the near term, aside from any efforts to bring al Shabab on board, al Qaeda is likely to focus on its existing subsidiaries. As it comes under continued pressure in Pakistan, al Qaeda will primarily focus on

making sure that the centralization of the organization's actions is maintained through the external operations carried out by its subsidiaries and that the subsidiaries stay on message. Doing so will ensure that in the event the central leadership suffers greater losses, al Qaeda will have alternative means to project power and maintain influence.

Because al Qaeda will continue to encourage its branch and franchises to carry out attacks and will continue to use the reactions they provoke to pursue its goals, it is important that the strategic picture of al Qaeda accurately reflect the organization's broad operating dynamics instead of wishful thinking about the central organization's degraded capacity. A large attack tomorrow orchestrated by the central leadership would prove wrong any assessments of diminished capabilities. Meanwhile, the enduring goals that drive al Qaeda's strategies and tactics, which have allowed the group to expand during the past decade of war, continue to be overlooked. Until al Qaeda's interaction with its branch and franchises is better comprehended and taken into consideration, assessments of its capacity and organizational health will continue to fall short. ☉

Reviews & Responses



REUTERS/IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA

*Palestinian girls looking out from the balcony
of their damaged home in Rafah, Gaza Strip, March 2009*

Many have interpreted the Goldstone report as yet another battle in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, waged by other means. But the report addressed a more far-reaching issue—namely, the difficulty of distinguishing civilians from combatants in modern urban warfare.

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